



# Home Without a Home

By Suzi Allen. Written as a bit of a narrative from my early childhood when Langdon Court was a children's convalescent home. My mother was the cook and dad the gardener, well under gardener really. I've extracted these pages from a longer memoir but the rest of it isn't really relevant to Langdon Court. The memoir is titled Home Without a Home because we were always in tied accommodation, wherever we lived and my parents worked.

## Home Without a Home

---

I was in total awe! To a three year old this place we'd moved to seemed like a huge fairytale castle. In fact it had originally been built in Jacobean times for a very wealthy titled family. I couldn't believe how big it was. Corridors with rooms leading off long stone passageways, even staff busying themselves with whatever staff did. My mother was to be the cook at this children's convalescent home and my father would take on the care of the enormous gardens under the guidance of the head gardener Harold. There seemed to be fields and glasshouses as far as I could see and I could hear chickens somewhere. This must mean there was a hen house and maybe my sister and I would be allowed to help gather the warm, freshly laid eggs.



*Dad 3rd left, Mum 3rd right, Sister Avery 2<sup>nd</sup> right, Harold far right*

~~~~~

My first full day at Langdon Court, I was sent to find my father for his lunch.

“He'll be in the potting shed,” Mum called. I started to make my way along the path in what I assumed was the right direction. I remember the tall, menacing trees either side of me as I hurried along. After what seemed an absolute age to me, (after all I was only three years old), I found myself beside the chicken run. That smell of bran cooking up with other bits and pieces I knew absolutely nothing about, was to my nose, sweet and delicious. I stopped and breathed in the glorious fumes. Then, looking about me, I suddenly realised I had no idea

## Home Without a Home

---

where I was! Panic set in. I started to cry and must have made a hell of a noise because the next thing my father was beside me, full of concern.

He was always quiet and gentle, dark hair, quite tall and slim built with a slight limp. Mum used to say he'd never been the same since his experience at Dunkirk during the second world war. It must have been horrendous for the men trapped there for days, hoping and waiting to be picked up and brought back home. Mum on the other hand, was always full of energy and we could always hear her coming. Fairly tall with jet black hair and skin that tanned so easily. Her voice would carry all through the corridors, full of authority.

“Come on,” Dad said, “I've got just the thing to cheer you up.” He took my hand and led me along another path to what I would learn was the potting shed. To my young eyes, it was huge! “Come on, but be very quiet. There's something special over in the corner to see.” At the very end of a bench that ran the full length of the shed was a kind of box construction with a hinged lid. He lifted the lid very carefully. “Take a look in here. What can you see?” I stood on tiptoe and peered in. There, huddled into the corner of the box was a heaving bundle of black.

“What is it?” I asked.

“What do you think it is?”

“It's all furry, it's kittens!” I squealed with delight. “Can I hold one, please?” Dad handed me the fattest little bundle of fluff. Jet black eyes closed and mewling gently. His little whiskers tickled my hands. I was in love! This beautiful little kitten was all I needed to stop my tears and make me feel so happy I could have burst.

“Quickly, put him back in the box. Here comes mother cat and she'll know straight away if one of her kittens is missing. Put him down gently now. Maybe you can come back tomorrow and see them all again.”

After this, I decided I was going to enjoy living here. Fields to explore, hens to watch, eggs to collect and kittens to play with. Just wait till I tell my big sister about this morning! I

## Home Without a Home

---

was sure she'd be really jealous, especially about holding the kitten. Andrea was three years older than me and very quiet. I used to think she was Miss Goody Two Shoes, never seeming to be in trouble. She'd inherited Mum's black hair, not like mine which couldn't really decide what colour it was. Maybe brown, maybe chestnut, thin and wispy.

The walk back up the path to the house didn't seem nearly as long as when I was looking for Dad. We passed the hens again and I asked if I could stop and feed them some corn.

"Maybe tomorrow. We'd better get back in for lunch or your mother will be cross with us," chuckled Dad.

The next day I couldn't wait to go back out and explore some more. My sister was home today as it was Saturday so no school.

"Come on Andrea, I'll show you where the hens are. You wait till you get a whiff of their food cooking! It smells really sweet and there are so many of them!" Feeling much braver today I led the way down the path as far as the chicken run.

"Wait!" cried Andrea. "What's at the end of this other path?" There was a fork in the path, just as it followed around the bend beside where the hens lived. My sister being my sister, started off down the other way and I had to run to catch up with her. Although the quiet and well behaved one, she was also very adventurous and was always finding something out of the ordinary for us to do.

"Wow! Just look at that! Do you think anyone lives there?" I asked. Ahead of us was a beautiful but really rundown looking cottage. There was a stable block built at right angles to it. We peered in, expecting to see horses there, but it was empty. Some mouldy old hay in the corner and the paint was peeling off everywhere. We didn't think any horses had been here for a very long time. Stealthily creeping up to the front door of the cottage we saw there was a flaky wooden sign on the wall, to the right.

## Home Without a Home

---

“Fir Cottage,” Andrea announced, as she traced her fingers over the letters. “Come on, let's look inside.”

I wasn't quite as brave as my big sister so hung back while she tried to open the door. After some pushing by Andrea, the door finally creaked and stuttered but opened just enough for us to squeeze in. Our mouths fell open and our eyes popped wide. It looked like something from a scary film. Cobwebs everywhere and I'm sure I heard something scratching in the corner.

“Come on,” urged Andrea. “There's a broom over there. Let's sweep up and see what it's really like. We could use this as our den and come and play here. Look, there's an old fashioned range over there.” She pointed to the opposite wall from the door. True, there was a range but it was under a thick covering of dust and spiders' webs. Everything was so dirty. At three years old I didn't really relish the thought of cleaning this! But my sister could be very persuasive.

“I tell you what,” she said. “There's no water here, but if we walk over to where the chickens are we can get some in a bowl and then bring it back to scrub the table and the range.” Hunting around Andrea eventually found a chipped old enamel bowl. At least it didn't have any holes in it.

“You stay here and I'll go and get the water. You'll only spill it if you go.” Left on my own I picked up the broom and tried to sweep some of the muck off the table before we washed it. But what were we going to use as a cloth? Ah, I remembered the mouldy hay next door in the stable. I reckoned if we scrunched some of that up and dipped it into the water it would do for now. When we went home we could have a look for something more suitable.

The chattering went on well after bedtime, we were so excited and full of plans.

“Of course, we're going to need plates, cups, dishes and some cutlery.” Always the more practical of the two of us, Andrea had started to make a list. My eyelids wouldn't stay

## Home Without a Home

---

open. I drifted off to sleep seeing us playing "House" in Fir Cottage. I wondered how many other children would have an opportunity like this.

~~~

When Andrea was at school during the week, I would spend my days in the kitchen with Mum. It was here I learned to read. I would sit at the smaller wooden table in the side window with simple books and either Mum or one of her kitchen helpers would come by and give me a helping hand with the words. By the time I started school I was quite a proficient reader. Dad would walk Andrea and me to the end of the drive where the school bus would collect us. The journey would have taken about half an hour but to me it seemed to take at least an hour. I don't remember much about it except the long straight road down to Bovisand and around the cliffs at Jennycliff. The homeward journey was a different route and we had to change from the school bus to a public service at Heybrook Bay. I was one of the youngest on this route and was thankful for a big sister in those days. Sometimes though, Andrea wouldn't be with me. If for any reason she had stayed home then I would have to manage this trip on my own. There were others with me as far as Heybrook Bay but from then on I was alone. Quite scary for someone so young, but we didn't feel threatened in those days.

I remember on my first day at school the teacher wanted me to join a group of others sitting at the table where all new pupils were to be taught how to read.

"Please Miss," I tentatively squeaked. "I can already read."

"Of course you can't Susan, you're not even four years old yet!"

I was so upset. Why didn't she believe me?

"But Miss, I really can." Turning round, I saw a set of books on the bookcase in the corner that I recognised. I had been reading these very same books before I came to school.

"Miss," I said, pointing, "I can read those books over there. I've got them at home."

## Home Without a Home

---

“Alright then, bring one of them up here. We'll soon see that you can't actually read yet.” Miss Coulton seemed rather agitated.

I took the lovely red book, my favourite colour at the time, up to her desk and opened it up.

“Page one,” I announced and began to read. Miss Coulton slammed the book shut and pushed me away.

“Right then Susan, I suppose you'd better go and sit with the older girls.”

I was so pleased I didn't have to spend much time with this teacher. She left the school not long after I started there. I hope her departure didn't have anything to do with me!

~~~

Another activity that I really enjoyed was scrubbing the table top. I would be stood on a chair and have an apron tied around me. Because I was only three years old this apron would be rolled up and then the ties would be wound around me until they were a manageable length. Next I would be given a big enamel bowl filled with warm soapy water. Then the scrubbing brush, heavy, wooden and with sharp bristles that hurt your hands if you caught one awkwardly. Firstly I would get a cloth and soak it in the water. I loved the feel of the smooth but frothy soap bubbles. Splosh, across the table. Then to scrub it. Such energy to really rub the grain of the wood until any sign of unwanted food or dirt would have vanished completely. Following that, the cloth again, to mop up all of the water and suds. This task could take me some time and if I wasn't pleased with the result first time, then I would demand a bowl of clean soapy water for another round of scrubbing. I think my mother and her helpers must have had the patience of Job. I don't remember ever being shouted at. They always had time for me.

At midday Sister Avery would come into the kitchen to serve the patients' lunches. Always two courses and I remember all the dishes of semolina being slid the full length of an enormous serving table. She would tell me to get to the other end ready to catch them as

## Home Without a Home

---

she slid them down to me. Of course, being only three years old I could only just see above the top of the table. I would have to be ready, arms outstretched, hands in position to catch the dishes as they arrived at full speed!

“Come on Susan, catch this one!” she would shout. This was our lunchtime fun. I'm sure Sister used to enjoy it because she always had a smile on her face.

It was during my hours in the kitchen that I stumbled across a way for Andrea and me to collect some crockery for our venture in Fir Cottage. I'd been watching what happened when a plate, dish or whatever got broken. If a plate was broken then just one piece from it was put into the designated drawer. Matron Plum would come to the kitchen once a month to go through the contents and identify what she needed to order. Each piece would be taken in her hands and turned this way and that until she was sure if it was a dish, a plate or something else. Well this looked too good to be true. Even for my young age I worked out that if Andrea and I somehow managed to get hold of a plate, we could take it away and break it. Then we could put all of the pieces into the drawer. So if a plate broke into four pieces we'd put them all in with the broken crockery and hope nobody realised our bits fitted together perfectly. But if we could get away with it that would mean one new plate for stock and three for us! We would wait until nobody was about and then one of us would keep watch while the other sneaked all the pieces in. Then all we had to do was try to get hold of the extra plates when they arrived. Again this involved some watch-keeping and dexterity! Every time there was a delivery we would have to somehow get our share down to Fir Cottage. Before too long we found we had collected a full quota of crockery for a family of four. It was a bit more difficult to get hold of flour, butter and eggs but somehow we did! We spent many happy hours playing in Fir Cottage but it was our closely guarded secret. Even Caroline and Bobby, our friends from the farm knew nothing about it.

Although the old range was still there it wasn't working and anyway I don't think we would ever have thought about lighting it! But once we'd cleaned the top of it we really had fun. We could mix a batter with flour, eggs and milk “borrowed” from the kitchen and then

## Home Without a Home

---

use one of the plates we'd taken to use in place of a frying pan. Pancakes, dropped scones, we made them all, or so we thought. In actual fact we were just making one dreadful mess with foodstuff that should have been used for the patients of Langdon Court. At our young age though, it was just fun to play house and at least we were keeping out of the way of Mum and Dad who needed to get on and work. There was still a wooden table and four chairs in the kitchen, all riddled with woodworm and a bit rickety but to us this was a wonderful place to pretend we were grown-ups! "Food" would be served up using all the crockery we'd secretly taken although I don't think anything was actually eaten. Raw eggs with the flour and milk somehow wasn't very appetising!

~~~

Back in the kitchen, I loved the days when the radio would be on in the background with all the hits of the day playing. There was Patti Page with "How much is That Doggy in the Window", Perry Como, Dean Martin, Alma Cogan. I loved to hear them all. Jessie or Judith, Mum's kitchen helpers, would sweep me up into their arms and dance around the massive serving table while singing along. I laughed and never wanted them to put me down. Then Jack the baker would come in with the day's delivery of bread. Now I'm an adult, I realise, looking back, that he was a bit of a Jack the Lad. He would flirt and tease the two women as well as my mother. I remember one day, he must have said something to really upset Mum as she got hold of the pastry she was making, rolled it into a ball and threw it straight at him, scoring a hit right in the middle of his forehead! I'm sure it was all harmless fun and he was always very kind to me, often bringing me something from his van, a doughnut or little bun.

On sunny days we might get the opportunity for a special trip through the woods to the beach. Some of the children in the convalescent home would be well on the road to recovery from whatever illness they'd had and were almost fit enough to go home. One or two of them had cystic fibrosis, an illness that didn't have a very good prognosis at all in those days. I remember walking past the ward one day, seeing a young boy called Tommy

## Home Without a Home

---

leaning right over the side of the bed. I thought he was falling out so called to him and ran in. The nurse on duty stopped me,

“Out you go Susan, Tommy here is about to have some physiotherapy for his chest. Off you go now.” So off I went on my travels through the long corridors, exploring and making up my own stories about what might have happened in this enormous old house. Then I heard a call from downstairs,

“Come on, all of you who are coming to the beach hurry up. Shrimp is waiting!”

It was Sister Avery getting ready for the outing. Shrimp, her donkey, lived in the field beside Langdon Court and was sometimes employed to pull an old cart that was used to transport us all to the sands. This was really exciting. About six of us would be loaded into the back and then Sister Avery would lead Shrimp through the woods, along the cliff path and down onto the beach. I always wanted to spend far more time there than we were allowed. I've always loved the seaside and even now have to go and have my fix from time



to time. Occasionally we were able to walk instead of go in the cart. This was particularly good when the bluebells were in flower. The floor of the wood would be a gentle sea waving in the breeze.

One day when we were walking through the woods, Andrea bent down to tie her shoelace that had come undone. Just as she was about to get back up we saw a snake slithering up behind her.

## Home Without a Home

---

"It's an adder!" screamed one of the boys. I don't think I'd ever seen my sister move so fast. She ran all the way to the edge of the woods and waited until the rest of us caught up with her.

Langdon Court itself had the most amazing gardens. All quite formal. One smaller piece overlooked sweeping fields and a path that led to the woods. But at the back of the building there was a beautiful terraced area. Various flower beds and, to my very young eye, an enormous fish pond. The water was for most of the time covered with duckweed so giving the illusion of it being grassy. Our old cat Tim, ginger with a white bib and four white socks, must have thought it was grass as one day he stepped over the edge and landed in it. Fortunately Dad was working nearby so heard him crying. He managed to fish poor Tim out, one very bedraggled ginger tom cat, feeling very sorry for himself. I don't expect he ever made that mistake again.



*Me with Tim the cat*

While on the subject of animals, another little bit that includes Shrimp the adorable donkey. I'd been having an argument with Andrea about keeping to her side of our bedroom and in fact I think it might have come to blows. Anyway, she had a Sunday School medal that had been awarded for good behaviour. This argument, or fight as it probably became, had really escalated and I wanted to punish her. So, the first thing that came to my mind was to get the medal and give it to Shrimp. As far as I was concerned he was far more deserving!

## Home Without a Home

---

Medal in hand, I ran through the corridors and made my way out to the field. There was Shrimp, in his usual position near the fence, looking somewhat bedraggled in the steady rainfall. But every time I got near him he decided to move on. In the end I hurled the medal into the field shouting,

“Shrimp! You deserve this far more than Andrea, but you're going to have to come and look for it.” That Sunday School prize was never seen again. I was in trouble with my parents and I think this is the only time I remember my father being really angry with me.

Being left to our own devices much of the time we were able to invent games, build dens and generally have a lot more fun and freedom than many children of our ages. The Manor had an industrial automatic washing machine and of course we wanted to find out how to use it. We had a few dolls' clothes that would benefit from a good scrub so we decided this would be a great piece of equipment to use for the task. We gathered up a few tiny jumpers and little pairs of trousers then wound our way through the stone corridors to what was called The Laundry. In reality it was a kind of outhouse, connected to the main building by these corridors.

“How do we get the water into the machine?” I asked.

“Oh that will all happen when we close the door and turn it on.” Andrea was always so practical when it came to things like this so I trusted her completely.

“Right. Now let's pour some soap powder in here.” She lifted the lid to a small square compartment.

“Are you sure that's right?” I was getting a bit worried in case we broke the machine.

“Yes, silly. Look, just put the clothes in that big opening and I'll close it all and start the machine up.”

After a few attempts it at last burst into life. What we hadn't realised or taken into account was the fact that this machine was built to deal with several sheets at a time, not a

## Home Without a Home

---

handful of tiny dolls' clothes! We kept checking throughout that afternoon to see if our laundry had finished. It seemed to take forever! After what felt like a very long time the machine finally stopped. We were devastated to find our dolls' clothes had shrunk! They would now be more suitable as finger puppet clothes. Goodness knows how much water and electricity we had used on this exercise and all for nothing. We vowed not to say a word to anyone about this. The clothes would just be lost in the toy box, along with other things we very rarely played with. After all, we had so much else to occupy ourselves with in our new home.



Andrea and me

~ ~ ~

Matron Plum, a very severe looking woman of indeterminate age, was in overall charge of the convalescent home. We would see her once a week as she unlocked The Shop, which was, in fact, a shallow cupboard situated in the wall opposite our sitting room. The key was always attached to a long chain that wound its way into her pocket. Any of the children who were able to walk to this shop and also had some money, would queue up on a Sunday, in anticipation until Matron finally appeared. She would only let them buy one or two items and as far as I remember she only had sweets in her store. Nothing practical like soap or toothpaste. Occasionally Andrea and I were able to join the queue and buy some sweets and maybe take them to Fir Cottage and pretend they were something else like perhaps jam

## Home Without a Home

---

tarts or chocolate sponge. They were never added to the flour and eggs though, but would be placed in two dishes as our Pudding of The Day.

Miss Plum was a severe looking woman. Thin, bony even. She wore glasses which were round and had dark brown frames. Her uniform dress was dark blue which she wore every day along with a nurse's white cap, trimmed with lace. One thing we did like about Matron Plum was her dog. Thinking back, it was maybe a spaniel or perhaps a long haired dachshund, but I can't remember his name, so let's call him Rex. He was a soft, gentle dog and Andrea, being older than me and so thought of as more responsible, was allowed to take him on his lead sometimes when we walked to our friends who lived on the farm. One day when we were on our way home after spending the morning with Caroline and Bobby, we saw a big black bird on the side of the road. It was hopping around but didn't seem able to fly away from us. Andrea immediately took charge of the situation and handed me the dog's lead. (I've just remembered his name – he was called Rex!) She then picked this great big bird up and with one hop he was on her shoulder. We continued our walk along the drive towards the back door of the big house. We must have looked a sight with a great big black bird on Andrea's shoulder and me trying to keep control of Rex. It transpired we had rescued an injured crow. Dad took the bird and put it into a large cage that was sometimes used to isolate a troublesome chicken. The crow stayed with us for a few weeks until he was fit enough to fly off into the wild again. After that day I was allowed to take Rex myself from time to time, as long as I didn't go any further than the end of the drive.

~~~

I woke early one morning, before even the birds had started their dawn chorus. My head was banging and I was hot, very hot. I wanted to scratch all over. Of course, our bedroom was downstairs, near where the night nurse on duty would be sitting. I wanted Mum, so I put on my brown woolly dressing gown, the one that had a blue rabbit embroidered on it, then pushed my feet into my slippers and grabbed my little torch, because

## Home Without a Home

---

the corridors were always so dark until the day staff arrived and turned on all the lights. Slowly, holding myself against the wall, I made my way to the night nurse's station.

“Oh my goodness Susan! You gave me quite a fright there. What are you doing out of bed?”

I was pleased to see it was Stella on duty that night, she was always kind to us.

“I don't feel very well,” I whispered. “My throat hurts and I feel hot and wobbly.”

“Come on, let's get you back to bed and then I'll go and fetch Mum for you.”

Stella tucked me up and gave me a glass of water. I was very thankful I didn't have to climb up the three flights of stairs to the little attic room where Mum and Dad slept.

A few minutes later Mum came running into the bedroom. After taking my temperature and looking at my body, which now had a horrible angry looking rash, she declared she was sure I had measles. I remember the curtains were kept closed for about a week and I slept on and off for much of that time. Then one day, as I was beginning to feel a bit better, Matron Plum came to visit me. This in itself felt special, but she had presents for me. A farmyard with a painted board marked out with green fields, brown tracks and blue duck-ponds. There were delightful carved animals and a wooden farmhouse. Horses, cows, sheep, pigs and a couple of dogs. Then I saw there was a shop as well, with miniature scales, a little cash register and empty tea packs, biscuit boxes and all sorts of other grocery packaging. I suspect many of them came from the used supplies in the kitchen. These two big toys really helped me while away the time as my body regained its strength and I returned to my usual bouncy self.



# Home Without a Home

---

*Side entrance to The Manor*

~~~~~

I had a couple of special friends. One was the daughter of the local police officer and I was very impressed because she got to live in a house with a connecting door leading into the police station itself. The other was called Sheila. She lived not too far from Langdon Court, but didn't use the school bus. They both came to a birthday party my parents put on for Andrea and me. We had a combined one as our birthdays, although three years apart, were on consecutive days. One year, just before our party was due to be held, there was a burst pipe and the lounge we shared with our parents together with the bedroom where Andrea and I slept got flooded. What was going to happen about the celebrations? Mum had bought this elaborate ice cream cake for us and we were going to have a wonderful day. The plumber was called, followed by the decorators. Our rooms were definitely out of use for the next two or three weeks. However, a solution was found. There was a huge, unused room just the other side of a swing door next to our lounge. This was hurriedly cleared and beds for Andrea and me set up in one end. The rest of this enormous room, which had once been used as a glamorous ballroom, was converted into a family area for all of us to use, complete with sofa and armchairs. We were so excited, what an amazing space to hold our party in!

The day arrived and we dressed in our pretty frocks. Probably the only time I wore a dress except for school. I usually loved to be in shorts and tops, being a bit of a Tomboy. I went along the corridor to the kitchen,

“Race you to it Andrea!” I shouted. But as I approached I heard my mother sobbing. I'd never heard her do anything like this before. It frightened me. What on earth could have happened? She reached for me and held me to her.

“Oh Susan, your lovely cake. The fridge broke down during the night and the cake that was in the ice box part, it's all melted.”

## Home Without a Home

---

I didn't understand how the fridge could break down. Andrea and I hadn't been near it so it wasn't anything we'd done. Well, that was a positive. But why should it matter, couldn't we just have the cake in dishes instead, and pretend it was some trifle or similar?

“You know Susan, I think that's what we'll do. I've got time to make a sponge cake and decorate it for you and your sister so let's crack on with it.”

So the day was saved and all our friends had a great time. We played games like Musical Chairs, Blind Man's Bluff and pass the ring on the thread. This was a game I played in later years when I ran a Brownie Pack. Everyone stands in a circle, there's a ring of some sort, maybe a curtain ring, threaded onto a long piece of string that's tied into a circle. Then all players take hold of the string and the ring is passed from one to another, with one extra person blindfolded and standing in the centre. Music is played and when it stops the blindfolded one has to guess who has hold of the ring. Kim's game was another favourite. Several items were placed on a tray and we were all given a set time to try to memorise them. Then the tray was cleared and we had to write down what we could remember from them. The afternoon ended all too soon and we were soon waving goodbye to all our friends. And the ice cream cake? Everyone loved it!

~~~~~

I remember when I first saw a television. Langdon Court had invested in a projector and the programmes were seen on a large screen that was, with much effort, pulled and secured into place at one end of the room. once or twice a week as a special treat. Andrea and I would go through to join the patients in their play room. Great excitement then followed as Dad would get everything ready. We'd all push to get the best seats, although I'm sure we could have watched from almost anywhere in the room, the screen was so big. Occasionally a film would be hired, cartoons being the favourite. There would definitely be a selection over the Christmas period although most of the children, if they were well enough, would go home to be with their parents for the festivities, but some had to remain at the home. These patients would be carried down to the lounge and wrapped up in the biggest armchairs with

## Home Without a Home

---

warm fluffy blankets. Then some orange squash would be served and we'd settle down to a cartoon or some adventure like Robin Hood.

Of course no Christmas would be complete without a visit from Father Christmas. This was when my father came into his own. He'd push a pillow down his front, securing it with an enormous brown leather belt. Then the red suit would be donned, along with white cotton wool beard and of course the red hood. On his feet would be his big gardening wellington boots. There was one little boy, Michael, who loved Dad and tried to follow him everywhere, often helping when it was time to feed the hens. Of course, Michael knew all about boots for such chores so when Dad appeared all dressed up Michael piped up,

“That's not Father Christmas, that's Mr. Moore. He's got Mr Moore's boots on!” Mum then had to come up with a reason why Santa would be wearing Dad's boots.

“Well Michael, Father Christmas forgot his boots today and had to borrow some so it really is him!” Eventually Michael settled but gave my father a sideways look as if to say “I know it's really you Mr. Moore.”

~~~~~

Every Christmas Sister Avery would give us a family ticket for the pantomime being produced at The Palace Theatre, Plymouth. One particular year it was to be Puss in Boots and Mr Avery, a well known cobbler whose handmade shoes and boots were very much sought after, was commissioned to make a pair of red boots for Puss. Those boots have stayed in my mind all this time. They were exquisite, bright red and reaching just above the actor's knees. How I would have loved such a pair for myself.

I remember there was a particular song in the pantomime, “Why does Everybody Call me Big 'Ead?” I think it was Freddie Frinton, a well known comic actor of the day, who was leading the audience with this number. When the appropriate line was reached we were all supposed to join in by shouting, “Big 'Ead!” However, being three years old and always being reminded not to drop my aitches, after all the audience had shouted I piped up alone,

## Home Without a Home

---

“Big Head!” I thought this was how it should be said and was trying to correct everyone. By the time we all reached the end of the number, Freddie would hold his hand to his ear and say,

“Wait for her, where is she? Come on then, Big Head!” With laughter all around me, at that age I hadn't realised I was the butt of the joke.

While on the subject of pantomimes, one year the staff at Langdon Court decided they would produce one for the children who would be staying for Christmas. They all agreed it would be Cinderella and my sister Andrea was to play Buttons. I wasn't happy about this at all as there wasn't a part for me. When I heard about the casting I stood sulking, my bottom lip stuck out, quivering. Eventually the producer, one of the nurses, relented and said I could be a page. However, my part was just to dress up and stand to the side of the stage throughout the whole performance, with nothing to say. On the one hand I was pleased to be involved but on the other I did so wish to have some lines! After much sulking and foot stamping my part was extended to allow me to carry the silver slipper around on a blue velvet cushion. Our pantomime was very well received and the day was rounded off with jelly and ice cream all round.