

Thinking Thirties by Lydia Penn

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The rain continued to beat heavily against the window panes, and as Louise looked out she could barely see the dripping green foliage outside; the grey leaden sky indicated yet more rain to come. Why does it always rain on my day off, she thought disconsolately.

She put down the book she had been reading and picked up the box of photos which her mother had left lying on the table. She opened it and idly rummaged through the contents, as she had often done as a child. There were photos of relatives, friends of her mothers, a lot of people that she did not know. There were not many of her childhood, but presently she came across one that she recognised.

It was a group picture of the kindergarten she had attended when they had first moved to the district, five years before the outbreak of war. As she studied the group, she was amazed at the number of children whose names she remembered – There was Denise, Peter, Dolores, John – Oh Yes John. He lived just at the end of their road, and she remembered telling him that it was her birthday, and he had given her a blue coloured pencil with a rubber on the end! Louise smiled at the memory.

His mother was a dressmaker, and I vaguely remember going there for fittings, she thought. It must have been for my uniform, as my other dresses were all bought. As her mind continued to travel back over those early years, the thought of dresses reminded Louise of her especial favourites, a green and white one, and a yellow one which she wore often.

The bungalow they had lived in had been part of an estate build on what had been an apple orchard in Kent just south of London. Louise had quickly made friends of neighbourhood children, as well as those in the primary school she had later attended. There was a Muriel, my special friend, she recalled. But as she pulled more photos out of the box she could only find a few of herself at the beach.

But now she was remembering names. She remembered Michael, who lived opposite; I had a great crush on him, she recalled, but why I can't imagine. I don't think I ever really knew him, and he was younger too. Then there was Mary who lived one house away. We would go and pick bluebells in the nearby woods, remembered Louise. It was quite safe to go almost anywhere in those days. Even the streets were OK to play in as there were so few cars on the road.

This thought brought back memories of the vehicles which did come by, the Walls Ice Cream man. Peddling his cart along the roads – oh yes, and the United Dairies. She remembered the red horse-drawn milk float and the uniformed milkman.

On Saturdays, her father would go out with a shovel to collect the manure for his garden, and I used to go out too, Louise remembered and try to talk to the boy who sat up in front. I remember asking his name, but I don't remember it, and he wasn't at all friendly – he must have had a Saturday job, she decided. She remembered too how she went reluctantly to Sunday School until she saw that boy there, lounging in a pew at the back of the church. No problem in going after that!

Heavens, she thought, was I that precocious! I could have been only eight or nine, and he must have been about thirteen I guess. Then she remembered a severe reprimand from her mother who caught her asking the painter his name. Was that my M.O. she wondered. What a funny little brat I must have been!

A lot of memories come crowding in of friends and events, all suddenly cut short by the war. Louise vividly recalled the day early in September 1940, when she has woken abruptly, her clothes packed and off she went to school in the west which was considered safer during the battle of Britain.

I never had a chance to say goodbye to anyone, she recalled. The war really changed my life, as it did for many. We never went back to Kent, and I never knew what happened to the people we had known. In fact, I never even thought about them. I entered the war as a child, and emerged a woman – well almost!

Glaring at her watch, she realised it was time to move. Hastily cramming the photos back in the box, she went to say goodbye to her parents and dashed out to catch the train which would take her back to London and the large teaching hospital where she was a student nurse. The rain had eased off a little.

"Enjoy your day off"? enquired a familiar voice as she was setting up a dressing trolley on the ward the next day. Louise turned and smiled. "It would have been better if it hadn't rained all day – but there, I know what you're going to say to that, "she added".

Gail, an Australian physiotherapist, laughed. "Come with me to sunny Sydney," she chanted as she moved on.

Gail was planning to return home the following year, and since she and Louise had become close friends she had frequently urged Louise to go with her – a tempting suggestion, but Louise was determined to finish her training and was enjoying her present life.

She loved her job, she loved the social life, the friendships. She had dated several medical students and was now very involved with a doctor with whom she felt she was madly in love. As time passed Louise and Gail continued to meet after, outside the hospital for coffee or a cheap meal at an Indian restaurant nearby. Gail had deferred her return home for a year, and she still talked incessantly about the sunshine there and urged Louise to come for a holiday.

That summer was cold and wet, weather forecast promised a bleak winter ahead and there was still much post-war austerity. Louise had almost finished her training when the shock came. The doctor she had dated for so long suddenly announced his engagement to another nurse!

Crushed and humiliated, Louise began to think again about her future. She sought out Gail. "When are you leaving?" she enquired over coffee one evening.

They booked berths on a P&O liner sailing for Sydney early in May. Louise borrowed the money from her father, bought a lot of new clothes and looked forward to a fresh set of experiences. Her spirits began to lift.

They both enjoyed the voyage and all the shipboard activities. Louise even had a shipboard romance, but even as they exchanged addresses and passionate kisses, each knew that was all it was – a shipboard romance. But it had been fun, and useful to have a male escort as they visited various ports and needed to ward off importunate beggars, and bargain carefully in the markets.

Gail's family, who lived on Sydney's North shore, welcomes Louise warmly and soon made her feel at home. They put on a large 'Welcome Home' barbeque for Gail and Louise met many of her friends and family. She got a job in a small private hospital and stayed as a paying guest in Gail's home. She soon settled into the Australian way of life and joined in all the family activities including attending church with them on Sundays.

It was about her third time there that she noticed a tall, brown-haired, good-looking young man seated on his own in a pew a few rows ahead on the opposite side of the aisle. "Who is he?" she whispered to Gail.

"I don't know. He wasn't here when I went away, but I'll soon find out," Gail whispered back.

Sure enough, when several of the congregation gathered for coffee after the service, Gail, in here free and easy manner approached the man and introduced herself and Louise.

"Eric," he said, and as soon as he spoke, Louise knew he was English too. They chatted generally for a while, then Eric said, "look, I have to go now, but why don't you girls join me for a coffee after the service tonight, and let me catch up on a bit of news about good old

London.”

He told them he was an accountant, in Sydney on a three-year contract, with one year left to go before he returned to England. As they talked it very soon became obvious that, although he was friendly to them both, it was Louise in whom he was really interested.

They began to go out together; Gail was really intrigued. “You should see them together,” she told her mother. “Wow”. This was totally different from what Louise had felt for the doctor – now she knew she was really in love and it was obvious that Eric adored her. Soon they were engaged and six months after they first met they were married in the church where it all began.

Eric loved to reminisce and talk about his childhood, and Louise found herself thinking about those early days for the first time since that wet afternoon when she had poured over her mother’s photos.

They never ceased to marvel at the discovery that both had grown up in that very same town in Kent prior to the war.

“Incredible,” Eric said, “that we should have lived so near each other, and yet had to go 12,000 miles across the world to meet. When we get back to England we must visit all those places together. Do you remember Danson Park. . . .?” and so it went on.

They were in the kitchen of their small unit preparing dinner together as they usually did when Eric started to reminisce again. “I don’t think I ever told you.” he began. “but I had a Saturday job with United Dairies. Do you remember the United Dairies?” He didn’t wait for a reply but went on. “It was great fun. I used to go round with the milkman.”

“Oh,” said Louise. Memories were beginning to stir in her mind. She looked at her husband engrossed in chopping up tomatoes.

“I always remember,” he went on, “there was this one street where the guy used to come out every Saturday with a shovel to collect the manure, and this pesky little girl would follow him and kept asking me my name. She had a yellow dress and long black hair – not unlike yours actually. And she was kind of cute.”

Louise began to smile, as Eric turned towards her and tipped the shopped up tomatoes into the dish she held out.

“You Know, he added, ” I don’t think I ever did tell her my name.”

Louise began to laugh, “Oh yes, you did,” she said, “You told me your name was Eric”.