

## A Long Weekend

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There was a disturbance in the middle of the night: a murmur of voices from shadowy figures in a pool of lamplight near the door. Someone turned towards my small bed which was tucked into the far corner of the room and whispered, "It's all right. Go back to sleep." Being barely awake, I did.

Morning came but it was not all right at all. The room that I had been sharing with my parents was empty. Night-time disruptions were not uncommon in those days but were usually heralded by a siren and, rather than being told to go back to sleep, I had to wriggle into my cosy siren suit - the ancestor of the onesie - and hurry to the air-raid shelter in the garden. This was something different. We were spending the weekend with an old family friend in a small town some distance from our area which was currently favoured by the Luftwaffe. Surely, we could expect a longed-for unbroken sleep but it was not to be. My mother's appendix had chosen that very night to burst and she had been carried away to the cottage hospital.

The day passed in a fog. Even the worries of war were temporarily blotted out for a while until evening arrived with the necessity of returning home. My father, not yet called-up, had to go to work and I to school. There really was an obligation to keep calm and carry on.

The journey by bus was long and I slept for most of the way. The commotion that woke me this time was our arrival. It was dark outside and searchlights were scraping the sky. It was not until we arrived safely home that I realised that in the skirmish to leave the bus, we had left my raincoat behind. It was a regulation navy blue coat but it had a cheerful checked lining that made it special, but worse than my sense of loss was the thought of how cross my mother would be.

Monday morning. As close to the small electric fire as I dared to be, I had dressed in my school uniform - the green blouse and navy tunic with its emerald sash that was compulsory for every child, even the youngest. Because my father had to leave for work, I had been sitting in the chilly classroom all alone for some time when the teacher arrived. Shocked to find me there, she asked why I was so early. From then on, my father and I were wonderfully cared for by the school and, most of all, by my grandparents who lived close by.

It seemed a long time before my mother returned. You could say it had been a very long weekend and something of a miracle that she had survived. It seemed to have given her a new perspective on life. When told of the lost raincoat she simply said: "Never mind." She remembered lying on the operating table in the cottage hospital and a large man in a white coat and muddy wellingtons arriving in a hurry. For the rest of her life she remained convinced that the doctor was away at war and she had been operated on by the vet.