

The visitor

Elizabeth Shove

I was nine when my parents decided to evacuate. I'd overheard them talking about the move, so I was not surprised when they announced that we were to leave our comfortable suburban home and join my grandparents in the countryside. It wasn't necessarily safer, but my youngest sister was just a baby and Granny and the Aunts would be around to help while Dad was away. Everyone said it was just for a little while, and that things would soon return to normal.

We always went to Little Bosford in the summer, but this time it was different. I'd have to go to a new school, and everyone would have to adjust, not just me.

Granny and Grandpa drove a horse and trap into town once a week. They had an outside privy and any number of outbuildings – an old dairy, pigsties, a hay loft, a big barn, stables and chickens scratching about everywhere. We were too young to be much use, but we were sometimes allowed to lead Sir Francis, the horse, into his stable. During the holidays we went fishing in the canal and my younger brother and I would chase each other through the stubbly fields. I loved the adventure and the novelty of country life, and I couldn't wait to go.

We made the journey North just before Dad was sent to France. On our previous trips we'd never met the local children, nor had we lived in the farmhouse in the depths of winter. A week after we arrived, my brother and I were sent to the local village school, and it was then that the trouble began. Our ignorance was a constant source of amusement. How was I to know that pigs didn't lay eggs? Or that pheasants didn't sing at night? The teachers were no help at all. They were settled in their ways, and they probably laughed at us as well.

Older boys surrounded me in the playground, sniggering and tugging at my plaits before running away. I wished we'd never come. I wanted to go home, and I wanted Dad to come back. Instead, we were alien beings in a hostile environment, cold, alone and out of our depth.

Those first few months were riddled with incidents of ridicule and rejection, but after a while we were grudgingly accepted. It helped that Dad had been to the same school when he was a boy, and that my grandparents had lived on the farm all their lives. The fact that I was better at reading and writing than my new classmates was a disadvantage, but one or two were in awe of what I could do.

We would always be outsiders, but we were not just targets for the local lads: we added to the small population, and we brought something fresh to Little Bosford as well. Bit by bit we began to feel as if we belonged.

The pattern of the day shifted, but not a lot. There were trips to sell pies and eggs to people in the surrounding villages. We listened to the radio at 6pm, we practiced putting on gas masks that never fitted, and on one occasion we watched the distant glow of a city on fire. Sometimes there were smoke trails and planes overhead, and a bomb once landed in a field nearby, but we took these events in our stride.

Our new routine was disrupted by the arrival of someone I barely recognised. It was Dad. Back from Dunkirk and from experiences he could not have expected in a million years. He didn't smell the same, but he hoisted me up on his shoulders in delight. I wriggled and wanted to be let down. His army uniform was hard and scratchy.

For a day or two we treated him cautiously – as if he was a visitor in his own home. It's true he'd sent us letters packed with tiny drawings and whimsical stories, but we didn't associate these with the father we had known.



On his first trip back to Little Bosford, Dad admitted that things had been a bit hectic, but no one really knew what he meant, and no one dared to ask.

After France he was sent to Egypt. Dad and his fellow Royal Engineers made the long journey around Cape Horn and up the Suez Canal, finally reaching the north coast of Africa and a world unlike anything they'd known before. The heat was stifling, sand whipped through the flimsy tents, and machinery was constantly breaking down. For their part, the locals and their camels kept away: wary of the British troops who were temporarily occupying land that was rightfully theirs.

Dad knew he'd never learn to navigate like a Bedouin, and he'd never be able to read the secrets of the shifting sands. This was not his native land, but he admired it all the same, savouring the quiet of the desert night and the stars above.

When the war ended, we returned to what had been home. The house in Sandford Road was familiar, but arriving was as much of a wrench as leaving. We'd all grown used to our surroundings: me with my extended family and my pet rabbit in the countryside, and Dad with his desert sky. For the first couple of months, we were strangers all over again: visitors in our own lives.