

CHAPTER 4

Our years in our flat were busy and full of incident. To set the scene a little more clearly, we lived in one of the old roads in the Borough of Finchley, as it still was, before being merged into the London Borough of Barnet some years later. The road had an old and well known name, Long Lane - a very villagey sort of name and a correct one, being 1 1/4 miles long in its start at Church End to its finish at Church Lane! A little way off Long Lane about half way along, was an oak tree called Dick Turpins Oak and it was old enough to really have been a hiding place for the highwayman. We lived near to the cross road with the 'new' North Circular Road, where the pride of Finchley, the purpose built fire station is; it being almost the centre of Finchley. When I was a young boy, I and others would sometimes go to that cross roads and wait to see if we might see a car go by!

Myrtle and I were still under 25 and therefore could legitimately be part of the Finchley youth scene. We were still working on the Finchley Council of Youth, involved with the Cubs and Scouts and becoming more involved in Youth Drama. Myrtle had stopped travelling in to central London and taken a job as a clerk at STC, so we travelled to and fro together - at first on the tandem and then on the combination. We became quite well known as the couple on the strange machines! Then later Myrtle gave up that job to be a mother to Michael but as we lived only 50 yards from my old home, my mother was often available to let us get away from the flat for our various activities. As I carried on working at STC, an electronics factory (I started as a 'lab-boy') only three miles away and Myrtle's parents lived only a mile away, our world was quite a small one - almost a village life although part of what later became called, Greater London. When Michael was born, he was such a well behaved baby, we found that we could often take him with us in the evenings and just park his carry cot in a corner to let him sleep.

Myrtle's parents had had her quite late in life, so they were now both in their sixties and her father was at official retirement age. He thought about continuing to run his nurserymans business, but to be honest, he never really wanted to be a nurseryman but just continued to work in the family business when his own father died. Being self-employed his state pension would be very small and he had no other, so was in the position of being forced to carry on working to 70, just to get the increased state pension for their retirement. Just at that time, another member of his church was looking to expand his small wholesale business a little and after some discussion, Myrtle's father took up the offer to work for him as a storeman. So, at 65, he closed the nursery business and started what was to be one of the best things he ever did. Eventually the owner of the business started up a small printworks as an addition to the business and sent him to a London school of printing, with all the school leavers! Although he officially retired at 70, he carried on working 'part time' until he was nearly 90 and really enjoyed life at last, although Myrtle's mother died when he was 76.

That decision of his had far-reaching ramifications for us for many years to come. He decided to offer us a third of the land that he was working as a nursery and just keep the other part for his own pleasure, rather than having to work at it. Thus we, who had

been wondering where and how to move to get a real house of our own, were suddenly in the position of being able to look at the very real possibility of having our own house built in the Finchley that we knew so well. We found a very good firm of architects to help us and the junior partner became very enthusiastic about the project - his normal brief was designing office blocks! While we were planning the bungalow and getting finance arranged, we encountered the first of the Tory arranged British depressions - at least the first that we knew about - and the Finchley Borough loan that we had been promised, suddenly was withdrawn. We eventually managed to get a standard and expensive building society loan, get the plans approved and start building. Due to the recession, office building was almost at a standstill and we were fortunate to get a very large building firm to do the work at a good price, as they wanted to keep at least some of their key workers in a job. They finished the job in five months instead of the contracted six - the three months that they had actually hoped to manage went by the wayside with our architects insistence on everything being done to the correct standards - so we moved in to our brand new home in November 1958. Nicely in time for Christmas and for the birth of our second son, Eric, in February. Once again, our favourite district nurse attended and this time the doctor didn't even get there in time for the birth! Cats and dog were as equally fascinated by Eric as they had been by Michael.

Just a short while after Eric's birth, tragedy struck. Myrtle went to the dentist, leaving the boys in the care of her mother who, still living in her old home next to the nursery, was now only 100 feet away. The dentists surgery was only a 15 minute walk away, and Myrtle did not notice that Richard followed her when she started out. At least, that is what we eventually thought must have happened. We had no idea at first that that was the reason why he did not appear that evening when I came home as usual and just tried the usual call to him from the door. He did not appear and we thought, "up a tree again!" and went further to look. We tried again from time to time that evening and then started to really worry. We still thought that he must be nearby and started to ransack all the old sheds and greenhouses, but no sign of him. You can imagine how we felt that night without a warm furry body snuggled up to us and our thoughts of him lost in the cold winter weather. Every day and evening for over a week, we were out walking further and further afield calling in a vain endeavour to find him, but all to no avail. Messages at the vets and notices on trees brought no news and we finally had to accept that he had gone for good, despite having his collar and name medallion always on him. Susie was equally distraught, but managed to get back to normal quicker than we did. We could not imagine life without Richard and I think we were at first quite resentful of our new home that had brought such a tragedy into our lives. Even now, while writing this, I do not know the exact date that he disappeared as we hadn't the heart to write it in our birthday book at the time. It was almost a year later that we got another cat to live with the boys, us and Susie.

By now, I had been promoted to junior engineer in the development laboratory where I worked and the head of the lab had a cat which produced kittens at the beginning of the following year. How it happened I can no longer remember, but one evening we went to see him and came away with a long haired black kitten. I can offer no excuse as to why we named her Blackie, it is such an ordinary name, with no real thought behind it, from the perspective of many years later! She was a pleasant little cat and the boys loved her but she was unfortunate to be overshadowed by an amazing event

that happened just a year after she came to live with us. Perhaps we over reacted and she felt her nose was put out of joint, but I am jumping ahead of myself and the events that followed.

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