

After stumbling upon the family history of my mother-in-law a small idea that was already growing in my mind began to surface more clearly. Here was a woman who had seen many decades of life and recorded them. For years we'd heard many of her "stories", the invention of the ball point pen that caused such an excitement in her day, the invention of toilet paper which was a dream come true for young people like herself who dreaded having to help make it each week, the hit records of her time.

Yet, my mother-in-law was never one to sugar coat the truth in her younger years. She told my children, who were all settled around the kitchen table consuming some new cereal she'd purchased for them, of the time during WWII when she was given a luscious chocolate egg when none of the other children had gotten one that year.

How it had arrived in a beautiful blue box, and how to this day she'd often wondered where it had come from. She didn't leave out the part where she foolishly ran out the door and showed off to all the children in the neighbourhood about her good fortune, and how upon returning to her small house she'd tripped and the egg had spilled out of her hands and been dashed into a thousand pieces on the footpath.

While we sat in horror at the unfortunate demise of a chocolate egg our only question was, "But did you eat it anyway?"

Not to miss a moment to share a life lesson she simply said, "I ran home, ashamed. It served me right though, which you've probably already guessed, for being so prideful to all those children."

As my mother-in-law has aged the years have been, at times, incredibly kind to her, and at other times cruel beyond measure. They've taken her husband, but given her friends. Robbed her of health, but given her grandchildren to focus on. And now, slowly those years have come to eat away, little by little, at her mind. Stealing her memories, her sanity sometimes, and often the common threads of knowledge she once cherished.

It is difficult to watch such things unfolds. It is, without doubt, heartbreaking to watch a once strong and vibrant woman who led a woman's revolt that started in the ladies bathroom

struggle to climb out of her chair, to remember how to use the oven, the microwave, or see her wonder if she took her latest tablet.

It tugs at your heart strings as you watch her stumble to find the words she once knew so easily, to sigh as she gives way to the blank that now fills her mind. To let you choose for her the name she wanted, to find the missing item that has somehow been mislaid, to let you mother her as she once did for her own children.

And yet, there's more there than one may ever know, and as I toyed with the idea of writing a fictional retelling of what I knew of my mother-in-law's life I began to see the story transpire before me, to see her young self skipping down the sidewalk with her chocolate egg, to see the frightened youth lying in the hospital bed alone, wondering if her guinea pig lived or died. The unspoken story between herself and her mother, what could it have been? The marvels she saw transpire, could I retell them?

Like most we feel daunted by the idea of writing that which we know to have truth to it, not because it is foreign or strange to us, but because it is so true, so real, will people know? Will they guess which parts are fictional vs which are real? Will they guess which character may represent them? Will they judge the work more harshly because we strayed from the truth for the purpose of an exciting story, because we didn't have all the pieces to fill in all the gaps?

These were the curious wonders that filled my mind, the shadows lurking in the dark recesses of my brain attempting to frighten me away, and yet the story itself, or glimpses of it at least, keep unfolding before me. I see her there, one minute in her school shoes as her life is normal and calm and at rest, and the next flipped upside down with the beginning of WWII and the breakdown of her family.

I see her, momentarily, laying on the sofa, shocked as her mother comes in dressed as Father Christmas bearing gifts. I see her laying back down, sick and miserable. I wonder at what she must have been sick with, and will it matter if I make it up or not? Will anyone know or guess if I do not tell them?

My mind leaps ahead and wonders about a traveling x-ray carriage, and what a delight it

must have been to her young self and her curious friends. The excitement and glee she must have felt at being asked by someone three years older to accompany them and have her own x-ray made.

Spoken of as though it were no different than having your photo made at the local photo studio. How that moment, that choice, tipped her world upside down and robbed her of simple pleasures and joys for over two years.

And I wonder at the medical experiments, for what else could you call the things she spoke of happening to her in hospital, came about and why. Would those same Drs look at today's modern marvels and gasp, would they feel guilty for the things they did to patients then? Would they still sever nerves in an effort to cure a patient of tuberculosis? What an odd and curious thing to consider, and yet it's there, right there, all neatly typed amongst the yellowing rust covered sheets of paper that my mother-in-law so dutifully typed up for her family.

And I wonder, can I do this story justice? Can I bring her to life on page and make people marvel, as I have, at the stories that, once all sewn together, make up a lifetime? I can only hope.



October 2019, I was at my local library up on the second story, sitting at one of the enormously long tables staring out over what was once a department store. The store was currently a pile of rubble as the city had removed it to make way for an elaborate hotel, but my eyes were not focus on the construction work, the empty space, or the ocean beyond. Instead my brain was lost in time as I debated this very story idea for the upcoming Nation Novel Writing Month.

I'd made myself at home in the swirling white desk chair, having kicked my shoes off under the table, and was lost to the world around me until my feet began to itch. The new carpeting

in the library looked beautiful, but unfortunately whatever chemicals were on it were irritating my skin, and the itching brought me out of my reverie reminding me that time was limited as I waited on teens to hunt down books, collect their holds, and update the librarians on the latest books in whatever series they were currently reading.

I lifted the lid on my MacBook and began typing at a rapid rate in order to put down the thoughts that would spur the story I have come to dub: Mrs Malloy. Why Mrs Malloy? I have asked myself that question a few times over, and the only answer I have is, "It's the first named that popped into my head."

The story is a long way from finished, but I spent 19 glorious afternoons curled up on the sofa in our home library, the sun streaming through our front window as I typed like a mad woman to reach my 50,000 words that particular November. The earliest I've ever hit the desired word count!

After which, I took a more placid approach enjoying the formulating of the story, the joy of research, and seeing what was just a dream days earlier come to life. My family was entertained by the many crazy things I learned in all my research, and a few even joined in helping me hunt down locations!

The story, however, remains unfinished. The characters took over and quickly derailed my original plan, and when I failed to contain them back within the pages, I took a break to [watch a long documentary on *The Big Freeze* of 1962](#), to see if the weather people from the UK had replied to my email, tried to hunt down a small stuffed guinea pig for inspiration, and in general attempt to find a way to regain control of my own story.

Before I knew it my birthday had given way to Thanksgiving, school was over for the year, and summer holidays were upon us. Mrs Malloy's story, not my mother-in-laws real name incase you're wondering, is still unfinished and buried under many other writing projects. Someday I hope to actually finish it.

The Reluctant Author:

