

Chapter 16

Move to Ipswich; house hunting

**Winter 1948 –
Summer 1949**



We were getting to know the Swingers very well, and drinking with them after their concerts, so we began to know Mary and Paddy too. Several times the three of us were invited to Randal's country home in Pebmarsh for the weekend. It was a dear little thatched cottage – not all that little – but with no facilities – a well in the garden for water – a little hut with a wooden seat over a bucket for a lavatory and a wood fire and candles for heat and lighting – on a sharp bend in the lane just before you came to Pebmarsh. They bought it for £100 together with an acre of orchard a few years back.

Recently Mary and Paddy had bought for much more money a cottage nearly opposite the pub in the centre of the village, which they called “Great Lengths” as they went there to get out of London. Their very elderly mother also lived in the village and needed a lot of care. Geraldine's daughter Judy was nearly grown up but Mary's son was quite a bit younger than Gale. This was bad planning as it interrupted their professional life twice as much as if they had twins.

Quite a little colony of musicians had begun to grow up round Pebmarsh as people came to visit, fell in love with the village and bought their own places – Alan Rassthorn among many. Peter found them all very stimulating but tiring – and I didn't feel it fitted in well with Gale.

It was their habit to get up late and, as soon as possible, walk to one of the two pubs to be ready for opening time and to stay drinking until closing time at 2 pm. After the stroll back and a bite to eat they would rest until tea time which merged into the walk to the pub for opening at 6 pm. If we went home at 11 pm when it closed we took a crate of beer with us – but frequently we were invited round the back to drink with the landlord – a source of the best dirty stories I have ever heard.

Peter and I had theories – life should be 90% Apollonian and 10% Dionesian – but at Pebmarsh it was the other way round, so only bearable in small doses.

Of necessity as we had Gale we had to modify the pattern anyway, but once or twice we left Gale in London and experienced the full weekend.

That year though, since I had promised to live in the country, we all spent Christmas there. Judy was there too. On Christmas morning Geraldine and Mary played the piano and Peter went outside into the frosty but sunny orchard and pruned some of the old apple trees while I cooked a large turkey in an oven over an oil stove. On Boxing Day one of their friends flew in from Geneva bringing a small suitcase full of the best steak! There was no refrigerator so we had to cook and eat it. After years of rationing it was a feast indeed.

Back home we held a conference. I had proved that I could cope with whatever country living threw at us. So now – should we look for a country home and then a job near – or a country job and then a home near? We decided to do the easiest first – so we drew an eighty mile radius circle round London in the atlas and agreed that Peter should apply for the first Senior English post that came up within that circle.

The first one advertised in the *Times Educational Supplement* was on the edge – Northgate Grammar school in Ipswich, Suffolk. We didn't know anything about Ipswich – or indeed Suffolk, but it was country, not London, so Peter applied, had an interview and got the job – just like that. The die was cast.

Peter's brother offered to drive us down in February to look round, while Spikey looked after Gale. Once we got out of London we found a heavy frost and roadside fields covered in patchy fine snow. The sky was very grey. I sat in the back knitting socks for Gale out of white knitting cotton which was not on coupon,s in a complicated and intricate lacy pattern on four needles.

In Ipswich we drove past the school buildings to have a look at them, headed out of town to look for our cottage in the country. Of course there were none – no To Let signs – no For Sale signs even. No empty properties. Everything looked bleak and each house and village turned its back on us.

Suddenly Bill shouted “Look – an empty house!” and there, across a small field was a dilapidated shell. He stopped the car and both men raced across – and came back laughing like crazy – “There's a goat in the kitchen!” they shouted.

Disheartened but not despairing we gave up as it began to get dark and headed for home. It was quite dark when the car broke down and we had no idea where we were. Luckily we were too far from a garage and pushed it there – but it was too big a job – they couldn't do anything that night. Warily we tried to hitch a lift but no-one stopped. As petrol was still rationed there were not many vehicles anyway. Finally in the distance we saw a well lighted something bearing down on us, so we all three stood in the middle of the road shouting and waving. It stopped, and when we ran to it, turned out to be a Grey-Green coach bound for London – not as we had hoped a free hitch, but very welcome for all that. We had enough money between us to pay the fares and eventually got back to a warm house and a welcoming Gale and Spikey, with very little accomplished but one beautiful white lacy sock. We decided to wait until the Easter holiday before visiting Ipswich again.

That last term at Stratford Grammar we were too busy enjoying ourselves to worry about where and how we were going to live. The Peppin twins gave several concerts, which were followed up by long sessions in a pub and then a party at Cannonbury Square.

There was a lot of talk about Dylan Thomas being expected but he always got too drunk at another pub before he got to ours. We did meet Augustus John though, also drunk, I was not sure whether he was being amorous or leaning on me for support he needed for his age or condition.

We were also seeing more than we wished of John Longdon. Indeed he began to turn up every evening we were at home and staying remorselessly on until we were obliged to say "Sorry, John, I'm afraid we must go to bed now".

"Don't worry," he would say, "I'll let myself out!"

I had a mild attack of flu. John insisted on sitting on the end of my bed reading aloud to me in his harsh monotonous voice. I suffered the whole of Byron's *Don Juan* and have never taken to it since! He must have been very lonely – a very intelligent man but most unpleasing.

We didn't have much time to see much of Arthur and Peggy and the Swingers suggested we should spend Easter with them at Pebmarsh to be within spitting distance of Ipswich. Peter had a lot of farewells to say at school and after an almost all night party at Cannonbury Square we left 44 Lee Park behind us to start a new life, with £32 in hand.

It was a late Easter and the weather was glorious. The country lane which twisted past the thatched cottages was bordered thickly with primroses, violets, cowslips ... so plentiful they even grew into the road where the tarmac was thin and it was impossible to avoid treading on them.

Peter hitched to Ipswich to make arrangements. We had been given an introduction to an architect, Birkin Howard, his wife and four children. Unfortunately they had no room for us too, but offered to do Gale's washing. Eventually he found a fairly cheap room for the three of us in a small hotel facing Christchurch Park and booked us in for bed and breakfast. We had most of our £32 still, but obviously couldn't afford to stay there for long. Getting back to Pebmarsh took longer and involved walking more between lifts.

On May 1st we were all sunbathing in the Swingers' orchard, Geraldine, Randall and Judith their daughter, Peter, Gale and me, and Gale was running about naked in the hot sunshine. Regretfully next day we said goodbye and Paddy drove us to Ipswich to start our new life, and Peter started term at Northgate Grammar School. Luckily the good weather held as we had to be out of the hotel all day. The park was a great resource but we must find lodgings before our money ran out – well before if we were to pay a week in advance. How does one find lodgings in a strange town? A local paper might help – not very likely but worth trying – some newsagents have cards in their windows but not,

obviously, those in the centre of Ipswich – so we went to buy a paper and an ice cream.

There was nothing in the *East Anglian* about rooms – only notices of houses for sale we couldn't possibly afford. Anyway we didn't want to *live* in Ipswich. We had long since drawn up our list of requirements. Peter insisted on a ploughed field at the end of a long garden, and room for a piano and all his books and much more. I felt we had to be near a school for Gale and some children for her to play with. But meanwhile we needed an affordable roof over our heads while we house-hunted. While Gale enjoyed her ice cream I asked the saleswoman if she knew of anyone who let rooms – just for a few weeks while we looked for somewhere permanent. She wasn't sure but thought we might try the other end of Woodbridge Road. "We needn't walk all the way," she explained, looking at the length of Gale's legs. "We could catch a bus at the top of Lloyd's Avenue". That sounded a good idea. A bus ride would be nice, if only for two stops. Then we knocked and asked, walked and knocked and asked again. Each time the answer was the same – no, there were no rooms to let, but possibly it might be worth trying Mrs So-and-so. Eventually, tired and very hungry, we caught another bus back to the centre of town. Gale had been so good and patient we would look for her favourite sausage and chips. They were not too difficult to find, and the waitress was very kind and helpful. She was not sure, but she had heard that they had rooms to let at number 96 London Road.

This time we walked, past the shops, a swimming pool, a big church, and there was London Road running downhill and there on the left was a tall house with steps up to an imposing front door. Yes, it was 96 – Yes, they did let rooms. Yes, they had a double free and a small one next to it that would do for the little girl – would we like to see it? We thought we would, though it didn't really matter as we wouldn't be there long. It looked fine. Mrs Barber seemed kind, a small dark haired tousled middle-aged woman with a little girl a bit younger than Gale hiding behind her skirts, and then, suddenly, two more girls who obviously ought to have been at school but were instead cleaning down the stairs and hallway. We would pay a week in advance and could we please come tomorrow. Peter *would* be thankful.

He was. Now our remaining money would last until he got paid. The house was clean and comfortable and not nearly as expensive as a hotel. I could use the kitchen. Peter could concentrate on his work. He found the Suffolk boys difficult at first. There was none of the lively insubordination and sparky taking up of opinions he had been used to dealing with from the East-Enders. There, besides being half girls the pupils had been about an eighth Jewish, mainly third generation Polish Jews now working on the Docks or running stalls in West Ham market. Here, besides being

100% boys, his classes were also almost one hundred percent Suffolk born and bred. There was no bad behaviour. There was no response at all! The boys sat stolidly, did what they were told but no more. Most of them spoke fairly broad Suffolk if and when they did speak. It was very hard work.

Gale and I visited all the house agents to ask about cheap cottages in the country and were given a handful of brochures advertising expensive bungalows on the suburbs of Ipswich – but now we were settled in rooms we could afford we could give our minds to house-hunting. It didn't seem worth sending Gale to a school for a few weeks only to change her again. Mr and Mrs Barber were a constant entertainment and almost compensated for the dearth of country cottages. He announced himself as an ex-spiv – a balding smooth-looking man who seemed to have plenty of money, but no obvious means of livelihood, though his wife and daughters worked hard enough keeping the house clean and polished. Occasionally the two older children went to school, but since their mother never left the house they were needed at home anyway to do the shopping.

Each teatime brought Peter back with the Ipswich *Evening Star* and as soon as Gale had been kissed and tea poured out we turned to the Houses to Let (generally none) and Homes for Sale (very few). It didn't really occur to us to wonder how we were going to be able to buy a house without any money on a teacher's salary. Three years before we had taken out an endowment policy with the Woolwich for one thousand pounds which seemed a lot of money until we looked at the prices.

One or two did seem possible. There was a cottage over at Debach – Ray kindly took Peter over on his motorbike to have a look – two and a half acres of garden, the advertisement said, and £950 freehold! There was no bus to and from the village, so no way Peter could get to school, but maybe we could think of something. His face when they got back told the whole story. The rooms were tiny, he said, but what was worse, there was no room in which he could stand up – someone had poured concrete on all the floors so the headroom had been reduced to five feet six inches. And the two and a half acres were a disused sand pit which fell as a vertical precipice fifteen feet deep just outside the back door. There was no way Gale wouldn't fall down and kill herself. Never mind, we said to one another, tomorrow there will be something good.

We had great hopes of a one-classroom school at Harkstead. That even had a teacher's house attached, one up, one down, and a lean-to kitchen. There was a pocket-handkerchief-sized playground in front and the school room was sturdy and a fair size, the windows skied to make sure no inattentive pupil would allow his gaze to wander outside, but no space at all for a garden – one of Peter's "musts". He and Sid Barber went off to bid for it. We had

decided to be sensible and stop our bidding at four hundred pounds as we would obviously have to spend twice as much as that to make it a habitable house. Perhaps fortunately for us a local businessman was willing to give five hundred pounds to use it as a store – so we lost it.

As the days and weeks went by we got more and more anxious to have a house of our own, which seemed as far away now as it had when we lived in London. We found the Barbers friendly but unbelievable. How many of their stories were true I will never know. I'm sure Sid enjoyed our shocked faces as we tried to listen with the mild interest of middle class sophisticates. The house, he assured us, he and his wife had run as a “short-time house” for American soldiers during the war.

“Very popular it was – sometimes the place was so full you could sit and watch all the lights swinging and dancing on the ceiling. They used to bring us whisky when you couldn't get it for love nor money. Very free with it they were, and my Little Darkey would pass her glass out to me where I stood in the garden where I poured it back into a bottle so we could flog it to the pubs. They were glad to get it. Plenty of meat they brought us – any amount.”

One day he decided to let us into a secret. “Come with me down into the cellars,” he said. Down we went. The stairs seemed very sturdy for cellar stairs and at the bottom we stood, quite as astonished as Sid hoped. He had secretly excavated a whole flat underneath the house. There it was, absolutely empty and spotlessly clean. I don't know how he managed about the foundations! It was not furnished nor was it even used as a store. Obviously he couldn't let it! but he really enjoyed the thought that it was there.

Sometimes he made money by not bidding for houses. He would go along to an auction with no intention of buying but knew just how much he could push the price up without being left with it on his hands – unless, that is, someone who really wanted it “bought him a drink” not to bid. This brought him in £100 a time. I don't know why local people didn't get together to call his bluff. One day he took Peter to see the boat he had nearly finished building on the Orwell near the Live and Let Live public house on the Westerfield Road. It was a four-berth beauty, just about finished down to the name proudly displayed on its prow “Mons Veneris”. He nudged Peter hard. “You and I, Peter, are the only two people in Ipswich who know what that means.”

Once Gale was in bed and asleep he regaled us with stories of his life. He had seduced his wife, Little Darkey, when she was fourteen on Hampstead Heath. By the time she was seventeen and married with a young baby he attentions had wandered. He was driving a taxi at the time and she would watch him getting ready to go out, dressed up to the nines while she stayed at home. She

knew he was being unfaithful and plotted revenge, buying a bottle of hair remover and carefully mixing it with his Brylcreem, but they didn't blend, so each morning she would have to be up first to give the bottle a really good shake and then get back into bed to watch him annoint his thick black hair really well and slick it back. Within three weeks, she said, he was almost totally bald, and it never grew again. When she went to see a doctor about a bothersome discharge she knew he was still at it, hair or no hair, as she was told she had gonorrhoea, so she left him and went back to mother with the baby. As soon as he was cured he coaxed her into having coffee with him, drugged her cup and kidnapped her and his daughter. She enjoyed the tales as much as he did, and seemed very proud of him. When he casually confided in Peter that tribes in the South Seas worshipped the male organ she was scandalised, "Worship it!" she cried. "Worship it. I'd spit on it."

Still, there were no possible houses in the paper and nothing remotely likely from the estate agents. Someone, I forget now who, told us there was a farmer at Walton, near Felixstowe, a Mr Smith, who owned an empty cottage at Levington which he no longer needed for one of his labourers. He might be willing to rent it to us.

As soon as Peter went off to work Gale and I washed breakfasty faces and set off for the bus station to catch a red double-decker for Felixstowe although we didn't need to go all the way. It was a lovely sunny day, warm already, and we were glad to be out of Ipswich and in the country.

We found Mr Smith in. The bus had put us down right by his farmhouse which was on the main road. He was reluctant to discuss renting out the house at all but in the end took pity on the homeless teacher's wife – Gale's big eyes looking up at him may have helped too – and said he would be willing to let it for a pound a week, but we had better go and see it before we decided. It was a bit isolated. Maybe this would be the answer to our problems.

We crossed the road and waited for a bus to take us as near Levington as it could; got off by a road bridge and crossed the railway line – and on, and on, and on, it seemed until, as directed, we took a left hand turn at a T-junction and came to an old thatched pub, The Ship. By this time we were very hot and dusty, so a drink of lemonade seemed a good idea. While we rested and looked over the Orwell estuary the elderly publican pointed out the house we were looking for, a distant blur right down by the water.

"You go down across this field," he said, "through that gap, across the next field, then across the marshes until you come to a plank across the ditch. Cross that and follow the path alongside the water and you'll come to it." It seemed a long way for little legs, already tired but Gale was brave and we enjoyed walking on grass.

As we crossed the plank it did occur to me that it might be difficult to move a piano into the house if we decided to live there. At last we arrived.

I hated it – or rather them. The empty double-dweller was high shouldered and ugly. Inside the walls had cracks the wrong shape in all the rooms and I seemed to feel an atmosphere of menace. In the bare and weedy space that should have been gardens, a headless doll lay by an unprotected well-head. Between the houses and the river lay a wide strip of black, smelly, dangerous looking mud, and there were a lot of large black flies gathering round us.

Desperate as we were for somewhere to live I suddenly knew that nothing would induce me to live there, however cheap it was. I tried to sound cheerful and coax Gale into facing the long, long walk back to the bus. She, too, seemed glad to leave, and we sang, plodded, ran, dawdled back, picking some rushes to plait, gathering a few wild flowers to take with us, thankful to reach the lane at last and the final test of the long lane to the bus stop. Luckily we did not have too long to wait, and thankfully we rode back to Ipswich and the safety of London Road.

“We’ll get something really nice for Daddy’s tea,” I promised Gale, wondering how I was going to explain why we couldn’t live in a country cottage available to let at only one pound a week.

Peter didn’t try to persuade me to change my mind, which was just as well, because in the 1953 floods that house was completely swept away.