

# THE NAVY-BLUE SUITCASE

*Curious Tales from a Travelling Life*

*Written and illustrated by*

SALLY VAN GENT



Wakefield  
Press

# Contents

The Limes    *1*

Fish and Chips    *25*

Ducks and Roses    *49*

Qatar    *67*

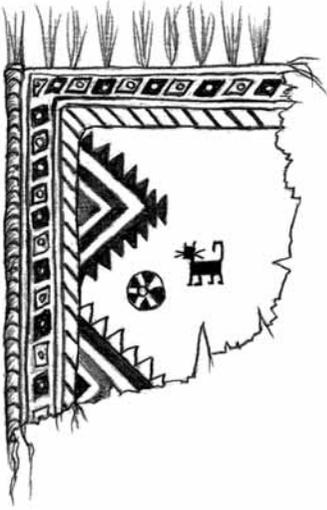
Mauritius    *101*

Brook House    *113*

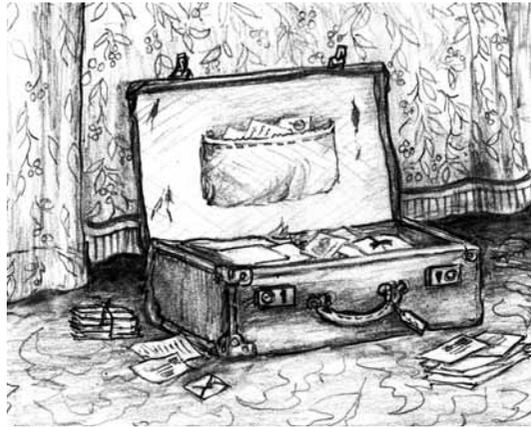
Stars in the Sea    *125*

Singapore    *145*

Australia    *157*



## THE LIMES



### **The navy-blue suitcase**

It must once have been a thing of beauty, but age had frayed its cream-silk lining and tufts of furry leather escaped the seams. It lay underneath our bed from the time we first moved into my grandparents' house and I knew all along it wasn't so much stored, as hidden there.

One evening I burst into our bedroom and caught my mother on her knees in front of the open case. In an instant she slapped down the lid and pushed it back into the darkness and blanket fluff.

I shared the big half-poster bed with my mother, and after she tucked me in each night she drew its heavy tapestry curtains. My grandparents' mahogany furniture framed the room – massive wardrobes with drawers so wide it took two people to open them. They contained our clothes and my grandmother's bed linen, but little else. My mother owned few personal possessions and those she had she kept inside her navy-blue suitcase.

It was years before I decided to look inside and only opened it then because I thought I might find something to help explain my father's odd behaviour. I waited until my mother had gone shopping and my grandmother was in the garden picking runner beans. Then I sneaked upstairs and pulled out the case from under the bed.

I'm not sure what I expected to find, but I was disappointed when I saw birthday cards and old letters held together with elastic. I glanced

through them and set them aside. My fingers dug deeper and I came upon an ageing wedding photograph mounted on brown card. Three rows of guests smiled stiffly for the photographer – men in wing collars and women wearing cloche hats. The bride, swathed in an enormous veil, carried a bouquet of arum lilies with ribbon twisted around their stalks. The happy couple were flanked by four adult bridesmaids wearing capes over tucked satin dresses. I didn't recognise anyone in the picture and wondered why my mother had bothered to keep it. Perhaps it was the wedding of an old schoolfriend?

Then I noticed the flower girl. She was leaning against the knee of a woman who looked vaguely familiar. I studied her face. She must have been much younger then, but it was definitely my grandmother. I looked again to see if there was anyone else I knew, and made a second discovery – the bride was my mother! But whose arm was she holding?

It wasn't my father's.

Suddenly overcome by guilt, I pushed the photograph back under the letters and cards. Then I sat down on the edge of the bed and gazed through the window at the fields that stretched beyond our garden. Why didn't my mother tell me about this wedding? Who was the plump, broad-shouldered man she married so long ago? And what of my father, who came to visit us at Christmas?

There was the sound of the front door opening and I heard my mother call out, 'I'm home!'

I leaped up. Had I left the case exactly as I found it? I closed the lid, pushed it back under the bed and hurried downstairs. My mother was in the hallway, taking off her hat. I hesitated. I dearly wanted to ask about the photograph. But how could I, without admitting to poking around in her personal belongings, tucked away in the navy-blue suitcase?



## The Limes



My grandparents named their house The Limes, for the two bright-leaved trees that leaned out over the front fence. Under their dappled shade grew tiny violets, lily of the valley, Christmas roses and Solomon's seal.

Between the trees and the coal shed was a dark and secret place where in the daytime fairies played among the fallen leaves, and at night climbed the stalks of the foxgloves to sleep inside their flowers. They were too shy to come out when I was near, but on windy days I heard them whispering.

There was always something good to eat in our garden: raspberries and apples, gooseberries and plums, cabbages and beans. And we were never short of honey for the fruit trees were pollinated by Grandpa's bees. He and I dug and planted together, and my cats, Timmy and Snowy, listened carefully while he taught me the Latin names of all his flowers.



Sometimes a hedgehog ambled into the garden for a saucer of milk and on rainy days frogs came out of their hiding place under the privet hedge and hopped around on the front path.



When my ball fell into the pit by the cellar window, I peered into it and counted five little frogs trapped in the bottom. To reach them I needed to move a heavy metal grate. As I pulled it aside the edges cut into my fingers and made them bleed. But I retrieved my ball and rescued the frogs that had turned snow white in the darkness.

On the last day of June, fifteen, and sometimes as many as twenty, of my schoolfriends came to the house to celebrate my birthday. They arrived in bathers and ran around the lawn under the hose. We splashed each other with water from buckets and bowls, and Grandma's old iron peggy-tub that she used on washdays for soaking the clothes.

Afterwards we sat down to one of my mother's marvellous birthday teas: boat-shaped sandwiches with paper sails, halved apricots on white blancmange made to look like poached eggs, and brown rabbit mousse on green grass jelly.



## The visit

The door of the telephone room creaked open and a moment later my mother skipped into the kitchen, her cheeks all pink.

‘That was your father,’ she announced. ‘Wonderful news! He’s coming for Easter. He’ll be here by lunchtime tomorrow.’

Grandma’s eyes widened. She stopped in the middle of working the creases into the legs of Grandpa’s trousers and laid down her iron.

‘But it’s Good Friday and the shops are closed. What are we to do? I’ll have to ring the butcher first thing in the morning to see if he has a piece of sirloin. And we’d better get some cheese – Stilton. You know how much Waldo likes that.’

She dumped the part-ironed trousers on top of a pile of shirts lying in the laundry basket and folded up the ironing board. ‘The rest of the washing will have to wait. What do you think about apple pie for dinner on Sunday?’

She turned to me. ‘Sally, look in the cupboard and see how we’re off for sugar. I’m going to make a batch of my special biscuits.’

She swept the plates into the sink, powdered the kitchen table with flour, and was soon kneading the pastry for her apple pie. Meanwhile, my mother dragged the vacuum out of the cupboard and started work on the hall carpet, while I was sent into the back room to dust the ornaments on the mantelpiece.

I hated housework. No sooner had I settled comfortably into a corner to read than my grandmother would call out, ‘Where’s that girl? Head in a book? Tell her to come into the kitchen and do something useful.’

That day though, excited as I was at the thought of my father’s visit, I was willing to do whatever she asked. Once the dusting was done, I brushed the cat hairs off the armchairs, then wiped the hearth and polished the brassware till it glowed like the sun.



After a while my mother released me and I escaped into the garden.

I found my grandfather in the shed behind the greenhouse, potting up geraniums. ‘Daddy’s coming tomorrow,’ I told him.

He grunted. ‘You’d better help your mother carry the camping bed down from the attic then. You’re going to need it.’ He turned away and went back to teasing out the roots of his cuttings, readying them for replanting into bigger pots.

I watched for a while, waiting for him to say something else, but when he didn’t I understood he wasn’t as thrilled as I was about my father’s visit. Mildly disappointed, I wandered back outside.

The Michaelmas daisies were in flower in the front garden and I bent down to pick a few. As I was arranging the pink and mauve clusters into a posy I thought about the last time my father visited us. It was at Christmas – not the one most recently gone, but the one before that. I remembered how happy I’d been to see him, and how sad I was when he didn’t stay long enough to watch me open my stocking.

He did bring me a present though. After he’d kissed my mother and shaken hands with my grandparents, he went into the back room and settled into the armchair beside the fireplace.

‘Come here, Sally,’ he said, reaching for my hand and drawing me to his knee. ‘Have you been a good girl while I’ve been away?’

‘Yes,’ I whispered, thrilled by his closeness: the scent of his shaving lotion, the oil on his slicked-down hair, the new leather smell of his shoes.

‘Have you been working hard at school?’

‘Yes, Daddy,’ I said, shy and proud at the same time. ‘I came top of the class in last term’s exams.’

‘In that case, I have a present for you.’ He reached over the arm of his chair, picked up a flat white box and held it out to me.



‘What is it?’ I asked.

‘It’s a cake.’ He laughed, and I knew he could tell from my expression that I was disappointed. ‘Aren’t you going to open it?’

I laid the box on the floor, carefully lifted the lid, and was surprised to see several layers of pink tissue. When I pushed them aside I discovered my father had tricked me, for instead of a cake I found a dress.

Its puffed sleeves were edged with ribbon and the bodice, drawn together by rows of smocking, was embroidered with tiny daisies. That was no ordinary frock. It was the sort owned by rich girls and princesses. All that year I wore it to birthday parties and whenever people admired it I told them it was given to me by my father.

Anyone could tell he was a special person. He’d served in the army. He was called Captain, unlike my friends’ fathers who were all plain Misters. Grandma and Grandpa had broad Yorkshire accents like mine, but my daddy’s voice was posh like the newsreader on the BBC. He wore a bowler hat and carried a black umbrella, and my grandmother told me he lived in London where our Queen had her palace.

Saturday morning, my mother rose early and went into town to buy a joint of beef, leaving me to make the horseradish sauce. I dug up the root, washed it and then rubbed it against the grater. At once my eyes began to smart and even though I was happy about my father’s visit, I couldn’t help crying.

At twelve o’clock a shiny black car pulled up in front of the house. My mother galloped down the back steps and ran up the path to the gate. We all hugged, and my father allowed me to carry his bag into the house. Grandpa and Grandma were at the door to greet him and everyone had a wonderful afternoon.

That night I had to sleep in the camping bed with the metal springs that creaked and dug into me when I turned over. My mother set it at the foot of the big bed we normally shared. Before I went to sleep she heard me say my prayers – first the Lord’s, and then the ‘God bless Daddy and Mummy’ one that ended with ‘and may we soon have our



own little house and all live together again.’ Then she tucked me in and reminded me it was nearly Easter.

There was a gap between the curtains that let in the morning light and woke me early. The window seemed to be in the wrong place and for a moment I couldn’t think where I was. Then I heard the sound of heavy breathing and remembered I had slept in the camp bed, and my father was lying beside my mother.

The high bed end hid me from my parents, but I felt uncomfortable – embarrassed. I gathered my clothes and was careful not to look towards the bed as I tiptoed out the door and went to dress in the bathroom.

When everyone was awake I was given my chocolate egg. But there was no time to eat it for we were all off to church, where my mother walked down the aisle on my father’s arm, smiling at the congregation and looking for all the world like a bride.

And then, before I could introduce him to my new cat, Timmy, or show him how good I’d become at drawing butterflies and ponies, my father was saying goodbye and telling me to be a good girl for my mother. And I knew it would be a long time before I saw him again.

## **Neighbours**

My grandparents and their neighbours built their houses at the same time, shortly before the start of the First World War. They remained in them ever after, living close enough to be familiar with each other’s ways, and a party to family secrets. And yet in all those years they rarely entered one another’s homes.

Instead the women met on the street. They whispered of sickness or scandal while the fishmonger weighed out haddock and cod. On Tuesdays they chatted in the mobile library while exchanging their books, and on Thursdays when the greengrocer rang his bell, they hurried out to gossip beside his cart. That too, was the signal for my grandfather to rush to the front gate with his shovel, ready to scoop up horse manure to put on his roses.



But as my grandmother's regular messenger, I was familiar with the insides of all their homes. It was my job to deliver jars of newly made jam to Mrs Oliver and to send for Mrs Spurr, the butcher's wife, when someone was sick. She knew what to do. She was good with animals too, although she couldn't save my pet rabbit when he ate pyrethrum daisies.

I liked Mrs Riggs the best. After I'd delivered my grandmother's messages we walked together in her garden, where the scent of lilac mingled with lavender and mock orange. Before I left she always went to a cupboard in the kitchen and brought out a box of handmade chocolates, so exquisite that choosing was nigh impossible. When I finally picked one out she slipped another into my pocket.

A small, particular sort of person, she was neatly dressed whatever the time of my visit. She did have that bit of trouble though when she was holidaying in Morecambe with Mr Riggs.

On their first evening they went for a walk along the pier. After a while Mrs Riggs grew tired and suggested they return to the guesthouse, but her husband grumbled because he was enjoying his stroll. Mrs Riggs, who had missed her usual afternoon tea, urged him to get a move on, and when he took no notice and continued to meander along, she grew irritated and decided to walk on alone.

She'd almost reached the guesthouse when she remembered her husband had the key to their room. She would have to go back and look for him.

As it happened, he wasn't far away. Mr Riggs was still making no attempt to hurry. Indeed, he'd stopped again and was leaning over the railings, gazing out to sea. Fuming, Mrs Riggs marched over to him and with her open hand, delivered him a hearty whack across the buttocks. Mr Riggs spun around, mouth wide open in shock.

Only it wasn't Mr Riggs. It was a man Mrs Riggs had never set eyes on before.

