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Written by **Aneira Thomas**

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HOLD ON
EDNA!

HOLD ON EDNA!

ANEIRA THOMAS



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Dedicated to the memory of my mother and father,

Edna May and Willie Rees.

I feel they are still walking beside me...

See you on the Sunnyside.

*"Do not allow to slip away from you freedoms the people
who came before you won with such hard knocks"*

D. H. Lawrence

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FOREWORD

Healthcare based on need, rather than ability to pay.

This simple idea has been copied around the world since Britain's historic introduction of the NHS on 5 July 1948.

In the seven decades since its foundation, life for the average citizen has been transformed beyond recognition.

Before, life was precarious for all but a wealthy few. The true potential of the many, blighted by treatable illness and injury, often went unfulfilled.

After that day we could suddenly expect to live to a grand old age. Childbirth and work accidents stopped routinely claiming lives in every community.

Aneira 'Nye' Thomas was the first person born in to this brave new world and the story of her family is the story of our most treasured institution.

These heartbreaking and touching tales from the mining communities of South Wales are the story of how our society changed to one no longer gripped by fear of death and disability.

Nye puts it best when she says of universal healthcare: "We see it as a basic human right, but it wasn't always.

HOLD ON EDNA!

“If the stories of my ancestors show me anything it is this; human survival and a decent quality of life came at a premium.”

Martin Bagot
Health Editor, *Daily Mirror*

PROLOGUE

Timing makes all the difference. Between contractions there is panting, breaths coming quick and fast. There is such a thing as too much pushing, between the pains propelling her forward. This baby is Edna's seventh. She lies on the bed in Amman Valley Hospital, exhausted. Funny how the mind forgets the pain after each birth, after the child lies safely in her arms. There is no way she could have done it again, after the first, if she remembered the agony of it all.

It is 1948. The war feels like a more distant memory day by day, and the country is starting to climb back onto its feet. Food is becoming more readily available after years of scrimping. Here, in south Wales, some men have returned; others will never come home.

Edna could be at home, right now. She could have called for a midwife, or "handywoman", as they were known then. But the house is small and full of children. It seems safer here, in the bustle of the local hospital. Women rush around, carrying towels, hot water, jars of pale white cream, trays of long metal instruments. Their hair is neatly pinned back, their uniforms starched and pristine. She feels a mess beside

them, trying to steady her breathing, sweat running down her temples and into her ears. They've seen it a thousand times before, she tells herself. Nothing will surprise or disgust them. Just keep going.

Another contraction, now. It's a big one and it pulls a moan, deep and loud, from her chest. She didn't know she was capable of making such noises. Its intensity frightens her. A nurse, standing by her side, takes her hand. Behind her head there is a clock, large and perfectly circular. It's soothing, somehow. The time is ten minutes to midnight.

It's been a warm summer, so far. June seeped into July with no sign of rain. The fields that spread around Edna's home, a smallholding she and her husband struggle to maintain, are parched and turning brown. She wishes it were cooler, September perhaps or February even. Pregnancy during the summer can be a wretched thing, but it's not as though she had much choice.

When she was 14, desperately unhappy and homesick, Edna worked for a brief period for a family in Cardiff. Miss Millie and Master Jack were sweet children, as sweet as her own. But the man of the house, their father, was a different story. She doesn't want to think about it now. But there she is, a tiny dark-haired girl once again, boiling a pan of water in the scullery. She's determined, watching it boil. When it's ready she steels herself and grasps the handle, noticing the bubbles rising to the surface of the water. She pours it down her leg in one swift movement, before she can

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change her mind. The pain is blinding, mind-numbing in its force. Hours later, when they find her, she's scooped up and returned home to her mother, and she never sees Miss Millie, Master Jack... or their father again. She escaped, but at what cost? And why, at seven minutes to midnight, is she remembering this now?

Nurse Richards has stayed with Edna through the hours that have passed since she was admitted. There is a doctor, too, watching the clock. Edna knows why he is watching it, but the seconds seem to be ticking by so slowly. For a moment she allows her muscles to relax: they've been tensing under the strain of anticipation, waiting for the next wave of pain. Her brow is slick with sweat and Nurse Richards dabs at it with a damp cloth. Down the corridor, Edna can hear the shouts of another woman. "She's got a while to go, though," says Nurse Richards, nodding her head back towards the sound. "Won't be a few hours yet." She pauses, looks up at the clock again. "It's her first," she explains simply.

The pain is building again now – a knot growing in size deep in her belly. Everything feels like it's being pulled in, preparing, getting ready. It's like the split seconds before a wave breaks the shore. Her face contorts as it hits her, and she is shouting now. She just wants it to stop.

Nurse Richards stands at the foot of the bed, gripping one of Edna's feet, watching and nodding. She spots a head, and calls the doctor. The time is three minutes to midnight.

HOLD ON EDNA!

“Edna,” says the doctor, coming to stand beside the bed. “You need to wait. It’s not long now. Don’t push. Just hold on, Edna.”

She recalls, dimly, why they want her to wait. Just hold on, she thinks to herself. Three minutes. Soon, it will be 5 July. She furrows her brow, concentrating on the long arm of the clock above their heads. Three minutes. 180 seconds. It’s a drop in the ocean compared to all the minutes that she’s lived through, but it’s the longest wait of her life. When the clock strikes twelve, everything will be different. She doesn’t know it yet, but her baby will be born into a new world. I hope it’s worth this pain, she thinks, and all the pain that’s come before it. It has to be.

* * *

Edna, my mother, is the last in a long line of women for whom childbirth could mean disaster. As I prepare to make my entrance into the world, she hears the calls of the nurse and doctor, and remembers why she has been asked to wait. There is nothing so tortuous as resisting this urge to push: it’s taking every fibre of her concentration, and she can’t hold out much longer. What if her delay causes harm to the baby?

Decades later, when the time comes to deliver my own children, I am filled with awe at her tenacity, her refusal to give in. It takes an awful lot to refuse such an instinctive feeling, to resist the urge to perform something so natural, so necessary in that white-hot moment. Midwives working

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in our busiest London hospitals today tell me that even after incredibly high levels of sedation, the body knows what to do. Twilight births, where vast injections of morphine and scopolamine were administered, were thought to relieve not only the pain of childbirth, but also any psychological trauma associated with it. The baby would be delivered via forceps: in 1960 Queen Elizabeth gave birth to her third child, Prince Andrew, in this manner, but the practice had been largely abandoned by the time Prince Edward was born, due to health complications for the babies. Right now, it's like Edna's hand has accidentally brushed an open flame, but she's willed it to stay there, to feel the burn. There's no sedation here.

Outside, the weather is unsettled; it has been for weeks. This makes life so much harder for the growing young family on the smallholding. January was the wettest month since records began, February brought severe chills and flu spread like an unpleasant rumour. It was difficult to stay fit and healthy, to ensure that the young ones were thriving. They were so much more susceptible to everything, it seemed, so vulnerable. In the weeks before my birth, my mother prepared herself and the children for her stay in hospital.

"While I'm away," she'd say to my sisters, "You'll need to help your dad."

"Where are you going?" asked Beryl, nine years old and the most curious. "Are you coming back soon? Who's going to give us our tea?"

* * *

I was the only one of my mother's children to be born in a hospital. By this point she was 39, and the risks were greater. She fretted over the money my birth would cost the family – at least a week's groceries, and they could barely afford to keep everyone fed and clothed as it was. Now there'd be one more mouth to feed, a tiny child needing care and attention, and six more bustling around getting into mischief.

Every morning began in much the same way: my brother, Phil, and Dad carrying huge pails of water from the well to the farmhouse; the younger children sitting perched on the stone steps eating bara – sugary tea dunked with chunks of toast. Cast-iron pots were heaved onto open flames to begin the long process of boiling water. A stack of laundry awaited Edna, standing by the Belfast sink, surveying the scrubbing board, the floors soon to be washed, the daily grind required to make the house run smoothly. And soon she would have to leave it all for the hospital, and return with her hands – quite literally – full. There was always the prospect, pushed away to a dark corner at the back of her mind, that she might not come back at all. Just days earlier, she'd had a very strange experience. She walked into the kitchen and received the shock of her life: "He was *there*," she told my father, pointing at the window. "A man, a stranger, and his face was *covered* in blood." She took this as an omen; my father never found anyone lurking outside, despite a thorough search of the

PROLOGUE

smallholding. No one could explain what it was that she'd seen. Perhaps it was some sort of sign.

* * *

The clock strikes 12 and suddenly everything changes. Now they want her to push; they want her to do it quickly, to respond to that next contraction. It's all happened so fast, from the long wait to here, when action is so suddenly required. "Now, push now, Edna!"

Their cries fill her ears and she does as they ask, giving in at last. There is a sound that surely she cannot be making – a shout that cannot be hers. The baby is crowning. For the past few hours she's heard measurements increase: five centimetres, six, seven, eight, and now 10. She has no idea what it means, but it doesn't seem to matter.

Nurse Richards is standing at the foot of the bed. Then, as now, her job is centred around observation. She intervenes when necessary, easing a tiny shoulder to prevent it jutting against the mother's pelvic bone, or – in extreme cases – using the forceps waiting on the tray table. But she knows that at this stage, it's a battle between the mother and the pain. Once the baby's torso is clear the rest follows more easily in the final push; Nurse Richards eases it out gently as Edna's effort finally pays off.

She feels a sense of great relief, a release, and the room is filled with a harsh cry, deep and loud, coupled with the high-pitched, tinny wailing of a newborn. The screams of the baby are added to the din, but there's no sound more welcome.

HOLD ON EDNA!

At first, Edna cannot comprehend this new noise. She's so tired; the air is thick with the smell of blood and sweat. She looks down and sees the nurse wrapping something in a long white shawl, watches her softly wipe bright redness from a face the size of Edna's palm.

It's me. I'm shouting. Hello, world!

Edna recognises dimly that Nurse Richards is crying. She holds the baby out to its mother, not trying to hide her tears.

"Well, Mrs Rees," she says, "You've done it." She smiles as Edna takes the child and cradles her in the crook of her arm. "A baby girl. Looks lovely. She's a good weight, I reckon."

The doctor is writing on a large pad of paper; he, too, seems overcome with emotion. "Congratulations," he says, noting the time of birth. "One minute past midnight." It's 5 July 1948.

Edna tries to smile but everything hurts, and she's grateful when Nurse Richards takes the baby and tells her to sleep. "We'll look after her, lovie."

* * *

At the end of July, the UK is plunged into the hottest spell ever recorded, with temperatures soaring to 34°. By the end of the month we are in the midst of summer storms, sweltering in the muggy damp heat. My father sets off for his shift down the mines every morning after bringing in the water; my siblings continue to munch buttered toast on the front porch and Edna, for a few months at least, is all mine.

PROLOGUE

I don't remember the heatwave, of course, but I know the toll it would have taken on the community, our small village not far from the Black Mountains. The pits were ghastly at the best of times – there was no “perfect season” to be going so deep underground, but hot summers were definitely the worst it could get.

If my father had been injured, just a year before my birth, we'd have starved. And if one of my siblings had fallen seriously, critically ill, they mostly likely would have succumbed to their sickness. Edna has lived with this knowledge all her life: hearing the stories of limbs withering away, cancers left untreated, hacking coughs slowly turning into something more sinister until, one day, they'd stop and there'd be silence. Edna knows the risks just being alive brings with it, every day. She sits by the Belfast sink, feeding me, fanning herself with one hand. She thinks about her mother, dead at 44. About Willie's mother, at 33. About all the generations gone before us, taken too young. On 5 July, all of this was set to change. Two years previously, in May 1946, a bill had been passed through the House of Commons that would change Edna's life, as well as my own. It would transform the fortunes of my children, and indeed those of the whole country, forever.

* * *

“Have you thought of a name yet?” asks the doctor, that day, his pen balanced over the sheaf of papers in his hand. It's a few hours since my birth, and Willie has arrived – my father.

Edna's face has regained some of its colour. "Because if not," says the doctor, "I have an idea."

Edna sits up, listening, eyes scanning for me. I'm there, in a cradle at the far end of the room, sleeping soundly.

"She should be named for the man who made this possible," says the doctor. "After the man who allowed her to be born here, for free. After Nye Bevan. Call her Aneira."

Edna thinks for a moment, the word filtering through the air. It has a lovely lilt to it – strong and playful all at once. She starts to nod, smiling. "My National Health Service baby," she says. "Yes. Aneira."

PART ONE

THE HODGES FAMILY 1835-1909

ONE

LITTLE TORY

WELLS UNION WORKHOUSE, SOMERSET, 1835

“What on earth are you doing here, child?”

Her voice cut through the air like a whip; Tory turned around just as quickly, dropping the vase she was holding. It shattered into tiny pieces on the ground, a mess of snapped porcelain and water, a smattering of half-dead daisies. Mrs Lowe was a fearsome woman, and anyone who angered her did so at their own risk. Tory quaked before her flashing eyes.

“Please, Mrs Lowe, I was taking these flowers to the san,” she whispered, her eyes on the ground.

“You know you’re not allowed in there, Tory.” Mrs Lowe’s voice was quiet and bitter. She was the sort of person who let out her resentment in dribs and drabs, great heaving sighs and sudden, unexpected outbursts, often when you least expected them.

“I’m sorry,” said Tory. “I wasn’t going to go inside, just leave them outside the door—”

Mrs Lowe glared at her. “And what if it were to swing open, Tory? What if somebody, one of the nurses, was coming out as you stood there?”

Mrs Lowe didn't have time for this. The warden had drunk two pints of brandy since 11am. She would be running the show today, and she was feeling a little groggy herself. She really ought to stop accepting Jacobson's moonshine, but it made for such a dreamless sleep...

Tory continued to look at the ground. She didn't like to think about the san, except to leave her flowers. She wished she could draw something to go with them, write a little note like she'd seen some of the other inmates do, but try as she might nobody had yet agreed to teach her. Plus, there were no colours here, no soft pencils to fill a sheet of paper with – she'd seen some once, in the stationer's window, and had dreamt of them solidly for a week. Blues, greens, reds and purples – all the colours of the rainbow, sharpened to points in deep brown boxes. She couldn't imagine owning something so decadent, something that didn't serve any practical purpose whatsoever.

“Tory?”

She started to attention, looking up into Mrs Lowe's face for the first time. She was still glowering down, waiting for an answer.

“I asked you what would have happened if you'd been outside when a nurse left, and the door swung open?”

“I don't know, Mrs Lowe.” Tory had no idea, but she could guess it wasn't going to be good.

“The nurses try their best to contain illnesses inside the san,” said the older woman. She leant down and stared into Tory's eyes. “They do what they can, but it's almost impossible

to keep everything in there. Things spread... Boils, pustules, coughs and sneezes." Mrs Lowe seemed to be relishing this slightly. "Things you can't see but which creep out and get you. It's not pretty in the san, my girl." She paused. "You don't want to get sick, too, do you Tory?"

"No, Mrs Lowe," whispered Tory.

Mrs Lowe straightened up, adjusting the blue, cross-shaped badge on her lapel. "Exactly. Now fetch the pan and a brush and clean this mess up at once. I want to see this floor spotless, or there'll be trouble."

Tory dashed off to the basements, where stacks of buckets, thick wooden brushes and broken-handled brooms jostled for space in the gloom.

At just nine years old, Tory is one of the older children living at the workhouse. She's been here ever since she could remember. Her father died just days after she was born. She, her mother and her sisters, having no money of their own and needing a place to live, came here in 1827. She is slight, dark-haired, pale. She looks a little healthier than some of the others, but the bar isn't high: everyone here looks as though life has somehow got the better of them. Everyone looks ill. Wherever she looks there is difficulty of some kind or another: a limping leg, missing teeth, slurred speech, hunched backs, arms inexpertly amputated at the elbow and sewed up again. It is gruesome, but perhaps it's made her tough. She's no stranger to these things.

The infirmary is a different story. At night, the sounds of screams fill the air. The hacking coughs and sneezes she hears from her own ward are nothing compared to the shouts of pain that issue from the workhouse hospital, where the invalids are kept, locked away. Tory cannot imagine anything worse than spending a night in there, listening to it all so closely, watching the horror unfold. Whenever she thinks of her sister, she imagines herself right beside her, and blocks all else from her mind. The flowers, picked quietly that morning on the way back from the milk collection, were wilted by the time she'd placed them inside the chipped vase found in the basement. You could find most things down there, if you looked hard enough.

The same is true of Tory's life. It is difficult to track people who didn't matter in the early 1800s. Few records were kept. It was on a trip to Glastonbury with Maris, my sister, that we first became aware of Tory. It seemed incredible to us once we started digging. But she was there, fretting about the smashed china and the wrath of Mrs Lowe, wondering what a pustule was and how on earth to escape, how best to help her family. Almost 100 before I was born, here she is – my great-great-grandmother, Tory Churchouse.

Her own mother, Ann, had been born into poverty in the late 1700s. Two years prior to Tory's birth, the Churchouses had welcomed Toriano, a bright-eyed little girl with a mischievous smile. But shortly after her first birthday, Toriano had suffered some sort of fit – nobody knew the cause – and

passed away in her father's arms. Soon after, they welcomed another child: Tory Ann, the stand-in, the replica of her sister. And by the time Tory was born, her own father John was dying – he was a farmer based in Godney, Somerset.

The will he produced still exists; it was written just before Tory's birth. For a man who didn't have much, he made sure to itemise the little he had. The will runs to six feet of parchment – the scroll unrolls as long as a coffin.

"I, being sound of mind, but sick of body, bequeath the sum of one hundred pounds to my lawful wife Ann Churchouse and my unborn child, with condition that she will not marry another. This was the last Will and Testament of John Churchouse, 28 years old. Witnessed, Signed, Sealed and Delivered."

Under the Poor Law, the Wells Union was set up to provide relief – both to the destitute and, by proxy, to taxpayers. Parishes were split into unions, and each was required to build and maintain a workhouse. Prior to 1834, relief for poor families came mostly from wealthy patrons' charitable donations and local levies. Not long before Tory's birth the new system was rolled out across the country, and welfare could now be sought solely through the workhouses. If a breadwinner could no longer afford to feed his family, his wife and children would accompany him into the place.

The workhouse was every young mother's only option if they were widowed and any income slowly trickled away. These were places full of farm labourers unable to make

ends meet, butchers, servants, glovers, washerwomen and seamstresses. John hadn't left Ann with a great deal of options by decreeing she couldn't remarry. "Jealous old lech," Tory had overheard her saying to Martha, one of the other women in her dormitory. "He'd rather I was in here than settling again with someone else. I've half a mind to take a lover, just to imagine the look on his face." She'd stared out into the yard, where the men were working, and grimaced. "Slim pickings, Martha, though, isn't it..."

Anna Maria, Tory's middle sister, had spent three days in bed the previous year with an unexplained sickness. They were convinced she would not recover, but their prayers were answered and she rallied. But now Susanna, Tory's darling eldest sister, was unwell. She was 22, more like a second mother than a sibling.

Tory herself had hardly ever fallen ill—something of a miracle. Infant mortality was high, and it seemed unbelievable that the children she played with, outside in the walled-in quadrangle, had survived at all. Childhood diseases struck hard and often: from whooping cough to pneumonia, measles, diphtheria, scarlet fever, narcotism and intestinal worms. Tapeworms were particularly dangerous, and could take between 8-10% of an already malnourished child's food intake. It wasn't until later that worm cakes, usually made of chocolate and containing a worm-killing vermifuge, were brought onto the market.

Among her friends Tory counted: Thomas and Eliza, the twins whose father was blind and couldn't find paid work; Henry

and Martha, who were orphans; Bill, Susan and Arthur, whose mothers all lived at the workhouse too, and their fathers were dead – just like Tory’s. Susan’s father had died just two weeks before, but nobody had told her yet, and she was constantly chastised for lingering in the damp hallways, hoping to catch a glimpse of him through the dirty windows into the yard.

Thomas was Tory’s favourite: a rising star in the world of petty theft, he could filch anything he put his mind to, helped along the way by a cherubic face and a mess of untidy blonde curls. “Butter wouldn’t melt, eh Thomas?” Mrs Lowe would growl, searching under his mattress for the missing items – always to no avail. Only Tory knew where he kept his spoils – last summer they’d discovered a nook in the hollow of an ancient tree, an old oak with branches reaching up to the sky.

“Perfect,” Thomas had whispered, and taken a wooden spinning top from his pocket. “The toy shop will never miss it,” he’d said conspiratorially. “It’s tiny. And it’s not fair that everybody else should have something to play with, and we go without.” Tory took the wooden top tentatively, holding it between thumb and forefinger. “Here,” said Thomas, taking it back. “You’ve got to balance it on something flat, and then—”

He placed it on top of a pile of bricks stacked under the tree. They were old and broken, useless now. With one sharp flick of his wrist he sent the little top spinning across the surface, its colours blurring into one constant stream of oranges and whites. Tory gazed at it in fascination.

“If you want to look at it, I’ll hide it in the hollow here, but make sure no one’s looking,” he said, watching her. “It’s our secret. I won’t even tell Eliza.” His twin was shy and timid-looking, intimidated by the noise and bustle of the workhouse and forever being scolded for her clumsiness. She would never dare go poking into Thomas’ things, but he was nonetheless wary of sharing. Perhaps he sensed, even then, that it was better not to get too close. By the time winter came that year and snow blanketed the ground in thick heaps, Eliza was in the san with what the nurses, grimly expectant, confirmed as tuberculosis. She died just before Christmas.

Days began and ended just the same here. At six o’clock the ward sister would arrive, ringing her bell and chivvying the girls awake. She was not an unkind woman, but five years at the workhouse had made her brusque, easily stressed. She had seen many children come and go, and resisted becoming too close to any of them, just like Thomas. That was the only way to survive: nothing could be taken for granted, especially not health. The children would scramble from their beds – thin, straw-filled sacks lain on hard wooden pallets – and pull on grey smocks or trousers that itched and were often several sizes too big. They queued in silence before the ward sister, pulling faces at one another, hopping on the spot to stay warm, shoving and whispering across the lines.

Outside, in the yard, the day’s work had begun long ago for the older inmates: the men marching down from the east wing and the women from the west.

“Beth, is that you?” a man called out, catching sight of an older woman; she was having some trouble on the steps.

The woman called Beth spotted the man and cackled bitterly. “Ah, and didn’t I know we’d both end up in here, Mr Jenkins.”

She turned to the woman beside her and winked theatrically. “I used to know him, in our younger days on the Lawsons’ farm. *Know* him, if you get my meaning.”

They could hear the sounds of horse’s hooves – deliveries coming and going, the arrival of post from outside, sacks of grain being deposited at the wrought-iron gates. Heavy thumps told them the stone-breakers were warming up: this was one of the most arduous tasks, only given to able-bodied men – or able-bodied enough. The hammers alone weighed half as much as Tory, and she marvelled as they’d swing them over their heads, relying on the momentum to scatter large pieces of rock into smaller and smaller pieces. Once there were enough, each around an inch and a half wide, the pieces would be shipped off around the country to rebuild England’s roads. The scrape and turn of the corn-grinder could also be heard, millstones pushed along by four or more men in an endless circle until enough corn had been collected for the day.

Much of the daily labour carried out at Wells maintained the workhouse itself – growing vegetables, chopping wood, making repairs, tending to the boilers, carrying out odd-jobs. The rest, such as oakum-picking, when strands of hemp rope were separated and sold on to shipbuilders to line wooden

vessels, was intended to create trading links between the outside world and the inmates, to earn some much-needed money.

The women's work may have been indoors, but it was no less easy. They must battle the additional stigma of having somehow fallen from grace: often their husbands had died or left, they were servants who couldn't find work or unmarried mothers. From scrubbers to sewers, knitters and nursery workers, there was no shortage of domestic roles. There were four kitchens, all the same size and a dull uniform grey, and all infested with rats. The children saw their mothers and fathers rarely: some had even been sent to different workhouses, but if they happened to live in the same building it was only ever minutes-long "interviews" that were permitted.

Every so often someone's mother would tell their children of encounters with rats the size of dogs scurrying beneath the copper pans, stealing scraps of bread. Most recently a fox had broken in somehow, causing mayhem as it panicked in the enclosed space, snarling at anyone who tried to come near. Steam billowed in great clouds from simmering pans full of broth. In the laundry rooms down the corridor it was even denser: bubbling cauldrons of sweat-soaked rags swirling inside shadowy depths. It was the children's mothers' dream to work in the kitchens – anything but the laundry, where barely a day passed without an accident. Clothes caught easily on open flames, hands became blistered and raw from constant scrubbing, and skin became sallow and dry from the moisture hanging in the air like smog.

For my great-great grandmother, Tory, days begin in the hall: a high-ceilinged, draughty room with hard tables and long thick benches. The children pad inside, barefoot as they always are, and shuffle along the rows. The older ones, the ones who will soon move up to the adults' jobs, hasten along the benches, depositing bread and butter onto chipped plates. The children are meant to wait until grace has been said, but some of them sneak a mouthful or two while the ward sister isn't looking. Breakfast is always the same. Lunch – then called dinner – is usually “hasty pudding” or frumenty: grains stirred into milk or water. Supper is identical to breakfast, with the occasional addition of a little soup.

They eat quickly: there is work to be done. They finish and bring their crockery to the metal container at the front of the hall. No one ever leaves anything, and if they did, their friends would eat it. The plates are licked clean; not a crumb ever remains.

The children are then ushered into their classrooms: girls under seven go one way, boys another. They have been learning basic arithmetic, practising their alphabets on slates and in copybooks. Some can even read passages from the Bible aloud. The girls learn needlework and household chores, too, and the boys help out with the gardening. They traipse to chapel each morning, a small building, barely noticeable, connected to the master's quarters at the back of the workhouse complex.

There is time set aside for playing, but not enough. It's a long day and Tory usually falls into bed – the bed she shares with

three other girls in this grim, cold room – exhausted. One of them is potty trained: she reminds herself to be grateful for small mercies. The fires are extinguished at half-past eight, and silence descends. It's broken only by the occasional shouts, sometimes muffled, from the infirmary. When this happens, she scrunches her eyes up as tightly as she can and prays for Susanna. Perhaps, tomorrow, she will be allowed to see her. Perhaps tomorrow she will be cured of whatever is making her so sick.

* * *

I shudder to think of the worry that must have plagued her. So young and yet so worldly. There was no system in place to help, no social care, no support to assist the workers into paying jobs once they left – that came after, with the provision of teaching for skilled employment, like tailoring or shoemaking. For now, they were stuck. And for those born into the workhouses the stigma was great: it was only later that the location of a child's birth was changed, made up or otherwise altered on their birth certificate, to reduce the inevitable judgment they might otherwise receive.

It was meant to be hard, meant to be horrible in the workhouses. Nobody went voluntarily. They had appalling reputations and earned them justly. It was presumed that such a grim existence would galvanise them into changing their ways, and provide an incentive for poor people to work harder, for fear of suffering the same fate. Wells Union was tiny compared to other workhouses in larger towns and cities, and

there were only ever around 150 inmates, though the space was built for double that number. Small mercies: perhaps Tory experienced less of the overcrowding, the terrible throng of too many bodies all locked up together, than some of her contemporaries in London.

She had heard dreadful things about what happened to those who stepped out of line. The punishments for rule-breaking were severe. Adults were frequently denied food for common misdemeanours, or confined in a room on their own for hours at a time. The “Pauper Offence” book, from nearby Beaminster Union Workhouse in Dorset, describes some of the privations endured by inmates: James Park, who attempted to escape on 4 September 1843, was whipped, while Isaac Hallett was sent to prison for two months after breaking a window in 1844. In 1863, Elizabeth Soaper was committed for 14 days’ hard labour after a series of infractions including “making use of bad language in bedroom,” “trying to incite other inmates into insubordination,” and “refusing to work.” I feel for Liz, she sounds like a hoot.

It paid to be a child, in some ways: young George Mintern, who got into a classroom fight one day in the summer of 1842, was simply denied cheese for a week. Others weren’t so lucky. Years later, child inmates reported acts of horrific cruelty, from whipping with stinging nettles to being hung from the ceiling in cloth sacks.

Just four years before my great-great-grandmother was born, a young boy of 11 would start working at a blacking

warehouse near Charing Cross, London, pasting labels onto tins of shoe polish. On weekends he went to visit his father, who'd recently been sent to Marshalsea debtors' prison in Southwark, along with the boy's mother and younger siblings. When that boy was grown he would immortalise the experience in a series of fictionalised instalments, a story published week by week between 1837 and 1839. Everybody was talking about the horrors of the workhouse after reading the adventures of the orphaned boy who was the hero of this young writer's book. That writer, of course, was Charles Dickens.

By the 1840s, years after Tory left Wells Union, the British press were gripped by the scandal of Andover workhouse, where inmates had been reportedly gnawing on scraps of putrid flesh from the bones they ground for fertiliser. It emerged that the master of the workhouse had been reducing ration sizes, channelling the savings into his own pocket, that he was often too drunk to stand, and that he'd been sexually abusing some of the female inmates.

Just two years later, Huddersfield's Union workhouse revealed similarly bleak stories when an enquiry into its conditions was published. Children often slept 10 to a bed; inmates received a quarter of an oatcake and three gills of soup for dinner, and there was such a shortage in clothing available that many people were left half-naked, even in winter.

It was the medical report, though, that left the public reeling and increased a much-needed discourse about the

country's treatment of its poorest citizens: typhus raged through the population, and patients in a state of highly contagious fever were often lumped into the same bed – a meagre bag of straw and shavings full of lice – covered in their own excrement. Often, it was found, one patient would die but be left in the same bed as another, sometimes for hours or even days at a time.

In 1866, the chilly room that the girls slept in at Wells was converted – there'd been a huge outbreak of cholera, and the space was needed for a makeshift sanatorium. Finally nurses were instructed on how to treat infectious patients, and prevented from helping one before moving on to another without taking certain steps first. The idea of separating infectious or otherwise ill inmates into separate buildings entirely was born – a revolutionary concept which improved survival rates and reduced the risk of passing on disease. She was lucky, in some ways, my great-great-grandmother. Time was on her side.

This, then, was how Tory grew up, over 100 years before Edna brought me into the world. It seems incredible that she did in fact leave the workhouse, that despite the enormous toll placed on her and the likelihood of contracting a deadly sickness, she made it out alive. And she was right to be afraid of the infirmary. Once you went in, it was almost certain you'd never come out again.

TWO

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WELLS UNION WORKHOUSE, 1835 AND 1845

Three months have passed. Tory has not seen her sister in almost 13 weeks, though she knows she is lying just beyond the swinging doors, the ones she mustn't go near. She is too scared of Mrs Lowe to attempt any more deliveries of picked flowers, and not confident enough in her writing to slip a note underneath the door.

"Besides," she tells Thomas, as they whisper in the yard, "the infirmary's huge. There's no chance the matron would see it there on the dusty floor. She would never know who it was for."

She pines away in secret, hoping each day that she will spot Susanna, back at work through the laundry doors, or mopping the cracked tiles of the corridors. Her mother has always tried to make the best of things. Even when they first arrived, cold and shivering as the rain lashed the broken windows, even then she had tried to laugh, tickling Tory when the master wasn't looking. "It'll be fun, won't it, duck?" she said, her voice unnaturally high-pitched. "Loads of children for you to play with, and you'll learn your ABCs." She said

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this significantly, as she signed her name with a cross on the documents the master had placed before her. Ann was trying her best to smile, to keep up the pretence that everything would turn out just fine, but no one was convinced.

When Mrs Lowe approaches Tory one Thursday morning, her heart races. It's springtime, and soon the inmates will be rising an hour earlier each day; the sound of the men's calls filters in through the open window and a horse whinnies, though it's hard to tell whether it's within the gates or outside them. Tory hopes outside. Mrs Lowe's face gives nothing away – it's always set in such a grim line. She imagines that perhaps she has done something wrong, and will be denied her supper. She racks her brains to think what it could be. Has Mrs Lowe discovered the secret oak in the grounds, the one where she and Thomas hide their trinkets? Could it possibly be worse than that?

“Tory,” says Mrs Lowe, placing a hand on her shoulder. The other girls look up, quizzically, before a flash of the older woman's eyes tells them to get a move on or there'll be trouble. Unusually, Mrs Lowe is lowering herself onto one of the thin dormitory beds. As she sits down Tory hears her knees crack. “I must tell you something, child. And you must be brave.”

Tory had known, deep down, that it could only be a matter of time. She knew her sister would not return to her, but hearing it out loud, so cold and confirmed and clinical, feels like being doused in a bucket of freezing water. She lets out a howl and sinks to the ground.

I feel I'm watching her, kneeling there on the dirty floor, as she cries at the injustice of it all. Tory has no idea what the infirmary is like. She has no notion that her sister's illness – a bacterial infection caused by a burn she sustained in the laundry – could have been treated, were she anywhere else but here.

As it is, all Tory has ever known is illness spelling almost certain death, and yet hearing it out loud on this crisp morning feels unbelievable. Her world has changed. She cannot believe that everyone else is simply going about their daily business. She does not, for now, think of herself: she does not consider what might become of her, here in the workhouse, with nobody to help her and her mother, nobody to look out for them. She feels more alone than she has ever felt before, or ever will again.

When inmates died, their bodies were often sent to anatomists' tables. Workhouses received money for corpses delivered for medical research, and even children as young as Tory would have known this. "The killing of the poor," she has overheard older men and women say, "to cure the diseases of the rich." For many inmates, the wait was not long: they were barely alive when they entered the workhouse.

To make matters worse, local criminals had been known to rob the graves of recently deceased inmates – there was money to be gained in doing so. So not only is my great-great-grandmother contending with the loss of her sibling, she is also faced with the fear that her body will be snatched, desecrated, that someone else will line their pockets as a result of her death.

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Mrs Lowe makes no move to comfort Tory, but neither does she scold her, for once. She feels guilt, still, for the length of time it took her to confess to Susan that her father had died. She has resolved to be better to the children, to be honest with them, but honesty seems to bring nothing but sorrow. She cannot think of anything to say to the crying girl, so they sit there, Tory on the floor and Mrs Lowe perched on the bed, for a quarter of an hour. Far off in the distance, a bell starts to ring. So conditioned is Tory to the sound that she leaps to attention, standing straight and looking around her wildly. When she realises what this means – that her morning lesson is about to begin, and that she must leave the dormitory – she seems to crumple slightly again. “Here,” says Mrs Lowe, and hands the child a hunk of bread and piece of cheese from the lining of her apron. The cheese is sweltering though it is not warm outside, and the bread is hard as the stones chopped by men in the yard. “Hurry along now,” she says, and Tory, straightening her back and wiping her eyes on the scratchy grey fabric of her smock, nods and leaves.

* * *

Walking north-east along the Glastonbury Road, it only takes around 20 minutes to reach the centre of Wells. The long, leafy road is flat and surrounded by fields; to the left the Keward Brook makes its way downstream to the River Sheppey. In many ways it should be an idyll, but Tory hates the weekly walk into town with the other girls, hates the stares

of the townsfolk. These can be separated into two categories: pity or contempt, and there's not much in between.

Some people keep their heads down when the crocodile of boys and girls pass them, taking care to avoid touching them even with the hem of a cloak. To everyone else, the workhouse inmates are best kept in the workhouse – they serve as reminders of the constant what-if hanging over all but the very richest. The children are grubby and sickly, too, and nobody wants to imagine the sorts of lives they lead, back along the road behind the high walls of Wells Union.

“Well now, if it isn't the paupers come for their scraps!” shouts a boy in a straw boater, one morning. Susanna has been dead for six months now, and Tory has barely seen her mother and Anna Maria since. There's nobody to look out for her, nobody to tell about her day, what's happened and who she met. There's also nobody to tut at her, no wise older sibling or parent to scold her. She imagines punching the boy square in the mouth, reflects on how satisfying that would be. He's chubby, rosy-cheeked and dressed in a ludicrous outfit of puffed-up green velvet, giving him an unfortunate toad-like look. He has a small dog on a red leather leash; boy and dog have paused in the middle of the square facing the cathedral. His eyes have narrowed and the dog is panting; it looks as though they're both smirking.

“Come along,” says Mrs Lowe, walking briskly past him. She's in a tetchy, volatile mood today, fractious since breakfast, when the workhouse warden pinched her cheek and called her “pet”.

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The boy reaches down to the ground and picks up a rock, more like a pebble, it's so small, throws and catches it once to himself, then lobs it at the passing inmates. It catches Susan on the ear; she immediately begins to cry.

"I say!" shouts Mrs Lowe. The children gather around their friend, some shake their fists at the boy, some swear, and Mrs Lowe leaves them to shoo him away. "I cannot credit it," they hear her saying, fury in her voice. "And a magistrate's son, at that!" The boy slopes off, chuckling darkly. He knows Mrs Lowe cannot do any more – his father will take his side, and he's much more powerful than a bunch of orphaned kids with broken shoes.

Tory wishes they didn't have to come into town, and not just because of the people and their stares. Everywhere she looks she spots things that make her heart ache. In the window of the bakery, shining brown buns sit studded with currants, fat layers of pearly icing support sticky-looking cherries, round as marbles. Across the square a lady emerges from a carriage: her dress is so long that her footman lifts the bottom to prevent it dragging on the floor. It's a pale pink and puffs out around her hips, pinching in at her waist. It looks like it weighs nothing at all, the seamless unwrinkled silk. The lady has thick, neat hair piled into two arches at the side of her head, and her cheeks bear the faintest trace of rouge.

She walks with her head held high, into a shop that sells books. It's the bookshop Tory cannot stand to walk past. Nobody else seems bothered, but the dark and dusty entrance

has always fascinated her. If she lingers slightly as they walk along, she can see the long shelves, the heavy spines and the tottering piles around the floor. Sometimes the shop has donated books to the workhouse: old or tatty ones, ones that nobody else wants. Tory remembers one story of a pirate setting sail on the seven seas, a Jolly Roger flapping in the breeze, and the sharks he spotted lurking beneath the waves. The drawings were rough and sketch-like but they helped her to imagine what was happening, as her fingers slowly traced the words on the page. She longs to go inside and browse, but there's no way the man behind the old wooden counter would allow her so much as over the threshold. You can't go into places like that in the workhouse uniform. Everyone thinks they are diseased, and most suspect they are thieves. Well, Thomas sort of is, thinks Tory, but she's still too cross about what the boy did to Susan to smile to herself.

It seems impossible to Tory that a building as grand as Wells Cathedral could exist at all. The children gawk up at it, crossing the flagstones of the square and filing under the arches that surround it. It's like something from a fairy tale, a castle, but not as austere, its spires and turrets reaching upwards and its many narrow windows glinting in the sun. It dwarfs the shops and cottages scattered beneath it, almost like it's protecting them, sheltering them from some unknown storm.

Once or twice, they have walked beside it as the bells ring out on the hour or for daily matins. The deep, booming gongs are soothing in their rhythm and terrifyingly loud, so different

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to the tinny ringing of the workhouse bell, calling them to work or dinner! The children have been inside the cathedral just once, on a long-planned visit led by the Archbishop. He guided them round the pews and up to the altar, showed them the sacrament and blessed them as they stood in twos before him. Tory noticed that nobody else came into the cathedral while they were there. Perhaps the bishop had closed the doors for a time; perhaps the townsfolk had simply seen the snaking line of grey-clad figures and decided to stay away.

* * *

I like to think that if we'd met, Tory and I would have got along well. She sounds intelligent, plucky, determined. She took everything life threw at her and realised, from a young age, that there was no use complaining about things that couldn't be changed. And she would have every reason to at least attempt some perspective: she was healthy, wasn't she? She was able to work: she had survived.

Across the water, in Ireland, increasingly troubling reports told of a terrible blight creeping through the fields, poisoning the crops so heavily relied upon for food and trade. Tory may have heard about the queues at soup kitchens, the long treks along beaches looking for snails or seaweed to eat, the people unable to pay their rent and being cast from their houses, about the thousands dead each week, starved to skeletons. She may have heard, as the women prepared food in the kitchens, that their Queen has donated £5 to the relief effort, and on

the same day bequeathed the same amount to Battersea Dogs Home, in south London.

10 years have passed since Susanna's death, and now eight since Anna Maria's. Experiencing the death of both her sisters has hardened Tory. Anna's stint in the san was shorter than Susanna's – something for which Tory is grateful. She felt more able to deal with this second bout of grief, just as she'd found a sort of peace following the first, but her heart has become stony. Something has calcified in her, and it's only since meeting Huw that things have started to change. I can picture her now: a grinning, shy 19-year-old, standing by the gates to Wells Union Workhouse. She has a small bag with her – more like a sack cloth. It contains every one of her possessions and weighs less than a bag of sugar. Somehow, the day has finally arrived. She's leaving at last.

For the past five years, Tory has worked on the cleaning roster. She can't imagine how many times she has dusted the same mantelpieces in the master's quarters, how often she has scrubbed at the same patch of hard stone, how much water she's collected and refilled and boiled. The master is often asleep in the chair behind his desk as she does this, his mouth hanging open. But soon Huw will be here and she can go. She fidgets with her hair as she waits: he's coming to fetch her at 11 o'clock, and it's not quite quarter to. It's a bitterly cold day and the thin shirt she's wearing – the one she's worn most days for the best part of two years – is doing nothing to keep the chills at bay. But it doesn't matter anymore. Things are going to be different.

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I think about Tory a lot – what she must have endured, how she must have suffered, and the endless hours of thankless work she toiled away at during her early years. She had a roof over her head, which was something, but nothing to look forward to – no prospects worth carrying on for. And yet she persisted. She kept her head down and got on with it. For that and so much else I admire her, and part of me wonders if knowing about her youth helped me during my own struggles. Remembering what she went through helps to remind me that I can keep going, even when there doesn't seem to be any light. On a very deep level I feel connected to her, this woman I never had the chance to meet.

But I'm getting ahead of myself: we haven't got to me just yet.

Tory met Huw in Wells, at the city summer fair. The inmates were manning the stalls – some selling toffee apples, others bright dresses and shawls they'd sewn in the colourless walls of the workhouse.

The townsfolk greeted each other but treated the inmates with their usual contempt. It wasn't until late in the day when Tory, fanning herself with one of the rough woollen hats for sale at her stall, spotted a young man walking towards her. He was quite short, about her height, with a wide smile and dimpled cheeks. He wore heavy black boots, carried a round-brimmed hat in his hand, and his shirt was greasy and torn slightly over one shoulder. She wondered if he was a blacksmith and, if so, what he could want with one of the

flimsy, shapeless hats sitting on her wooden table. He ambled along, one hand in his pocket, until he stood in front of her, still grinning.

“These are pretty things,” he said, lifting one of the hats. It was the first time anyone had spoken to her all day, except Susan, who was serving too-pale lemonade in the stall beside Tory’s. “Did you make them yourself?” said the man, still examining the hat in his hand. “Very nicely stitched.”

Tory nods, but has no idea what to say to this. It was so patently untrue – the hats were sad-looking and unflattering – that she felt flustered, unsure what he wanted. Was he mocking her? “It’s a fine day for it,” she said, in the end, her cheeks scarlet.

He looked her full in the face, then, his broad smile like a lighthouse beam that’s spotted a ship.

“It really is,” he murmured.

* * *

Huw Hodges was 25, a horse dealer from Somerset. He was a catch, kind and compassionate. His family had never had much, but they’d never been so poor that they’d needed to enter the workhouse system. He had watched the men and women on their walks, the children in their snaking lines, from the paddock where he reared and trained his herd, and had always felt a pang of pity for their shuffling feet, their downcast eyes. He hadn’t planned to attend the summer fair that day, but when his brother offered to exercise the horses

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he thought he'd take the opportunity for a wander. There was nothing especially interesting for sale, just knick-knacks and bric-a-brac, mostly broken, and he was about to head home when he caught side of Tory.

There was something about the way she carried herself: a certain pride, a refusal to submit to the indignity of this whole make-believe charade, when the haves and have-nots were seen to mingle happily for one day only. She was slender and her hair reached all the way down her back, tied into a long plait. He loved her the moment he laid eyes on her.

* * *

Tory and Huw are due to be married next week. She hums a little to herself as she watches the road, scanning for an approaching cart, the sound of hooves. She glances back at the workhouse, its dark windows hiding everything that happens inside. It feels anticlimactic, somehow, now that it's all agreed and the papers signed. As Huw's wife-to-be, she has no reason to stay here. He'll keep her safe. His job pays enough, more than enough, and they'd be happy together in his little cottage in Godney. She has never been to the village before, but Huw's told her all about it.

At 11 sharp, she hears the sound of a carriage approaching. Huw is driving fast, speeding along the quiet lane. His horses are sleek and glossy, covered in sweat. They are enjoying the run-around, the fast pace of the man urging them on. Huw does everything quickly – he is swift and efficient, but sensible

when it matters. In true fashion, it hasn't taken him long to decide that Tory is who he wants beside him, Tory who made him gallop along the country roads at such a clip. He asked her to marry him at the exact spot she now stands, clutching her bag. She said yes before he even finished the question, and now here he is, her future husband.

"Hello, Miss," says Huw, leaping down from the carriage seat and kneeling before her. He kisses her hand, sweeps his dusty coat from his shoulders and places it around Tory's. She feels warmer immediately: a sensation that is, she knows, only partly thanks to the coat.

If the workhouse had been rural, it was nothing compared to these endless stretches of fields, green as far as the eye could see. Godney was heaven, surely, and despite being only three miles from the workhouse, Tory had never seen such uninterrupted, open skies. Low wooden barns and thatched roofs dotted the landscape, cows chewed lazily on thick clumps of grass, and the air was thick with the smell of honeysuckle. It was all so wild and free compared to what she was used to. She turned to Huw and smiled as they bounced along the lane, the horses slowing now as they turned into the paddock in front of the stone cottage. For the next week she would bunk with Huw's sister, who slept in the little attic room upstairs. Once they were married, the couple would move into the small annexe attached to the cottage. It would be Tory's home, now, for the next 24 years.

Meanwhile, in 1850s Vienna, a Hungarian obstetrician called Ignaz Semmelweis was making waves. “Wash your hands,” he urged physicians, midwives, doctors and nurses. Semmelweis suggested that many of the sepsis-inducing puerperal or “childbed” fevers associated with childbirth, and the high rates of mortality for these women, were born as a result of cross-contamination. Many of his contemporaries found this advice hard to swallow. As if they, the ones treating their patients in the throes of their illness, were responsible for these all-too-natural – though of course regrettable – deaths! Slowly, this advice would come to be accepted. Slowly, midwives and nurses realised that cutting umbilical cords with a dirty knife, or tending to a patient with a dirty cloth, could have disastrous consequences.