Micki Maunsell's story of

Amy

My Mother's Story

Her name was Amy Reeve. My brother Richard called her “Mummy” or “Mum,” but to me she was always “Belinda”, after a cartoon character named Belinda Blue-Eyes. She was born around 1899 in Tasmania, and was the youngest of four daughters and one son. At least, this is what I thought until a recent internet search revealed that she was actually born nine years earlier, on February 3, 1890, and was the fifth of six daughters and one son. Perhaps only four of the girls survived, and that is why I was never aware of the other two. I recall Belinda telling me that her father, a surgeon named Charles Frederick Reeve, was a Baron from England, who met and married my grandmother in Australia.

In 1892, my grandfather went to India to build a mission hospital for the people of Pune. A few years later, his wife and some of his children became severely ill, and had to move back to Australia. Charles, however, remained dedicated to the cause and would not budge. He only visited his family on occasion, and combined these visits with speaking engagements, where his exotic tales and charismatic personality attracted both donations and volunteers for the mission. It must have been on one of those rare visits that he decided to take his most beautiful daughter back to India with him; thinking she would make the most suitable hostess for entertaining visiting personages. He took Belinda to Nasrapur, a village located about eighteen miles from Pune.

The house was a huge U-shaped building, designed by my grandfather and built by local peasants out of stone. It was set on a property with extensive mango orchards, and natural pools fed by a nearby waterfall where the girls and women of the village would go each morning and evening to fill enormous brass containers with clear, sparkling water. The three inner walls of the house were open to a screened courtyard and to the elements. During the monsoon season, which lasted about four months, the rain would beat on the flagstones in and around the building; leaving Amy depressed and longing to find a way to leave.

In 1919, her escape came in the form of an electrical engineer on a motorbike, who came roaring over the hills to verify for himself the rumours of a beautiful damsel kept in the secluded folds of Nasrapur village. They got married. But Belinda’s dreams of a more sophisticated life in less demanding climate were soon dashed. Sidney Botevyle Hickin, or “Dick” as he was known, took his bride from humid Nasrapur to oven-like Sukkur in the Sindh Desert, in what is now Pakistan. They had a large house beside the Indus River, not far from where Dick was helping build the Sukkur Barrage, part of the largest irrigation system in the world. The barrage bridge was nearly a mile long, and held enough water to transform millions of acres of desert into arable land.

Amy was the belle of the barrage. She looked like a porcelain shepherdess—dark hair, white skin, and petite body – standing just five feet tall on tiny feet. She was elegant, bewitching, and a shocking flirt. The men were starved for glamour until she arrived. Although there were only twelve British couples in Sukkar for them to properly socialize with, Belinda and Dick started a drama club, wrote and performed plays, and made elaborate costumes. He was popular and fun, and she was very conscious of her lady memsahib position. She grew a traditional English garden which needed constant watering by several “coolies” to remain green, played tennis, rode well, and danced the other ladies into sweaty heaps. She also bore two sons (one died young) and me.

In those days, many British children were sent to boarding schools in England to be educated. My brother Richard was six, and I was five, when we left India with our mother aboard a ship destined for England. Belinda left me at a home near The Dragon School, Oxford, and then disappeared. I thought that she would come back to get me, but she did not. I took to hiding in a bush near the house and weeping, until

one day I realized I could not stand the crying anymore, and forced myself to stop. I have loathed the smell of yew ever since.

After that, we saw Belinda for two months each year during the summer holidays. She would take us to the island of Jersey, where we lived in an old railway carriage near the beach. I spent each school year longing for her to come, and each summer dreading for her to go. But oddly, when we were together, I don't remember us talking much. She would leave us under the watchful eyes of the men fishing from the pier, or the beach's unofficial lifeguard—Miss Brown, a café owner's daughter—and she would go off on a shopping excursion to France to buy shoes and fabrics; or would leave to play bridge all afternoon with a countess at a hotel down the beach; or would go for one of her long swims out beyond where we could safely join her. Or, she would take dancing lessons from an oily dance teacher with greased back hair, and then dance late into the night at the Palais de Dance. Those nights, an anxious Richard and I would wait for her to come home, and then feign sleep when she finally tiptoed back into the railway carriage.

In 1939, I was fourteen and nearing the end of a five-year scholarship at the Royal Academy of Dance, when the war broke out. Through the Academy, I had landed a job in the pantomime Buckie's Bears. I desperately wanted to do the work and finish my studies, but ironically, had to return to India with my mother. We went to Nasrapur to sell my grandfather's old house. As when Belinda lived there, there was nothing to do but play board games and listen to the rain drum incessantly on the roof. Desperate for entertainment, I would go into my late grandfather's library and pull old Victorian novels from the shelves, only to watch them crumble in my hands from the moisture and the silverfish.

My mother's story is not unlike one of those old books, but at least I know how it ends. Three years after the war, when I had married and had my own daughter, my parents moved back to England, and bought a bungalow near us in Epping. Here they planned to spend the rest of their lives. But when my mother opened the crates from Sukkar, she discovered that her faithful Indian servants had stolen most of her precious things, and broken what little was left. She was so traumatized by the loss and the betrayal, she had to be admitted to hospital.

A few days later, I brought my two-year-old along with me to visit her. But when we got to her room, we discovered that her bed was occupied by another patient. I asked where she was, and a nurse said, "Oh, she died last night—Did you want to see her?"

The doctors later explained that she must have had multiple sclerosis for years, but even my father didn't know she'd been sick.

It was 1948.

I never really knew her.