

## Chapter 1

### The Circus with no Future

Janine Tairg-Sinclair

*“Wake up Oskar! Sinclair Brother’s Circus is finished. You’ll never go out on tour again. How about you selling me your tent and seating?”*

That was the first paragraph of a short letter, in the scratchy writing of Grandfather Oskar’s sister, Gerda. It had come all the way from the lowlands of Scotland to our home in North Wales. She was the owner of a rival show, called the *Sinclair Family Circus*, that had always tried to be bigger and better than ours. Our circus, *Sinclair Brothers Circus*, was the one that Oskar and his sons had owned before the war, though we hadn’t known about his sister, or the other show. The first time that Oskar told us anything about his sister was late one snowy evening, some weeks ago now, when Peter read an advert in *the World’s Fair*.

“Is there *another* Sinclair Circus, Oskar?” Peter had asked, a little puzzled by the name. Oskar took the paper from Peter, read the page, and snorted.

“It says the circus is looking for people and equipment to start up.” Peter told Natalie and me.

Peter grabbed the paper as Oskar dropped it and shook his head. As he described the *Scottish Sinclairs* he gave us the impression that there was no love between him and his sister, especially when Peter suggested that we four could go to Scotland and join her circus instead of making our own!

“We don’t need to join no stick and rag show.” He had rumbled. “We have a world class show of our own.”

“Are we really going to have our own circus again?” I asked. After all, we’d been brought up believing we would, but there hadn’t been much sign of it lately.

“Of course we are!” Oskar stood up to go out of the wagon. “Just wait and see!”

By the way, Peter and I were both ten years old, ten years and six months really. We lived here in Wales with Grandfather Oskar and Peter’s mother, Natalie Sinclair. You see, Natalie was Oskar’s daughter who had married Dafydd Evans, who was the tent master back in the circus’s great days. She used to have two younger brothers, Jacques and Pierre, who were the *Brothers* of the circus’ name. Only, the two young men had decided to join the navy when the war came, but their submarine had disappeared one dark night, never to be seen again.

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The conversation over the *World’s Fair* had been weeks ago. Today was a late February morning in the hills of North Wales. Hitler’s war had been over for eighteen months and now, in spring nineteen forty seven, the Welsh coast resorts were waking up, thinking of being a holiday area again. It was cold this spring but, in the fashion of our valley, there was driving rain sweeping the last traces of snow from the bleak hills.

Peter and I were coming out of the post office stores to Oskar, who was waiting outside. As we came out of the door of the little stores, we stopped for a moment in the doorway.

I held the letter in gloved hands and ripped the seal. I read it aloud to Oskar and Peter. As I did so my ten year old heart fell. I had little doubt that this letter would finish Oskar's plans for our own circus.

He didn't comment then, or during the fifteen minutes that we needed to trudge silently up the steep road under the bridge of the *trên fach* - the disused narrow gauge railway - and on up toward our circus quarters.

As for us, the two Sinclair children, everyone outside the family thought that we were brother and sister, especially the teachers and the other children at our school. If we were, we would have to be twins because my birthday is just two weeks after Peter's. Only we aren't related at all. Although we are the same age and both quite tall and slim, same sized enough that we could and did share shorts and coats, we didn't look similar at all. For a start Peter has medium brown hair and hazel green eyes, and I am a blue eyed blonde.

But in a way Peter and I *were* nearly brother and sister. I was two years old when *Tiger* and *Lili*, my parents and, I was told, a fantastic riding act, left me with Natalie and dashed back to their family home in Prague - never to be heard of again. From that day on, Natalie had been mother to both of us. Her short white bearded father, Grandfather Oskar, had been father to us all, ever since I could remember.

Oskar Sinclair was the kindest man I have ever known, as well as the best and most patient teacher one could ever imagine. I'm sure that all came from years of training every sort of animal. Natalie always said that his father was the son of a Scottish laird, who had run away with the circus, and his mother was a German trapeze artiste. As a young man, he had travelled all over Europe, marrying twice, and finally returned to us from a show in Germany in the very last minutes of pre-war peace. In circus terms, he was an animal man and one of the best. Bears, big cats and above all elephants were his delight. It must have been a big come down for him to have just our four ponies and two horses in his care, but he never complained.

He was an odd looking person, too, our Grandfather. People outside the family called him a *character*, which I suppose he was. Most notably, except in coldest weather and on formal occasions, he dressed in greasy old leather shorts that reached down to the middle of his kneecaps, with old army boots and no socks. Above a leather belt that hung loose around his waist, he wore one of his old thick woollen seaman's sweaters, summer or winter. He owned half a dozen blue sweaters, each more dilapidated than the last, and all many sizes too big. That meant that his white bearded, bald crowned, sunbrowned head always appeared to be without a neck.

As for the old man's past life, so well travelled, Oskar's command of languages was unbelievably bad. His native language appeared to be a sort of German, which had been rather difficult for us to explain during the war years! Luckily very few people recognised his accent! His English was poor, too, with no trace of his Scots ancestry. Confusingly, he liked to throw in French phrases. His favourite was "*d'accord*" - which he used most often when it wasn't appropriate. Natalie could speak perfect French and real German with him and they could, and did, use the *Parlari*, the British circus slang, together. It might have given us a good grounding in all those languages, had we ever known where one ended and another began!

In case you hadn't worked it out, Peter and I were born on the tenting circus, near the

end of the summer season, three years before the war. We had lived here in Wales every winter as babies and, since the show closed down, on our own circus farm many miles away from possible bombs and invasions. Because of the military service, most children of our age had parents in the services. Us too! It was a great advantage that we weren't much different from the other country children. Although we still lived in the big old showman's wagon that had always fronted the show in pre-war days, rather than in a house, we had horses to feed and look after and chores to do before we could go to lessons in the village school. That made us just like the farmers' families whom we knew. We looked like the other children, spoke like them, and we were happy.

Only, unlike them, we had a dream. A dream of being a circus again.

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Oh! I was forgetting Gerda's letter! Why would Oskar's sister think that our circus was finished?

Well, it had happened this way.

Pierre and Jacques had been lost at sea in the first month of the war, long before we were old enough to understand. We hadn't seen Peter's dad, either, because he had got himself into a prisoner of war camp. It was a couple of years now that Oskar in Wales and Dafydd somewhere in the South Pacific ocean had started to write letters to plan a future for Sinclair Brothers' Circus.

The first sign of a coming change had been on Christmas Morning the year before last when Oskar gave me two monkeys. It took Natalie by surprise because Peter had to help her empty out and scrub a cage for them on Christmas afternoon instead of taking a rest. They were young animals and not the slightest bit cuddly, but they were easier to train and show than I thought. I was ready to show them in public last Easter, and I felt as if I was going to be a real circus princess at last. Nothing had happened!

Dafydd came home for a short leave last August. Of course, we both had vague memories of him, and there were several pictures of him on the wagon walls, but he was even nicer and more handsome than we expected. He was quite tall, brown haired just like Peter but rapidly going bald. He said that was because he hadn't eaten any of Natalie's good cooking for such a long time! To my pleasure and not a little relief he was never a misery like Oscar, who could become sulky when things weren't to his liking. Dafydd was a really happy person all the time.

I showed him my monkey act, he liked it straight away, and when we all went to do our first ever gala show the next weekend I was one of the performers! The last weekend before he had to go back to duty, he took us all on the train to Birmingham, so we could see one of the biggest English circuses. They knew him and welcomed him, so much that we sat in the Royal Box opposite the artiste's entrance. It was a wonderful day out that ended in the boss's living wagon. Dafydd introduced Peter and I as the young stars of his new show, and promised them and us that he'd be back and ready to tour at the end of this February, this month.

But Dafydd never came home!

Only eight weeks ago, the aircraft flying him home for Christmas was lost in the middle of the long hop between Hawaii and San Francisco, diving into the sea within sight of

the infamous light ship. They pulled most of the passengers out of the water, but Dafydd was one of a dozen who were never found....  
Do you wonder that Gerda Sinclair thought that we would never travel again?

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Today as always, I wondered if Oskar would manage to get up the long hill home without stopping for breath, but he managed it as he always did. *Circus Farm* was a shallow quarry working, hidden behind a row of derelict slate miner's cottages. The post office is at the crossroads at the west end of the village where our road comes down steeply at a sharp angle to the village street. The road goes under the railway, with a blind wiggle under the disused track, and on up without a break. After the road junction at the top, we turned right across the bridge that crosses over the rusted tracks where they used to lower the slate down from behind our hill, and on past the old chapel. A little further on, the road in front of the row of derelict houses was guarded from our stone quarry by a rotting wooden gate in the dilapidated drystone wall. Behind that wall was our home.

We lived in two long low living wagons, ours once varnished and Grandfather's painted dark red. They were parked with their doors away from the road, towbar down hill, behind the houses. Below them was our roughly built wooden stable. Opposite, where the ground rose suddenly towards the end of a terrace of houses, two beast wagons that had once been yellow were parked next to a green box wagon with their towbars resting against the rocky bank. We had a lorry and a horsebox, too, they stood shrouded in tarpaulins at the back of the quarry.

Oskar went straight across the yard to his living wagon, pausing only to call a quick "*Komm*" to Natalie. She left me with the horse she had been riding. I put him back into the stable as she hurried off to Oskar's wagon.

They were busy talking for a very long time. Peter and I tidied things around the yard for over an hour, looking at the closed door from time to time. At last, Natalie came out and went off down the steep hill without a word, probably going to the post office and the telephone. We both knew better than to ask what was happening, even when Oskar made us help him prepare and cook the lunch.

When Natalie struggled back up the hill, just in time to sit down to eat with us, she looked happier than she had for weeks.

"*Y'schafft?*" Oskar asked.

We guessed that he was asking if she had managed to do something.

"*Laiift schon!*" She confirmed.

Whatever he wanted, it was *running*.

We both asked what was running, but she wasn't going to tell us. One thing was clear, Gerda's letter had got things moving at last. It seemed that we hadn't known Oskar as well as we thought we did!

## Chapter 2

### New Plans

*Whatever* was going on elsewhere, we started to see changes at home at eight o'clock the very next morning. *It* got two men and a large petrol driven road tractor down from the quarry, not our quarry but the big one on the road that leads over the hill that goes to Bettws. Natalie had been working there as a secretary until last year. We helped Oskar to drag the tarpaulins off our old Foden steam lorry and the elderly driver backed up their tractor as close a possible, ready to drag it up to their workshops. As soon as the heavy push pin was connected, we asked to ride with them and they, and Natalie, agreed.

"Do what the driver tells you, and come straight back." She warned.

It was really quite frightening, riding with the driver's young mate in the cab on our steep and narrow roads. Not only frightening for us, who were perhaps more thrilled than scared, but certainly for the two men. Our heavy steamer was pushing their tractor down the slope despite the back wheel brakes on each vehicle being full on. We took the corner so wide at the bottom of the hill that we bumped the far kerb in front of the post office door. Then the tractor sped on along the level road beside the stream, frightening the milkman's horse as we passed the village pub' and making several people jump off their bicycles to stare after us. As we turned out into the main road with a fanfare on the tractor's hooters but no attempt at a stop, we roared off toward the steep rise above the railway tunnel at full pelt. Peter looked at me with excitement in his face. "Do you think he'll get up to the quarry?" I asked. "If it starts to go backwards we'd better jump out!"

Peter grinned.

"I know! That's what these wooden blocks are for. Don't you remember the big load that came down our valley last summer? They put them under the wheels to stop it running away."

He patted the big wedge shapes on the floor.

The man steering our lorry glanced at us. He was concentrating on keeping exactly behind the tractor.

"He's trying to rush the hill. Once he gets down to bottom gear you'll see how good our tractor can pull." He explained.

We didn't get very far before the speed was down to a crawl, so we jumped down and walked alongside watching the tractor driver. The engine roared, the wheels only turned slowly, but the load still moved.

We survived the journey! After watching at the workshop door as our lorry was pushed backwards inside, we shouted our thanks to the driver and his mate.

"See you in a couple of weeks!" called the driver's mate.

They waved to us as we went towards the gates and we waved back until they went into the buildings. We settled down for the long walk home. As we walked we discussed the happenings, still wondering exactly what was being cooked up.

By the time we got back home Natalie was out somewhere. Across the yard from our wagon, Oskar was struggling alone with rolls of canvas that hadn't been out of their wagon for years. We helped him to unroll the four quarters in the yard and check them

over as far as we could. Natalie wasn't impressed when she came back from the village stores with a bag of food.

"Use a bit of sense, Dad! You'll get it damp. Get it back in the dry!"

Oskar did as he was told, scurrying around as we folded and rolled it again. He was like a little boy that day, with a big happy grin on his face that reminded me of Peter when he had been given a present!

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The day we started the Reo horsebox was no less exciting than the morning we had spent with the Foden, though it was pretty frustrating at first. It had its turn after the next weekend. Peter and I had swept it out and cleaned off the dust and mud with buckets of water and brooms on Sunday afternoon. Oskar had gone around its engine with an oilcan and a greasy rag. We filled its tank with petrol, Peter standing on the top of the bonnet and tipping the big can so that the fuel poured into a funnel and Oskar giving directions below. Oskar was surprised, and I guess a little annoyed, because the two gallon can of engine oil he had carried up the hill wasn't needed. Peter's dad had put the Reo away at the end of the last season and, unlike Pierre who had simply drained the water from the boiler of the Foden, he had done a good job. Natalie sat in the driver's seat and, after fiddling about under the bonnet, Oskar wound the starting handle that stuck permanently out of the front above the heavy metal bumper. It didn't start. Neither Natalie nor I had expected it to run, though both Oskar and Peter had been certain it would. We took turns at sitting in the cab with a foot pressed on the accelerator pedal while Oskar wound the heavy starting handle. In nearly an hour it coughed a few times and once, just once, it had given a loud bang and a puff of grey smoke. Even when the three of us pushed it across the yard with Natalie in the driving seat and she let in the clutch nothing happened. We abandoned it beside the gate and went to clean up and have tea.

On Monday morning, as we were finishing breakfast, a young farm worker turned up with a big white carthorse and demanded to see the boss. Natalie took him over to the Reo and we pulled off the covers again. After discussing with Natalie, the man hooked a rope between the towing hook at the back and his horses harness. He and Natalie looked at Peter.

"Peter. You can steer and look after the brake." Natalie told him. "I'm not going to try!" The man climbed into the cab and tried the controls.

"Is it out of gear?"

I looked at the pedals and levers, and so did Natalie. Peter found one lever with a round knob, which looked possible.

"Wiggle it?" I suggested. I had often watched the driver in the Crosville bus when we went down the valley. "If it is loose it must be in neutral."

It was loose, and the man made way for Peter.

Oskar turned up from the village just when the horse had pulled the Reo backwards into the road, facing downhill. We were putting stones under the wheels so it wouldn't run away as he greeted the man. He gave the man a few coins for his trouble, patted the horse's nose and turned to us.

"You stand wide away." He ordered. "First you pull the stones out, then push."

We understood. Oskar was getting into the driving seat and we kicked the stones aside. He looked out at us.

“*Yetzt* - Push!”

We all pushed, Peter and the farm worker with their shoulders backwards against the back door, Natalie and me with our hands stretched out, and at last the horsebox started to roll down the hill.

We jumped back and watched as it started to run down toward the bridge. Peter and I caught up and ran alongside the cab as Oskar put it into gear and the wheels started to turn the engine.

It was just like our attempts on Sunday. It coughed. It even puffed out a bit of white smoke, but nothing else. It crossed the bridge over the incline and speeded up. Oskar tried again and got a very loud bang. Then he turned left on to the steepest part of the slope and the horse box speeded up until we couldn't keep up.

As he went under the railway bridge, with less than a hundred yards to go before he would have to stop, if he could stop or else run into the post office windows, there was another bang. This was far louder than before. Flames flew out of the exhaust and then the hole of the bridge was filled with black smoke. We came coughing out of the smoke in time to see Oskar and the Reo racing off up the village street and hear the motor throbbing loudly.

It was almost an anticlimax for us to climb up into the cab of the waiting lorry and ride down to the bus terminus, round via the valley road and back up to our quarry. One small thing of our dream was coming true. We were now riding in one of our circus lorries for the first time.

The Foden came back too, under its own steam, full three weeks later. We were at the gate and heard the steam whistle as it came up the hill. Our next door neighbour stuck his head over his garden wall and asked what it was.

“It sounds just like the *trên bach!*” Exclaimed the elderly postman, who was handing over a couple of letters to Natalie, and then had to explain to us about the trains that had once come up the valley.

“They all had two whistles to signal to each other, so that they switched the tracks” He told us. “They used to sound just like your lorry's whistle.”

We parked it in its place and for the first time ever Oskar and Peter followed the instructions on filling the boiler from the water wagon and then damped down the fire.

“Next time you do that, we'll have just arrived on our first ground!”

Natalie put her arms round our shoulders and looked up at her father who was in the back of the lorry.

He put on his happy face.

“It won't be long now!”

You would think that in nearly two years since the end of the war our grownups would have checked everything, wouldn't you? But they hadn't. Except for Oskar's quick look at the canvas with us a month ago, he hadn't done a thing. By now, Natalie couldn't be expected to do anything, really, because she wasn't supposed to work now. Over the next weeks, we two ten year olds did most of the humping and heaving that was needed to get things out of wagons for them to look them over.

Peter and I did all the painting, too, not very professionally I'm afraid. Our method was to paint over the old detail with new paint, like painting in junior school, and then do the big areas afterwards. In between painting, Peter tried his best to start many of the essential repairs. At least he did those jobs that were possible with a hammer and a box

of nails. He even hammered in wood screws when Natalie wasn't watching. It seemed the easiest way to both of us, and a coat of paint covered most of his worst workmanship.

All the while we never wondered, even once, why we had no help. We were too busy, and perhaps that is why we didn't complain.

"Are we going out on our own?" That was the question that Peter kept on asking as Natalie called us in nearly every day to try on costumes that she was making with her old Singer sewing machine.

"Wait and see!" Was her invariable answer.

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It was already a few days after Easter and still school holiday when Oskar seemed to get into a panic. He got up earlier than usual one morning and complained when he came in from the stables.

"Why you are still having breakfast?" He asked.

"No time for much eating. Today should be *etwas wichtiges* at the Post. *Yeh runter!*" He didn't explain what important something to expect, but we wandered slowly down across the bridge and down the last steep slope to the crossroads at the post office.

The letters had just arrived. The red post van and the Crosville bus were driving off in different directions as we came down under the bridge. We went into the Post, bought a bar of chocolate each and collected a couple of uninteresting looking letters. That didn't seem important enough for a special trip so we thanked the Postmistress and went outside to eat our chocolate.

Peter was so busy unwrapping the Fruit and Nut bar, that he was holding in the same hand as our letters, that he bumped into two men standing outside. One was perhaps nearly as old as Natalie but the other was tall, thin and still nearly a boy. They were helping a girl to pile their cases on the pathway. Peter was apologising, in Welsh, as I waited on the doorstep to come out.

"Do you speak English?" Asked the younger man. "We're going to the Circus Farm." "We're the Circus!" Peter answered. "Can we help carry your cases?"

The older of the two men looked somehow familiar, as if we knew him. He had jet black hair and a weather beaten face with a military moustache. He was wearing a heavy overcoat and it looked as if he had a grey suit under it.

"You'll be Jan and Peter?" He asked in a very deep voice that had a tiny trace of a scots accent.

Peter nodded.

"You must be our Uncle Barry, then!" He exclaimed.

Peter was right. I really knew it too, but he was quicker than I was. So this was Oskar's youngest son Barry, the son of Oskar's Scottish wife. We'd heard of him years ago. At least we knew that Oskar had another son, and had heard more about him and his ability as an Advance Agent one day when Oskar had been in a talkative mood.

This, then was the famous Barry who could book grounds and put up bills single handed for any circus and it seemed that he was going to do it for ours in future!

It's surprising how much you can learn in twenty minutes, even when you are walking up a steep hill at the time.

Barry told us that he had been wintering in Scotland until a few days ago, although he wasn't booked to go out with Gerda's show. She had laughed when he told her that he had chosen to go out with his father.

"You'll regret it. I can get you work down south. Why go with those people?" He had mimicked an old croaky woman.

"It's a new show, that's why!" He said in his own voice.

By the greatest chance, the two young people had turned up in Scotland the day before he left, looking for a job with Gerda. She had taken them to her practice shed, watched them perform, and thanked them for coming.

"Come back in a year or two, when you have a bit more experience. If you come over to my wagon after you tidy up, I'll pay for your train tickets home for your trouble."

Barry had watched too, and realised that these two were what Oskar needed. Without any further thought he had booked them for the season on his own responsibility!

We helped them and their heavy cases up the hill, across the bridge over the incline, past the chapel, and right into our quarry. As we walked we heard all about our new partners.

Young Bill Williams was the son of a coal miner, he said. Born in Staffordshire, he should have been a miner too, but they found that he had a bad chest as a young child.

"Much younger than you. Maybe I was three or four."

His family had to find him work outside and there had been just one chance in their village. It had been a boring job, at first, working as the general *dogsbody* at a riding school. He could ride now, of course, and really knew a lot about horses but it was poorly paid. He could never be anything better than a labourer there and he knew it.

He'd been at the riding stables for several years, and was nineteen now. What excited Barry was that he had trained his own two pet dogs to do an act. He thought the dog act was so good that he had expected Gerda to give him a chance. Gerda's loss was our gain.

The girl with Bill turned out to be his wife, Margaret. She had worked in the kitchen for the owner of the riding school. A few months ago they had married and, quite naturally, they wanted a home and perhaps even a job together. The sort of work they wanted was difficult to find, until Bill had gone to Gerda.

We were soon going to get to know these three, and they were going to be good friends to us all.

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Oskar was the person who had to turn us all from ordinary people into a circus. I think even now that he was the only one who could have done it. Because our quarry was too full of wagons, especially since Barry went off and found an old plywood trailer caravan for the Williams family, the first job had to be to find a flat field where we could build up the tent and practise. To do that, we needed a big car, or perhaps a little delivery van with which Barry could search the neighbourhood. He turned out to be a good bargain hunter because he found the ideal van for himself.

Bill and Barry went down to the railway station at Port' to fetch Bill's dogs in the travelling box that had brought them back from Gerda's farm. They went down on the bus, but instead of coming straight back they took another bus toward Criccieth because the old stationmaster had tipped them off. It was a baker's delivery van, an old

chain-drive Trojan. It looked as if it was almost on its last legs, but underneath it was the best kept and most reliable of our transport. Oskar never found out what Barry paid for it. It was his, and he wasn't telling.

"It's mine, not yours, Dad. So you don't need to know." He told Oskar, as they went for a trial trip with Peter and me in the back behind the driver

Two days later, after Barry had painted it himself using two pots of Woolworth's paint and the last good paintbrush, he drove off out on to the valley road. He went on and on, looking, speaking to farmers, and searching right down to the last village on our side of the Cob. At last he found one field, which was close to the village centre, and flat enough for our tent. He had talked to the owner and, maybe because Barry was a still a canny Scotsman, they let us have it for a book of free tickets.

With only a Reo horsebox, the Trojan van and the old Foden lorry to pull our wagons, we took two days to move ourselves down the steep roads that led down to the *tober*, the circus ground. Bill's trailer went down first before the loads, but Natalie and I were the last to leave our quarry.

I didn't know then that we were seeing our little quarry for the last time as a family.

"Goodbye, Home!" I said, aloud.

I'm not emotional, but I did have a little tear at that moment. Natalie pulled out her handkerchief, too.

"For better or worse, Jan'." She said. "Here we go. Wish us luck!"

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Barry and Bill knew how to build up the old fashioned green two pole tent, and already had the two main masts up and the canvas ready to lift before Oskar, in the cab of the old Reo horsebox, towed our living wagon on to the field. Peter came over looking excited.

"Jan'! Come and help. It's easy."

It was easy. We'd talked about building up, and now we were seeing it for the very first time. Barry and Bill were inside pulling down on the ropes and lifting the canvas higher and higher up the poles. Margaret was putting in the short side poles and we went to help her.

Except for the top canvas, nothing was really heavy, there was just such a lot of it. Lots of poles, lots of side ropes and a lot of thinner white canvas to pull in and out of the side poles to make the walls.

We hadn't ever seen a circus tent being built up, at least not to remember. As soon as it was properly up we ran around inside and out and looked at everything. Bill stopped tightening the side ropes to grin at us.

"You'll be doing it on your own soon, so have a good look."

"We know how to do it now." Peter was always confident. "But it's too heavy for us yet."

"It's not light for us." Barry stopped tidying the end of a rope by folding it up on itself and stuffed it between pole and the rope itself. He added his view. "Oskar will have to employ a couple of tentmen and a driver once I'm off doing the *Advance*, so next time will be easier."

'Next time' sounded good. We considered it.

"When do we build up next?" Peter wanted to know.

Barry laughed at him.

“We’ll have to open here and do some shows. Then do a pull down. Then we can think about building up.”

At that moment, Oskar came into the tent with two young men and introduced them to all of us.

“*Hier* is Robert and? ... Gwyn. They *graft* with *uns hier*, and if they like and we like we take them *auf Tournee*.”

Gwyn and Robert might have been brothers, with identical slicked down black hair and blue jeans, but they were opposites in many ways. Taller slim Gwyn was the older and an experienced driver, whereas his short tubby brother had just passed his driving test. They were both good workers and they were going to make a lot of difference to our daily work. Today, with their help, we had the ring fence in place and curtains across the artistes’ entrance before Natalie had cooked our lunch. She called us all in and handed loaded plates and knives and forks to the two new men.

“That’s the way we do it here. If you travel with us you’ll have a wagon to eat and sleep in, but I do the cooking.”

We spent the afternoon sorting the wooden seating. There were red painted, step like frames, with ‘V’ shaped props to hold them up. The wide, blue painted, planks would go on the four flat tops of the steps for the people to sit on. All the wooden parts had survived, but most of the rope that would hold them in place was rotten.

There’s a lot of advantage in being near a harbour, even one as run down as Port’ was in those days. While Gwyn drove off with the Trojan to get new rope and new wire staples to nail it on with, Peter and I went to see what else we could do.

Natalie and I were quite naturally in charge of the horses. Peter and Robert had put up our small horse tent, long and narrow, for the three ponies, the big ring horse and Natalie’s riding horse, and we set out the brushes and combs ready to groom them. Peter and Bill pulled in several leather trunks and started to sort out leather tackle that had only been unpacked once before in over ten years.

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It took three days before we had found everything. I don’t know who was most surprised, we children or the adults, to find that there was nothing to buy new except for rope, a lot of rope. The seating was complete, the horses’ harness was being cleaned and repaired and Gwyn, who had turned out to be very good with a screwdriver and the set of drills, was busy pulling out lots of Peter’s nails and mending the various tubs and pedestals that the dogs and ponies would use.

Oskar hadn’t forgotten us, either.

“*Komm, Kinder!*” He said every morning. “Practise!”

We hadn’t practised much in the last twelve months! It hadn’t seemed to be necessary, once it seemed that our show had been staying home after all.

Our acrobatics had always been a game, rather than in earnest, and once again Oskar had to build a new routine with us. Cartwheels from one side of the ring to the other, handsprings and flik-flaks from front to back of the ring were our starting point. Walking on our hands and making three man pyramids with his support was his next lesson.

Those were the raw materials that Oskar needed to build our first act together. A full week of practise for us, twice and sometimes three times in a day, was making us more

confident and relaxed.

I took my monkeys out every day for my practise, followed by Bill with the two dogs that still lived in his caravan. I watched him, and he watched me, and we helped each other a lot by seeing the things that might go wrong. Margaret was practising too. Bill had hung a trapeze from the ridge pole, the metal bar that supported the canvas between the poles, and she was up there four or five times a day. It must have been difficult because she had never done anything like it before, but Natalie wasn't allowed do it now and was trying to teach the only other one who was interested.

I wanted to do something else, so I took Peter and we started to look what else was hidden away in the boxes of props and the backs of wagons. We soon found a set of metal X's in the back of a nearly empty box wagon.

"That's a wire walking prop. Natalie used to do it in the show, I've seen pictures of her." I remembered.

It took us another half an hour to locate the coiled up wire. It looked interesting so we dragged them into the tent and I asked to try it. Oskar hammered in a metal stake each side of the ring and stretched the wire between them. By pushing wooden blocks under the wire, near each end, and knocking them outwards with a stake hammer we had a tight wire about a foot above the ground.

We all tried walking on the wire, even the tentmen had a go. Peter was the best because he was balancing with the long pole in both his hands, but Natalie made me and Margaret use a parasol and that was far more difficult.

All the same, Margaret and I were doing quite well at walking the wire until they put up the proper six foot high supports and we all tried up there. For all that Margaret was getting used to being high up on the trapeze, she didn't like the wire.

"It's horrible. There's nothing to hold on to!"

I knew exactly how she felt.

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We were on the circus ground for two whole weeks before Oskar called a conference. "We open next Thursday." He said. "I have the *Plakate* printed. Bill puts them out today, with Barry."

We looked at the posters. Barry had done the design and taken it down to the printer. The yellow paper had "Sinclair" in red at the top, with "Circus" bigger below it. They had kept the old name, but the black "Brothers" between them was so small that it looked almost apologetic. The blank area for the place name came next, where Oskar had used a black wax crayon to write *Penrhyndeudraeth* and the dates.

Underneath the headings were little blocks of writing, some in red ink and some in black, all in different styles of letters.

We read them aloud.

"Pony Parade." "The Educated Pony." "The Pony that won't Jump." "Cossack Riders." "The American Riding Machine."

"That's seven horses." Peter commented, although we both knew. Like the human artistes, each of our horses would have to do several different acts.

"Monkey Business." I read out. "That's me!" I was proud of that.

"The Sinclair Clown Charivari." Peter and Oskar.

"Long John, Stiltwalker."

"Oskar, White Yoga, Fire and Glass ...."

The two men collected the posters that we had been reading and rolled them together with the others. Bill picked up a heavy bucket of paste and the long handled brush, and set off with Barry into the village.

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Now we had an opening date, things really hotted up. Instead of just practising our acts we tried to put them together into a show. It sounds easy at first, just write out a program and make sure that the right people are there when they should be.

It isn't easy at all. Firstly because people have to change clothes and put on makeup between numbers. Then, because animals have to be fetched and taken back, other people have to there at the right time too. Worse still, Oskar had a peculiarity when it came to programming, one that made it even worse. He had a fear of ever having an empty circus ring. It was Oscar's fixed rule. There always had to be something happening between acts, usually a clown filling in with a simple trick, but that cost us an extra performer.

That first program took hours of thought, and experiment, and when we tried it out we had almost to start all over again because of the things we'd overlooked.

Oskar nearly went mad within a minute of starting the first run through.

He had dug out the long wooden stilts that had once belonged to Pierre and given them to Bill, who had been practising every day since before we moved. Stiltwalking had always been a speciality of our show, and that was the way Oskar wanted to open the show again. Even now, after all that practise, Bill wasn't good enough to do anything but walk around outside

"What is that for an opening?" Oskar stood on the ring fence and watched Bill standing with his outstretched hand gripping the ropes on a king pole.

"On the ground!" He ordered.

Bill walked over to the wooden step ladder that he had used to get on to the stilts, sat down and unbuckled them. Peter had never tried them, but he begged his grandfather to let him have a go.

Oskar let the two tentmen try first. They weren't too bad at all and I wondered if Oskar would put one of them in the show instead.

"Me now!" Peter insisted, and Oskar shrugged. But he watched as his grandson put on the heavy wooden stilts and stood up.

To our surprise, and I think Peter's too, he was by far the best. After a few minutes instruction from Oskar he could already dance the polka step, one two three hop!

"Bill has too much to do. Peter will learn." That was Oskar's decision, and I knew that it had made Peter's day.

Each time we did a run through of our programme, it was a little better. We tried with costumes to see what it looked like. Oskar hated it all. We repeated it in practise clothes so that Natalie and Margaret could get on with sewing.

Too soon it was the day before the opening. Oskar was gloomier than ever and kept disappearing into the horse tent where he sat on a bale of straw with his head in his hands.

"Nothing can go wrong." Said Natalie, reassuringly, going to fetch him. "We're all ready."

But of course, something did go wrong. Something we had almost forgotten. Natalie had been walking badly for a week. Sort of waddling. Anyone who understood would have expected it, but we were children and Margaret was perhaps too young to know. We were all surprised when her baby started to arrive, at two o'clock on Thursday morning. It certainly gave us something to think about when the cheerful old doctor came down in his rattly little car, took one look at Natalie, and sent her off to the hospital in an emergency ambulance. We were still worrying about her when we started the show that afternoon.

Peter opened the performance on stilts. He welcomed everyone in Welsh, announced the ponies and stood back.

To our surprise, everything went down as it should. Bill showed the dogs and ponies, I did the monkeys and then went back again with Bill to do the educated pony, the pony that counts and guesses the age of little children.

Margaret was even better on the trapeze and Peter on the wire than we had expected. Even the special clown number that Peter and I had added with one day to go, one where I hid in a wooden box and he pushed swords through it, went down well.

"The audience like us!" Bill commented to us children as we three came out of the ring with the group of dogs.

Oskar ended the show with his fire eating, I recited the Circus Farewell, oddly it doesn't sound as good in the poetic Welsh language as it does in English, and the audience slowly left the tent.

"We did it!" Peter was dancing around in jubilation when somebody came through the gap in the outside walling into the screened off *ring doors* behind the curtained artists entrance.

"Mister Sinclair? The hospital said to tell you. Your daughter and grandson are all right."

It was the village policeman, reminding us that one of us was missing. We had forgotten Natalie in our excitement! The five of us piled into the Trojan and drove off to see our Mum.

"It was good. You should have seen us."

"The *Kinder* were not bad at all."

"Oskar hasn't lost his touch!"

That last from Bill, who had been primed by Barry on the day he left. Oskar was tired out after the weeks of hard work, but he seemed to grow six inches at the words.

Natalie was more interested in showing us our new brother, but we wanted to tell her about the show. We took turns at holding Duncan, he was to be named after Oskar's oldest brother, while Peter and I told her all about today's success. After a long while, she took Duncan back and put him in his cot.

"We'll be there to see you on Saturday." She promised.

## Chapter 3

### Under New Management

By the time Peter and I were sixteen, in August 1952, we were already running the circus ourselves, and it was a pretty good show though I say it myself. Bill and Margaret were still playing an important part in the daily performances, as well as being drivers and cashier. Oskar had bought a lioness and bears, to Bill's delight, and the Sinclair name was getting to be as well known as it had been twenty years before. I had more or less taken over the office work from Natalie, who had done very little for couple of years. She had never quite recovered from Duncan's birth, somehow seeming to have given up her vitality to her baby, who was a real bundle of energy. Our little brother had been clowning with Oskar since he was three years old.

Like Natalie, Oskar too had done less and less as time went on and had even handed on his beloved fire eating act to Peter as an early sixteenth birthday present. With two of the family taking little part in the show we were quite hard pressed.

It could have been far worse, if it hadn't been for our hired acts.

Oskar found our first new performer in the spring last year, and put her under contract. We had been wintering near Cambridge every winter since leaving Wales and for his last season as boss, Oskar had recruited the young wire walker and contortionist who had been at the theatre there. Mary was brown haired and, being young and slim, she looked good in the ring. She was enthusiastic and a hard worker too, so she had stayed with us over the winter to learn the trapeze.

I recruited the next addition, as my contribution to our first season in charge. Alli ben Yussif was a short wiry little man, with a dark arabic look and a deceptively high class British accent. He appeared after the new season was well on its way, in July when the university long vacation began. A university graduate, he explained that he wanted to study the *Parlari*, the old circus language, for his masters degree.

"Do you mind if I travel with you? I can rent a trailer for myself. It won't cost you anything and I don't mind helping out. Anything you want."

Oskar and Peter both agreed with me, and Alli and his old Morris Minor car joined the circus.

Alli was a great surprise and he certainly earned his place with us that summer, once I discovered that he was a really accomplished acrobat. I was practising *voltige* in the ring, one rainy Tuesday morning, and was having trouble with turning around on the horses back. Not surprising because I had taught myself and I had never quite got the pirouette to work. Margaret was keeping Red, our young ring horse, to a steady collected canter and I was getting worse every time I tried the trick. I was about ready to forget it.

"You'll never do it that way." Alli was standing in the ring doors and grinning like a Cheshire cat. "Come down and I'll show you!"

He showed me all right, and his riding was ten times better than mine. By following his example I was doing the impossible within ten minutes. He also showed me the backward somersault, a sort of flik flak, that I needed to leave the horses back at the end of the act.

"Where did you learn to ride?" I asked, as Margaret took Red to the stable.

Alli grinned again.

“My father thought all his children should learn a healthy sport. I was lucky at school, and we always had horses.” He shrugged his shoulders. “Would you like some tips on your other spot?”

I didn’t need reminding that the ground acrobatics that Peter and I did with children from the audience was pretty poor. Our original act, as taught us years ago by Oskar, had been turned into the “*name-of-this-village arab-acrobats troupe*” and I accepted on the spot. I was glad that I did.

From taking Alli’s advice, it was only a small step to putting him into the act. It was not long before it was *his act*. We heard later, from other people at Oxford, that he had been considered for the Olympic Games but was not qualified to represent Great Britain.

At the end of the season it was hard to think of the show without Alli. We were even worried that Mary might leave, they were such good friends. Alli was supposed to return to his college several days before the show pulled in. But in the first days of November, when he was still with us and we thought we were going to lose him at any moment, he dropped his bombshell. He was going to marry Mary and wanted to stay. Oskar was as pleased as a dog with two tails.

We were pleased too, when Mary had a baby in the middle of February. Mary Junior was born early, and was the tiniest baby I had ever seen, but she was beautiful and became everyone’s pet.

Mary wasn’t the only new mother. Margaret was next, with a son who they called Paul, after her father. With a still growing Duncan, that gave us three little children who Oskar would be able to show off as the fourth generation of the Sinclair family.

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For all the success of ‘fifty two’, it wasn’t surprising to any of us that the following season was the worst any of us could remember. There were going to be unexpected and much less welcome changes at the other end of the family. We lost Natalie to a heart attack on Boxing Day that winter, the day after Alli and his family left for a six week trip to America. Oskar was so distressed that he went walkabout for nearly a month. If we hadn’t had Bill and Margaret with us, and the ever increasing stock of animals to keep us busy, we might have given up everything.

Oskar ended up in Germany, somewhere, with relatives of his mother. We had a telegram late one afternoon telling us he would arrive at Heathrow Airport next morning. Barry turned up to visit us, just in time to drive us down to collect him.

The old man was pale and thin and was walking slowly with a stick. He was no longer the man we knew.

“It’s not *richtig*.” He said to Barry as he sat desolated in the front passenger seat. “All my little children. They’ve all gone. You are my last child. Look after the young ones for me.”

Barry promised.

“Promise me.” He said, suddenly turning round to face Peter and me over the seat back and grabbing my wrist tightly with both hands.

“Promise me you two will marry, then I will know there’ll be a Sinclair Circus to carry on the name.”

We were quiet all the way home. Peter and I were brother and sister, if not in blood, at least in our upbringing. I don’t think we had ever considered marriage, but it did seem a

good idea. I felt it would make my future, our future, secure. Peter agreed that we knew each other, the good parts as well as the bad, and we got on well together. We slept on the idea and next day we told Oskar we would marry. Grandfather Oskar cheered up immediately and Peter and I started a new sort of relationship. It was thrilling, and it was fun.

As we had both been known as Sinclair all our lives, it was odd to hear the banns giving our names as Peter Evans and Janine Taigr. Nobody would know who we were! Bill joked that nobody would be able to say anything against our getting married!

At Easter, when we were married in the village church, Oskar wore his full highland dress. To the amusement of everyone Duncan had a new kilt and the two of them strutted around together like two Scottish gentlemen. We had a one week holiday in the south of France, a present from Bill and Margaret, and then went back to work.

Oskar went with us on the long trip to the Evans family lawyer in Port and got Peter's name legally changed from Evans to Sinclair. You could see his happiness was complete.

But it was getting late. We had prepared for the season and the show was booked through Suffolk and Norfolk. The tour started and Oskar appeared once in every show, coming in with his walking stick and the three youngest children at the finale. Nobody asked him to do anything else, and he was more and more tired as the season went on. My child was already showing when Oskar went into hospital for the first time in his life. He was very weak when I saw him that evening.

"Thank you Jan'." He whispered. "You are my granddaughter now and I'm relying on you."

He touched my tummy, very gently.

"That's my great grandson there." He said. "Look after him. You can call him David, after Peter's father. But don't give him that funny Welsh name. English is good enough for both of us."

He winked, for the last time. I knew that he had always called his son in law David, just the same as he had always refused to use the French names and called his own sons Jack and Peter.

I promised.

Oskar died happy, just before midnight. He was eighty eight years old.

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Peter and I inherited Sinclair Brother's Circus in Oskar's will. It was all his to give and he chose us over Barry, who was happy for us.

"Don't you fret. I have everything I want. Just keep me a corner of your winter quarters to stay when I visit."

Oskar had put Barry and Bill Williams as joint managers in charge until we were both twenty one, but it was ours. The formalities were complete and we were the circus owners in mid August when I was rushed into hospital.

Oskar was right until the very last! I gave birth to his great grandson, David Evan Sinclair, at six thirty on the morning of the twenty first of August, 1954. It was a few days after Peter and I had our eighteenth birthdays.

David was a difficult baby, crying in the night when we first came home, and again as he started growing teeth. Like Oskar before him, my Peter had a way with all the

animals, especially frightened or injured animals, and it seemed to be a simple step to be a perfect father. I could never manage quite as well, but he seemed to understand and took a great pride in the job - even in the early hours of the morning.

But there was something wrong in our happy life. Peter had been getting letters with OHMS on the envelope. Government letters.

Very early one December morning, Peter was feeding David with the bottle when I came into the living room of our wagon. Peter looked so young and worried that I took our son into my arms and asked right out if everything was going well.

I wish I hadn't.

In the 'fifties, Britain had National Service. All young men had to go to the army for two years, to learn to be soldiers in case there was another war. Peter had all the papers but he wanted to go into the navy instead. He'd had one interview and they said he would have to go into the army.

He asked again for the navy and they had said "Not a chance. Not unless you sign on for five years or more."

"I don't want to be a soldier." He had said to me. "I want to be a sailor like our family always were."

"And what about our circus?" I had asked.

"You'll manage. Bill and Barry will run it for you, and I'll be there every time I come on leave."

He went off with Bill to fetch new hay.

I cried on and off for hours, as I carried on with my daily work. I was remembering that the circus had lost three men to the navy, men who had never come home, and it couldn't be allowed to happen again. Peter promised me that night that he would try to get deferment, to get the call up put off until later, because the whole circus depended on him. He even said he'd try to get off completely if it was so important to me.

"There are ways, you know."

Yet I know exactly how his mind works. That's one problem of living so close to someone. I knew already, deep down, that the decision was already made. If he had to go he would go and he would never come back. This wasn't Peter, as I wanted him to be. It was Oskar through and through, come round to haunt me again.

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There was a sort of truce between us over the Christmas holiday and it lasted almost into the spring. Peter didn't mention the navy, and I wasn't going to.

It was just four months of silence before it ended in disaster.

The preparations for the new season were in full swing. One of Oskar's last ideas had been to order a four pole tent and last years show hadn't been good enough for the bigger audiences in the larger towns that we needed to visit. The bigger tent needed more customers, and we couldn't get enough in small places. Alli and Bill were still with us, along with their families. Barry was out booking our tour, and we were expecting a French family with seven children to make our show the biggest and best it had ever been.

David was getting big, too, and starting to crawl. I thought that Peter was waiting for the season to start and looking forward to showing off our son. I was ready to go back to working my monkeys and the horses as I had been doing for years.

I almost thought we were going to be a proper family again. So much that, when Peter took me with him to visit a musical clown he wanted to book, we stopped at a small hotel on the way home. I was happy again.

It was mid morning when we got back to the ground. We fetched David from Margaret's wagon where he had stayed the night, and went back to our own wagon. Alli was waiting for Peter at our door.

"Don't forget we're going billing today. If we're going to open at Ely on Monday, we'll have to be on our way soon." He said.

"Give me half an hour to read the mail."

"Half an hour it is."

Alli went off to his own wagon. Peter started to open the letters. The first was another OHMS envelope.

He read it, and passed it to me.

"Report to HMS ....."

I couldn't read the letter properly. There was a date, not long away. It was from the Navy and Peter had to go to their training camp. He was going for five years, maybe even more! He seemed quite happy about it.

I wasn't.

We argued for a long while. Peter said he owed it to his father and that I was a better manager than he would ever be. I said we were a married couple and we were a partnership and we shouldn't, mustn't, couldn't, split up now.

It ended in tears.

I'm sorry to say that I tried to use tears to make him change his mind. He had an odd idea of duty, just like Oskar's, so I should have understood. I didn't understand and it led me into making the biggest mistake I have ever made.

I could have told Peter that I was expecting another child. Instead I decided to pack up and leave before they came back from their trip.



## Chapter 4

### My Final Decisions

Jackie was born seven months after I had left Cambridge, some time after I moved to Norwich. If, at that age, David looked more like a little Oskar than anyone else I knew, then baby Jackie looked like the pictures of my family. He even had the Taigr blonde hair, but I hadn't any idea of my father's real names or my son's name would have been decided for us.

In the end, David and I had to name him Jacques. Somehow I still couldn't give him a name that didn't belong to the family. We had already had a Peter and a Duncan back home, my baby didn't look like a Jamie and I wasn't going to inflict the name Oskar on any child of mine!

Jacques Evans it had to be, I didn't have Oskar to swing the registration and Evans was on my passport. It didn't take long before everyone anglicised it in Oskar's fashion to Jacky.

I was working and we were living in a small village, twenty minutes by bus from Norwich. I had met Eva, my employer and an elderly Czechoslovakian exile, when our circus showed in her adopted village near Norwich the summer before I left home. Hearing where she came from, I had sat with her in our tent after the show and talked. We had talked about the country I had never seen, never even been to because I was born at Penge in Kent, and I told her about my lost family who might still be there.

"It happened a lot, back in those years." She said, shaking her head. "What was your family name?"

When I told her the little that I knew, she became excited. The Taigr family were once the landowner's in the village of her birth, where she had lived so many years ago. She even remembered that one of the sons was a circus performer.

But the greatest thing was that her nephew still had his home there.

"If you ever want to visit the village, come and see me."

I had kept Eva's address, and it was to her that David and I had gone from Cambridge. She had found us the place to live, given me my job as her housekeeper, and then paid for someone else to do it whilst I was in hospital. All I had to do was to look after her, taking care of her house and cooking two meals a day.

David started school at five. His brother was at nursery two days a week and our landlady was only too pleased to look after him when I was working at Eva's house. I worked hard.

Two years later, just before David's seventh birthday, Eva had another surprise for me. "Janine! I have heard from my nephew. He invited me to visit him, but I said I'd like to send you. He says he would be honoured if you would be his guest."

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I was lucky that I was British by marriage, in fact there was no clue of my birth in any of my papers. Otherwise I might have had problems crossing through the border into Eastern Europe. I had my own separate passport already, in the name of Evans, a legacy of our Christmas shows in France, and it still had years to run. It turned out that, as long as I was invited in a letter, it was easy to get visas for the journey to Czechoslovakia. I

left the boys with our landlady and flew off too look for my past.

Prague was a lot different to what I had expected, though it was dark when we landed and I saw very little that evening. It felt quite friendly as I rode in a rather small but quite smart taxi from the airport to my hotel. The people were helpful, the evening meal plain but tasty, and the bed comfortable.

I waited early next morning in the narrow and dark hotel foyer to be fetched.

“The Taigr family owned the land as far as you can see. I did a bit of research for you. Ferenc, your father, was the youngest son and had a reputation as the best horseman in the whole kingdom.”

Eva’s nephew was in his late twenties and was the school teacher in the small town. It had been a small country village in the nineteen thirties, dependent on the big estate, but now it was growing into a dingy, tired looking, country town. Oto and his wife were friendly and helpful as they took me around and showed me everything, even the house where my parents were born.

Only I didn’t want to know names but family, not see places but meet people, and there were no people. No Taigr family. No Taigr gravestones later than nineteen twenty. Nowhere a remote relative even by marriage, or even many times removed.

“Your parents were in the resistance. It was a difficult life for them and they were caught blowing up a train, and taken away. By the time that the Russians came to liberate us, the rest of the family were long gone. All of them had moved away before they too were caught.”

It was the sort of finish to my quest that I had never dreamt of.

I flew back home from East Berlin. I’d had an invitation to visit Oskar’s family on the way home, but his cousin was a railwayman and wasn’t really interested in us. His wife was pleasant, but big cities and blocks of flats were not my cup of tea!

All the long train journey to get there I kept thinking, backwards and forwards. I knew I had a home, I could find it easily by phoning the right people, but I couldn’t go back without admitting that I had been wrong to leave. There was no simple solution, I decided. At least the boys knew nothing of our circus past, I had taken care not to mention it, and I could justify myself by saying that the nomadic life would be disturbing after their stable childhood.

Or was I afraid, perhaps, that I would find my roots had disappeared there as well?

I left Berlin with nothing resolved and no decisions made.

Before I went back to my boys I tried one more way out. I took a train to the north Wales coast, and a bus up to the little village that we had once called home. It was a Sunday and everything was closed so it seemed that nothing had changed. The rusty tracks of the *trên fach* looked the same, except perhaps narrower than I remembered them and even more overgrown than before.

It was a long hard walk in the eternal drizzling rain, up the steep slope from the long dead railway station, past the now deserted Chapel with its broken windows and barricaded door, and then into the quarry where our wagons had stood for so long.

Everything was the same as it had always been until I reached the quarry, reassuringly the same, but at the corner I stopped. It wasn’t a quarry any more. The row of cottages were gone and the whole place was a building site.

The ground was crossed with trenches and half built walls. Two wooden huts on wheels stood against the bank where our stable had been and a cement mixer near the water

standpipe where Peter and I had filled the big brass and copper cans each day. Deep trenches were cut in squares beside the road.

The big painted board said that they were to be council houses. I walked around the deserted workings looking for traces that I, that we, had ever lived there.

I stood for a while. I had found nothing, but I knew that I had come here for some reason, not just on a whim. I had wanted things to be simple, just like they were. Fate had given me an answer, and not the one I hoped for.

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I cried all the way down to the post office, and mopped my eyes as I went into the phone box. I was more composed as I phoned Eva to tell say I'd be back the next evening. The rough stone steps up to the deserted station were still there. I climbed them, past the shell of the station buildings, and reached the rusty rails. It was only a short walk along the overgrown tracks of the *trên fach* to the gateless level crossing at the top of the line. I was soon at the site of the old railway terminus and on to the road. It was too late for the northbound train so I found a bed and breakfast in the town.

“Come in lovely, you're soaked through!” Greeted the grey haired old lady whose house it was.

She took my rucksack, made sure that I had a hot bath and gave me my first proper meal since leaving Prague. It felt funny to be speaking Welsh again after so many years but it made me feel safe inside. In return I poured out my story and felt lighter for having shared it. It was a comfortable bed and I dropped of in minutes.

As I slept I dreamed of Oskar and wished for the first time in years that he was here to tell me what to do.

Although I had slept, and slept well, I woke up almost as tired than I had been the night before. I ate a breakfast of fried bread and egg, and then walked in even heavier rain than yesterday's to catch the train out through the long tunnel and off cross country to Birmingham and back to Norfolk.

I had made up my mind. The boys would never know where they had belonged. I had them, they had me. We were healthy and I was a good mother with a job and a home. I resigned myself to being Mrs Janine Evans, single mother of two boys, just a simple housekeeper.