

PITSEA, ESSEX

After leaving Liverpool Hospital, I travelled with my mum by train to London, and on to a little country station called Pitsea. From there, we rode home in a taxi.

Home turned out to be my grandparents' tiny cottage in Essex, in the south-east of England. The small village of Pitsea lay just fifty kilometres east of London. This was the first time I remember meeting Granny and Grandad.

Granny appeared delighted to see me and spoilt me, just like Mum did. Grandad ignored me. Mum told me to keep away from him because he liked peace and quiet. I suspected the real reason was he didn't like kids.

My grandparents lived in the middle of nowhere. Granny's tiny, rented cottage stood on the right, halfway down an untarred, narrow country lane. The lane's entrance was a T-junction with a quaint cottage on one corner and a black double story farmhouse on the other. The field behind the farmhouse was bare earth. Mum said it was autumn, and nothing would grow until spring.

Beyond the farmer's field lay open ground, with a few thin hedge rows. Granny's cottage stood on a quarter acre of land on the edge of a wide expanse of open ground, with no other buildings visible. How on earth did Granny and Grandad end up in such a remote spot? Large oak trees running the length of the lane provided the only relief from the monotonous landscape. It seemed so isolated.

I enjoyed Mum and Granny's company in the cottage. But Grandad's presence encouraged me to spend as much time as possible outdoors, though the damp and windy weather kept Mum and Granny indoors. I was accustomed to the hot and dry weather of the Punjab, so the late autumn weather proved to be a novelty and fun for me. Dad travelled by train to London each day, leaving early in the morning and returning well after dark. Exhausted by his week-long searches for work, he paid little attention to me on the weekends.

In the garden, patches of grass broke up large muddy areas. A thin scraggly hedge defined the boundary, and nothing prevented the icy autumn winds blowing across the open countryside. The cold ground remained damp from the frequent drizzle and rain. In the hostile environment, I learnt two of life's great secrets.

Hanging around the damp grey garden all day bored me. All my toys remained packed away in trunks from the voyage over from India. Without my toys, I needed to entertain myself. If Mum or Granny came outside, I would try to engage them in conversation to keep them with me as long as possible, before the weather drove them back indoors.

On one occasion when Granny came outside to hang out the Monday morning washing, I asked her about something that puzzled me. Why wash on a cold, damp day? How would washing dry without the sun? 'Ah, but there is plenty of wind,' she told me. 'The wind will soon dry the washing.'

That didn't sound right! In India, we relied on the sun to dry the washing. So, I spent the next two days soaking one of Mum's hankies in cold water and holding it open, flapping in the wind. To my amazement, it dried in record time, which was just as well, considering the short breaks between the periods of drizzle and rain. I soaked and dried that hanky several

times over those two days. The scientific method worked, proving my experiment's results. I'd learnt one of life's great lessons that would hold me in good stead in the future.

Winter dropped upon us like a heavy booted foot, making us housebound. Christmas and New Year came and went. Soon, my fifth birthday arrived. There'd be no party this year. I'd not seen another child in almost three months. Still, I remember happy days when Mum and Granny made a special fuss over me. The end of January snowed—a wonderful sight, with a downside. Soon, wet and slush prevailed, and I remained inside for three days.

One day, Mum took me to London to meet distant relatives. The most exciting event in our entire stay in England occurred. Behind a row of grand old London houses lay a field with grazing cows. I put my right hand through the fence and a cow bit it off. Do cows often do that? Skin hung loose from my wrist. Of course, I made a fuss, but Mum seemed unconcerned. 'Your hand will soon get better.' She proved to be right. By the next morning, my hand had grown back. Mum couldn't remember that incident, but I did. After all, I was the one the cow bit. Only much later did I concede it might not have happened.

By the end of March, spring threatened with more showers. Then the weather improved, and Mum took me for a walk to the shops. We passed a muddy wheat field on the left, with tiny spots of green showing. By the T-junction at the lane's entrance, we turned onto the main road. The question of left and right arose. Mum pointed to the black farmhouse. 'That building is on the left.' I wondered how she knew that, when she'd not walked this road before. I worried though. How would I recognise the left side of every road we entered? When we passed through London by train, I saw lots of roads. Who remembered the left of each one? Perhaps I only needed to remember the ones near where we lived.

The shops turned out to be a post office, and a store that stocked sweets, newspapers, and Mum's cigarettes. On our return trip, when we passed the black farmhouse, I pointed and said, 'That's on the left.'

'No,' Mum said, contradicting her earlier statement, 'it's on our right.' She explained, the right was the side she parted my hair. Ah, so that's how it worked! What a clever idea, I thought. I didn't need to memorise the left side of every street I entered. With this new information, I'd learnt another of life's great secrets. It would give me an advantage over everyone who'd not heard about it.

When we passed the quaint cottage on the corner opposite the black farmhouse, an elderly lady in the garden waved to us. She got talking with Mum and invited us to tea the next week. I enjoyed visiting that old lady. Not only did she have a pretty garden, but also jam scones and cream. We didn't visit her often enough during our stay in Pitsea.

One day, on a walk down to the corner at the T-junction, I noticed the green shoots of the emerging wheat. Watching its progress became a big topic of conversation between Mum and me. The green wheat stalks grew and grew until they looked like a choppy green ocean driven in the wind. In June, the bright green faded, and by mid-July the wheat field boasted a sea of yellow green. By month's end, golden yellow waves swayed in the breeze, before vanishing one day. The bare, brown earth, with scattered yellow stalks, displayed the carnage that befell it. I'd missed seeing the wheat being reaped.

One evening, on his return from London, Dad announced he couldn't get a job in England. Only weeks later, we found ourselves on Southampton docks, ready to set sail on the Stirling Castle. In the gathering dusk, we descended into the bowels of the ship. The winter darkness

cloaked everything outside the cabin's porthole, giving us nothing to see. Only an hour after leaving the docks, I felt queasy. At that point, I didn't realise seasickness would last a whole week. We'd been in England only a few months. Now, I looked forward to the next stage of my life. We were on our way to South Africa.

One of my strongest memories was crossing the line, with the sailors dressed in spooky clown costumes, waving sabres, getting everyone wet, and threatening to make passengers walk the plank. After a week with seasickness, each morning, I enjoyed sitting on deck in the deck chairs, waiting for the stewards to serve hot, salty cups of Bovril.

Often, my father took me to the ship's stern to look for the dolphins that liked to follow close behind. I'd hoped to see sharks, but saw none. In the late afternoon or early evening, large schools of flying fish were a common sight.

My toys were locked away in trunks in the ship's hold, but I'd kept my football. In the evening before dinner, I'd go with my father to the games area and kick the ball around. Nets tied to the railing prevent anything from being lost overboard. One evening I kicked the ball, and it hit the net and fell into the ocean. We discovered the net was not secured to the railing, and I watched as my football bobbed away into the distance.

We arrived in Cape Town on a sunny morning, delighted to be back in a warm climate. From the docks, we caught a taxi to the railway station to leave our luggage and book our tickets to Pretoria. The train was leaving in the late afternoon, so we walked in the city before taking the cable car up Table Mountain. Although the views from the top were spectacular, it was the tearoom that held my interest.

Later that afternoon, we were on the train, heading for Pretoria. I can recall leaving Cape Town and passing through the beautiful scenery of the Cape Winelands and sleeping through most of the arid Karoo. But my most vivid memory is the sound of the xylophone calling the passengers to meals in the silver service dining car. At breakfast, I was introduced to South African Grape-nuts cereal and Maltabella porridge, both of which remained amongst my breakfast favourites throughout my life in Africa.

Soon, we'd be arriving in Pretoria, where we'd stay with my aunt's family, and I'd meet my cousins.