THE ROAD TO NAB END – Chapter One – Griffin Street

Part One

Mr Smalley, whom we called t' knocker-up man, came with his wire-tipped pole in the dark six mornings a week to shake our window until father stirred and shouted loud enough to be heard in the street below, 'We're up!' Mr Smalley then went next door and rattled the bedroom window of our neighbour, Mr Morgan, the coal hauler. I often lay in bed listening to Mr Smalley coming down the street. With his coming, Griffin Street began to stir. Daylight followed.

Not long after t' knocker-up had finishes rattling our window-pane, a stream of wooden-shodden workers began to hurry past my window on its way to the mills. In the Blackburn of 1916, more than two hundred factory and workshop chimneys were belching smoke by five a.m. Muffled voices and morning greetings flew up from the street. As the grey light grew and the night's bright stars paled, the stream of passers-by, their heads covered with shawls and caps, became a river and then a flood. The clip-clap of their clogs on the cobbles drowned out all other noises. In winter, deadened clogs meant a heavy snow; clogs that rang meant a frost. When it was raining, I looked down on a sea of glistening umbrella tops bobbing up and down on their way to the mill.

By mid-morning the stream of clogs had been replaced by a stream of horse-drawn carts, clippety-clopping their way to the railway station with mountains of grey cloth. Some of the clothe, which we called 'duties' – after the Indian word dhotis – was on its way to be bleached, dyed and printed in Manchester twenty-five miles to the south; the bulk of it would then go to Liverpool, thirty-five miles to the south-west, on its way to India, wherever that was. India must have been very important to Blackburn because I seemed to hear more about India as a child than I did about England.

As the day wore on, the street echoed to the call of the rag-and-bone man, the scissors-grinder and the thread, needles and ribbon sellers. My favourite was the tinker who mended pots and pans.

At the end of the working day, the tide of workers, the women walking arm in arm, surged past our cottage door again, homeward bound. Their step was not as brisk as it had been at the beginning of the day. After that, apart from the plaintive shriek of a distant train n the distance, or the haunting sound of a lonely concertina being played by a passerby, silence reigned. To keep up steam, the thump of the mill engines went on all night, but that didn't bother anybody. The workers didn't notice noises that brought them bread.

Part Two

My brother Dan and I shared a bedroom with our parents. There were two metal beds with straw mattresses on thin metal slats. Dan and I slept in the same bed. We slept so close to our parents that we could touch them. The nearness of our bodies made us feel safe. My sisters Jenny and Brenda slept in the other bedroom, behind a paper-thin wall. No one noticed the lack of privacy. Living n such a confined space meant

everybody shared everybody else's joys and sorrows.

Our clothing, what little we had, hung on the whitewashed walls. As the walls were sometimes damp, sheets of brown paper were slipped between the clothes and the plaster. The pegmat at my bedside protected my feet from the freezing floor. In our house there was one by every bed as well as before the two fireplaces downstairs. They were made from old clothing and could be of all colours. They were not only solid and warm; they meant that no garment, however old, was wasted. The women made them at night, pulling strips of cloth with a rughook through a stiff piece of fabric. Several women would work together, chattering, singing and laughing into the night. The mats were kept clean by beating them against the outside wall.

The kitchen was the centre of family activities. As it was three paces one-way and two-and-a-half the other, children didn't sit at table, we stood for meals. In front of the fire was a top-bar on which the kettle sang. The range was kept clean with black-lead ammonia. I don't know how much lead we consumed. Coal was dumped in the kitchen under the stairs, a sack at a time. The cloud of dust that flew up when Mr Morgan poured it, took time to settle. The worst thing that could happen was for Mr Morgan to arrive while we were eating. With a sack of coal being shaken out almost against the dining table, it was impossible not to eat coal dust. No one grumbles. Even a child knew that we couldn't possibly manage without coal.

We had a single metal gas ring for cooking. For the gas there was a penny meter under the stairs. If the light gave out and we didn't have a penny, we used a candle; if we didn't have a candle we sat by the fire and told tales or went to bed.

Part Three

I'd always believed that I had been born in our cottage in Griffin Street. 'Ah, no, Billy,' mother said one day, 'that's where tha wrang; tha was born in t' mill.' Mother cleaned cotton at Hornby's cotton mill. 'It was the telegrams.'
'What telegrams?'
'From t' War Office. Dad was in France fighting the war. The first telegram they brought to t' mill. The foreman, Patrick Murphy read it to me. It said that your dad was killed and that the War Office regretted it. Just a line to change your life. Everybody was real nice. Told me to go home and rest, and to come back when I was ready.'
'Did you?'
'Well, when you don't have any money and your husband is dead and you've got four mouths to feed, including your own and your unborn child, you'd better be ready all the time or you'll starve.'
'But Dadda wasn't dead.'
'No, that's right, he wasn't. A week later another telegram came saying that the first telegram had been mistake. Two hours after that you arrived. Patrick Murphy delivered you on a heap of cotton against a wall in a corner of the shed. There was the din of the carding machines and cotton dust falling on us, but no bother, all went well. Mr Murphy shouted "It's a boy, and a sturdy one at that; worth a drink o' rum and tay, he is. It's not every day it happens in t' shed. Tha can be reet proud of thiself, Maggie, tha can." Two days after you were born, I was back at work, slubbing in the mill; cooking, washing and cleaning at home.'