

Letter of Love

7 September, 1988

My Darling Little Granddaughter,

Your Daddy phoned me in the middle of the night to tell me of your hasty and very early arrival. He said your weight was only one pound, twelve ounces and I cried. How could such a tiny person survive?

This morning I drove northwards anxious and sad, fearing I might be saying goodbye before we had even met.

But there you were in your incubator, my darling, not only breathing on your own, but crying, showing off to the world that you have healthy lungs. You were dressed in a little pink bonnet and nothing else, and your innocent immodesty allowed me to see that you are perfect.

I stretched out my hand into the incubator and stroked the downy blonde hair peeping out from under the bonnet. I held your tiny hand and your fingers curled round mine in a firm grip as I told you all the family news. Then I wept again, silly grandmother tears of great joy as I marvelled and thanked God for your tiny perfection.

Your eyes are the deepest brown, unusual in a new baby, and you stared at me with what I felt was a look of recognition. With the greatest certainty I knew you were trying to say, "Don't worry, Grandma, I'm going to be alright," and my anxiety changed to a happy peace as I sat with you.

My darling little Lauren, on this special day, I am already dreaming of the fun and the friendship, the laughter and love, that we will share together. God bless you, my tiny first born granddaughter.

With all my love,

Grandma Liz.

My Special Day

One evening in late October 1991, I got a phone call asking to speak to Elizabeth Strachan. I'd had a telesales interruption to my dinner already that evening and I almost put the phone down. I'm glad I didn't.

The friendly lady congratulated me on winning the European Letter Writer of the Year Competition and my prize was to be a luxury holiday for two, staying at the world famous Danieli Hotel in Venice. She wanted to make sure that my husband and I would be able to attend the prize-giving luncheon at the Mirabelle Restaurant in London with overnight stay in the Washington Hotel, first class travel, all expenses paid. A letter would follow confirming all the arrangements.

The letter didn't arrive for another week and meanwhile I worried that maybe it had all been a dream.

Indeed I had almost forgotten that I had entered the competition. Apart from writing newsy letters to friends and helping my two sons with their essays on Hamlet or the romantic poets, I had never written anything since my school days. I was a Maths teacher and was expected only to be a whizz kid in all things to do with numbers.

However the competition entry form had caught my eye, in a jewellery shop in Aberdeen where I was having a new watch strap fitted. It was sponsored by S.T. Dupont, Paris, and fortunately no purchase was necessary.

The subject of the competition was "a letter of love" and I had written that very letter three years before when my first grandchild was born. That secret, emotional piece, welcoming little Lauren to the world was there somewhere in an old diary.

The days before the prize-giving flew by in growing panic. I was interviewed by local newspapers, foreign newspapers wanted my photograph, I had to find the right outfit for the occasion, and my husband and I had to persuade our employers to do without us for a couple of days.

I feared that I would be out of my depth at the luncheon. Well-known literati from TV, newspapers and magazines would be there and all I had written was a 280 word letter. However Maryla, the lovely lady who had first phoned me, guided me through and I even managed an interview for a breakfast television programme. I was able to relax and enjoy the superb luncheon, which ended with coffee and replica S.T. Dupont pens made in chocolate. Thankfully I didn't have to read my letter. The lovely actress, Angharad Rees, did it so beautifully that I noticed a few people, including my husband, wiping away a tear. Then the managing director of S.T. Dupont presented me with a certificate confirming our holiday the following spring.

The week in Venice was the holiday of a lifetime but that day in London was my special time—which will be in my memory forever.

Two

Wartime and Early School

Lizzie's War

(Published in the P&J on 8 May 1995 in a special issue commemorating 50 years since the end of World War II)

My forty-three year old dad proudly announced that his screaming new four and a half pound daughter was born to raise hell and indeed four months later, Britain was in a 'state of war.' I was small, neat, noisy and fast so the family called me Spitfire. I was at school before I realised that I had actually been christened with the Queen's name.

My memory is hazy about these early years. Some incidents I remember, others I learned from my parents, and over the years I have put them all together like the pieces of a jigsaw falling into place.

I was born at 16, Summerfield Terrace and I lived there for three years. On the night of 25 April, 1942, a German plane dropped a bomb which killed a little girl, the same age as myself, called Sylvia Robertson, who lived only a few yards away at number 22. My Dad, who was on ARP (Air Raid Protection) duty that night, raced home to find every window in the house blown in and my mother and me huddled in a cupboard.

After such a close encounter, we took our ration books and went to live with my grandparents in the safer west end of the city. In the overcrowded tenement house, I was spoiled rotten by four adults and my beloved granny became my best friend and confidante. The only time I can remember not having her full attention was when she was turning the heel of one of the hundreds of socks she knitted for "our brave men." I was blissfully unaware that like many of my contemporaries, I was an undernourished, underprivileged war time youngster.

My mum had many talents. She played the piano, sang like a nightingale and she taught me to read when I was four. But she was a terrible cook and a starving dog would have walked away from what she did with a bit of oxtail. A few months after coupons were required for beef and mutton, other cuts like tongue, heart and head were also rationed, and sometimes the butcher was unable to supply his registered customers with even these disgusting bits. Grandad, who was a gardener, often came home with a rabbit. I would view these furry dead creatures with horror, and my stomach would revolt when my mum brought it, grey and greasy, to the table. At four I was a dedicated vegetarian.

On special occasions, we had a boiled hen. One scrawny bird fed all of us for three days. On the third day, the soup made from the bones looked like stagnant pond water.

My granny was a carrot freak and used them in all sorts of ways. I think she invented the original carrot cake. It was a far cry from the delicious concoction we love today. She made it from dried eggs, dried milk, saccharine, margarine and carrots and she baked it in the temperamental black range oven. If chunks of granny's carrot cake had been dropped over Berlin, Hitler would have come running out of his bunker, hands held high.

Grandad was inventive too. He made me a pair of stilts out of National Dried Milk containers. Before long, every child in the street was stomping around with their feet attached to two tins.

Behind my mother's back, both my grandparents shared their sweetie ration with me. Grandad kept his false teeth in a cup and only wore them on Sundays for going to church. The sermon was always very long and Grandad and I would crunch our way through his two ounce ration of butternuts. Sometimes he would buy motto lozenges and I would consult Grandad about the little homilies like "Love is forever," or, "East, west, home's best," in a stage whisper which distracted the entire congregation.

Under school age children had red and blue Mickey Mouse gas masks but when I went to Mile End School in January 1944, I was issued with the regular version.

Respirator drill was never taken seriously. The boys could blow

raspberries through the rubber and we giggled so much that the mica windows would steam up and we staggered round the playground like drunken aliens.

I loved my Class 1 teacher, who was one of the first married women allowed back into the profession. We were an oversized class of war-weary kids whose sleep was often broken by night time sirens and a transfer to the air raid shelters, but Aberdeen children got the best possible education under the circumstances.

The school nurse, Nitty Nora, was concerned that I was so small and thin. "Elizabeth," she would ask, "Does your mother put you through the mangle?" She compensated for the fact that I had never tasted fillet steak, or Stilton cheese or bananas and cream by arranging for me to have an extra bottle of school milk. Eventually with all that milk and an addiction for Strathdee's butteries, I expanded upwards and outwards to her satisfaction.

On 30 April, 1945, the very last air raid warning was sounded in Aberdeen. The news was good and only eight days later, it was all over. We crowded round the wireless with its big acid batteries and listened to Winston Churchill announcing the end of the war finishing his short speech to the nation by saying, "Long live the King!" We all wept with sheer joy.

Life didn't improve immediately. Many men were still in the far east, tragically a few more telegrams would come from the War Office and food rationing went on for several more years.

But on 8 May, 1945, Aberdeen was in party mood. My mum allowed her precious piano to be manoeuvred down into the street. Neighbours found flags and bunting last used for the Coronation and plates, piled high with homemade cakes and spam sandwiches appeared from every house. We cheered and sang and danced until long after midnight and nobody told me it was bedtime.

Soon, at home and at school, the blackout curtains were torn down to reveal a glorious happy summer and for a few years at least, the world was at peace.