

Tenby, 1955

Nana, Kay's mother, came from Tenby in Pembrokeshire. She was born Evelyn Lucy Beynon in 1879, the fifth child and eldest surviving daughter of Charles Beynon and his wife Patience Hattin.¹ Charles was a cabinet-maker, having learned his trade at Heal's in Tottenham Court Road. He was in digs in London, and his landlady was Patience's sister. Patience had come up from the country (Hook Norton or thereabouts) to help her sister. After their marriage Charles set up shop in Tenby and built a thriving business, until he was forced to retire through ill-health. The family left Tenby for Wolverhampton, where Patience supported them all by keeping a lodging-house. In her teens and early twenties Evelyn had a series of arduous, ill-paid jobs in Wolverhampton as a bakery assistant.

It's not clear exactly when the change in the family fortunes occurred. The move from Tenby happened sometime between the 1891 and 1901 censuses. Charles Beynon died in 1903 in Stafford Lunatic Asylum. Evelyn told Kay, however, that she had been only twelve when her father died. Does this mean that Charles went into the asylum around 1891 and that Patience told her children that he had died? Or did Evelyn bring forward her father's death in order to expunge the shame of his illness? It's possible that she managed to blur the issue when telling Kay about it all, saying something like, 'My mother was a widow, and I was the eldest daughter and had to help her manage the lodging-house from the age of twelve.' The point she was probably trying to impress upon Kay was that young girls had to make themselves useful; she was in poor health herself and relied on Kay to help around the house.

I never heard Nana speak of Tenby, but one can imagine that it was something of a lost paradise, a lovely town beside the sea, where her parents were prosperous and her father was a man of some note.² The move to penury in Wolverhampton must have been a shock, not to mention the horror of her father's illness. I think she was pleased to think of herself as Welsh. She didn't speak the language, but she was able to say the famous long place name which in my childhood was regarded as a shibboleth of Welshness. She looked Welsh, I think. It was said in the family that her black hair, which never went grey, was a Welsh characteristic. She pronounced her father's surname *Baynon*, not *Bighnon* as it is usually pronounced in productions of *Under Milk Wood*.

Nana had three sisters, one of whom died in infancy, and five brothers. We knew nothing about any of them apart from the youngest, Mabel, except that Kay mentioned her uncle Charles, who kept a pub and had a wooden leg. We knew Mabel quite well as she used to visit Nana, and later on would sometimes come to stay in Farnham. The story in the family was that as a child she had been sickly, with something wrong with her back which required her to lie on a board for a long time – exactly how long changed with each re-telling, varying from a few months to years to the whole of her childhood. Tony used to say that Mabel proved the saying that creaking gates last longest. She got well and prospered, having a lifelong position as companion to the simple-minded daughter of a wealthy Stourbridge glass manufacturer. She was present at our wedding in 1967, giving us six whisky glasses and a water jug in Stourbridge crystal. Mabel was a wispy, delicate sort of old lady, always beautifully dressed, heavily made up and with what I think must have been a blue rinse. She never said very much, but once when we were watching the test match on Nana's television she asked me why cricketers always rub their ball. She liked gin.

Nana lived in part of a house in Manor Park, Lee Green. Mummy visited her every week, and each Sunday after church she would have lunch either with the Eden-Greens or with us. Before I started school I was taken on the weekly visits, on the 94 bus from Guibal Road. I remember liking some of the smells of Nana's house, although I couldn't say what they were, and wouldn't recognise them now. Perhaps it was moth-balls, because the clothes in her wardrobe, including her various bits of fur, were festooned with them. Lunch was usually fish followed by junket. I expect I was less keen on the smell of fish. I don't know whether Kay was able to keep up her weekly visiting after our

1 This account the Beynon family is based on information provided by Denise Eden-Green, supplemented by Kay's book of memoirs and my recollection of conversations with Kay in her old age.

2 The Beynons were hereditary freemen of Haverfordwest following the part played by an ancestor in beating off the French invasion at Fishguard during the Napoleonic war. This distinction was presumably of more significance in Pembrokeshire than in the English Midlands.

move to Shooters Hill Road and her return to teaching. In 1958 or 1959 Nana came to live with us, occupying the large room on the ground floor which had been briefly rented by Alan Reynolds and his wife Vona.³ They had decorated it exquisitely in a black and white wallpaper with (we were told) touches of gold leaf.

I remember Nana as a crotchety old woman in fox-fur who didn't like boys. It was said she didn't like males generally. I don't remember any conversation between her and my father, and she always favoured Ginger Ella over our poor old neutered tomcat Bimbo. When she lived in our house in Shooters Hill Road I was expected to do various chores for her, which I don't remember my sisters being called upon to do. I suppose this was because Nana felt she could do all the women's work there was, or get Kay to do it, but she needed a male for certain specific functions like fetching the coal and ensuring that it was all the right size, neither too large nor too small. She once sent me to the chemist to buy senna pods, and Kay was very angry, although she wouldn't tell me why.

Kay used to say of her that Nana had no sense of humour. I remember watching her leaf through a copy of *Punch* without a flicker of a smile⁴, but with her habitual twitching of her cheek and the side of her nose. This tic fascinated me, and I would watch and wait for it. It was very pronounced when she once pinned me against the wall and told me to be kinder to my mother. I think Kay would have liked Nana herself to be kinder to her. I remember how she would call out, 'Kathleen!' When she was old and infirm this cry for help was understandable, but it was clear that she had long made demands on her daughter. The relationship between them had always been difficult. Once I watched the two of them walk the length of our garden at Shooters Hill Road, and I thought how alike they looked, how old Kay seemed. Nana was leaning on her for support, but for a moment it was not clear who was supporting whom.

But I was not a sensitive observer and this view of Nana is one-sided. I was mainly conscious of the inconvenience of having her living in our house, the smell of her boiling chicken bones, her tendency to ambush me with chores and errands, and the increasingly distressing cries of 'Kathleen!' from the top of the basement stairs. I had to go to her once when Mummy was out and she was sitting on her commode, howling and hammering with her shoe. She would press food upon us, bits of ham on stale bread, for instance. Once when Jeffy was ill in bed she insisted on giving her a raw egg in sherry. By now we have experience over two generations of dealing with very old people, but I have the impression that all this caught Kay completely unprepared.

Nana had a knack of causing embarrassment. When I went to France I was told to bring her back a bottle of sherry. It was obvious to her, I suppose – I was going abroad, sherry came from abroad, therefore I should bring her sherry – but it was almost impossible to find *vin de Jerez* in Bourges, and my hosts thought it yet another English eccentricity that one should look for Spanish wine in the middle of France. The greatest mortification, however, was during my first year at Dulwich. Somehow she heard about Founder's day, and insisted on coming, insisted on sporting a cornflower – and while pottering around the grounds insisted on holding up play by walking in front of the sight screen.

Jeffy told a different story. She was very fond of Nana and always remembered her with affection. There were times when she would spend hours with her, evening after evening. I'm sure this was done out of kindness, but since she was, like all adolescents, sometimes at odds with her parents she may also have sought out Nana as a sympathetic listener.⁵ When we were little I had the impression that Tiggy was Nana's favourite. Perhaps this went back to the circumstances of her birth, in Lewisham hospital, with Tony away in India. Nana may have been more involved with her than with the rest of Kay's babies. I think Tiggy was sent to stay in Manor Park while I was being

3 Alan Reynolds had rented the attic flat for some years; when he married he took the ground-floor room in addition.

4 Of course many people fail to find *Punch* funny, but at the time I regarded it as the last word in humour.

5 I suspected another ulterior motive. Until we acquired a family television, we used to rely on Nana's, and there was a conflict between *Emergency Ward 10*, which Jeffy wanted to watch, and *Hancock's Half Hour*, which I wanted. Inevitably Jeffy's preference won Nana's approval.

born, and there was a story of her having swallowed a plum-stone while she was there. Later on, like Jeffy, she also sought refuge in Nana's room from her conflicts with Mummy and Daddy.

Later on, long after Nana died, I heard things that explained both the demands that Nana made on Kay, and Kay's deep resentment. In the 1920s, while Kay was still a schoolgirl, Nana was in poor health, clearly with some gynaecological complaint. She would take to her bed when she had her periods, and leave the running of the house to Kathleen. Eventually her husband Eden appealed to a cousin, Thomas Watts Eden, a distinguished gynaecologist, who agreed to perform a hysterectomy. The family story was that this was the first ever hysterectomy, and while this was not literally the case it was true that the procedure was in its infancy and Watts Eden was a pioneer of new techniques. Nana believed the operation saved her life. She had a further forty years, and although she suffered from annual attacks of bronchitis she was still pretty vigorous in her seventies, which was when I first remember her. She was in charge of jumble sales and sales of work at the Congregational Church. She was also an accomplished and productive needlewoman, with a special talent for making new uses of old stuff, aprons out of summer dresses, short trousers out of old tweed skirts. I think she may have made knickers out of black-out material, but I might be imagining it.

Like her mother before her, in middle age she was obliged to become the breadwinner when her husband's heart condition forced him to retire. As well as his employment at Johnson and Philips (Electrical Engineers) Samuel had a small enterprise of his own, manufacturing and marketing a patent toasting-fork. Unfortunately his partner in this business absconded, which deepened the crisis in the family fortunes. Nana resorted to taking lodgers and eventually opened a tea-shop. Kay once said that her mother had been reduced to taking in washing, but I don't know whether this was true. Nor am I entirely clear about the chronology of these events. Kay said the taking in of washing dated contributed to her social insecurity in the face of her well-heeled schoolfellows, but I don't think her father was forced to give up work until some time in the early 1930s, by which time she had left school.

The drop in income left Kay bitter, with a resentment that affected her feelings towards her mother. It meant that she had to take a job immediately on leaving school, and it was only later that she went to King's College to train as a teacher – and even then she was not allowed to stay long enough to take a degree. The sense of deprivation remained with her and had its effect on her ambitions for her own children. I don't think she felt she had been particularly badly treated on account of being a girl, if only because the family troubles affected her brother Alan even more dramatically as he had to leave school at sixteen to take a job. Kay blamed her mother more than her father, to whom she was devoted. He died in 1938.

Samuel Eden Green (I don't know when the hyphen was introduced) seems to have been an engaging man. Born in 1879, he was the son of Mary Eden and Thomas Green. The Eden and the Hattin families both came from the Cotswolds, but it seems to have been in Wolverhampton that Evelyn and Samuel met. At the time Evelyn was working under very unfavourable conditions as a bakery assistant, and also under some sort of strain at home. She fell ill and went to stay with relations in the country. One can imagine that the relationship with Samuel must have come as sweet relief. They took advantage of the low postage for postcards to keep in frequent contact, using a simple code to maintain their privacy. I think they must have been a lively pair. They were married in 1906 and had three children, the eldest of whom, Eric, died in childhood.

As children we knew very little about our grandfather Samuel, but we had his toasting-fork, and a good many of his books. He was a great reader. Mummy was very keen for me to read the battered copy of *The White Company* that he had read repeatedly during his illness. We now have his glass-fronted book-case, which he had made for him, and which Nana used to complain was too tall – he had too many books.⁶ It's true that the book-case is rather top-heavy.

6 I don't know whether the book-case was made by Mr Kidney. Mr Kidney was an out-of-work carpenter whom Samuel employed partly out of kindness. He made a desk for Kathleen which first Jeffy and then I inherited, although I'm not sure where it is now. Both my grandfathers seem to have made a habit of employing people who were down on their luck – it was probably a common enough thing during the years of depression and unemployment.

He was himself an ingenious handyman. He installed electric wiring in his own house in Charlton, probably using copper wire that he obtained from his employers. He also acquired a sheet of copper from which he made a mount for a print of Shakespeare – I have this. Alan inherited his tools and, it must be said, almost all the practical skill, little of which seemed to come to my sisters or me. I should have the gratitude to acknowledge that even if Nana did not approve of boys she made sure that the book-case and most of the books came to me.

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In 1955, when she was in her late 70s, the Eden-Greens took Nana back to Tenby for a summer holiday, and we all went too. We had always gone on holiday by train, sending a trunk by luggage in advance, but for some reason this time Kay and Tony decided it would be better to go by car. I always assumed that it was because they couldn't face the journey by train with four children all the way to Tenby, but I suspect the main reason was that they thought it would be awkward to be without our own transport when we got there.⁷ Our stay in Devonshire the year before had involved a great deal of walking, and I expect I had made a fuss about it. This year there was the three year old Rowwy, no longer in a push-chair, to consider as well. We might have ended up being dependent on the Eden-Greens and their shooting-brake. So for one reason or another, between January and August, we bought a car, and Daddy learned to drive.

The car had a Morris engine, but the superstructure was not like any Morris one had ever seen. The story was that it had been built just after the war for use on an airport, presumably a very small airport, to take passengers out to the runway. There were two front-seats and two non-matching bus-seats at the back, so it could carry our family of six. It was maroon, with woodwork which we later painted in a sort of magnolia – at least that is how I remember it. It had been advertised as a shooting-brake, but it was very different from the Eden-Greens', even though that too was a Morris. I could write a lot about this car and about Tony's driving, but I'll keep it for another time. The girls, Jeffy and Tiggy, later became deeply ashamed of it, but this first summer I think we all just felt the excitement of having a car at all. There was a tail-board which could be let down to make a convenient table for picnics beside the road. The back seat, where Rowwy and I sat, leant up against this board, and I was never confident that it wouldn't fall open while we were speeding along.

It takes four hours nowadays to drive from London to Tenby. No doubt in 1955 it took longer, but the Eden-Greens did it comfortably in a day. We allowed six days, starting off early ('crack of dawn' as Tony always said) on the Monday morning. By late afternoon we had reached Burford, some 75 miles from London, and there we camped until Wednesday. Kay said it was lovely and she had always wanted to explore the Cotswolds and see Stow-on-the-Wold again. But the girls later claimed that the real reason for the delay was that Tony couldn't face going on. They said he had been taking 'purple hearts' to keep his courage up. We set off again on Thursday, going by easy stages and reaching Tenby on Saturday. I don't remember the route, except that we camped in the Brecon Beacons and stopped briefly in Abergavenny, where we bought a badge to stick in the window, thinking wrongly that it would be fun to plaster the windows with a record of where we had been. Until we went to Sennen Cove the following summer Abergavenny remained our only trophy.

Inevitably this epic drive (which Kay and Tony repeatedly referred to as the Wages of Fear) left a store of family myths and sayings. There was the long straight stretch of road where Daddy triumphantly forced the car up to fifty miles an hour, something that he never repeated. There was the long uphill haul at Bwlch (unsurprisingly pronounced by us as *Belch*) where we got to the top without stalling.⁸ Whenever we passed a learner driver, Daddy would say, 'Good luck mate,' and

7 I recall an evening in the winter when Rowwy said, 'Why can't we buy a train?' to which Mummy replied that we would almost need to buy a train to take us all down to Tenby, so perhaps it would be better to have a car. It was then that the idea of buying a car first came to my attention, but it's certain that Kay and Tony had it in mind already.

8 There was a term which Daddy used, the meaning of which I have never understood, *double de-clutch* – apparently in order to get into bottom gear it was necessary to double de-clutch, something which he was unable to do. Usually he would press on in second gear until the car stalled, and then start off again in

when we saw an army lorry we would call out, 'Wakey wakey!' The girls, when a smart car sped past us (a frequent enough occurrence) would call out, 'Oh my dear!' which prompted Rowwy to christen such cars Oh my dear cars. Rowwy's most memorable word, however, was *feeling*, to refer to the sensation of sudden descent that we had when we went over the brow of a hill or crossed a hump-back bridge.

We were staying at a farmhouse in the village of St Florence about five miles from Tenby. I don't remember anything about the accommodation apart from the outside chemical lavatory. There was a large family on the farm, with several grown-up sons, one of whom was always offering to move our 'van', I'm not sure why, perhaps Tony never managed to park it in the right place. The word *van* was mortifying to the girls. The harvest was being taken in while we were there with everyone helping. We too were allowed to take our turn. My own contribution was nil (although they let me stand on the cart while the hay was pitch-forked onto the stack) but I dare say Tony may have done some useful work, and Kay and Jeffy too. This participation in the life of the farm must have delighted Kay.

The farmer's wife, who provided breakfast and supper, had a piercing voice and shouted a lot. At one point I remarked that whenever I came to look back on the holiday I would think of the woman with the loud voice. Daddy replied that whenever the farmer's wife remembered us she would think of the boy who shrieked and cried so much. From this I deduce that I must have given way to bad temper and thrown tantrums while we were in the house. It was a regular thing, whenever we went away on holiday, for me to be even more bad-tempered than I was at home. Tension between me and my elder sisters was always at the root of it. Things started badly at the beginning of the holiday when we were pitching camp at Burford; I resented the fact that (quite reasonably, because they were older and, as Girl Guides, knew about camping) Jeffy and Tiggy were given all the more interesting tasks while I was sent off to look for firewood. I don't remember any particular tantrums during the Tenby holiday, but I do remember being unhappy much of the time.

And yet Rowwy has found a photo of the four of us on the beach at Tenby. The four of us are there in a row, from Rowwy the littlest (three years old) to Jeffy, who was just fifteen. Tiggy, who was eleven and three-quarters, is wearing a puckered elastic swimming costume. Jeffy's costume is strapless – or perhaps she had just dispensed with the straps in order to appear more glamorous. Jeffy and Rowwy both appear to be shouting something, Tiggy has what looks to me like a forced, mocking grin, and I appear to be smiling naturally. This hardly suggests tension and unhappiness, but then few children in normal circumstances are unhappy all the time. I seldom woke up feeling unhappy. Unhappiness was something that came from nowhere to disrupt a happy day. So presumably this photograph was taken on one of the rare days that remained serene until the end, or on the other sort of day, but before unhappiness had struck. In any case, I suspect that there is more to the picture than the four laughing children that meet the eye. It looks to me as though the girls, Tiggy and Jeffy, are putting on a show. I expect they disliked having their picture taken with Rowwy and me, and so when they were told to smile for the camera they made an exaggerated parade of being jolly, with Tiggy smiling foolishly and Jeffy calling out – it looks as though Rowwy might be repeating whatever it is that Jeffy was shouting. I look extremely sunburnt and very happy.

The purpose of the holiday was for us all to revisit the scenes of Nana's childhood. I don't remember anything of this except that we saw the cabinet-maker's shop where she was brought up, with the stone ledge at the front where her father was made to sit when smoking his pipe. My memory suggests a narrow street and a brown-painted frontage. I don't know whether it was still a cabinet-maker's. I regret not having paid more attention to what was being said. Did Nana relive happy memories and share them with Kay or Alan or Jeffy, or did she stare with the same unresponsiveness as she had shown when looking at the jokes in *Punch*?

Another place that Nana wanted to see was Manorbier, and one hot Sunday we had a great expedition there, with a grand picnic, both families together. There was a huge empty beach, and we congregated in a corner where the rocks provided some shade. I've seen photos of the occasion. Manorbier left a terrible impression on my mind. At some point I needed to empty my bowels and

bottom.

was told to go a little way off, find a good place, dig a hole and do what I needed to do. I set off with my spade (like the spy in *Ice Cold in Alex*) but in the vast desert that confronted me it was not obvious where the best place would be. I walked on and on under the blistering sun, unable to decide where to dig my hole, until at last desperation, or urgency, forced the issue. When I had finished and filled in my hole, I dragged my sweaty, sandy, soiled body back over the desert to rejoin the picnic.

It is probably this single incident which left me with the overwhelming sense of having been unhappy on this holiday, although there was one other occasion when I remember being desperately sad, weeping inconsolably. It was either on the way to or from Tenby, a night when wind and rain made it impossible to put up our tent, and Mummy therefore persuaded a farmer to let us sleep in his barn. It must have been a worrying moment (if it was on the way back, Rowwy was poorly) but I suspect Mummy was thrilled at the adventure of it. I don't know why I was crying, unless it was that I feared being exposed to the elements. I don't think it was a tantrum, just childish wretchedness. Mummy, presumably pre-occupied with making up the beds in the straw and getting Rowwy to sleep, told Jeffy to try to make me stop. Jeffy was extraordinarily nice to me. I remember thinking that no-one had ever before been so nice to me, and imagining that this was how it would be from now on – only to find the next day or the day after that our normal teasing and sparring was resumed. For years afterwards that night remained in my mind, a moment of paradise, never to be recovered.

But there's the photo to tell me that I was not unhappy all the time, and certainly there were things that I can clearly remember enjoying. I liked going in Uncle Alan's car. It was frightening because he seemed to drive along the twisting lanes much more quickly than we ever did and I did not believe he was able to see round the corners, but it was so comfortable that pleasure outweighed fear. Odd though it seems now, I remember liking the outside lavatory with its agreeable chemical, earthy smell and the novelty of the experience. Probably the high-point of the holiday was seeing the sea-planes in the harbour at Pembroke Dock. I liked Burford too, and the days we spent in the Cotswolds, but particularly Burford with its steep main street. Over the years I've been back to Burford two or three times, and found it a pleasant enough little town, but have never recovered the magic of that first visit.