

## **On War, Love, and Loss: A Life in Three Acts**

by Elizabeth Bird

### *Prologue*

I watch over my father as he fades slowly into darkness. Nurses flit by, chatting quietly.

“We hardly got to know Tom, but he seemed like a lovely bloke,” says one.

“He told wonderful stories,” adds another. “So funny—and exciting!”

I ask what kind of stories. The family, his life as a doctor—surely the story of meeting my mother?

“Oh no, love. War stories! One about picking up stranded Dutch soldiers somewhere in the Pacific, I think. Quite dramatic!”

As his final hours drift by, I think on my father’s life—the joy in his roles as husband, father and grandfather, and the love and kindness he showed in his ninety-five years on earth. And how the legacy of war helped shaped that life, casting shadows and yet guiding him into sunlight.

I

War had marked his life from the beginning. He was born in 1919 in northeast England, less than a year after the end of the Great War that was meant to end wars. His infantryman father served in the muddy trenches at the Somme, where in five months, more than 300,000 soldiers died. He survived, his lungs forever scarred by mustard gas.

My dad remembered him as a distant figure, breathless and unable to play or engage with two growing sons. The family struggled in the Depression, but his ambitious mother pushed him and his younger brother to excel academically and win scholarships to selective schools, offering a gateway to the professional class. She seized on the idea of a doctor in the family, and his father’s service turned ambition into reality, when he won

a scholarship reserved for the sons of World War I veterans. He became the first in his family to enter college, undeterred by the strings attached to his award: a five-year military commission. It was 1937, with Hitler on the rise in Germany, but at eighteen, he wasn't thinking about another war. Wasn't it less than twenty years since millions died to ensure peace? But war came, creating an urgent demand for medical staff, and at twenty-two, he began his Army service as a newly minted doctor, just after his father died. He had never set foot outside England.

The bare facts of my father's war are unremarkable. In late 1942, he was posted as a Medical Officer to the multinational force preparing to invade Normandy in what would be D-Day. Preparations would take months. But in Spring 1944, he and dozens more MO's found themselves on a troop ship—but not to France. In comic detail, he would always tell us how they “turned right into the Suez Canal,” and realized they were headed to India where “they already had MO's coming out of the woodwork.” The ship arrived not long before D-Day, and for months he shuttled from Bombay (now Mumbai), to Delhi, to Calcutta (now Kolkata), caring for troops and civilians alike.

Finally, in January 1945, his unit went into action against Japan, invading Ramree Island off the Burma coast. Manning beach dressing stations, the medical corps supported the six-week assault. With American bombers overhead, the Japanese were routed, and the unit braced to push on. But that August, on a troop ship in the Pacific, my father heard the news of Hiroshima. “I remember thinking it was the end of the world,” he once told me. Then Nagasaki, and the realization that though the world hadn't ended, the war had. His unit moved into Malaya after the official Japanese surrender, and then on to Singapore.

The war was over, but his service was not, and he headed back to India as the sub-continent barreled toward independence and partition. He watched the country break apart and dissolve into a bloodbath, as Muslims fled to the new nation of Pakistan.

He ended his service on a troopship, ferrying soldiers across the Pacific, seeing Hong Kong, Bangkok, Sumatra, Java, and on to the Seychelles and Mauritius. Somewhere along the way, he met an Army nurse and became engaged. As 1947 drew to a close, he went home to his mother's house in Newcastle and to a Britain forever transformed.

His 30<sup>th</sup> birthday in sight, he picked up his career at the city hospital, vowing to catch up on lost time. After a year in an entry level job, he applied for promotions in his preferred specialty. Passed over in favor of younger doctors with careers uninterrupted by war, he was offered another junior post. Frustrated, he vowed to resign and move on, but when he walked into his superior's office to tell him, his life abruptly changed. It was a story he told for the rest of his life.

“A young woman was sitting on a table swinging a pair of the nicest legs I'd ever seen. And then I looked at her face and I just fell in love. It was the most important thing that ever happened to me.”

Eileen was one of those young doctors who had moved ahead while he was at war. Suddenly this didn't matter; love-struck, he accepted a job in pathology, a less desirable specialty, and stayed.

His decision mirrored the mood in a Britain exhausted from six years of war. Winston Churchill, the hero who had saved the nation, was unceremoniously booted in favor of a Labour government that touted change. An array of social reforms followed—in education, social welfare, and the revolutionary introduction of the National Health Service. India's independence heralded the glimmer of sunset over the British Empire.

He too was ready to turn the page on war. First order of business was “disentangling” himself from his fiancée, still stationed in Germany. Next was persuading Eileen, who was seeing another doctor, to do the same. By Spring 1949, they were together.

That summer, Eileen left Newcastle for a short trip to Scotland. For years, she preserved the letters he sent her daily, giddy with love.

“The hospital has not been the same without you, but even the biochemistry department looked sunny this morning when I found your letter propped up against the microscope!”

In these faded letters, he ponders the last decade and where his youth has gone. Meeting her “meant the end of years of waiting, wondering and just faintly hoping.”



*Eileen and Tom, c. 1950*

He tells her they will never again need to write letters; that October, 1949, soon after his 30<sup>th</sup> birthday, they were married.

## II

Within a year, my brother was born, followed swiftly by me, my sister and a few years later, our brother. My mother put her own medical career on pause to raise us.

This is where his story becomes mine too. I've read so many sad tales of childhood gone awry—abusive or neglectful parents, poverty, sadness. It's almost embarrassing to write about a family in which I felt unconditionally nurtured. For a father of that era, that wasn't a given—Dad was raised in a family where expressions of affection were scarce. He remembered his distant, war-damaged father, and he wanted something different for us. He never quite mastered the art of the hug, but he did learn to be a dad to us all.

I'm sure each of my siblings has a different story to tell. But for me, he was a dad who brought books back from trips and read them with me—I still have a shabby *Hobbit*, inscribed from 1962.

A dad who came to teacher-parent meetings and protested when teachers doubted my potential. "She is much brighter than you think!"

A dad who happily drove me miles to country churches to pursue my passion for brass-rubbing—perhaps the most inconvenient and Britishly nerdy hobby ever conceived.

A dad who told me it was just fine if I didn't want to go into science like everyone else in the family, telling me he secretly always wanted to be a historian.

I knew a man who loved Scottish dancing and old ballads, who composed silly parody songs about medical procedures, who gathered with friends in our home, drinking wine and singing Tom Lehrer songs into the wee hours. Who loved my mother conspicuously and exuberantly. Who never raised his voice in anger—except the day we came home from the seaside to find our gaggle of guineapigs slaughtered by a neighbor's dog, bloody



Tom and Liz, Scotland, 1959

corpses scattered across the garage floor. As our mother hurried us inside, he stormed down to their house in incandescent fury. “No child should have to see that—they’ll remember it forever!” Which we did, of course.

In the early days, when money was tight, vacations were a month in Northern Scotland, where he would fill in for the local doctor, driving through the highlands to remote crofts, while my siblings and I played on the beaches or walked the hills with our mother. Sometimes he would take me along, visiting patients who spoke Gaelic and welcomed him with fresh fish or home-baked scones. In down times, he took us fishing; a favorite childhood photo shows us sitting by the water, his attention on me as I struggle to bait my hook.

When he no longer needed to work on vacations, we ventured further afield to France—to Brittany, Normandy, or the Dordogne. Our parents slept comfortably in our VW camper van, next to us in our tent. In the evening, around a fire, one of us would inevitably ask: “Tell us about the war, Dad.”

Our mother would roll her eyes, and off he’d go. In these tales, war was a great adventure, spun for maximum comedic effect. The unexpected voyage to India and the incompetence of military bureaucrats, one of whom had told him in Delhi he couldn’t possibly be Captain Bird, since he was shipped back to Blighty months before. “That’s the Army—things like that happened all the time—you’re nothing but a number. I was 254125,” he would remark.

He spoke of months of training and waiting, the discovery of spices and curry after a lifetime of meat and boiled greens. The hectic train rides across the continent to see the Taj Mahal, bargaining for the beautiful rugs now scattered across our home. Burly soldiers who keeled over at the sight of a needle. Cricket matches on the beaches of Mauritius, surrounded by the most beautiful women in the world (another eyeroll).

From the moment of its inception in 1948, Dad believed in the promise of the National Health Service. “This is what we fought for,” he would say. “But for the war, and the way it changed everything, it could never have happened.” He rose to head a lab in the area’s largest teaching hospital; one of his greatest joys was working with medical students and young doctors, many from India and Pakistan. Private health care did not disappear; it operated alongside the NHS for those that wanted to pay for a little luxury.

Sometimes, Dad's lab would do tests for a private patient, entitling him to fees. Instead, he chose to donate them to the hospital library.

He loved his job—even more so when our mother returned to medicine as my youngest brother moved into his teens. But later, with three of us grown and the last nearing college, Dad's thoughts began turning to another wartime moment, on embarkation leave before his deployment in 1943. Alone, he had traveled across country to the English Lake District, where in heavy Army boots, he hiked every day through the “worst bloody weather for twenty or thirty years.” Soaked and tired on the last day, he walked across a steep valley. “I came to look down on the Loweswater and Buttermere Valley, and as it swung into view, the sun came out, and I looked down into a little village nestling round a lovely lake, with high hills surrounding it. And I thought, this is paradise.”

That vision stayed with him through war and beyond, and almost forty years later, my parents moved to the valley of Loweswater, leaving behind three decades of friendships in search of paradise. Not long before, his brother had made the same move; Dad joked that after hearing the story of the rain-soaked hike for so many years, his little brother vowed to beat him to it. Now both couples lived in 17<sup>th</sup> century cottages by the lake, in sight of the fells with their mysterious names—Mellbreak, Carling Knott, Catbells, Darling Fell.

His brother, self-contained to the point of reclusiveness, had moved to escape people, preferring the company of his dogs as he strode the hills, and rarely interacting with anyone outside his family. My parents embraced a different life, creating a network across the valley. They both took jobs at a hospital in a nearby town, quickly connecting with fellow physicians. They became firm friends with the sheep-farming couple next door, their only neighbors. My mother missed her old life but joined a choir and brought new friends home. This had been his dream, but she accepted it with love, planting daffodils down the winding gravel track to the road, and heather in their rustic garden. From my new American home, I wrote letters and rejoiced at their happiness.

Barely three years in, my mother, a fit sixty-year-old, began to feel breathless on their hikes; a childhood brush with rheumatic fever had damaged a heart valve. It would be a routine fix. Days before the scheduled surgery, Dad settled her into bed with a mug

of cocoa while he walked the dog down the track. He returned to see the cocoa spilled across the bed. Despite all his efforts to revive her, she was gone.

### III

And so began his final act alone, gliding from the depths of despair to a resigned happiness, and offering a thirty-year lesson in living with grief and hope. He gradually carved out a new reality, learning to cook and bake, and eventually winning prizes in the annual valley fair; his chocolate roulades, doused in copious measures of brandy, became the stuff of local legend. To stave off solitude, he postponed his planned retirement as long as he could. But when the inevitable moment came, he joined walking groups and took up amateur dramatics. He sang in the choir my mother had loved and always urged him to join. His neighbors were constant in their love and support, and he enjoyed quiet weekly dinners with his brother and the company of his dog, Ben.

And all the while, he nursed his grief like a fine wine. A healthy sixty-something widower is a coveted commodity anywhere, and I'd ask about the single ladies who sang in the choir or occasionally came for tea, taken in my mother's antique teacups and accompanied by his freshly baked scones. One hiked with him occasionally in the hills.

"She reminds me a bit of your mother; I can almost imagine it's her."

But none would get past the teacups or the hiking boots.

My new, American family—husband and two boys—visited as often as we could, falling in love with the lake alongside him. He found joy in the ten grandchildren he eventually had, even as he still struggled with overt affection. As my children grew up, and transatlantic flights became increasingly affordable, I visited more often, usually alone, or with one of my sons, as my husband tended to his own aging parents down south. Once, my son and I recorded his memories, a decision I treasure, but I learned just as much in our evening chats, sipping wine by the lake in Spring, or warmed by the wood stove in his timber-beamed living room in Winter. His thoughts would often turn to the past. Meeting my mother, for the thousandth time. Family holidays. Memorable moments in his long medical career. Walking the hills in their first golden summer.

And the war, of course.

It was then that the sunny tales of army mishaps, train rides, and cricket on the beaches gave way to darker memories never shared with us as children. Like the arrival in Singapore as the war wound down, where the survivors of the notorious Changi prison were brought on board for treatment.

“They were just skeletons, barely moving, barely alive. They were treated so awfully.” Changi had housed thousands of Allied prisoners of war, many of whom were tortured, starved, and subjected to forced labor. He never forgave Japan for Changi.

Or his assignment as physician to the prostitutes in the Calcutta brothels where soldiers lined up to take their turn with desperate Indian women who had nowhere else to go.

“I’ve never forgotten it—the worst weeks of my life. I’ve never felt so much sympathy for women, and it’s lasted, you know.”

Or August, 1947, in India when the friendly Muslim rug dealer, who had visited the barracks weekly to bargain with the troops, arrived in terror as he fled marauding Hindu neighbors, throwing his wares at their feet.

“He said he’d take whatever we could give; he was running for his life. We British created this mess, and all we could do was watch. I never saw him again.”

Or the futility of patching up casualties on the beaches of Ramree Island.

“You can’t do much with battle-field dressing stations. It’s first aid really. You never know if you’ve really helped.”

He told me once about a young soldier, who seemed about to die, though with only a small wound on his head. Dad recognized a rare allergic reaction and used an antidote to save the boy’s life.

“I can honestly say, he was the only person I *know* I saved, and I held on to that when I wondered if anything I did made a difference. But in the end, I couldn’t save the person who meant everything, could I?”

His grief never faded, but it hid behind happiness. He once said that if he had even the slightest belief in an afterlife, where he would see my mother again, he might have considered hastening his own journey.

“But I know there isn’t, you see. So as long as I can feel her around me, and you kids are with me, I want as much time as I can get.”



The valley sustained him. “I used to ask her: what will we do when we can’t walk up the hills? And she’d tell me we would walk in the valleys and look up at the hills. And when we couldn’t walk in the valley, we’d sit in the garden and look at the hills. And that’s what I do.”

For his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday, the village hall filled with friends and family for a joyful *ceilidh*, and he danced to the skirl of fiddles and accordions with neighbors, daughters, and granddaughters.

When he turned ninety, it was a more sedate affair, with a few missing faces. A soprano sang his favorite songs; my brother-in-law’s video camera caught him smiling through tears as he mouthed along to her words, transported to who knows where:

*I may be right, I may be wrong  
But I'm perfectly willing to swear  
That when you turned and smiled at me  
A nightingale sang in Berkeley Square*

Afterwards he rose to thank the roomful of friends and family, cheerfully inviting us all to his 100<sup>th</sup> birthday party.

Dad kept a clear mind his whole life, but even as we celebrated his birthday, he was mourning his younger brother’s descent into Alzheimer’s. He told me about a frantic call from his sister-in-law—her husband was raging at the “strange old woman” in his living room. When Dad arrived, his brother turned his anger on him. “Who are you? My brother is a young man—please bring him here!” “Wish I could have,” he remarked sadly. Not long after, his brother died, leaving Dad wondering anew. Why did he live on, while so many did not?

When broadband finally reached him, he discovered Skype, and we talked often. He couldn’t quite get over the technology that brought us together. “Your voice is clearer than a phone call across the valley, and I get to see your face. Bloody marvelous!” Each year I would visit once or twice, often in December, when I’d join him as he visited my mother’s grave to bring Christmas wreaths. He fretted that her hillside gravestone,

battered by the cold lake winds, was almost illegible after thirty years. “Promise me you’ll put up a new one when you drop my ashes in with her.”

Finally, the trek to the barn for logs grew harder, and the hazards of driving on country roads became more real—although he was secretly proud of his first ever speeding ticket, acquired at the age of ninety-four. He reluctantly put the house on the market, moved to a flat in a nearby town, and sold his car. He grumbled that the complex was full of “old ladies,” and his windows had no view. One weekend, with the sparsely furnished house about to sell, he gathered supplies and took a taxi across the hills to his home. In a flurry of frantic emails we siblings, from our distant locations, shared our exasperation.

“What is he thinking?”

“He’s determined to go while the weather is good. He promised if the phone isn’t working, he will get straight back in the taxi.”

Between our anxious phone calls, he cooked and drank wine, while walking in his garden and gazing at the sheep-studded hills. For one last time he lit the fire and climbed the stone staircase to the bedroom that overlooked his beloved Loweswater.

Later that year, a cancer diagnosis signaled the end, and my transatlantic trips grew more frequent, as we took turns to care for him in his flat, bonding as our visits overlapped and we shared his decline. As his independence crumbled, he muttered against his failing body. “My own daughters helping me shower—you should never have to do this!” Growing ever weaker, he agreed to the move he knew would be his last.

One evening, after my sister left and we awaited the arrival of my brother, who would supervise the transfer to the nursing home, I sat with him, flipping through family photos on my laptop. He mused about his life, and its three almost equal parts—before Eileen, with her, and grieving her. He wondered about the youth he never really had: “But I was lucky really—I had a pretty good war. There are times you can’t stop thinking about it though. So many people dead, so very many. You’ll probably say I’m daft, but I think it somehow made me a better person. Does that seem awful to you?”

No, Dad, it doesn’t.

The doctor had said he may have months left, and I flew back to teach my classes in Florida.

### *Curtain Call*

Just a couple of weeks later, I returned to find him sliding into twilight, barely acknowledging my presence.

“He was in pain, and he asked for the syringe driver,” my doctor brother explained.

The driver is a small, battery-operated pump that delivers a steady flow of medicine to the body, through a thin tube under the skin. It may be used at any life stage, but loaded with morphine, it is a tool for dying. Dad knew exactly what it meant, and he was content.

My sister had said goodbye and left for her long drive back to Scotland. My brothers and I agreed it made sense for them to go home to their jobs and families, hours away. Now so far from home, I would stay to watch over him until the end, as the nurses shared those last tales he spun.

The body is stubborn, and he held on. “It may be a couple of days,” the nurses told me. Each day stretched to another; every time I left for some brief respite, I expected to find him gone, but he was still there, shrinking before my eyes.

On the fifth evening, I returned to his flat to get a bite to eat. The jangle of the phone told me it was finally over.

“Your Dad’s passed, love.”

“Was anyone with him?”

“No, we saw when we popped in to check.”

I headed back to his room, where he lay in fresh pajamas, eyes closed and sparse hair combed.

I silently thanked him for organizing everything in advance—there would be a cremation with a God-free service and a final gathering in the village hall. And a brand-



*Tom at Loweswater (91 years old)*

new, marble headstone. The head nurse chatted on: “You know, sometimes they wait until there’s no-one there—to spare you. We’ve seen it often.”

I don’t want that to be true; it would mean he knew he was alone.

All those days, as I waited for the morphine to release him, I wondered what was playing in his mind, as I do still. I’m certain the shadows of war, seared into his young mind, still lurked to haunt him. But surely there were brighter, shimmering scenes that nudged out those shadows before the inescapable fade to black. My mother’s face, smiling on their wedding day. His sons, daughters, and two more generations of children. And the moment the sun burst through the clouds on the fells and led him to the valley of Loweswater for his final, bittersweet act. I hope so.



A retired Anthropology Professor, **Elizabeth Bird** published many academic articles and seven books before turning to creative writing in 2021. Her work appears in *Under the Sun* (winner, Readers' Choice Award 2022), *bioStories*, *Streetlight*, *Dorothy Parker’s Ashes*, *HerStry*, *The Guardian*, *Mutha Magazine*, *3Elements Review*, *Heimat Review*, *Witcraft*, *Summerset Review*, and elsewhere. Her essay "Interlude: 1941," was a Notable in *Best American Essays 2023*. Her website is: [www.lizbirdwrites.com](http://www.lizbirdwrites.com).