

THE GINGERBREAD GIRL



Sheila Newberry was born in Suffolk and spent a lot of time there both before and during the war. She wrote her first 'book' before she was ten – all sixty pages of it – in purple ink. Her family has certainly been her inspiration and she has been published most of her adult life. She spent forty years living in Kent with her husband John on a smallholding, and has nine children and twenty-two lively grandchildren. They retired back to Suffolk where Sheila still lives today.

Also by Sheila Newberry

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A Home for Tilly

The Watercress Girls



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ZAFFRE



First published in Great Britain in 2007 by Robert Hale Limited

This paperback edition published in 2016 by

ZAFFRE PUBLISHING
80–81 Wimpole St, London W1G 9RE
www.zaffrebooks.co.uk

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is
available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-1-785-7611-1

Also available as an ebook

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Typeset by IDSUK (Data Connection) Ltd

Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, St Ives Plc



Zaffre Publishing is an imprint of Bonnier Zaffre,
a Bonnier Publishing company
www.bonnierzaffre.co.uk
www.bonnierpublishing.co.uk



I dedicate this book to Sally Bowden, friend and former editor. Also to the fond memories evoked of a favourite uncle, and his version of an enduring song.



PART ONE

1936–1945



PROLOGUE

1936

November

To Cora there appeared to be a mile of echoing hospital corridor ahead. She had not walked so far for many weeks. Her wobbly progress was exacerbated by her footwear which was new to her, but a size too large, like the starched cotton frock and the cardigan which swamped her spare frame. She'd heard the whispers of two of her fellow charity patients as she left the ward where she had spent the final days of her recovery.

'Bet that lot ain't been paid for yet!'

This was true, Cora had no doubt. Beg or borrow from the neighbours, that was her mother's way; her daughter couldn't blame her for that. Piecework from the rag trade was poorly paid.

Now, young Cora Kelly was leaving the orderly life she had come to accept over the past eight months; the long



rows of narrow hospital beds with their red-rubber protected mattresses, clean starched sheets and pillowcases; impeccably tucked-in cotton coverlets. She would miss the nourishing food here, now that her appetite had improved. Milk, and plenty of it, not stewed tea with a teaspoon of condensed milk from a sticky tin, which attracted the flies.

The young nurse accompanying her placed a steadying hand on her back. 'Take your time,' she said kindly.

'But me mum will be waiting,' Cora's lip trembled. She felt the sudden onrush of hot tears to her eyes. She recalled her mother's face, white and anxious, the evening eight months ago, when the ambulance men rolled up her little daughter in a rough red blanket and carried her out of the building. The rest was a blur. She had been very ill indeed with diphtheria. There had been an epidemic in their crowded East London tenement. Most of the children there had not been vaccinated against the disease. Many were immigrants. Cora's own great-grandparents on both sides had come from Ireland around the middle of the last century in search of work. This had also been her feckless father's excuse when he left home, such as it was, when Cora was a few months old. You didn't miss what you'd never had, she thought, regarding herself, but it was much harder for Mum. Bertie Kelly's visit last March had been totally unexpected. For four days they'd seemed like a family, but it didn't last. He'd left them in the lurch again, after pocketing the rent money, with no forwarding address.





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Biddy had been inconsolable but there was worse to come just a week later . . .

‘I’ll see you tomorrow,’ Biddy Kelly had promised Cora, hoarsely. It was a pledge she couldn’t keep. Visitors were barred from the fever hospital but on the last week in November she had at least heard her mother’s voice and was aware she was near. The heavy-breathing stout woman who swept under the beds every morning had smuggled a note to her.

Be in the end lavvy at two o’clock. The window will be on the catch. I will be outside, with something for you.

The curtains were drawn across the windows in the wards, shutting out the sight of the white world outside, as overnight there had been the first snowfall of the winter. Cora sneaked out of bed after temperatures were taken in the morning, to marvel at the transformation of the dreary courtyard, the snowflakes whirling. A nurse trod carefully over the white carpet, wrapped around in her winter cloak, which on special occasions, like Christmas, would reveal the shiny scarlet lining, when the nurses sang carols to the patients, walking the wards, by the light of their lanterns. A sight to see, Cora thought, but she hoped she would not still be in hospital then.

Just before time, while the patients obediently closed their eyes and settled down for the customary rest, Cora tiptoed out; she was fortunate that her bed was not far from the swing doors.





There was no lock on the door, but the lavatory block was deserted. Cora wrinkled her nose as usual at the powerful smell of carbolic. She crossed to the window, knelt on the closed lavatory seat and peered out.

‘Mum?’ she called uncertainly.

A hand wriggled through the tiny gap in the window, a shadow was revealed against the frosted glass.

‘Cora? Yes, it’s me. Among the dustbins! It’s snowing hard, I nearly slipped over. Wish I could see you properly, darlin’. Are you all right?’

‘Yes, Mum. I’m coming home soon, I hope. They say me nose swabs are clear at last. What about you?’

There was silence for a moment, and then Biddy said: ‘I miss you. I can’t stop, you might get into trouble, so might I, and that nice cleaner what helped me. Just hold my hand for a minute, that’s it.’

‘I love you, Mum,’ Cora blurted out. Biddy’s hand was cold; Cora tried to warm it with her own. It reminded her of her mother’s numbed fingers turning the handle of the sewing machine, as she hunched over her sewing in the winter. ‘Oh Mum, I’ll have to knit you some gloves for Christmas!’ She added: ‘Old London looks better when it snows, don’t it? Covers up all the rubbish in the streets, and I love the icicles hanging from the windows up top, and the church spire reminds me of a magic wand pointing in the sky. I wouldn’t half like to be out in our street, sliding about and pretending to be an ice skater like Sonja Henie.’





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‘I’d like to see you with a rosy face again, darlin’, you been shut away here far too long.’ Biddy told her. ‘The shops are all decorated up for Christmas already, all them pretty lights.’ She sounded wistful: they only got a chance to stand outside the big stores in the better parts of the city, and press their noses to the glass to watch a toy train going round and round past a sign which declaimed: TO WONDERLAND. Father Christmas came along the path among the melee of shoppers and rang a bell crying ‘Ho, Ho Ho! Come inside, my elves have been busy!’ Small boys, ragamuffins the posh folk called them, had snowballs in hand to aim at a gentleman’s top hat.

Then her hand was released, her mother’s withdrawn. Almost immediately a small packet was pushed through the opening in the window.

‘A little early Christmas present. Goodbye, darlin’, never forget, I love you, too. Get back to your bed now.’

Cora retrieved the package; when she looked up the shadow had disappeared.

She didn’t examine her present until she was safely back under the covers. A hard-baked gingerbread man, slightly battered in his fall. Cora couldn’t eat him, for he was a precious reminder of her mother. The biscuit was tucked in her cardigan pocket now, having escaped the daily inspection by Matron.

Now, she thought, I’m on me way back home! When they arrived at the reception desk a small woman rose





from the chair where she had been sitting for almost an hour and greeted Cora with relief. This was her mother's good friend, Eliza Quinn, who shared their rented rooms. She'd supported the family through many a scrape. Eliza was single, no dependants, and served in the local baker's shop. When left-overs came her way she passed them on. A breakfast treat for Cora was a slice of stale bread dipped into hot water then fried in sizzling dripping.

'Here you are at last, Cora dear!' She'd never lost her husky Liverpool-Irish accent.

'Eliza, where's me mum?' Cora asked anxiously.

Eliza had been silently rehearsing her explanation. Now she replied quickly: 'Your mum's not too well just now. The hospital board don't feel she's up to caring for you for a while. They consider you need to go convalescent.'

'What's that?' the child demanded. Her pallor contrasted with her cropped black hair and dark, long-lashed eyes. Eliza observed that Cora had shot up in height. She was no longer doll-like and pretty, but a skinny and gawky seven-year-old.

'You need good fresh country air, a long holiday. No school for a bit. Your mum asked if I could help. Well, I thought of me aunty. She and her sons run a farm. You'll like it – all the animals and that. She's got a big heart, Ginny Brookes. Brought me up, you know, when me mum couldn't cope with all us kids in Liverpool. Twins, two sets in one year! Ginny was newly married, no family





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then of her own. She said you should come, and welcome, Cora. We're going there today, by train. They're running to time again now the snow has disappeared, but it's still bitterly cold.'

'Can't I see Mum first?'

Eliza hesitated. 'She says she'll visit you as soon as she's feeling stronger. Now, Nurse, I'll sign the release paper, and then we must catch a cab to Liverpool Street!'

As they waited on the station platform Cora clung to Eliza's arm. After the quiet of the hospital the noise seemed horrendous. It made Cora flinch. People hurried backwards and forwards, a goods train shunted in the sidings, a disembodied voice boomed out, from nowhere it seemed, announcing the arrival of their train.

Steam billowed, doors opened, folk disembarked. Porters appeared with trolleys to transport luggage. A woman in a sumptuous fur coat glanced in the train windows, impatient to find an empty compartment. She had an imperious voice and chivvied the porter along. Cora and Eliza stood back until the chaos cleared, and then Eliza helped her young friend aboard. They walked a short way along the corridor then entered a carriage. Eliza placed their bags on the luggage-rack. Doors slammed shut.

For the moment, they were alone.

'Sit down, dearie,' Eliza advised as the train lurched forward. She plumped down on the seat beside her, took off her round felt hat, and shook her head in relief, the





bright red curls bouncing on her shoulders. Her hair and laughing freckled face made her appear younger than her twenty-eight years. She was actually the same age as careworn Biddy.

‘Where are we going?’ Cora ventured.

‘Californy, here we come!’ Eliza sang out sweetly, with a smile.

‘California, d’you mean? That’s in America!’ Biddy had a sister there. They received a card from her each Christmas enclosing a photograph of her growing family.

‘This one’s in Norfolk. Not far from Great Yarmouth, where I sent them bloaters from, last year. Settle down, it’ll be hours, and a change of train, before we get there.’

The final stage of their journey was in the early evening. Cora was wrapped round with horse blankets, the smell of them made her wrinkle her nose, but she told herself she must be polite and not mention it. They bowled along the winding lanes by pony and trap, driven by Ginny Brookes, small and round like her niece, with a man’s flat cap on a bundle of hair which was faded but still streaked with red.

Cora caught glimpses of the sea below the cliffs before they veered inland. Traces of snow lingered on the grass verges and it was almost dusk.

They drove down a long track to the old house at Westley Farm. The roof was uneven where the original small structure had been extended over the past century or so. There





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were crumbling bricks on one side, and newer red bricks on the other, not yet taken over by the encroaching ivy. There was a chorus of barking from the dogs in the yard and chickens squawking and flapping out of the way. Seagulls wheeled overhead. The door stood open, welcoming them in.

‘Boys will be in to supper, they’re busy right now,’ Ginny told Eliza. ‘It’ll give us time for a chat, eh?’ She helped Cora down from the trap. ‘Come upstairs and tidy up. I’ll show you your room. Eliza, you’re in your usual bed. How long can you stay?’

‘Only till tomorrow,’ Eliza said regretfully. ‘Got to get back to work. The boss lost his wife recently; I’m doing a bit of housekeeping for him and his son, too, extra hours for extra cash.’ She added softly, with a quick glance at Cora, ‘I’ll help with her keep . . .’

Cora was to sleep in the little box room, immediately above the kitchen. She shared the space with some interesting items, long stored away but not necessarily forgotten.

When Ginny opened the door and ushered Cora inside, she exclaimed: ‘So this is where Aunt Poll’s box disappeared to! I never noticed it yesterday when I made up your bed. It’s well-aired, lovey, don’t you fret about that. Granny Jules’s old washstand, see, you’re honoured! Hope you don’t mind the artefacts.’ She rubbed her finger over the lid of the square enamelled box on the windowsill. ‘I must have dusted it. Would you like it to keep something from home,





inside?’ She opened the box to reveal the empty interior. ‘Aunt Poll put her baubles and beads in here.’

‘Ta, it’s lovely,’ Cora said politely, as her mum had taught her. Then she yawned widely, forgetting to cover her gaping mouth with her hand.

‘You’re worn out,’ Ginny told her. ‘Why not get undressed and jump into bed? I put a nice stone water bottle in there, afore I come out. Eliza’ll bring you up some supper. You can meet the rest of the family tomorrow, eh?’

Dear Eliza helped her to spoon up the hot bread and milk with honey. Cora’s eyes were closing as Eliza sang again softly:

Californy, here we come,

Right back from where we started from. (‘Well, I did, anyway,’ she added.)

Where bowers, of flowers, bloom in the spring . . .

She gently removed the half-empty dish, placed it on the bedside table while she tucked the bedclothes round her charge.

Cora awoke some time later, and it was only then she allowed herself to cry. She turned the feather pillow over when it became too damp. The mattress was plump, ‘well shook-up’, as Ginny said. The box sat on the bedside table. Inside was the crumbly gingerbread man, which she’d guessed came from Eliza’s shop.

When Cora stirred again it was morning. Eliza came into the room carrying a tray.





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‘Breakfast in bed!’ She beamed. ‘Sit up and rest this on your knees. A boiled egg, see, with your name on it – now how did that get there? Ginny cut the top off for you, and made you some dippy bread-and-butter strips, soldiers, don’t you call ’em? Not that these are standing to attention. Eat up. I’ll put the glass on the little table. Fresh from the first milking, that was. Did you hear the clanking of the milk pails?’

‘No. Ta,’ Cora said. She looked at Eliza. ‘Why are you wearing your hat?’

‘Time for me to make ready. A train to catch,’ Eliza said regretfully.

‘Can I come and see you off?’

‘You’d like to do that, would you?’

Cora nodded her head. She was intent now on eating her egg; she wasn’t going to be left behind here on her own.

‘The clothes you wore yesterday are already in the wash, they smelled of the hospital, but you’ve another set in your case.’

‘I saw that, when you took my nightie out last night and the new toothbrush and that. Where did they come from?’ Cora drained the glass of milk. It was a bit too creamy for her taste and still warm, but she wouldn’t have dreamed of being impolite and saying so.

‘A friend at the bakery gave them to me for you, her daughter had outgrown them. Good as new, see? Must be a careful child! Let me take the tray. I’ll bring you up a jug





of warm water to wash with. Privy's off the scullery, in the yard. Oh, I forgot to say,' Eliza gestured at the washstand cupboard, 'the jerry's hid in there.'

'It's all right,' Cora assured her, 'I guessed!' She grinned. 'I turned up the night light when I had to get out. I ain't daft, you know.'

'Getting your old spirit back, dearie, that's good; your mum'll be pleased to hear that.' Eliza paused. 'Make the most of your holiday, won't you.'

'I'll try,' Cora promised.

Eliza patted Cora's shorn head. 'That awful pudding-basin cut,' she said ruefully, 'I suppose they had to chop your hair off because of the fever. Still, by the time Biddy sees you, you should look more yourself, eh?'

The following weeks passed happily. There was so much to do on the farm although it was really more of a small-holding these days. Ginny had rented out some of the fields when her husband died, and reduced the stock.

Cora quickly became involved. Ginny bought her some wellington boots; it was always muddy in the yard because Mal gave it a hose-down after the milking, when the small herd of cows went through to the field to join the pony. There were half a dozen lambs being fattened up in a smaller paddock which they shared with an aged, bearded goat, and two young male pigs wallowing in mud in a pen. Cora was nervous of these last; she skirted them hastily as they stuck their inquisitive snouts over





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the fence and blinked at her with their beady, bright eyes. She was soon given a morning task to herself: gathering the eggs from the hen house. She'd apologize to a hen on the nest:

'Sorry to disturb you! Let's just feel under you and see . . .' Then she would hold up a warm brown egg with a clinging feather or two and add: 'Ta very much!'

The hens, a hybrid assortment, with wings unclipped, often escaped from their pen, like they had the day Cora arrived, but they mostly went back to lay, and to roost in their quarters at night.

Many feral cats lived in the barn. Cora approached that place with caution, for Ginny had warned her about the rodents who shared the cattery. The sacks of corn were the main reason, and other animal feed was also stored in here. Cora would push open the door, cry, 'Scat!' fearfully, and then pour skimmed milk from a jug into a big dish for the cats. The only one to come near her was a young ginger tom, who didn't object to a brief tickle behind his ears while he lapped his milk. Once he leapt from a beam on to her shoulders, startling her; he had a somewhat rusty purr and as he kneaded with his paws she winced as his sharp claws dug into her flesh. Her exclamation of pain made him drop to the ground and shy away.

'You can't make pets of them, dearie,' a concerned Ginny said later as she applied soothing ointment to the scratches. 'Got to watch out these don't turn septic . . .'





Mal was the older of Ginny's boys. His hair was bleached like straw by the sun; he had a ruddy face and red hands, because they were often in cold water. He was responsible for the cattle as he had been since losing his father six years ago, when he was fourteen. He was a chap of few words; Cora was in awe of him. She wanted to ask him about the beehives he tended, and how the honey was produced, but all he said in his gruff way was to be respectful of the bees, then they wouldn't sting her.

Jimmy was different. He was almost sixteen, still growing, with a mop of sandy curly hair which made him look angelic, but he was a bit of a dare-devil. He rode the old dun pony bareback round the paddock, and sometimes he was to be seen vaulting on to the back of one of the cows, hanging on to her horns as she attempted to throw him off. Jimmy was always the last up in the mornings – he'd left school this summer, but when he wasn't up to mischief he always had his head in a book.

'We'll never make a farmer out of him,' his mother would sigh indulgently.

Mal and Jimmy didn't argue over the younger brother's attitude to the family business. It was understood that Mal would inherit the farm, and that at some point Jimmy would leave home and make his own way in life.

Cora secretly adored Jimmy. He was willing to amuse her after supper with a game of tiddlywinks or snakes and ladders. She learned to be a good loser because Jimmy





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made no concessions to her age. He always had an answer for her questions and she believed him implicitly, even when he had an impish gleam in his hazel eyes.

Once, she couldn't help herself, she whispered in his ear as she wished them all goodnight: 'When I grow up, I'm going to marry you, Jimmy Brookes!'

He grinned, whispered back; 'Some hope, Cora Kelly!' She wasn't quite sure what he meant by that. She knew he had a girlfriend, for he went to the village social every Friday evening with Helen, from the big farm further up the lane. Cora watched from her bedroom window as they cycled off, avoiding the ruts, chatting animatedly.

When Cora was grown up, she'd sigh that these were the happiest days of her life, at Westley Farm, except her mother wasn't there, too . . .

It was coming up to Christmas, and Cora knew without being told, that she would be well enough to go back to London and school in the new year. She had mixed feelings about that, but, of course, she longed to see her mum.

She woke one morning and went over to the window, pulled the curtain as usual, and saw that something magical had happened overnight: everywhere was covered by a blanket of snow! The barn opposite wore a cap of white, and trudging across the yard was Mal, whistling as he always did, carrying the milk pails. He looked up and grinned, called out to Cora, 'You look as if you've never seen snow before!'





I have, she thought, but it's not like this in London; it soon becomes slushy and you have to watch out, or you can slip over on the snow. Here it looks crisp and clean, I can see Mal's footprints, and here comes Jimmy, scooping up snow to make a snowball. Like Mal he wore a balaclava, with a big scarf wound round his neck.

'Wait till I've delivered the milk to the dairy, then we'll have a battle!' she heard Mal say.

'We must show Cora how to make a snowman later,' Jimmy said, and he looked up at Cora too and waved.

'You must have breakfast before you go out in the cold, and wrap up well,' Ginny told her.

Cora wore a pair of Jimmy's old dungarees, with legs cut shorter by Ginny's sharp scissors, an overcoat, which Ginny had pounced on at the last church jumble sale, a multicoloured pixie hat and mitts to match and like the boys, a scarf. Jimmy found the old sled they used when they were around Cora's age, brushed it off, added old cushions for Cora to sit on, and Ginny wrapped her round with a horse blanket. Jimmy squatted in front of Cora and steered the sled down a snowy slope, while Mal ran alongside in case they tipped over. Cora enjoyed every minute of the ride, but soon it began to snow again, soft feathery flakes to begin with, which melted when she caught some, but the grey heavy skies above were a sign there would be more to come . . .





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While Cora was indoors warming up by a blazing fire, the boys went in search of a small Christmas tree, and returned in triumph. They dragged it back from the woods on the sledge. Ginny was busy baking mince pies, but when they were in the oven, she produced a battered box of tree ornaments, red and green crepe paper and lots of tangled tinsel. Cora decorated the lower branches. After supper, she was presented with a long woollen sock and hung it on the end of her bed. Would Father Christmas know she was here? She wondered. Of course he did: the gifts were modest, mostly hand-made, but like the gingerbread man she would treasure them, and remember the Christmas day she spent here forever.

Ginny said very little as they drove to the station to meet Eliza, a week later, when the snow had disappeared, except to remark, as they glimpsed the sea, 'I meant to take you on the beach for a day. You would have enjoyed that. We're always too busy on the farm.'

I don't mind, honest,' Cora replied. 'Did Eliza say if me mum was coming, too?'

There was a pause, Ginny flicked the reins, and then she cleared her throat.

'She can't come, dearie.'

'Oh, well, I'll see her soon. Are me and Eliza going back to London tomorrow?'

Ginny nodded. 'By the way, would you like to keep Aunt Poll's box? A little farewell gift from me, eh?'





‘Oh I would. Ta.’ I’ll share it with Mum, Cora thought, she deserves a present, too. I wonder if the gingerbread man is too stale to eat now?

Eliza said to herself, as she gathered her things together in the train, We’ll arrive at the station in five minutes. I must powder my nose. When will I break the news? Lord give me strength to do so . . . She firmly believed in the power of impromptu prayer.

She waited until after supper, when the boys went out, and they’d cleared the table.

‘I’ll wash up. You two have a talk, eh?’ Ginny bustled into the scullery.

‘Come and sit by me on the settle,’ Eliza said. She hugged Cora close.

‘Why are you crying?’ the child asked.

‘Because . . . I have some very sad news, Cora. Your mum—’

‘What about me mum?’

‘You remember she wasn’t well, that’s why you came here . . .’

‘She never wrote, not once,’ Cora said in an injured tone.

‘She couldn’t. She wanted to, but she couldn’t. She had a little baby, Cora, she should have told you she was expecting it, but, you were so ill too and . . .’

‘I . . . don’t understand.’

‘She . . . passed away soon after the baby was born, just before Christmas. You’ve got a tiny sister, Cora. Your





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mother asked me to look after her, and you. Mr Norton, my boss, has been so kind, I'm to be housekeeper for him now full time: you and the baby, the three of us, we'll have a proper home there in a nice part of Stepney.'

'What's its name?' Cora asked. She didn't appear to comprehend what had happened to her mother.

'The house has a number, not a name. It's not too far from the shop.'

'I meant, the . . . baby.'

'Deirdre. Biddy decided that, after her own mother. The baby's still in the free hospital, the nurses call her Dede. We can take her home when we're ready.'

Thank goodness, Eliza thought, she hasn't asked who the baby's father is. Poor Biddy: who else could it have been but Bertie? If I can help it, that wretched fellow'll never know about the baby. Biddy's children are my responsibility now.

If only Biddy had gone to the hospital earlier and asked for their help, she might have been saved. If only I had arrived home from work earlier that day . . . the shock of finding she had given birth, all by her . . . that will haunt me for ever.

Eliza gave herself a mental shake. *I'll try not to let you down, Biddy. I promise.*

