

Faces of War

Rosemary Hutchinson

My friend Charlie and I are cruising down the Strand in a Hillman. Now a Hillman, to the uninitiated, is a type of car spewed out to meet the emergency of wartime. It is extremely small, and much inclined to rattle at an early age, especially this one under Charlie's heavy hand.

A vitriolic mustard shade, it sports two orange blobs of special paint on the hood. In the event of a gas attack these blobs will change color. Charlie and I are at a loss as to the action necessary if this catastrophe occurs, because our gas masks are somewhere in the bedsitter we rent on Earls Court Road.

At the moment I am more concerned with this girl's driving. Her approach might, at best, be termed nonchalant. "You are the most gawd-awful driver," I tell her as a traffic light stops us at full belt.

A taxi pulls up beside us. The driver, in a dusty cap and shapeless raincoat, leans across his steering wheel and shouts: "Hey Canada, where'd ya learn to drive, on one of them Rocky Mountains you have over there?"

Popping her head out the window, Charlie replies: "Na Guv, on one of them h'icebergs we have over there."

The cabby starts to laugh, I laugh and Charlie, overcome by her own wit, laughs hardest of all. The traffic light turns green and the taxi cuts us off neatly. "Serves you right," I remark, bracing my feet on the dashboard.

But the cabbies of wartime London are kind to the Canadian girls who drive here. They give us endless patient directions when we get lost in the maze of the city, sometimes holding up long streams of traffic to do so. I suppose that after years of blitz and blackout our remarkable driving habits are a source of amusement. The war is nearly over, soon we and our tacky cars will disappear. Perhaps they will even miss us.

This war has made Londoners of Charlie and me. We are the grateful recipients of a living-out allowance, 12 shillings a day, that enables us to rent the bed-sitter, a vast, shabby chamber with a permanent smell of cooking.

We also get civilian ration coupons for milk, margarine, cheese and endless tins of corned beef. We admire the British housewife, who manages for a week on this meagre supply; we devour ours in two days. However, we are lucky: The Sally Ann and the Knights of Columbus canteens fill in the void.

Food, any kind of food, interests us greatly, so we are pleased when some affluent boyfriend asks one of us out to dinner. A great gastronomic event is the arrival in town of Charlie's father, a big gun in the navy. He always finds time to take us to the Berkeley, where he sits and frequently remarks: "I don't know how you kids can eat so much and stay so skinny!"

We are enjoying ourselves. Life is not as traumatic as at an operational station where people you know and like have a tendency to disappear – permanently. Each morning, we board the Underground at Earls Court and eject near Russell Square, site of the RCAF motor-transport section. From this vast subterranean garage we are let loose on our daily ploys. We drive hither and thither about London with important people or documents, or both, and often make runs through the lovely countryside.

We are on such a trip today, bound for the plastic-surgery hospital at East Grinstead. Charlie is delivering sealed documents and, on my day off, I am keeping her company – at great peril to my life, I think, as we wheel down the Mall at a great rate. We have planned this safari carefully. We will take the long route home with many stops to contemplate nature and refuel the inner man. The night shift, which tends to be more casual, will have taken over by the time we get back and we are hoping our tardy return will go unnoticed.

In due course Charlie delivers her papers, getting all the right signatures in the right places from the proper people, and we wheel down the drive towards the main road.

Two figures standing by the entrance have their thumbs out in the universal gesture. They are sergeants with pilots' wings. I know what is coming, so I turn to Charlie: "Are you ready for this?" She glares at me: "Of course I'm ready."

We stop. I lean out the window and shout cheerfully: "Are you bound for the Big Smoke?"

One of the sergeants leans in the window: "Can we get a lift then?"

I smile, determined he will not guess that I am shattered by his face. It is a patchwork of pink and white skin crisscrossed with surgical stitches. His nose is a queer shape and he has no eyebrows. But his brown eyes are cheerful and when he smiles his teeth are white and even. But then, I think, teeth don't burn. His pal, an Australian, has fared somewhat better facially but his hands are like claws and he tries to hide them behind his back.

"Hop in," I cry. "We run a super taxi service here!" They laugh and squeeze into the narrow back seat.

As we drive along we learn they are going on leave, but must return to the hospital for further surgery. They hope to reach the one lad's Yorkshire home by catching the night train north.

Conversation languishes, but Charlie saves the day by shouting "Pub Time" and wheeling down a leafy lane to a drinking place she knows. We sit in its little garden quaffing beer and things improve dramatically. By the time we cross Putney Bridge we are all chirping like little birds in the spring.

Charlie debates hanging on to the car for the evening and suffering the inevitable wrath tomorrow, but caution prevails. We dump the Hillman back at the section and take our new friends to Soho where we eat spaghetti in an Italian restaurant.

This is augmented by beans on toast, a couple of fried black-market eggs, chips and a slice of spicy chicken that Charlie claims is really "London alley cat." It says much for the quality of the

wine that nobody finds this remark upsetting. We finish with spumoni – water ice streaked with violent colors of red, green and yellow.

Our pals have three hours before train time, so I suggest we go dancing. This idea is met with shouts of approbation, so we take a cab to Hammersmith, where the mighty beat of the band surges out to engulf you before you can even see the Palais de Danse.

We join the rocking humanity on its enormous floor. They are playing our music – Glenn Miller, the panacea of wartime youth. Gone are thoughts of ruined faces and clawed hands. We jitter and jive to Chattanooga Choo-Choo, Jersey Bounce and The Boogie-Woogie Bugle Boy. I am so hot I tear off my jacket, then pull off my tie and wave it round my head. I would take off my shirt too were I not afraid of being thrown out. We dance in twos, we dance as a foursome, soon we are dancing with people we have never seen before. We dance away the dreary sadness of the war.

We barely get our 'outpatients' to their train on time. At Kings Cross we push them past the irate guard at the barrier, but when he sees their faces he becomes kind and gets them on board. We wave frantically as the train slides away from the platform.

Charlie and I walk to the station entrance. It is wet and dark and the euphoria is beginning to wear off.

"Do you think too much drink, too much food and too much exercise is good for plastic-surgery patients?" Charlie asks anxiously.

"Dunno," I reply. "It's too late to worry about it now, but they had a good time, and you know so did I."

Charlie looks surprised. "Me too, and you know we never even found out their last names."

Coat collars turned up, we plod through the rain to the Underground to take the long trip back to the bed-sitter.

God Knows

Rosemary Hutchinson

The year of our war 1944 finds me and my friend Charlie still driving cars in the RCAF, but Ottawa has lifted us out of Newfoundland and plunked us on a Yorkshire bomber station.

We are having supper in the mess. I jab at a piece of burnt toast covered with blobs of melted cheese, the whole surmounted by a piece of raw bacon. Only in the air force have they the ability to burn the bottom of something and leave the top raw.

"Hey Charlie, called the maitre d'. This bacon is still twitching, it's about to crawl off the plate."

Charlie flips her toast in the air with her fork to see if the other side looks better. "Very funny," she says, then changing the subject: "When are we going to ride the bikes down Sutton Bank?" Charlie has a one-track mind. When things are going OK she has to think up something dumb to make life more exciting.

"Never," I tell her, chomping on my burnt offering; it is amazing what you can eat if you are hungry enough. "I'd rather go down Sutton Bank on roller skates than those old wrecks."

These are our issue bicycles. When people are transferred out they are turned back to stores. Someone there gives them a shake; if anything rattles it is tied up with wire and they are reissued: "airmen for the use of!"

Sutton Bank has a chilling gradient of one in four. It joins the soft rolling Vale of York to the higher moors and dales that stretch away into the distance to Scarborough and the sea. The road ascending this mini-Mont Blanc borders its edge, so that any fool daring the descent stands a good chance of soaring into space and landing below in a horrible tangle of body and bicycle.

Charlie and I go up and down regularly in our little Hillman cars and I always treat this hill with great respect. In fog it is a brute. It is so steep that if I have someone fat like Floom-Loot Plopper in the car we simply don't make it. The Hillman stalls halfway up and I push – figuratively, of course – the Floom-Loot on to the road where he trudges forlornly upward while I pass him, to await his arrival at the top. Plopper isn't a bad old duck, and a real tiger with the ladies. He must have addresses all over Yorkshire where he "stops for tea" – while his driver waits. We frown on such unmilitary behavior.

Charlie and I leave the mess and repair to the NAAFI to eat its stodgy tarts, drink its milky coffee and eat our chocolate ration in one glorious orgy. The initials stand for something, but I can never remember what. We just call it "naffi" with affection. It is a canteen, a great social spot for the other ranks, which certainly includes us.

The subject of the great suicide ride is dropped and might have lain forever buried had not Bussy Bodine's aircraft blown up practically on the end of the runway while Charlie was watching it take off.

This gave Charlie an acute case of the shattered nerves quite unlike her usual stoic acceptance of sudden death among aircrews.

Bussy was our old cohort of laying-the-flare-path days in Newfoundland, when the three of us had worked together on the runways with the harsh sea wind howling about our ears and extinguishing flare-pots as fast as Bussy could light them. He had come up in the world, a pilot with his own crew, halfway through his tour, but was the same cheerful, chatty boy quite unchanged by promotion. We had been having great fun together through this hot English summer.

Apart from Bussy's death, I think Charlie was just fed up with life in general, the deaths, the food, the black-out driving, even the titanic struggle to bag a bathtub at the wash-house before the hot water ran out. It was about the only place you could be alone, though as you lay in the tepid water contemplating your toes someone was sure to bang on the door telling you to get the lead out.

So, to cheer up the poor girl, I gave in to the inevitable: "OK, I'll ride down Sutton Bank with you."

Our next 48-hour pass finds us staying with my Aunt Sophy in Thirsk, a town within biking distance of our project. Aunt Sophy is a pal of my grandmother, a remarkable old girl who still plays tennis wearing a voluminous ankle-length white skirt. She can smash a ball so accurately that your survival depends on leaping out of the way and, as Auntie likes her tennis appreciated, you must shout "Oh, well played" as you dive to safety. She should be commanding a gun site on the south coast: She could waste any enemy object in the Channel with one shot.

The next day is very hot and it is late afternoon before we struggle to the top of Sutton Bank and collapse exhausted in the grass bordering the road. Shirt, shorts and even my socks are wet with sweat. We lie in silence gazing down over the Vale of York. The green fields flow into the distance, dotted here and there by darker clumps of trees. The farm houses look like toys, and in the distance the Pennines frame the sky. The sun is low and the landscape shimmers in the heat, giving everything a golden glow.

Charlie gently touches the tiny flowers that grow among the grass. "Where do they go?" she says softly as though to herself. "Where do all those dead boys go?"

I stare up at the blue sky wondering if she expects an answer. Perhaps the Archbishop of Canterbury or the Pope know, but they are not handy. Then I think of my mother – in times of crisis I often think of her.

"Charlie," I say, "my mother is quite good-looking for her age. She's old now, of course, must be nearly 50. She likes parties, nice clothes and doesn't go to church much, but she has this awesome faith in God.

"If she were here now she'd give you a bit of a hug and say 'God knows,' and really mean it. Of course she'd weep for their short lives, but to her God knows everything. So why not let Him look after your boys. He knows where they are. What we must try to do is remember them always and what they did for us."

There is a long, long silence, Charlie and I not often dealing in subjects so profound. She gives me an intent look and finally says quietly: "You do me good," adding in an offhand way "Kid, you got depths I have not plumbed. Let's get down that hill."

We line up the bikes at the top. I nod at Charlie to go first. As I watch her gathering speed I fervently hope this is not one of the days the air vice-marshal decides to drive to Filey. Perhaps, at this very moment his big staff car is climbing the hill towards us. He won't take too kindly to us plastering ourselves all over his windshield. Neither will his driver, who has spent hours checking and polishing the Chrysler. If we are not dead on contact she may finish the job in a furious rage.

I push off, the hill grabs me and my clapped-out old bike and we start to fly. Charlie disappears around the first curve at a precarious angle. I follow and survive. The wind sings in my ears, the road edge flashes by in a green blur. Everything on my bike is vibrating, there is an ominous flap-flap from one of the tires. I am paralyzed with fright at the furious speed, but as the road straightens I am suddenly exhilarated. It's fun to be young, alive and doing silly, dangerous things like this. "Live for the moment," I shout at the wind. "There may be no tomorrow!"

We reach the foot in a ridiculously short time, considering the long struggle we had to get to the top. The road flattens out and I wobble to a stop beside Charlie. "Wasn't that great," she shouts, "If I weren't so pooped I'd do it again!"

"Yeah," I reply, "next time we'll try it in a fog. Let's go. Remember we're taking Aunt Sophy to the Red Lion. Do you suppose they'll have steak and kidney pie tonight?"

Charlie gives me a small, very apologetic smile. "God knows," she says.