

## Chapter 9 Joan Alone in 1944 A Difficult Year in England

From both these sources, the diaries and the letters, and with some knowledge of the state of England during 1944 we get an idea of life for Tony's family.

1944 must have been a terrible year for Joan. She started the year with a 9 month old child, managing on her own without her husband, Tony having gone to India. The last time she saw him was October 1943 when he had embarkation leave. As had been happening over the previous year she had a continuous stream of dentist appointments – up to three a week struggling with fillings, an abscess and maybe some false bits. It is hard to grasp what was happening with her teeth but it seemed to take up a lot of her time and effort.

In her diaries there are no references to the outings like in previous years – one trip to the theatre with David and that was it. Her brother who no doubt had been a tremendous support had died in September 1943 and most of the lads she had known were at war.

The previous year she must have been totally occupied with child rearing and an occasional visit from Tony, who was by then an officer and was stationed for much of the time in Scotland.

In January 1944 Joan must have felt desolate and struggling with a number of issues related to her religious faith. We have two letters back to her on this subject, one from Tony and one from her wise Uncle Rex.

Sadly we do not have all Tony's letters from Asia, at this time. This was taken from No.3 9<sup>th</sup> Jan 1944.

“It is very difficult darling trying to answer your letters .. the information will be 6 weeks old when you get it .. however I will try and answer as intelligently as possible, and comment on your last 4 letters.

You ask if I am able to give any details of the voyage .. the answer is no, all that will have to wait until we meet again .. Next darling you speak of the “Power of the Spirit”. I am sure that in no special sense am I very religious or even more so than you ---- when I say I shall always be with you in spirit” – and I really AM. I think that this is really love ... certainly a lot more love than religion -- however I may be a little bit calmer about things in general because we believe in obedience to the divine will of God .. explicitly ! .. sort of Kismet !! I suppose – though there is no “fatalism” attached to the emotions – I should not worry too much about not being able to opening up your heart to be. No woman has ever yet completely revealed herself to men. – And it is because I know quite a lot about your search for religious expression and your general dissatisfaction with your present religious experience that in the past I have adopted such an uncompromising tone when we argue --- you might as well get your dogma right from the very beginning!! You give yourself away terribly my darling – when you say quote “I went to church on Sunday, to pray for you, and to try and get nearer to God and to you. But I really might as well not have gone or so it seems.” unquote.”

“What a crushing indictment of your Church !! what a barren religion !! No comfort ... unless you argue that you were probably not receptive or something -- you went in the right mood – questioning – and NOTHING. The emptiness is within yourself darling. You are seeking as so many are, you like so

many others have not yet found the answers. You know something is wrong and yet you cannot put your finger on it and with all you are a child of tradition and cannot break with that tradition... Ah me! One day darling – but no argument of mine will avail – one day you will find that TRUTH and faith which is so necessary to we poor mortals – An Anchor without which life is meaningless and much, much, too difficult.”

“Next .. Reigate, so glad you went darling. It must have done both you and Raoul a lot of good – when he is a little older you could perhaps take him to Meols – though it’s an awful place .....”

It is worth noting that within 7 months Joan and Raoul were living at Meols and were pleased for the support which would have been as welcoming as that from Auntie Gertie in Reigate. Gertie and her husband Lewis Davis had three sons Pat, Geoffrey and John Davis, all of whom were at war. Geoffrey, a Surgeon Lieutenant in the Navy, died at sea on the HMS Mourne.. John Davis whose pre-war experience was in Malaya, spent his time in SOE behind the Japanese lines in the Malayan Jungle and survived working with the Communists whom he had been fighting and against whom he struggled after the war during the “Malayan Emergency” until 1960.

The difficulties that Joan was having regarding religion give an interesting insight into a number of aspects of Joan and Tony. Joan was from a traditionally High Church of England background and from her father’s letters over the years, particularly from the front in WW1, it is clear that he had a strong and clear faith and was grateful to the Church for being there. Her Grandfather, William Joseph Dibdin, was traditionally religious, working in the temperance movement and creating a historical puzzle by marrying the granddaughter of Agostino Aglio, an artist born in Italy and with very strong

connections with the Catholic Church of the day and with the senior hierarchy in Rome although his relationship with the church broke down in Rome and he seemed to have followed the Anglican tradition in England.

Although others amongst her aunts and uncles were not quite as committed to church as Lionel, his sister Margaret married a very high church Anglo-Catholic “priest” and fulfilled the role of supporting vicar’s wife with gusto. Joan had every reason to lose faith in God, taking into account her challenging mind, particular nature and her experience of being orphaned at 13. Tony, a confident Roman Catholic at the age of twenty five, must have had a fair insight into Joan’s spiritual turmoil, which was probably aggravated by the issue of infallibility as well as the complexities of fate and predestination. Tony seemed to have a settled relationship with his Church and God as expressed in an earlier letter to his mother from Poolewe, Achnasheen, co. Ross, in Winter 1941, where he was handling the site at one time, on his own.

“A Padre turned up this morning so we had the unusual consolation of mass. Nobody could serve so I did it – Took me back quite a day or two, to half forgotten times .. I was quite thrilled it seemed absurdly “fitting” that I should be serving the mass for my men.”

It is not unreasonable to draw the comparison between Tony and Joan’s father, Lionel, who writes from France in 1916:

“All sort of places, dugouts, tents, huts, etc, all used for different churches, and I know without the help & strength to face danger which is given by God, few men would stand the strain long, although they might not always admit it.”

Throughout Lionel’s letters there are references to church and services, and he does encourage his wife, Cecily, to get confirmed.

Joan had obviously written to her Uncle Rex regarding her thoughts and questionings. Rex was a wise gentleman, perhaps even a genius, but because of injury in WW1, and probably the general effect of war, he became depressed and paranoid and so his wife felt she had to leave him.

His mother's young nurse Peggy, with encouragement from her, looked after Rex, in the broadest way, and stayed with him for the rest of his life. Because of this, he was considered the wicked uncle and would always refer to himself as such while giving sound philosophical advice.

From his letter, which can be seen in full  
Appendix 14 Rex's letter

“Take the point you mentioned ‘Infallibility’. I believe every Dibdin, at least, at some time has been infallible in his own eyes, on some point. That none of the others ever agreed with him on that, made no difference. Fortunately they grew out of it sooner or later.”

Tony was not necessarily the “goody-two-shoes” that he would appear from all the letters and reports about him. In fact he quite obviously was not, judging from the need to get married in a bit of a hurry in Oct 1942. Also Joan once mentioned how he was quick to find pleasure in the company of his delightful cousin, Theresa, at a time when he was on leave and she was somewhat under the weather because her brother had been killed within the previous month.

End of March into April was a dismal time for Joan. Being on her own, husband away, she had time to think perhaps, and 28<sup>th</sup> March was the anniversary of her parents death and it was six months since her brother's. She started to write entries into a larger diary and these give one some idea of the intense feelings and moods she was experiencing:

The only few entries in a special everlasting Diary of Joan's in 1944

14 March

Auntie E {Edith} died midday - Heart attack

[Aunt Edith Haycraft looked after Joan during the holidays from 1933 to 1937]

28<sup>th</sup> March

Tis eleven years ago today that Mother and Father died; tis six months today that Peter died.

Have been to the cemetery this afternoon. Met Beryl afterwards and stayed for tea. Everything is really the same at Carshalton but somewhat disappointing.

29<sup>th</sup> March

Had a painful time with the dentist this afternoon. Shall be glad when he has finished fixing my teeth. Called at no.4 to collect my watch and found Mater had just got home. She seems in a bad mood – can't think why. She could be so much happier if she would try to be more cheerful and not so much on the defensive. I have written to Tony tonight and have told him my fears of our reunion – that he will have changed and we at home will not have.

31<sup>st</sup> March

Spring cleaned the bedroom – pretty big job.– Victor came round in the afternoon – stayed until about 7.00 and helped lay carpet and put up curtains.

Sat.1<sup>st</sup> April

Raoul and I went to Ewell for the day – David was there. Didn't feel to grand in the evening.

Winifred ( Colville?)

Sun 2<sup>nd</sup> April

Quiet day at home –turned out some of the boxes and cases.  
Was very harassing – going through Peters things. Poor darling he must have had a miserable life & so lonely. I wish I could have been more help to him – wrote to Tony.

3<sup>rd</sup> April

Dentist at 3.15 – left Raoul in the garden. Called on Mrs Midd on the way home – met her niece Lorna again Michael is home after 3 ½ years. Didn't get home till after 6.00 but Raoul was waiting very patiently. Had a parcel from Tony in morning lovely things – 2 bone storks (1 broken) 2 ebony elephants ivory necklace and bracelet - money bracelet -ivory figure- ash tray brass cig. box and carved wood cig. box.

Letter from Tony in the afternoon –went round to No.4 in the evening for a little while; all out at a picture except Nita and Dinah – both feel bit better.

4<sup>th</sup> April

Had rather a lazy morning ! rushed lunch then massage at 2.00 – started exercises.

It has been a lovely day quite a bit of rain which has brightened everything up a little – But we need so very very much more. We had tea with Anita and Dinah and have again spent the evening turning out cases and boxes.

5<sup>th</sup> April

Tony's Birthday

It is just past 6.00 and have just drunk Tony's health and happiness

I wonder if he is thinking of home at the moment and having a drink with me. Oh God bless you my dearest Husband "Bon voyage & safe return – my heart is yours forever.

6<sup>th</sup> April

Shopping and turning out cases Mrs H did the bathroom and dusted around

7<sup>th</sup> April Good Friday

Quiet Day – Got some fish for Raoul in morning – more turning out in the afternoon. Spent a while with myself upstairs this evening and had a whisky – There is much in my thoughts today but I cannot express it on paper. I listened tonight to the episode of the crucifixion of Our Lord – Very beautiful but too modernised – Found Raoul cutting his eye teeth.

8<sup>th</sup> April

Spent evening at No. 4

9<sup>th</sup> April Easter Sunday

Spent day at No.4

10<sup>th</sup> April

At home met family for drink at lunchtime with Mary – Turned out boxes and clothes.

11<sup>th</sup> April

Marriage 3.00pm - Turned out cases - awful lot of moth around.

12<sup>th</sup> April

Quiet day more turning out. Mary came to dinner.

13<sup>th</sup> April

Dentist 3.00 thank God he has removed all the fillings. Had to have cocaine today. Mary looked after Raoul for the afternoon

During April and May, Joan seemed to settle to a quiet time, except that she was still visiting the dentist often,

As was mentioned earlier Joan's social life was somewhat curtailed. However she did manage to visit family with her son, presumably dragging him around on public transport. There were trips to Reigate, Sutton, and up to town. The numerous visits to the dentist were in London and so Joan could fit in a visit to Mrs Midd ( Middleton).

On one occasion Joan left her son happily in his pram in the garden in Streatham while going up to Town for the afternoon. From her diary 3<sup>rd</sup> April 1944:

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Joan and Tony had set up a flat in 81 Stanthorpe Road in November 1942 after they were married, and this was situated round the corner from Mater and the family at 4 Pinfold Road. Joan felt at ease dropping round from time to time.

Mrs Midd was a significant member of the Dibdin Family. She had joined the family as a companion/maid to Joan's aunts and uncles on her father's side when they were young, and had stayed with the family until she was married to Norman Middleton, a sailor who travelled the world and brought back

objects from many countries. They lived in a basement flat in Victoria Street which was sufficiently central for family of her generation and the following to visit often. She acted as the family confidant and had the special insight of someone who had lived with the family but was not quite so involved.

The chief memory of the pram was some years later, probably when I was five or six, when living in Chiswick at Wellesley Road, of finding it and a tin of red lino paint in the garden shed. I remember painting the side of the pram and was very proud of my decorating skills but I think my mother was not very pleased.

On 15<sup>th</sup> June, the bombing raids started again on London. Of course, having a child, Joan was no longer in the Forces and so free to do as she thought fit. She started on a tortuous journey of evacuation, keeping on the flat in Streatham and moving to the Midlands, staying for some time with the Nottingham Haycrafts. This is little doubt that this must have been unsatisfactory, probably because of space constrictions, and there are two letters archived, from July 1944, replying to Mrs Haycraft, who was Joan's Aunt in Nottingham married to Bernard Haycraft, regarding an advert asking for accommodation.

One was from a respectable working bachelor and the other from a widower. Both offered to be interviewed at their home and were happy to offer accommodation in return for light household duties.

Whether or not Joan took up these offers is not clear, but there is an indication that she did lodge with somebody, not family, and had to leave to give up the space for other members of the household's family.

What ever happened at the end of June she was in lodgings in Rushwick, Worcs and then she stayed for a while with a Mrs Culworth until moving to a house in Cable Road, Hoylake.

By mid July 1944 had moved in with her Aunt Tine ( Christine) in Meols.

It is noteworthy that Joan did not easily acquire a location for evacuation. Was this because of her drive to be independent and so did not land on family members, or was it because she was made to feel unwelcome or perhaps nobody had the space.

From her diaries and bits of letters it seems that throughout these few months she felt seriously like a refugee. Although some of the family offered her accommodation, it was clear that space was always tight and that Joan and a 15 month old child were not the best of company at the time.

It was often the practise, during the two bombing periods in the war that children were evacuated out of the cities into the countryside or even further to Canada or Australia. Whereas the main purpose at face value was to protect the next generation, there was also the logic of leaving their parents to be free to work unhindered on the necessary war work. It is unlikely that Joan was going to abandon her one and only child to lonely evacuation so she had to find somewhere suitable for both to settle. This problem of finding a new temporary home must in some respects have been reminiscent of her life 10 years before. Christine was the obvious and very satisfactory solution at least for Joan and her child although may have been quite an imposition on the family at Meols. Christine of all the Aunts was probably the most down to Earth and resourceful. Joan used to say how she would spend time with Tine, Christine, during her orphan years and how on a number of those sort of occasions when young girls need motherly advice she always was quick with encouraging and optimistic support and advice.

There is no doubt that at Meols she was in the best place to be able to face up to the coming catastrophe.



Christine Dibdin when young (Tine)

As an aside during that same period Joanna Rowntree, Raoul's wife to be twenty years later, was evacuated for a while away , with family in the west suburbs of London near Gerrards Cross from her parents in North London but showed such distress that she had to come back home whatever the risks.

It would have been from Meols that Joan sent her last two letters to Tony which were returned unopened. These can be seen in Appendix 6