

Chapter 12

Post-war in London; Peter starts to write

1946–1947



Spikey spent eight months in America. She flew all over the country speaking on the radio and at Womens' Clubs; receiving hospitality from their officials, and coming back regularly to her flat in Washington. She talked about women in Britain, the war and conditions now the war was over, and they loved her. Being an ex-housewife she easily fitted two years' work into that eight months. They tried hard to persuade her to stay longer but she was missing her grandchildren and, I expect, Professor Norris. Thoughtful as usual, she left money behind her there so that the parcels and magazines kept coming. Nothing like them was available yet in Britain even if one had coupons to spare.

Her professor was very pressing; she should divorce her husband and marry him. She thought long and hard about it, but came to the conclusion that, while she loved him, and while he was the man who had awakened her sexually and had introduced her to orgasms, they already had the best of their relationship. If she married him so that they were *living* together and not just *sleeping* together she could foresee that she might begin to object to the vast amount of whisky he drank and the amount of time he spent at the Savage Club, from which of course as a woman she was excluded. So she refused him and sent him back to his wife and daughters. But they remained good friends and occasional lovers.

Meanwhile the weather had decided to finish off what the war had started. Even in London we had deep snow. Everything froze, even the water pipes deep underground in the road. There was no fuel to be had unless Peter pushed Gale's pram to the gas works at Greenwich to queue up for a bag of ovoids (reconstructed coal dust and cement) from the gas works. Luckily in Gale's little bedroom there was a large gas fire. Someone had left a tap dripping in the bathroom directly above and a momentary thaw, soon over, lasted just long enough to bring water down through the ceiling. Gale was frightened and refused to sleep in the room, so we moved her cot into our big room next door and spent the winter in her little room heated, overheated by the gas fire, but cosy. For a while we had to melt snow to get water to make a cup of tea.

Peter painted a mural all over the long wall where she had picked off the wallpaper – an almond tree in full bloom, rabbits, primroses, a little road winding between the hills into the distance, while I made a patchwork quilt.

Eventually the bitter winter came to an end, and things returned to normal. We took Gale to the zoo. Most of it she loved, but while Peter was carrying her on his shoulders we went into the giraffe house. A particularly large giraffe bent its head down over the high railings of its cage until its very large head was level with her face, and breathed on her – a long, noisy, warm damp breath. She was terrified. For months afterwards she was convinced that there was a giraffe on the kitchen stairs.

Peter decided it was time to arrange a holiday back in Cornwall from which we had been so rudely wrenched in 1939. So now, in 1946 we planned a group to go back to the field above the cliff in Kennack. Gale's friend Margaret was to come with her mother and aunt; one of the doctors from the Peckham Family Health Centre would bring his wife and two children to join us for part of the four weeks and Honour Arundel, a journalist who wrote for the *Daily Worker*, and her 50-year-old Red Indian husband who worked for the Water Board brought their eleven-month-old baby. We travelled at night and for the only time in our lives booked berths in a sleeper, one for Peter and one for me and Gale. The camping equipment we had of course sent on in advance.

And for four weeks it rained.

We had three Gomphe gales. All the tents blew down several times, one on a lighted primus. The doctor and family, having come in a car, went home. The rest of us had, for several days, to take refuge, Peter, Gale and I in the farm's bike shed and the rest in a hayloft which seemed very warm, soft and comfortable but where they all got bitten quite badly.

It was the year of the worst cigarette shortage, and we all smoked. We had arranged for friends to send us supplies, but they didn't. So one of us, each day, had to make the twenty-four mile round trip to Helston, to return, if lucky, with ten tenners, small disgusting cigarettes reputed to be made from the sweepings of cinema floors. Ten divided by six won't go – so we bought a tiny pipe, dismantled the cigarettes and passed a pipe of peace round the circle.

We kept telling each other it couldn't last – the weather must clear up eventually – but it didn't. Although we were all wet through most of the time no-one caught a cold – in fact it was quite warm so we wore bathing dresses under macintoshes, which looked indecent but wasn't. Nearly everyone was good tempered. Only the Red Indian tended to sulk in his tent. Perhaps he was too old for such an adventure. Finally we arrived home, damp but none the worse.

By now everyone was demobbed so the house had filled up. My niece, Jill, ten months younger than Gale, lived with her parents on the top floor. David and Spikey occupied the next one down, Peter, Gale and I slept on the ground floor, and we all used the basement "kitchen" as a living room.

In January 1947 my mother suggested that as Gale was now nearly three and a half Peter and I ought to have a weekend together leaving her to baby-sit. So, rather nervously, we left her in charge one Saturday morning and caught a coach out of London. I don't even remember what county we went to, but there were beech hangers. When the coach stopped at what looked like a nice

pub we got out and went in for a drink. I don't think we knew the name of the village, but the pub, although a bit posh, was very welcoming. Large coal fires were burning in the bars and the solid-looking tables and chairs were old and well polished. The beer was good too, and so was the ploughman's, plentiful and not ridiculously expensive. So we asked, and they did have a double room which we booked. Yes, they did evening meals – when would we like to eat? – as it got dark so early perhaps at seven.

We explored the countryside round and had afternoon tea in an afternoon tea shop – villages had them in those days. Then we people-watched and talked, enjoyed our very good meal, more drinks before an early bed.

Next morning we got up pretty late, but not too late for a Sunday morning breakfast of bacon and eggs – obviously rationing was not very strict out in the countryside. The sun was shining as we left the pub and the air seemed quite warm. Peter was carrying his walking stick, an essential accompaniment for a walk. As we passed the last cottage we heard the unmistakable sound of a hunt in the distance, then saw, weaving its way between the beech trees on a hillside, first the dogs and man with a horn, then the well-groomed horses carrying men in pink coats and women in black, a couple even riding side-saddle. We both disapproved of hunting but despite this found the sight entrancing – trees and ground both thick with the rich tan of leaves framing the picture. It was magic.

For a while we were silent as we left the village behind, content just to walk together – then we began to talk, to talk properly about our future. Peter certainly wanted to continue teaching, but we didn't want to share my family house for ever. And Peter had always said that eventually he wanted to live in the country, and to write. I had always lived in London, and was not sure if Peter's dreams of authorship and a country cottage were just pipe dreams. Maybe if we uprooted he would find he didn't like it after all! Anyway he really liked the job he had, and we were still paying off his college debts and the Kent Education Committee and had no savings or furniture.

So I made a bargain.

“All you need with which to write a book are determination, paper and pen. If you will write one, then I will live in the country.”

“It's a deal,” Peter said. “We'll start as soon as we get back. Let's turn the little room next to the kitchen into a study. No-one is using it now and it will give us somewhere to get away from your family.”

“Good idea,” I said, “I'll type everything you write during the day while you are at school.”

So that's what we did. At first Peter started on a book about his childhood in Owslebury, but realised very soon he couldn't ever publish it without hurting his parents very much. So he put it aside and began writing poetry again, and then decided to write a novel about an evacuated school during the war.

His health was still not brilliant and he still suffered from a lot of stomach pains, but every evening after supper he went into the study and wrote a few pages – and then read them to me and made any necessary alterations once he heard how they sounded. I typed them next day. Gradually the book took shape. Fired with success he started to write articles and more poems too. We joined a Writers' Group which met monthly in a pub in Charing Cross Road, and there we met other left-wing writers: Cedric Dover, a race relations expert from India, Randal Swingler, who had written the libretto for Benjamin Britten's *Peter Grimes*, George Barker, a poet, and many others. Randal and Cedric became friends.

Peter went to hear Louis Arragon, a French poet, read his poems. It was in a house in one of the posh London squares and the audience sat on elegant little chairs. Peter laughed so much that he fell off his chair, broke it and slit his trousers right down! Luckily he had a mac with him – but they all went off afterwards to the Trade Union built Unity Theatre to dance on the stage after the show. It was really hot and Peter's partners kept asking him to take his mac off, and thought him very strange that he wouldn't.

That winter was another bad one, but not quite as bad as the year before. We had quite a lot of snow though, for London, and Gale and Jill, well wrapped up, enjoyed being pulled on the sledge to shop.

Randal Swingler became a close friend and visited us at Blackheath. He invited us to meet his wife, Geraldine Peppen, and her identical twin sister Mary who turned out to be married to Dr Paddy Fisher who, years before, we had heard singing about the fat man watering the workers' beer. Mary and Geraldine were professional pianists who played together always, on two pianos. Their great friend James Gibb was also a professional pianist and they started inviting us to their concerts, and to the booze-up in a pub afterwards.