

Me Mam's Mam

By David Copson

As if it wasn't enough that the front of the house was blown off and the Co-op tea service landed in pieces in the next street - people had relatively little then, and house-proud stood in for technology and social communication. The hours of cleaning and scrubbing could really be appreciated if someone called; and she'd be all the more proud if they weren't expected.

My mother told me how her mother had "queued in March along a windy street for oranges, fretting that my oldest brother was still in to look after us. Her coat was not sufficient for the five hour wait and would not have saved her if a bomb had landed. And when she arrived home with all the anguish of a hunted fox, she expected to be warmed by our delight in her hard-won prize. But when we grimaced and complained the oranges were sour, her eyes clouded with a grief we could not comprehend. The sugar ration went in ten minutes."

And as if it wasn't enough that she couldn't go to work because five rumbustious children needed an anchor, a playmate, an angel of hearth and home; a confider and a magician - which they expected as a matter of course. And those same children could not provide the warmth at night that such sacrifice deserves, but would instead cry and fight and need her to banish the monsters of their dreams, born of aerial bombardments and sooty winds wailing through the lips of shattered windows and the bare limbs of trees. And in such times she was a soothing storyteller, a soft cradle to all the ills that fill a child's unfinished heart.

And it was some years beyond this before my mother properly explained how my grandfather had returned from a war beyond his imagination, and how he was so changed that he left one day with his few belongings and a belief that children don't really need a father, and set up a new life with a woman with no children whose husband had been stilled by a doodlebug. In those days the other side of the city was a long way away, and you could cry for hours without anybody knowing.

Society flourishes beyond your reach and the mores of ancestors are shed slower than a snake's skin. It was too late by the time she found the sanctuary of peace, and I can only imagine the resignation that had paved the miles of her life. But as her grandchild I would never realise this until she was gone, for she was always a ray of light, a counterpoint to my parents' severity. She bore no medals, had no street named after her, nor had any statue in her honour in the corner of the park. She had taken on a war beyond a war and she had fought alone: and I dare say she was worn out by it all. As if that wasn't quite enough.

