
Opening Extract from...

Bread, Jam and a Borrowed Pram

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A nurse's story from the streets

DOT MAY DUNN

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Although the events and the characters in this book are based on real experiences, all names have been changed.

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Monday, 8th September 1958

9.00 a.m.

With a roar, and a belch of diesel fumes, the bus pulls away from the pavement's edge and my friends are gone. I know they will climb to the top deck; Janet will have to have 'a quick puff' and Joyce, moaning about smokers, will be behind her. I search the bus windows for them but already they seem to have vanished inside. I peer down the road but the bus has gone and with it my student days.

I had trained as a midwife and, during my training, had been attracted to Community Midwifery but it was already on the wane and no posts were being filled. Midwifery on the ward at the Burlington General Hospital had not been for me and, keen to get out and about, I had applied to Burlington Council for a place on their Health Visitor's Course, and had been accepted.

Janet and Joyce had been my constant companions on the course; through all trials, tribulations and the impossibly hard subject matter, they had been there. But the year has ended; we three have passed the examinations, and have celebrated to the fullest extent.

Now we are trained to work in preventive medicine and this morning, one by one, we stood before the Director of Health Visitors and signed contracts to work as Health

Visitors. I will be working in Maternity and Child Health, based in one of the city's Child Health Clinics. As well as running clinics for both children and antenatal women, I will be expected to visit, on a regular basis, all homes where a woman is pregnant or where there are children under the age of five years old. I have been told that my patch will be in the centre of the city; Lancaster Street Clinic to be exact. Janet and Joyce are to work in the suburbs. I can't quite believe our time together is over, but at the same time I am eager to start my new job.

A small, oval, pewter-coloured badge now resides on the lapel of my jacket and announces, to anyone who would wish to enquire, that I work for the city of Burlington. I think of the lessons drilled into me. We have been informed many times that we visit not just the child but the whole family, that we take with us nothing but our black bag and our professional knowledge, and that we offer a non-judgemental ear and advice to suit every need. We have no right of entry to any person's property; we must, by our professional behaviour, seek, and if possible obtain, such permission. Should entry be denied and we deem it essential, we may seek the support of the Medical Officer.

As I run my thumb across my badge to reassure myself that it's there, I think with relief how glad I am that I have been reimbursed for the money spent on 'suitable clothing to be worn at work.' During the last couple of weeks of the course, the Senior Tutor had said with a stern face, 'It is your professional knowledge and behaviour which is up for judgement and not your dress. But remember, you are a professional and must appear so – these aren't parties you'll be attending. A yearly allowance will be given, from which a navy-blue suit, three blouses, white, cream or light blue, two pairs of black or navy shoes, a navy rain coat, a

navy top coat and a navy hat, must be purchased. Do not spend great amounts of money on your first suit; in time you will need a warm winter coat, believe me.'

This morning receipts have been presented, and the suitability of our purchases examined. I am pleased to say that my new clothes have been deemed acceptable and I have been reimbursed.

Janet and Joyce are gone, and the whirl of the city encompasses me. I have walked away from the bus stop and, as I turn, my reflection in a shop window looks at me. The neat dark suit with its fitted jacket and calf-length skirt, and the low-heeled shoes, makes my slim, five-foot figure look almost frail, and the light auburn hair, which refuses not to curl, almost hides the navy cap, which sits on the crown of my head. Brushing the hair back under the cap I turn and, with a racing heart and a proud stretch of the mouth, a habit inherited from my four feet ten inches of fiercely determined mother, I head for my own stop, from which I know the bus to Lancaster Street Child Health Clinic leaves and my new life beckons.

10.00 a.m.

'This is your box.'

The hand, with its age marks and manicured nails, lies on the top of a brown wooden box. Eighteen inches wide and extending the width of the desk, the brown varnished box looks unimpressive. The voice continues: 'As far as I know, the caseload is about a thousand; no one has worked it for the last six months, except for new deliveries, of course.'

I look across at her face; grey hair closely surrounds an equally grey face, and small eyes, behind their rimmed glasses, hold little sparkle. Her mouth, whose lipstick has almost disappeared, attempts to widen into a smile and the

hand, which she places on my shoulder, I take as an attempt at comradeship.

'I'll leave you to get acquainted with your caseload; you might start with a quick look at your patch.' So saying she taps the varnished nail of her forefinger on a piece of cardboard, which resides on the desk against which we both stand. 'If you want any help, you know where my office is.'

Before I can say that I have no idea where she hides, she has turned and on silent feet has left the room. The door remains open, and although the day outside is sunny and bright, this room is dull and stuffy. The large hall, through which we had just passed, had been equally dull, but because it was large and had no ceiling, only rafters, it felt airy – that is, if you can call that distinct smell of a medical establishment airy.

10.15 a.m.

I take off my suit jacket, anxious not to crease it on its first outing, and hang it on the back of the upright chair which stands by the desk. I need to still my anxiety by doing something, so taking a deep breath I look around the room. Another desk stands under a high window whose leaded lights let in little illumination. Dominating the ledge of the window, and acting as a screen against sunshine entering to lighten our darkness, the face of the Virgin Mary looks down on a neat and tidy desk. I tell myself, 'No doubt about *her* point of view.'

Having been brought up during the Second World War, under the influence of the Presbyterian Church but by a Jewish mother, I have long doubted the authenticity of any one brand of religious doctoring. I have also learned not to waste my time in argument with the confirmed so I hold my own council, unless asked for an opinion.

A third desk faces the far wall. Piled high with clinic notes and various pieces of paper, it gives little information about its owner other than that he or she is disorganised.

The ring of a phone fills the room and I almost jump out of my skin. A table stands by the door and a blotting pad with a curled and torn edge, covered many times over with numbers, names and doodles, supports a black Bakelite phone. The ringing continues and no one comes to answer it.

I remind myself that I am now a qualified Health Visitor and that it is my responsibility to deal with cases, so taking a deep breath I answer the phone.

'Lancaster Street Clinic, Miss Compton speaking, may I help you?'

For a moment there is silence then a distinctly Irish, and educated, voice asks, 'Is Mrs Burns there please?'

Since entering the building I had seen no one but the superintendent, who had just left me, and whose name I knew to be Miss Hampton, and a clinic clerk, whose name I did not remember, but whom, I recalled, had been introduced as 'miss', so I make the assumption that Mrs Burns is a fellow Health Visitor. The voice speaks in my ear again. 'Hello, is that the health clinic?'

Now I jump to attention,

'Yes, I'm very sorry for keeping you, but is Mrs Burns a Health Visitor?'

The voice half laughs as it replies. 'Yes indeed she is, and you must be Miss Compton the new Health Visitor. I have heard much about you and can I say that you are very welcome.'

The voice stops and I wonder if the speaker has gone, but then the voice speaks again. 'By the way, I am Father Michael from the presbytery; tell her I will ring later.'

The click sounds and the phone goes dead, so assuming

that the Virgin Mary looks down on Mrs Burn's desk, I place a note in a suitable position before heading out to explore.

4.00 p.m.

I made an attempt to take a look at my patch on foot but the dark factories, the incessant traffic, the invasion of schoolchildren and finally the rain, had sent me searching for the bus.

It is crowded; in fact, it is so crowded that I am unable to put both my feet on the floor. I stand with one foot on top of the other, my face very close to the back of a woman whose toilet has been less than adequate. In these crowded and damp conditions her odour is overpowering. But still the voice of the conductor calls out: 'Pass down the bus please; move down the bus as far as you can go.'

I can go no further: the large lady blocks my way and almost blocks my airways. Beyond the lady stands a man; his back is broad and bent, and in the grey jacket it stands steadfast, like granite that has stood for millennia. Virgin, untouched, bus space extends before him. Like open range in the cowboy films, it offers space and fresh air. With a jolt I am thrown even deeper into the odorous body and we are both pressed against the granite mass, which moves not an inch. Another man, in a jacket and flat cap, rises from one of the seats off to my right and he fights to gain control of his body as the bus jerks. He leans back against the fogged and wet window, then with much kicking of booted feet he makes it to the central aisle of the bus. Every standing passenger leans to their right as he fights his way down the narrow passageway provided and my odorous companion now sinks into the newly vacated seat with a grunting sigh.

A brawl ensues by the entrance to the bus as

schoolchildren in shirt sleeves, workmen in overalls, and women with children in their arms fight to escape the sudden torrential downpour of rain that has swamped us in the past hour. Again the voice shouts, 'Only the first three please, get off the bus, sir, only the first three. Two seats upstairs, one passenger inside, get off the platform, sir; I won't start the bus until you do.'

The voice continues, but the words are lost. Now I can breathe, and if I lean sideways I can see out of the window. Well, at least I think that I can see out, because the dull grey, damp, silent mass inside the bus seems to be repeated on the other side of the glass as the bus moves, and dark grey walls, with black iron-clad windows, crawl across my vision. They continue to fill the whole of my view for such a length of time that I begin to feel that I am on the wrong bus. I had seen a canal marked on the map of my area, and in my mind I had envisaged the green and pleasant walks of my childhood which I had taken by the Cromford Canal with my father. My father is a coal miner, but much of the time he does have above ground has always been spent in long walks in the Derbyshire countryside. Throughout my childhood I had walked up green hills and down steep dales beside this strong and silent man, pausing only occasionally to examine a hedgerow flower, a shy violet found for Mothering Sunday or a wild orchid in high summer.

But here only wet and bedraggled figures crawl past grey walls, heads drawn into jackets, flat caps pulled low against the rain. Two small shops stand open by the pavement's edge, their insides dark and forbidding, and their windows, made opaque by time and traffic dust, show few wares. The bus passes slowly and a man with hands cupped stands by a shop door; he strikes a match, lowers his head over his

hands, and then with head back he watches me crawl past as smoke pours from his nose and mouth.

'Canal! Anyone for the canal?'

As the conductor's voice calls out again, it rises to a higher note to sound above the grinding of the bus's gears, and again I am thrown forward, this time into the smell of engine oil, as the man of granite finally turns, mumbles 'sorry,' and makes his way off the bus, his lighted cigarette held high. There is much coming and going and several of the windows are wiped; now I know that I am on the right bus and I try again to look for the canal. But from my present vantage point I can see no green, only grey, in all its differing shades.

'Lancaster Street and the Health Clinic, Health Clinic here, miss.' The voice rings out and brings me back with a start. All eyes watch me as, with my black leather bag held close to my chest, my face burning red and my once neat jacket steaming, I descend on to the now sunlit pavement.

5.30 p.m.

That night, my landlady, Mrs Ramshaw, opens the sitting-room door as I close the front door; I had seen the lace curtain move as the gate clicked open, and I knew that she would be waiting for me. It is a well-established house standing in a long row of similar houses in the Moseley area, in what is locally know as a respectable part of town.

'Mr Ramshaw, God rest his soul, was an engineer, worked all through the war . . .'

Although I knew that she was not of the Catholic religion, as she had a Methodist chapel prayer book resting on the hall table, she had crossed herself before dabbing the corner of her eye with a small handkerchief. Throughout

this well-practised exercise she had not taken her eyes from me.

'. . . but there we are, times are now hard and I must let a few rooms.'

She had given me this information on my first visit, when I answered her advertisement in the *Burlington Times*.

My boyfriend, Alan, had been delighted when I'd taken a place on Burlington Council's Health Visitor course. It had meant that I would be staying in the city where he was completing, or trying to complete, his doctorate. So when these lodgings, not too far from the university, came on the market I had eagerly snapped them up. But after a year under Mrs Ramshaw's watchful eye, the digs have started to lose their appeal.

'Hah, Miss Compton.' She emphasises the double S at the end of my prefix with an outlet of air that sounds like a viper. 'I had many applicants for the rooms in my premises; I selected you because you informed me that you were of a sound Presbyterian background.'

Without moving her eyes from me she places her hand on the prayer book that continues to remain in its particular, and as far as I know, unmoved, position on the hall table. 'Now I hear from your neighbour, Mr Betts, that when I was away last weekend, a gentleman was in your rooms until late into the night, and possibly all night, as he was seen going to the bathroom at an early hour.'

The word 'rooms' makes me laugh as I have one room for bed and sitting, a small partitioned section as a kitchen, and the toilet facilities are shared with Mr Betts, who is a biology teacher at the local grammar school and who looks and behaves like one of his own bottled specimens. I have no doubt that he had been spying on me until late and that he was up early on the same job. He had, on many

occasions, visited my room on the most ridiculous pretences, and I had had difficulty in getting him out before bedtime.

Her voice continues on as I try to head for the stairs and the safety of a closed door.

'This is not the first time that I have had to remind you of the ten-thirty rule. My dear Charles, I know, would not put up with such behaviour in his house, nor would he allow such a laggard, as your gentleman friend appears to be, to enter his estate.'

I back towards the stairs mumbling my apologies and saying that it won't happen again. I had known this was coming because Mr Betts had given me the hint when he passed me on the way from the bathroom this morning.

'When the cat's away, hey, Miss Compton?'

He had looked me up and down as I tried to pass him, and had squeezed against me as I entered the steamy bathroom, which still smelt of his keen aftershave.

Now I feel near to tears. My first day as a Health Visitor has been, to say the least, a shock, and now I feel exhausted. I want to take a bath and to change my clothes. And I want to ring Alan. We have known each other for a long time, from our schooldays, in fact. At school he had always been a pleasant boy, tall and slim, with dark blond hair and a ready and infectious smile. We had shared much of our knowledge, our joint delight in mathematics always pulling us together. But I was not to continue on to university because my father had felt that studying would addle my brains. We were reunited when we met at a 'hop' at the University Students' Union. I was doing my part two midwifery and Alan was just starting to write his doctoral thesis in mathematics. We have become what they now call 'a unit'. Alan still has another eighteen months left in which to complete his thesis.

'Maybe another two years,' he moans.

When I had given up my midwifery job and taken a Student Health Visitor's wages, money had been short. Alan had lodged with other students and I had taken this room. After my results had come through we had talked about taking a larger flat and moving in together. These arrangements had been discussed two weeks ago at the celebration held for my passing but things at the party had got a bit out of hand, so the arrangements were rather tentative. However, after Mr Betts and Mrs Ramshaw's comment, I decide that they must be put into action, if Alan agrees, that is.