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Information from Freda Milne

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Eileen Fry (aged 5 in 1944)

WHALE MEAT.

All kind of meat was in short supply, and you had to keep on the right side of the butcher. The ladies were all smiles as they made their way in the queue. Sometimes a random rabbit would be hanging from a hook, and very rarely a chicken or perhaps even a pheasant, but this was not often.

Mum came home one day looking very pleased with herself saying the Butcher had given her something very special which we had never had before. She had been told it was a rare delicacy. "Good for the bones." Mum placed the dish of cooked meat on the table. We took a piece to go with our vegetables. It was Whale meat, announced Mum. Fresh from the Sea. I still remember the taste. It was quite strong, salty and rubbery but not unpleasant. The colour of the meat was a very deep red. I enjoyed it. Sadly it was a one off, and the Butcher was never able to get any more to sell.

MY FIRST BANANA.

I had heard about a fruit called a Banana, but had never actually seen one. I had seen a picture of this yellow, strange shaped, delight. I heard all you had to do was peel off the skin, and eat it straight away before it went brown. It sounded a bit magical. I heard it came all the way from a country called Africa where it was always very hot. No wonder it was hard to come by.

A boy in the playground told me with authority that if you ate four bananas one after the other, there was a good chance you could die. We were all impressed with this knowledge.

Sometime later, one afternoon when I was walking home from school, a boy came running up to me saying he had just eaten a Banana. I had the presence of mind to ask the name of the Greengrocer selling this delight, then ran home to tell my Mum. She quickly put on her coat, rushed to the shop to join the queue. That was the day I ate my very first Banana.

MY AUNTY FLORRIE.

When I was staying in Swindon with my Grandparents I often used to go to stay with Auntie Florrie at weekends. Florrie was my Dad's sister, and my favourite Aunty. She had not long married Uncle Jack who was not good looking but very kind and quiet. They had a very nice semi detached house in Bridge End Road Stratton St.Margaret. Florrie was short, dark, attractive and very lively. All the girls had been eager get married. It seems they wanted to escape the tyranny of my Grandad who was very strict about their comings and goings, who they were with and why. I suppose this was quite common in those days, when every family feared the disgrace of a girl "getting into trouble." Daisy, Phyllis and Florrie got themselves a husband as soon as possible and enjoyed the comparative freedom of married life.

Florrie would pick me up on Saturday morning and I would take my very small brown case with my nightie and toothbrush etc.. I felt very grown up as we walked from Cricklade Road to Stratton down Gypsy Lane. We would go down the bridge to Stratton where at one time there were prisoners of war staying on the right hand side of the road towards Stratton. They were Italians and tried to speak to us through the fence. I know they called out to the Bambino which was me. We smiled at them and tried to be friendly. I felt very sorry for them, even though people said they were once fighting against us. The poor men I saw did not look as if they could fight anyone. They just looked sad and lonely. Aunty Florrie said the Italians always loved children.

We arrived at Fifty Nine Bridge End Road, and I took my case upstairs. I had a big bedroom all to myself. I loved this bedroom because I could look at the trains which passed by at the bottom of the back garden. As soon as I could, as long as it was not raining, I would take a little stool with pink legs into the garden. I would have a large story book on my lap and spend my time watching all the trains go by. Now this was very special because I found trains fascinating. They were never the same. I loved the shiny steam engines and the noise and smoke they gave out. The smells too. Often they were troop trains with lots of servicemen going by. I would wave with vigour wondering where they were going. I would always get waves back. Then there were the goods trains. They would trundle along full of all kinds of things. I would try and count how many trucks I saw. I think I once counted thirty two, which seemed an awful lot to me. I also used to wait patiently for the guards van at the end of the line. There would always be a guard in his uniform looking out. My Uncle Edgar, one of my Dad's brothers was a guard and I always hoped that if I was very lucky I would see him. On rare occasions my patience would be rewarded and he would proudly pass by wearing his peak cap and uniform looking very grand. I would wave until he was out of sight.

On Saturday afternoons my Aunty would take me to the bathroom for my weekly bath and hair wash. It was a great treat as she kept a special bar of Pears transparent soap for me. It had such a lovely smell, and she was very generous with the soapy rub she gave me. Florrie would wash my hair and sometimes put strips of rag in my hair to give me curls. I enjoyed this pampering. Then I would go into the bedroom for a lie down so that I could stay up until nine o'clock at night, on condition that I had a lie in on Sunday morning. My Auntie Florrie would sometimes tease me and talk about how the fairies would come if I did not do what I was told. This did not worry me, as my Mum had already told me there was no such thing as fairies. I just smiled and let her carry on with her fun. I would sit down for Sunday dinner with Aunty Florrie and Uncle Jack, then all too soon the time would come for me to pack up my suitcase again. We would walk back again to Cricklade Road and I would tell my Gran about all the trains I had seen. I suppose my absence had meant that my Gran and family had been able to have their own weekly bath in the tin tub, in the scullery, and in peace.

Not long after I had returned home to my Mum and dad in Croydon, Aunty Florrie and Uncle Jack had a little girl of their own who they named Jacqueline. We went to see the new baby as soon as we could, and I had never seen a small baby with such spindly thin legs. I was very concerned. The baby soon grew however and loved to play with their little Jack Russell dog called Tanzi. The dog would allow anyone to dress it up and push it around in a pram.

The weekends were a treat to me and gave me a lasting interest in trains. As for Pears soap it takes me back to my Saturday afternoons in Stratton St Margaret.

W.W. II. Memories

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