

NEVER SAY DI

by Diane Lofting, as told to Sue Kelso Ryan

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

'Some people think that to be strong is to never feel pain. In reality, the strong people are the ones that feel it, understand it and accept it.'

- Turia Pitt

Really one should write memoirs when one is younger – we'd recall the details more clearly that way. The trouble is, I was far too busy living my life to take notes. You might think you can spot a plan in the things I have done, a well thought-out route from A to T (we're not quite at Z yet) with carefully scheduled stops along the way. If you can, you're doing better than me. There was no plan, you see.

My storytelling began when I was teaching my step-grandsons to ski. Cuddled up together on the chairlift, they were always keen to listen to a story about my life. 'What shall it be today? The lions and Masai warriors in Africa or working with the Canadian drug squad?' I could always make a story just long enough to reach the top of the mountain. My story is the same as many others – yet different: a desire for roots, for affection, to survive and to achieve. From the outset it was a struggle and I am still fighting for survival, but I'm as optimistic and positive as ever. Okay, cancer is not too good to have but I hope that what I've got to tell people will inspire them. I'm not writing to show off. Whatever life throws at you – and it came up with some pretty ghastly things in my case, as well as some wonderful ones – I believe we should still go on and live life to the full. Use the strength you glean from within. That's the reason, particularly now, that I want to pass on this message. I get sad when people say, 'I'd love to do that but I'm a bit too scared...' I think, 'No! Go for it!'

Diane Lofting, October 2016

'The best way to not feel hopeless is to get up and do something. Don't wait for good things to happen to you. If you go out and make some good things happen, you will fill the world with hope, you will fill yourself with hope.'

- Barack Obama



CHAPTER TWO

Early Childhood

I wasn't expected to live as a baby: though nobody has ever troubled to tell me why. As far as I know, I wasn't premature but I was put into a steam tent and I had some sort of lung problem. At any rate, they didn't expect me to survive. The doctor sent my parents away,

saying, 'It's better to leave her. Say goodbye,' and all that. Well, they were in luck and I was still there the next day.

I was born in the naval port town of Fareham, Hampshire in 1940: Diane Jasmine Wallbridge, younger daughter of Hilda and Bob. It was wartime, and we were living right where all the bombs were coming down. My father was a baker and even the bakery was bombed and set alight. Mother was distraught during the bombing and so we moved from Fareham to Baldock in Hertfordshire to get away from the danger. Then when I was six my mother abandoned us and Dad was unwell, so I was packed off to boarding school with my sister Wendy. But I'm getting ahead of myself...

Amazingly, after having such a difficult start in my first few days of life, I don't remember being treated as a delicate child growing up or that anyone took special care of me. I have asked my half-sister, June, about this but she can't remember. I suppose she'd have been kept away during the initial drama and it just wasn't spoken about afterwards. Perhaps it would be a good idea to introduce the members of my family.

Dad was much older than Mum: nearly 20 years. I'm not sure how they met but I think it was in a café in Fareham. Parents don't tell you these things, do they? Possibly Mum originally came to Fareham to work for Dad, who was running the bakery and café business but I don't think Mum ever helped out as such. She didn't work outside the home either, because in theory she had both Wendy and me to look after.

My sister Wendy was two years older than me and I adored her – she was my rock and I clung to her. Dad had been married before and Mum had too. I think they both had problems getting divorced, so they weren't married to each other, meaning Wendy and I were illegitimate.

Mum had been married very young and had two children with her first husband; my half-brother and sister, Jack and June, and they both lived with us when I was small. There was another boy born during that first marriage but he had died before his first birthday.

Dad didn't mention having had children from his first marriage though we now think there was a son. I have a vague recollection that someone said his first wife went to Australia but there's no trace of her or the boy after that. Nothing was ever mentioned but I'd love to know. Maybe all this explains something of the family relationships that you'll see unfolding in these pages.

There's no question that Dad married Mum for her looks. She was attractive and blonde with stunning blue eyes. She was also a socialite, constantly craving excitement, and going out to the cinema and for tea. I didn't see much of her throughout my childhood. She was very immature, I'm afraid and wasn't a mother to us. She never cooked us a meal or bought us any clothes. We relied on my half sister June or Dad to look after us.

Mum was born Hilda Violet Adams in Salisbury, Wiltshire and she was one of about 13 children. I can't recall all their names but I do know that the sisters were known as Phyl, Mil, Bill and Hil. She didn't tell me much about her childhood.

Dad was a lovely man, very loving and caring - a big gentle giant. He was a skilled craftsman, a master baker, but he suffered from continuous bad health, be it heart or sciatica, so I helped him a lot. He had a rough time with Mum but he was a very loving, caring man and always did his best for us. There was no malice, nothing nasty in my Dad whatsoever. He loved Mum, even though it was tough for him. He couldn't do enough for her. Unfortunately, people took advantage of Dad's kind-heartedness. When we had a bakery in Ash Vale, he found accommodation for all the workers he employed but they weren't always honest with him. In fact, he found that some of them were stealing from the shop.

Dad was probably closer to my older sister Wendy than me but I had a very strong bond with him too. Wendy and I were quite different: I was a bit of a tomboy whereas Wendy could relate to Dad on a more academic level. That was fine but I adored my Dad, as everybody else did. In fact I feel that Dad treated me like a boy. There were no hugs and nothing

physically close between us. He would actually shake hands with me, so that was a bit tough because I didn't get any of that intimate demonstration of love from anybody. I think now that Dad knew he was not well and suspected his life span was limited and he didn't want me to get so close that I would miss him. I think it was his way of coping. It wasn't that he didn't love me because he did. I make up for it now because I have become a hugger! Even at the golf club, they gave me a mug saying 'group hug' because I hug everybody.

Dad's name was Robert James Hinde Wallbridge and he was born in a pub in Portland, Dorset in 1884. He was one of four children: one of my uncles worked in the quarry, one was a blacksmith and my Auntie Sue was a seamstress. He had an interesting upbringing but no real family as such – it was all a bit tough. After his parents had died he did his best to support his sister, my Auntie Sue, and she in turn became my surrogate mother as time went on. When Wendy and I were growing up we spent all our holidays with her in Portland, Dorset. She was a real spinster and lived in a lovely little thatched cottage, which was more like a home to me than anywhere else. Even Auntie Sue could be very strict, though. You never got on the wrong side of her. She often caught me doing things I shouldn't be doing and I suffered for it.

From a very young age, Dad went on a horse and cart from Portland to the county town of Dorchester, where he learned his trade as a baker and confectioner. He went to stay with an aunt, who lived in part of a great big manor house. I remember him telling me he went for walks with the novelist Thomas Hardy, who lived in Dorchester. Hardy was a miserable old devil, according to Dad, but they went for lovely nature walks. Later he did his apprenticeship for baking with an uncle, going from Dorchester to Frome, again by horse and cart. If you check the phone directory, half of Frome is called Wallbridge – our family name. There are lots of connections with people in Frome but I don't know who they are.

Dad did his best for the family. When he was able he used to take us down to Sheringham, Norfolk, where we stayed in the same bed and breakfast place for each holiday. Dad paid a driver to take us everywhere because he couldn't drive. In the pictures of us on the beach you see us as a family but Dad never stayed because he had the business. He'd go down there, maybe stay a night and then he'd have to get back to the bakery. Wendy and I would stay there with Mum, and usually Mum's sister, our cousin Jill and half-sister June. So we did have a family holiday but it was never with both Mum and Dad. Sometimes if we went down to see Auntie Sue in Portland we'd be all together but my Auntie Sue didn't like my mother, so she wasn't really welcome. I can't really remember us all staying there together.

Looking back at photographs of my childhood, I am a little fair-haired thing, always beside my big sister Wendy, who was very intelligent, very bright. We never came out of school uniform: Mum never ever bought us clothes and never cooked us a meal. She wasn't a mother, I'm afraid. So everywhere we went, we were in school blazer and summer dress or skirt and blouse, even on holiday. Now I think about it, I spent a lot of my working life in uniform as well. I'm making up for it now because my wardrobes are bursting with clothes I don't need.



I was too young to have any memory of the war itself, apart from wearing a little gas mask. It was a Mickey Mouse thing, which I thought was fun. I think I remember bombs and bangs when I was in Fareham but I can't be sure of that. I'm told I was locked out on the bedroom balcony by mistake one day when there was a real blitz on and the sky was full of bombs. It will tell you a lot about the sort of child I was that apparently I loved it: I thought it was great and very entertaining. As for the actual war, I can't honestly remember it. So my father moved us from Fareham to the bakery in the market town of Baldock and my education started at the nursery school across the road. I don't recall a great deal about it, except that Dad gave my beloved rocking horse away to the school. This was my first experience of losing something I loved and I struggled to understand it. I had better get used to it though – there's a lot of love and loss to come! For example, Wendy and I had two cocker spaniels, both of which got killed on the A1 in Baldock, even though the road wasn't nearly as busy in those days.

I was extremely young, under six, when I was dumped with Mum's sister, my Auntie Phyllis, in Salisbury. Dad couldn't cope when his relationship with Mum went through a hard time and he farmed us out to relatives. This was the first time I had been separated from my beloved sister, as Wendy went to Auntie Sue in Portland, so we were both living with unmarried aunts, who didn't much like children. I went to school in Salisbury on a horse and cart and I can remember being taught how to tell the time while I was there, so I must have been quite young. Auntie Phyllis was tough and it wasn't a good time. I remember a little black cat that came in through my bedroom window, and that I nurtured. Enoch, I called him, I don't know why. He used to sleep on the bed and when she found out she absolutely went mad. She said, 'You can't have that cat here!' So the cat had to go and I was locked in the attic as a punishment.

I was always going from pillar to post as a kid, either down to Auntie Sue's or Auntie Phyllis's. I hated Salisbury because when I went there as a little tiddly tot I didn't know what was happening. I didn't know where my parents and Wendy were and nobody explained anything to me. I didn't like Auntie Phyllis and I hated my grandmother, who was also there so I always disliked Salisbury.

One day, without warning, all my belongings were swept together and I was suddenly taken back to Baldock. Dad wasn't well at this point. I was overjoyed to be reunited with Wendy but we returned just in time to see Mum driven off in a big car with the grandparents. Dad said she had gone for good. In the kitchen, June was sewing nametapes onto a big pile of school uniform, which she said was for us. That same day Wendy and I were sent to boarding school together, in the middle of term, in the middle of the night.

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