The Midwife's Sister

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PROLOGUE

The moment we went into the house we knew something was wrong. We stood in the hall, my sister and I, listening, hearing nothing but the ticking of a clock in the distance. It was the quiet that was peculiar. Ours was a house always filled with life – laughter, singing and the sound of the wireless. It was as if we had come to the wrong place. Seconds passed while we absorbed the unfamiliar, unsettling atmosphere. I looked up at Jennifer. She was the eldest and biggest. Her expression was serious, her face a picture of concentration. I slipped my hand into hers and stayed silent, waiting for her to make a move. Without a word we headed up the stairs and crept from room to room looking for our parents, even though we both already sensed that we would not find them. Still, we went on searching, finally returning to the landing on the first floor and sitting at the top of the stairs. I hung on to Jennifer's hand.

In the hall, just inside the door, were the bags we had brought back from our holiday at the seaside. We had been dropped off by one of our aunts. Our mother, Elsie, had been with us for the first few days, but Gordon, our father, had not come down as he was working. Mother, missing him, had decided to return home early to Amersham and surprise him, leaving us behind with our aunts. I didn't mind

her going and neither did Jennifer. It was not as if we were abandoned, as the house in Jaywick Sands, near Clacton, we knew well and loved and, anyway, we also loved our aunts.

The day our mother left she looked wonderful, her long dark hair newly washed, her favourite lemon-coloured dress swishing around her legs. She was full of joy, elated, effortlessly casting bright sunbeams as she kissed us goodbye.

That day was the last time for a long while that we saw her like this.

Jennifer got up and tugged me to my feet and we left the house. We went to see our grandmother, who lived opposite. She was a reassuring presence and explained that our mother was ill, but not what had happened, or where she was. We didn't ask. Later, our father returned and took us back to our own home. He seemed his usual affable self and pleased to see us. He made us something to eat and put us to bed but told us nothing about our mother and, again, we wondered but didn't ask.

I think we were too afraid of what he might say.

It was the autumn of 1945. I was seven and Jennifer had recently had her tenth birthday. We knew that whatever had occurred had to be serious. What we didn't know was that our childhood as we had known it was over.

PART 1

When I Was a Child

Gordon aged ten on his mother's farm.

My mother at her sister Doris's wedding,
sitting on the front row, the second on the left.

Beginnings

From a very young age I did everything with my sister, Jennifer. We had huge freedom and enjoyed great adventures together, just the two of us. I don't ever remember our parents being anxious about our exploits or trying to stop us from going off on our own, exploring. They encouraged us to be strong and independent and probably knew little of what we got up to. We more or less did as we liked.

I was born on February 1, 1938 and brought up in Amersham, in Buckinghamshire. My father was sent off to register my birth, under instructions from my mother that I was to be called Rosemary Elsie. He preferred Christine Mary, registered me as such, and Mother had little choice but to accept it. Christine was soon shortened by most people to Chris, although my father always called me Christabel. By the time I came along, Jennifer was a determined child of two and a half. One of my earliest memories when I was perhaps three years old was of us going for cycle rides as a family; my father in front, me on the back of his bike, then Mummy, and behind her, Jennifer. Seeing my sister pedalling like a mad thing, I felt very proud to be sitting in some comfort behind my father. We went for walks, too, which I loved and hated in turn, since my legs were shorter than theirs. I would struggle on, often arriving at our destination to find half the picnic had already gone.

We often went to the seaside, to the house at Jaywick Sands, which my father had bought at the beginning of the war. He had an open-top car and Jennifer and I would stand on the back seat regardless of the weather. Wind and rain were nothing to us. We laughed, tipped back our heads, and caught droplets of rain in our mouths as we sped along. In the 1940s, there were few other cars on the roads and no seat belts or laws about children being strapped in – and cars did not go at the speeds that we drive at today. We found it exhilarating. If the rain came down, it was not my father's habit to stop the car. He drove on, and we sang at the top of our voices. Jennifer and I loved 'Two Little Girls in Blue' from the Broadway musical of the same name: 'Two little girls in blue, lad / two little girls in blue / They were sisters, we were brothers / and learned to love the two / And one little girl in blue, lad / who won your Father's heart / became your Mother / I married the other / but now we have drifted apart.' We thought this very beautiful and sad at the time.

In 1942 the country was at war, but for us as a family the conflict and its horrors seemed a long way off as we escaped to our house by the sea, where friends and relations gathered during the holidays and an atmosphere of fun and goodwill prevailed. Jennifer and I would run onto the long, wide, empty beaches, braving the mountainous seas, with their huge waves; we made ever-larger sandcastles, and buried each other up to our necks in cool, damp sand. We laughed as we danced with lengths of seaweed, tossing them around, and collected exquisite shells and debris from ships, brought in on the tide. I loved catching in my hands the tiny crabs inhabiting the rock-pools – and in doing this I thoroughly enjoyed the only power I ever had over my big sister, for she hated these tiny creatures, and I loved to chase her un-

mercifully with them. She would then reciprocate by pinning me down on the beach, and tickling the soles of my very sensitive feet. As for her own feet, Jennifer always seemed to have them bare whenever she could and even in adulthood would walk around without shoes, even on roadways. It didn't seem to bother her. She was tough.

I was four, Jennifer almost seven, two very different little girls with a shared sense of fun and a strong bond. Jennifer, tall and skinny, very short-sighted, requiring pebble glasses; me, shorter and plumper with curly hair and, it was said, an angelic smile.

I can still picture us sitting on a deserted beach of sand and pebbles. It is summer, and a breeze blows on the south coast. Always, there seems to be a cool breeze coming in from the sea. We hug our knees and look into the distance. Seagulls swoop and screech, and the pale sun comes out from behind white cotton-wool clouds. The smell of seaweed and salt is in our nostrils. We are at one with our surroundings. There is not another soul to be seen. Behind us loom huge rolls of barbed wire, put there to keep out the Germans. We find a gap in these defences and creep through it, into our own little Eden.

The greatest excitement from those beach days was when we discovered on one of our excursions a disused roller-skating rink, abandoned at the outbreak of war. The rink was at least the size of a tennis court, and there were rusty skates of various sizes still hanging out of open metal cupboards. No one was there, no one to stop us taking over. On these old, disused skates we tried to move about the rink, and fell and fell again, grimly holding on to each other. With bloodied knees and hurt hands, we returned home. Our mother, ever cheerful, made nothing of our wounds, and we

were told to try again until we got better. Alone, and without help from anyone, we did. Before long, with great pride, we flew around the huge expanse of the rink.

Our mother and father had the same relaxed attitude to rock-climbing, cycling and swimming. Jennifer was a wild child, reckless. She would balance on one leg on the very edge of the high cliffs, her other leg extending outwards over the drop. It seemed to me a certain death. I would beg her to stop and hold my breath as I watched, terrified, before running away, her laughter carrying on the wind behind me.

Free spirits, we ran and jumped and shouted to the howling sea. We were eager and aware of life all around as seagulls swooped and the wind gusted and almost blew us over. Along a footpath of pebbles and tufts of grass were many battered buildings with flat roofs and no windows. These old defensive forts, Martello towers, had risen up the century before. We peered through the narrow entrance of one into darkness. Gingerly, we crept into the gloom, smelling something rancid. I tugged at Jennifer's arm.

'I want to go,' I said, afraid.

'Oh no, Baby,' she said, shaking me off.

Jennifer always used the term *Baby* to describe a want of courage.

There was a hissing and a mewing. We froze, waiting for our eyes to grow accustomed to the dark.

'Jennifer . . .' I began.

'Ssh, don't be a baby,' she said, and took another few tentative steps into the dark.

Against the far wall, a great skinny black cat lay on dirty oil sacks. She pulled herself up to her full height, baring her teeth, eyes flashing. During the war there were many

neglected cats, often wild and ferocious. Jennifer knew not to get too close. I huddled behind her.

At home we asked for food for the cat, but when we returned clutching our bounty, she had gone. We searched every tower, but there was no sign of her. In the end we left the food beside the dirty sacks where we had first seen her.

These seemingly endless holidays filled with adventure were magical to us.

The First Few Years

At the beginning of the war we had moved from a pretty little cottage into one of our grandmother's properties in Hill Avenue, above and behind one of her shops. It was quite spacious, although the garden was somewhat reduced in size by a huge, ugly air-raid shelter. Jennifer and I had to share a bedroom, which was large by today's standards, with a big open fireplace that divided her side from mine. It was in this room that we usually played, as there was plenty of space for our games. We had an enormous dressing-up chest, a wardrobe with all our clothes and an old Victorian chest of drawers. We liked this room and never considered that we would have liked to be on our own.

Sundays at home in winter were good. The fire was lit in the drawing room after breakfast. It was a fairly ugly room with large furniture and huge paintings of stylized ladies adorning the walls, but when the fire was lit and the room filled with music, it came to life. It was here that we learned to play cards. Mother, Jennifer and I would join in, and our father too – his favourite was whist, or there was rummy, snap or patience. I adored seeing the flames of the fire climb up the walls of the chimney and cast shadows in the evening light. We ate celery and cheese from a trolley, and crumpets which we toasted on a fork in front of the fire. The silver and

pretty china came out on a Sunday and we sat there politely, eating off small tables.

I remember one snowy Sunday when we walked through the woods to Rectory Hill, Jennifer towing a large and magnificent toboggan Daddy had made us. He was dying to try it out, and so was Jennifer. He had built it from old oak planks and fitted metal strips onto the outriders. He was very proud of it and it looked amazing. When we arrived on the hill it was really wonderful to watch Jennifer and Daddy go off at tremendous speed all the way to the bottom. I was exhilarated just watching, and I was thrilled when it was my turn and I sat behind Jennifer clinging tightly to her waist. At the bottom we fell about laughing as we tumbled in the snow. But the toboggan was heavy, and by the time we had dragged it back up the hill this little girl was exhausted, and content to watch as Jennifer and our father continued with huge enthusiasm.

It may seem odd to see our childhood as idyllic in the midst of war, but in Amersham we were removed from the terrors of the cities. It is true we had food rationing – little butter, little meat, and only one egg each a week. But the black market was rife, and my father sorted out extra rations with a farmer friend. Each week during the war Jennifer and I were sent on a bus to Chesham to collect a shoebox filled with beautiful brown eggs. We knew it was illegal and were terrified in case we were caught, but always returned home safely to our mother, who opened our parcel triumphantly. Yummy! Boiled eggs for breakfast! Our mother was also very popular with all the tradesmen, who would keep her special treats when they arrived. A tin of peaches was certainly a prized possession, and would make us all terribly excited. We did not think that we were missing

out on anything, yet we knew nothing of bananas, oranges or cream. Compared to many others, we were lucky.

The war played havoc with people's emotions; everyone was affected, and everyone helped each other. But despite the privations there were parties in our house: loud parties, dancing and singing to the latest sheet music played by my mother on the piano. So many faces, singing along, all the women in sexy clothes, lips all covered with Max Factor lipstick. Then hushed voices at night, talking of atrocities and death. We heard of the Germans, the Chinese, the Japanese. Fear see-sawed. Strangers were trying to kill us. Jennifer and I sat on the stairs in the dark and listened to the grown-up talk. So many people were dying. We did not like it.

We had few toys, but we didn't really need them or want them. My favourite doll, although she was pretty ugly, was called Lois. She was handmade from dull green cotton material left over from some worn-out garment. Jennifer liked a soldier doll, which was equally ugly and handmade from scraps of old material. We invented games, played shops with the contents of our mother's cupboards, and schools with paper and pencils – Jennifer was always the head teacher, and I was the child. And we played hospitals with torn-up bed linen. Jennifer was always the doctor and I was the nurse, and we would bandage each other and make slings.

Dressing up was our favourite game. Out would come our mother's amazing clothes, hats a speciality. An emerald-green silk doughnut snood with long, green, coarse netting that lifted up your hair was my favourite. Jennifer liked a theatrical curly wig. As for our mother's incredible long dresses, we had to be content to look at them and feel them because we were not allowed to play with them. Mother

wore these when our parents went out in the evenings. They loved dancing, particularly at The Orchard, at Ruislip, always coming back with treats for Jennifer and me. I can still remember a wonderful dress our mother wore with a ruched fine silk bodice in cerise and a lavender heavy satin skirt cut on the cross so that it billowed out as she moved. Clothes were beautifully made then, with hand-stitched button holes, zips perfectly introduced, and hemming done by hand. In time, I learned to do all these things, and felt proud of myself.

Mother laughed a lot and flirted her way through life, making everyone she met feel good. She overwhelmed me with her huge kisses and clutching me to her ample bosom. Jennifer kept her strictly at arm's length. We both disliked these huge hugs; they were just too much. Mother was such a warm person, but we children were like her gloves, to be put on when necessary. While she had time for everyone, particularly her friends, she sometimes forgot us completely. We got lost at the zoo, on stations, in shops, theatres, cinemas and libraries. On many occasions I was found wandering unaccompanied and announcements were made for the mother of a lost child to report to such and such an office. Mother would collect me, never with the slightest hint of concern. Losing her children was a commonplace occurrence. I actually found these occasions when I was 'handed in' more thrilling than upsetting.

We did so adore our mother. We would watch her, mesmerized, as by a dragonfly. At bedtime she would tell us wonderful stories, all made up from her fertile mind, and they would continue, keeping us enthralled night after night. These stories of fairies, beasts and demons were a never-ending serial of excitement.

She loved to cook, and this was another time when we got her undivided attention. I loved sitting on the table helping to chop and stir and break eggs and lick spoons, as the fire burned in the range and music rang out loudly from the wireless. We were given the cake spoons to lick. Jennifer always adored cake, and she adored licking the big wooden spoons covered in fruit-cake mixture.

We would always have puddings and pies after the main course and I can still remember apple pies, crumbles and Charlottes, treacle pudding, spotted dick and rice pudding – absolutely delicious. And of course stewed fruit, which our mother preserved in large Kilner jars as it came into season: apples, pears, plums, rhubarb. We'd collect the pips on the side of our plates and count them out to see what our futures would hold: *coach, carriage, wheelbarrow, dung cart* – to be repeated as many times as there were pips. Or *boots, shoes, slippers, clogs*. Or *rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief*. Or *tinker, tailor, soldier, spy*. We pretended to dread the last one but found these games hilarious, and went on and on organizing and rearranging our plates.

As a family, we cooked. We stirred and tasted and laughed and hugged each other. Cooking was our play, our family play, and eating was serious business. My father's mashed potatoes were to die for. Our Aunty Doris used to make the most delicious sponge cakes and time herself for twenty minutes of hard hand-whisking with a fork to make these perfect confections. Our mother was far too impatient, and hers came out like biscuits. As an adult, Jennifer's cakes also came out like biscuits, to the delight of her children, who would play 'catch' with them in the garden.

As a child, I loved cooking and Jennifer loved eating, so all was well.

Every night we were given a dose of rosehip syrup and then cod liver oil and malt; Jennifer first, then me. We neither of us liked this great spoonful of sludge, which smelt very bad. We had all the childhood complaints, from mumps to measles and whooping cough and chickenpox. It was normal then – all children got these illnesses. We had to stay in bed for days, the fire was lit in our bedroom and trays of delicious food were brought in to us. It was really enjoyable being ill, as Mother would hover, and Grandpa come in to play draughts with us, and we had the wireless brought into our room. Before penicillin was widely available, M&B (sulphapyridine, an anti-bacterial drug of the 1940s) was the only drug used for these complaints. Jennifer and I were both fearful of getting scarlet fever with its horrific ramifications or, even worse, tuberculosis. We both had a great deal of tummy aches, for which we were given Dr J. Collis Browne's Chlorodyne, which we thought delicious. It certainly had a remarkable effect, curing our tummy aches instantly. They still sell it now but have taken out most of the morphine and it doesn't seem to work any more.

The most important garments in winter were liberty bodices, which Jennifer and I were buttoned into every year. These fleece-lined sort-of-vests kept us warm and safe from the cold – no central heating then. I also used to get really nasty chilblains every winter and was made to sit on a chair with my feet in a chamber pot of urine. Ugh! I felt it was so undignified, even though it was my own urine, and Jennifer would be delighted at my discomfort, dancing around and laughing.

My father's transport business flourished during the war, so weekends were times for shopping, buying sheet music and, on occasion, going to London. My mother loved clothes

and nothing, not even Hitler or the restrictions of clothing coupons, was going to stop her frequenting her favourite shops. She could buy extra clothing coupons on the black market, which was what she and her friends did. We taxied through bombed-out London, seeing the effects of war, the devastated buildings, the poverty on the streets. My mother swept through it all, from half-ruined Oxford Street to Harrods in Knightsbridge, and we sailed along behind her in our matching clothes from Daniel Neal's, in Kensington, the two of us in our pristine white ankle socks and Start-Rite shoes.

Jennifer played the piano from a very early age, and I would recite poetry for our mother's friends, as this is what we did before the invasion of television. Every week there was ballet dancing at the Fabian School of Dancing at the Turret House, where I performed with enthusiasm while Jennifer bunked off. On Wednesdays there were piano lessons with Miss Goudie, a large, florid lady who lived down White Lion Road, some way from our house. She would teach Jennifer first, all smiles, while I sat and waited my turn. No more smiles.

'Why have you not practised?'

But how could I, when my mother and Jennifer were always on the piano? I hated these weekly lessons; I thought Miss Goudie was fat, and smelled. To make matters worse, we had to walk to her house alone. In the winter during the war all the streets were dark, lamplight forbidden, and the houses had blackout curtains at their windows. The wardens and police were about, looking for gaps of light. So Jennifer and I would creep along the pitch-dark streets, holding hands, fearful that at any moment something from within the wilds of our imagination would leap out at us.

At home, there was an air-raid shelter in the garden. Raucous sirens would ring out, warning us all to take cover and go into the shelter, but we never did. The air-raid shelter stank of damp, and we thought rats lived there. Anyway, our mother's fearless attitude prevailed over all.

'It's only bombs, dear,' she would say, and cheerfully carry on with her life. So my sister and I did the same.

Mother always ignored anything she found unpleasant.

Amersham may have been peaceful, but we found our own excitements. Our favourite was going off to play on the common. It was very safe, but Jennifer and I would secrete our pennies into our pockets and run to the stile that allowed access to the railway line. We would climb over it, place our pennies on the line and wait. We thought it was very, very dangerous. We held hands and were breathless. Trains would pass at speed, unaware of two small girls hiding in the grass. The noise of the wheels on the line was huge, and the wind even more so, throwing us sideways as the carriages roared past. Then we would run excitedly onto the line to inspect our pennies, and compare their size and shape – such fun, they were hot and misshapen. We told no one – somehow we knew it was not something the grown-ups would enjoy.

Christmas was a glorious time, with every year a wonderful tree to decorate on Christmas Eve, and under it so many presents from aunts and uncles, grandparents, cousins, and the best and last from Daddy and Mummy. The wrapping was very basic, as there was little pretty paper around at the time and my mother hadn't the patience to create anything superficially pretty, but we all made paper chains to put on the ceiling and brought in holly to decorate the room. There would be lots of delicious food, and an enormous bird, always a turkey or goose. Our father's arrival with it was

heralded with shrieks of laughter. Where had he got it from? Our cousins joined us, and we played games until darkness took over. Charades was a favourite with our mother.

On Boxing Day, Mummy, Daddy, Jennifer and I dressed up to go to The Orchard, a large exclusive restaurant in Ruislip with a dance floor at its centre. There were balloons and crackers and so many wonderful things to eat – unheard of during the war. There were singers and a band, and Daddy took Jennifer onto the dance floor to dance with him, and then me, standing on his feet. What joy! Then it was off to London to see Bertram Mills Circus, where we held our breath waiting for the trapeze artist to fall. Every year we also went to London to see *Peter Pan* and every year we believed in Tinker Bell and shrieked at Captain Hook.

To School, Gently

Our first school was Kingsley House, where for the first time I recognized that boys had the best deal – they played the drums and large, crashing cymbals, while we girls were given triangles. With very bad grace, we hit them discordantly.

Jennifer and I would walk to school hand in hand, past the shops, to the other side of Amersham where our small nursery school was situated. We were aged three and five and a half, and our mother thought it perfectly safe for us to walk there alone, as was usual in those days. Everyone knew each other and there was always a policeman on the street with his high helmet to protect us if need be. One excitement I can remember was when Jennifer won a black china doll by naming her Dinah. Mother had schooled her not to say Diana, I've no idea why. I can't remember the name I gave. Jennifer won because the headmistress felt Dinah was the most suitable name. She was very proud of her prize, but we seldom played with her.

In 1942, when still only four and seven, we were sent to Belle Vue, a polite girls' school a few miles away. We travelled by steam train by ourselves to Little Chalfont, with the guard in charge of making sure we got off at the right station. We loved the train journeys, the smoke, the guard's whistle and jostling through the countryside. We wore black

and gold uniforms, and black berets with darling little gold tassels. We dawdled to school from the station along winding country lanes, listening to the birds and picking flowers on the way, and in the autumn kicking up the dried golden leaves and collecting chestnuts. We were always late but no one minded, and we loved the old house set at the end of the long drive. We had stories read to us by the beautiful Miss Clarke and were told how special we were. Then the school moved to Hyde Heath, changed its name, and collected all the Amersham children by coach. No longer the joy of a steam train, and the walks down mossy lanes. The coach was smelly and I was always sick on the way, but everyone was kind, even if Jennifer ran away, for she heartily disliked the smell of sick.

In the summer it was different. We cycled to school along the leafy lanes, with the smells of summer and the sound of cuckoos in our ears. We loved it, except for the fact that Jennifer's bike was bigger than mine, and went faster, and I was always left behind. My wild, adventurous sister was always falling out of trees that were too high for her and making great holes in various parts of her anatomy.

At school, with great difficulty, we knitted coloured squares to make into blankets for the war effort. We collected ship halfpennies (ha'penny coins with sailing ships on one side, and the king's head on the other) so that presents could be sent to the sailors who were risking their lives for us every day. We also collected coloured pictures which were given away inside cigarette packets: Clark Gable, Greer Garson and Hedy Lamarr were our favourites. In those days, all packets of cigarettes had small photo cards of film stars, sportsmen and the like.

We also had pen pals and, with help, wrote simple letters

of encouragement to the troops off fighting in different parts of the world. The intention was to keep up morale. We collected the exotic stamps from their replies. It was all very exciting for us, except when some did not write back and we were left to wonder what had become of them. Had they survived?

We were read books at school – how I loved *The Wind in the Willows*. I particularly and secretly adored Toad – I knew he behaved very badly, but he was just so much fun. I have never changed.

Although dilatory and not particularly interested in homework, Jennifer was very bright, and was put in a class with children rather older than her. She fitted in, was happy enough, and made some friends. Molly Wilkinson was her very best friend. I, on the other hand, struggled to keep up.

'She does not seem to pay attention,' my teachers said, perplexed. 'Or do her homework.'

They were right. In the classroom, I would concentrate on the great outdoors through the windows, fascinated by the changing seasons, wishing I could escape to explore the countryside. I felt part of the countryside. I was the grass over which I rolled, I was the daisy and the bee. I was the big oak and the swallow. I was the sunlight and the wind and the rain. How I loved the rain – the splashing as I ran into it, opening my mouth to catch the droplets, sloshing about with bare feet in the summer and wellies in the winter. These were the things that drew me in. Many years later, I discovered I had a mild form of dyslexia, although growing up in the 1940s it was a term that was unknown to me. Undoubtedly, it affected my ability to read and write at an early age.

'Jennifer's the clever one, Chris is the pretty one,' was how

our mother frequently described her daughters. She repeated this all the time.

'Your sister is much cleverer than you, you should be more like her,' I was told by my teachers on more than one occasion.

I remained silent. Did I really want to be more like her? I was uncertain. She would play with me and then discard me, tease me and run away. No, I decided, I did not want to be more like Jennifer. Yet, together with my mother and my grandmother, this headstrong girl brought me up, and I loved her fiercely.