

Chapter 15

**Gale starts school;
interview at
Goldsmith College**

Autumn 1948



That September Gale had a new fairy cycle, quite a big one, for her birthday, and started school at Blackheath High School. The little ones now inhabited a house at the end of The Paragon, facing the Heath, a much longer walk. There was a back way, even longer but quiet and very suitable for a bike. By the first day of term she had learnt to ride, but not yet to mount and dismount. I had to put her on, give her a push, jump on to my own bike, and ride beside her with my hand on her shoulder, past an actual farm; yes, a farm in London eight miles from London Bridge. The first day of school came and, dressed in her new uniform, we set off. All went well. We managed to cross the fairly main Lee Road safely. When we arrived I very quickly rested my bike against the fence and turned to catch her before she fell off.

As an infant she had morning school only, so I met her outside school at 12.30 and we repeated the process. After three days I rode up Lee Park in good time to fetch her when I was amazed to see my daughter cycling safely and independently down the hill toward me. She had been let out a little early, decided she *could* get on by herself; had ridden home carefully looking both ways at the main road. After that she insisted on getting on and off the bike herself, but I still escorted her each way making quite sure I got there early to meet her before she set off home.

Cedric Dover insisted that *The Rule of Three*, now complete with chapter headings, be professionally typed and soft-bound to send to an American agent in zero time, so against our better judgement we paid £30 to have it done – not as well as I could have done it! And off it went.

Peter had done his part; now I must do mine. But before we started on our project to live in the country he decided to apply for a job at Goldsmith College, just a twenty minute tram ride away at New Cross. Here is a story he wrote about that adventure.

I realise now that I was even less well organised in those days; the story of my solitary attempt to get a job in training college depended on this personality quirk. That summer I felt that I ought to be applying for suitable posts – almost so that I could say that I had tried. There were practical considerations too, including considerably more money; Bill Spikes had said that I shouldn't be too long in my first job and took the view that, including war service, I'd been nearly ten years at Stratford; and a training college, rather distinguished, advertised for a lecturer in Speech and Drama and was only a sixpenny journey by tram from the end of Lee Park. The last thing I knew about in any professional way was Speech, but on the other hand I was quite a dab at drama. Anyway, it was worth trying.

So on the day before the interview I felt at last obliged to check my only suit – my demob suit, issued when I left the army three years before. This was a heavy serge three-piece which combined blue with a foxy red and was always mentioned as my unemployed tram driver's suit. It *was* on a hanger, but it was hopelessly crumpled and had obviously been gardened in if not worse. There was no time to have it cleaned – no time,

even, to press it. Then our frequent visitor, John Longdon, said that *he* had a perfectly good grey suit which he had worn in Burma when he was in the army there, and – triumph – it had been cleaned and hung up in *his* wardrobe, still in its paper overcoat, and therefore immaculate. We arranged for him to bring it round next morning. The interview was at eleven. We thought we were roughly the same size, and in any case, I reflected, it wasn't a beauty competition.

I was up early, had a bath and a rather meticulous shave, and John arrived holding the suit well off the ground by its wooden clothes hanger. It didn't fit very well – a bit “proud” in the behind and waist, and a trifle narrow across the chest; but with a “sincere” tie (I'd just been introduced to the American comic writer S.J.Perelman) it looked tolerable, and in any case there was no alternative. I put a coloured handkerchief in the top pocket in a desperate attempt to distract attention from sartorial inadequacies elsewhere, stuffed a packet of Players Weights and some matches into the rather tight pocket, hung my scruffy mac over my arm, and launched forth to the interview.

As I climbed up the little curved stairway of the tram I was aware of being a trifle nervous – it was my first job application and I felt a bit stiff and unnatural in this grey but rather fibrous hairy suit the material of which was unpleasing to my bare legs. So of course I lit a cigarette and looked out at the bright morning from the open top of the tram. I was sitting in the front and thus had a Cortez-like view of three sides of the landscape all the way to New Cross. My own body really did look strange, like somebody else's. On the crotch I noticed a bit of red cotton had caught on the slightly bristly material. I pulled, and pulled, until I had a couple of feet of red cotton in my right hand, my left still holding the cigarette. At last – or at length – there was no more and in attempting to tidy up the area I touched my own skin. I felt the area thoroughly. There were many square inches where there was no grey heavy protective suit material but only a gaping hole. Then with a sudden rush of dark blood to my face, I remembered that if you sent anything to the cleaners and they found a hole, slit or burn, they stitched round with red cotton to draw attention to the need for repair and to absolve themselves from any responsibility. I felt further and encountered only the soft cotton of pants and my own bare skin; my trousers, or rather John's trousers, were virtually crotchless and I was twenty minutes off an important interview. The tram stopped at the traffic lights. I threw my cigarette butt over the side; it landed on the open top of a lorry alongside loaded with large objects wrapped in straw. As the lights changed I saw with rising disbelief the lorry speeding up the hill in front, thick smoke rising from the straw and a flicker of flame half visible in the bright sunshine. It was then I concluded that I *must* be dreaming. Too many impossible things were happening simultaneously.

Soon my stop arrived. I got off the tram and walked across a big paved area and up the steps to ring the bell and be admitted by a porter who, on my shyly admitting my name and purpose, led me to a Miss Someone, a shortish lady in her fifties with a wind-battered face, grey hair pulled back into a would-be casual bun, and conspicuously short skirts showing rather bony knees. She took me to the coffee room and chatted amicably about the job and the prospects and potential colleagues. Then

she checked her watch and said “Mr Hewett, I think it’s about time we went up” and led me to the bottom of a very steep and narrow stone staircase. She invited me to precede her up the stair, and I insisted that she went first. Very soon we were waving at one another like Punch and Judy, she insisting with rising firmness that I went in front so as not to receive inevitable glimpses of hidden treasures beyond those very short skirts, and I equally insistent with a kind of quiet doggedness which I’m sure she took for utter stupidity and insensitivity as well as rudeness that I should follow her. Better, I thought, a glimpse of her maiden underwear than a full frontal – or backtal – view of my totally unclothed privates. I won in the end and she went up first with some difficulty, knees together: I followed equally spavined and was led across a very long interview room, knees banging, to a solitary seat in front of the board, which I greeted briefly before sitting down smiling and then nearly shouting aloud as I lowered myself onto the very chill leather-topped chair.

The interview was, of course, a disaster. My ignorance of recent developments in Speech Therapy was revealed in all its richness and I pictured them saying after I left what an incredibly awkward and shy young man the last applicant had been. But when I got home and exposed my plight to John and Diana they showed no pity at all but merely howled with cruel laughter.