

## Dulwich Wood Avenue

*By Rosemary Entwisle*



I am looking back, head turned backwards as my feet plod forward, unwillingly.

My brother walks by my side, a little more briskly than I do. The picture I see is of an empty avenue, lined with trees bordering the Common fully dressed in their summer leaves. On the side of the road, there are the serrated, irregular outlines of hedges, bushes and the gardens of our neighbours. It is almost the last week in July, 1944.

As I look back, I catch glimpses, like a fast forwarding film, only not fast but slow and hastily-seen, of a woman's figure standing at our garden gate, waving. She wears a summer frock and gradually, with each unhappy step, her face becomes smaller and a little further away until, from where we are now, my brother and I, it becomes a bit of a blur and the mother I knew so well becomes an ever-tinier and more distant figure. Ultimately she disappears altogether into the distance.

I clamp my jaws firmly together, like a vice to keep my lips from trembling and the tears from starting. I need comfort desperately and search my mind for some method. I reach out tentatively, seeking my brother's hand; he is my elder, middle brother and is at this time my tower of strength and my protector as we begin a journey that will end in my Aunt's house, miles away from London, in the North of England.

We look at each other. This is a momentous, serious time in our lives. Fortified by the firmness and warmth of his hand, steadied by it, I have an inspiration for inner strength and comfort. "It is not forever." I feel a tiny fragment of inner steadiness from this, so I repeat it and repeat it again to myself, "It is not forever...not forever." So saying, I control my tears and stuff down my almost unmanageable feelings. So saying, we leave the avenue where I have lived for eight years, my mother and the lovely, gracious Georgian house we lived in Dulwich Wood Avenue, Dulwich, London.

I am ten and a half years old. I have never been away from home before, so this separation and the journey ahead to stay for an unknown length of time with my barely-remembered aunt, is daunting. I am afraid and experiencing many mixed feelings, of which anxiety at leaving my mother, that now completely faded and gone figure at the gate, and grief at leaving her, my brothers and my home are the topmost. It is however, unthinkable to me to let any of these feelings show, so I shove them down, repeat my mantra and keep on putting one foot in front of another, hurrying a little to keep pace with my 17-year-old brother.

We are at the bus stop now, situated a few hundred yards from the end of our avenue, and I have lost sight of my mother and the familiar neighbourhood close to our home. My whole face and body feel stiff with effort at self control and being brave and tough. A good boy. Well trained by my brothers and North of England and Ulster heritage of keeping my feelings to myself, or perhaps better even, not having any at all.

By now I really am feeling numb and so I remain throughout the journey to my aunt's, so far away and to an alien neighbourhood and barely known strangers. This was the summer of 1944 when a new kind of weapon was being introduced to the skies over England – the silent V2 bomb that flew overhead and fell without warning to create destruction to all in its path. Our house had survived the first wave of these, the V1s that gave a buzzing warning just before they fell, and so were known as buzz bombs. Somehow the new threat of the V2 caused a sense of protective alarm to my mother (and possibly my father who was living elsewhere, I do not know).

All I now recall of the matter is that two weeks before the July day I have described, I was walking in the garden with my mother, just the two of us, where she was telling me that my youngest brother and I were to be evacuated to Manchester for our safety while the new rockets were falling all around. I clearly recall the strong surge of loyalty to her, who was the whole world to me, that rose in my chest as I said aloud, “ No, I am not going to leave you, Mother.” I feared that something might happen to her if I left her, that she would be vulnerable to harm and I needed to be around to protect her.

Well, of course, that did not work out and it seemed my fate of leaving home and all I had known and loved was sealed. The door to negotiation was firmly closed and locked. Hence, two weeks later, the dragging steps and breaking heart and the reassurance, self-imposed, that “It is not forever!”

But, as it turned out, it was forever. On August 4<sup>th</sup>, 1944, a V2 rocket fell on our home and killed my mother as she ran out into the garden to see what was happening. That is where my brother Douglas found her when he returned home from a day in town.