ROSIE ANDREWS

On the Home Front

Like any real gardener, Reg Taylor's primary instinct towards caterpillars was to do unspeakable things to them. This instinct though, was rarely, if ever, acted upon as every time he was confronted by a herd of the beasts sprawled across his cabbages, he remembered what his Madge used to say: "I love that they can become something else. It gives me hope for the rest of us."

But he didn't have to like it.

"Pernicious little bastards," he said, plucking off yet another one and hurling it into a shrub behind the bed.

Reg loved gardening, the simplicity of it—water, sunshine, soil, time. He loved the silence, and the satisfaction of striking items off the daily, weekly and monthly jobs lists. Where, for some men, the sight of a shapely leg or a willing smile might be the high point of the week, for Reg nothing beat a freshly turned bed, ready for planting, except perhaps, a mound of onions covered in clumps of mud. And if his labours covered his hands in calluses and made his back smart, well, he didn't mind so much when he surveyed his little kingdom, a land of plenty, where the weed had been summarily exiled, order quietly established. Resistance was useless.

The allotment had been a park until 1943, when it was requisitioned by the War Office as part of the effort to rely less on the convoys. Reg, just retired, had judged it a sound, practical plan; he and a couple of local lads had attended some Council meetings, discussed the practicalities, and then volunteered to take it on. When peace came, a food surplus didn't come with it, and they had

carried on just as before.

It wasn't large, just three-and-a-half windy acres between the town and the cemetery. There was a small boating lake where no one sailed anymore. A once grand behemoth of a bandstand that currently housed his miscellany of usefully sized border stones and bricks, a sunken garden that now made a first rate cottage kitchen, and a bowling green with a club house (this still saw some use on a Sunday). If Reg was lucky, he could rope in some of the regulars to do some hoeing, picking or pruning. The men grumbled that they would rather be down the Fighting Cock but they turned a rake willingly enough, taking home a few lettuces or a squash for their pains. There was one rule: don't mention the War. Don't talk about when Freddie was coming home from Cairo, don't speculate about the end of rationing, certainly no bloody Churchill.

The caterpillars in full retreat, Reg rose from his knees with a grunt. He surveyed the neat rows and judicious spacing with pride. Then, he checked his watch; Olive would be putting the tea on soon. She complained when he was late, a habit that privately annoyed him. Her mother would have simply put a hot plate in the oven for him and greeted him with a kiss. He quashed the thought, knowing it to be unfair. He scraped, cleaned and put away his tools, changed his shoes, then walked to the little lovers' gate in the old park, retrieving his bicycle from where he had left it leaning against the wall that separated the allotments from the cemetery. He cycled home in a bit of a hurry.

He needn't have worried. Olive was still out when he arrived. There was a note on the pad that said, simply, '*Grocer's—back by 5.30*.' He reflected on the fact that his eyesight wasn't what it used to be—could be time for new glasses—then tore off the top sheet and threw it in the bin. He sat and wrote out a letter in his own scrawling hand.

15th August, 1947

Dear Will,

First off, forgive me if I repeat myself at any point in this letter—put it down to my age, eh?

The weather continues to be glorious—I'm as brown as a nut.

No sign of autumn yet.

Your sister is well. She's still clerking at the tannery. Still no gentleman callers, but hope springs eternal, as they say. Perhaps this year will be 'the year'.

I'm still taking care of Gunner for you; he had a bad belly last week but seems completely recovered. He continues to be company for me at the allotment. You'll be pleased to hear my knees are holding out—just.

I don't mind telling you—and I hope you don't feel this is a boast—I'm proud of what I've managed to do with the place, especially after the winter we had. The honours aren't mine alone, mind; it's a team effort, with Jack and Charlie coming along as gardeners in their own rights now. We've got potatoes, marrows, beets, cauliflower, peas, all as you'd expect, but fruit as well: apples, pears and currants (Mrs O'Brien from number 18 is green with envy at the latter, in particular). We're adding a fair amount to the market stalls on Saturdays. We've even been mentioned in the Gazette: 'Reg Taylor—Still Digging for Victory'—a bit over the top, maybe, but it's nice to be recognised for doing your bit. There's been some talk of turning the land back over to the Council, re-opening it as a park, but I don't think there's anything in that. It's too useful to have it yielding as well as it is.

Yours,

Dad.

Just as he finished, the front door opened and he heard, "Hello, Dad."

Olive unlaced her shoes, planting them and her satchel in the hall. She was carrying a bag of groceries. In her wake was a black cocker, which, at a sharp whistle from Reg, padded into the kitchen and settled under the table.

Olive put the bag on the worktop and started to remove tins and parcels. She said, "Tea is mashed potatoes and a bit of corned beef. We've still got some of your tomatoes."

Reg said, "Well, that's something."

Olive went into in the kitchen, and Reg took out a newspaper. He noted the transfer of power to India with a snort, then started with the cryptic crossword: *Nobody's son in the garden (5)*.

Half an hour later, he had completed his puzzle and Olive had set the table. She had removed the letter addressed to Will and put it behind the mantel clock. They sat down to eat.

"Good news at the tannery," Olive said, after a few minutes. "My contract is going to go to November, and they're giving me an extra shilling a week from next month."

Reg nodded, slowly moving the mash around his mouth, a poor imitation of chewing. God, he missed proper meat. Beef. Lamb. There were always butchers selling horse but, as he told Olive, there were lines which shouldn't be crossed. Besides, he had eaten horse in the army and had no desire to repeat the experience.

"And Dorothy. They put up her wage too," Olive added.

She lifted the lid of the teapot and swirled the sparse leaves about with the air of a fortune teller. When she realised no reply was coming, she said, "And the flat is still available. It's just about affordable if we take it together. And I can still pop in every day to do for you and the house."

Reg acknowledged this with a grunt, but muttered something about being able to do perfectly well for himself. They finished the meal with only a few more words about the state of the pipes in the bathroom, which had sprung several leaks.

Three weeks later, Reg cycled the three miles to Olive's new rooms in town, balancing a box of odds and sods on the handlebars. There was a spare teapot, a couple of long spoons, an egg pan and a butter dish. He had also dug out some spare sheets and tea towels, and a dimpled glass bottle. On impulse, coming down the stairs, he had spotted a framed line drawing of Westminster Abbey (one he particularly hated) and had put that in too—to liven the place up.

The flat was above the Dog and Duck, which made his nose twitch a little. Access was round the back, up a fire escape that reminded him of his first Hornby train set. He tied up his bike and picked up the box. It was heavier than he had thought (he hadn't imagined he would need to climb thirty stairs with it) and he heard his left knee click as he took the first step. Sighing, he went all the way to the top.

The front door didn't recommend itself to him any more than the

staircase; it was obviously original and covered in patches through which layers of curling paint could be counted.

The woman who answered his knock was tall and broad, with a face as round as a dinner plate. When she saw him she smiled, softening a face that was rendered severe by her eyebrows, which sat like two flat strokes of a black pencil. She had dark hair bobbed short around her ears. She was wearing wide-legged trousers with flat shoes. Reg, who knew he wasn't much of a modern man, was still aware that the world had moved on with the war, but he hadn't yet managed to reconcile himself to the shape of a woman's legs moving beneath a pair of men's trousers. Each time, he felt it afresh, the same discombobulation.

Then she shook his hand.

"Mr. Taylor," she said. "Welcome."

She had a loud voice, not unpleasant.

Inside, the flat was an improvement on the outside—clean, getting a fair amount of light through the nets on the first floor windows, but he was struck by how small it was. Their house on Crossley Street wasn't large, a standard two-up two-down, but this was almost one room, about large enough to swing one cat, but certainly not two. He noted a kitchenette with a small stove branching off the sitting room and two other doors. With his gardener's hat on, he started making a mental floor plan, but he was distracted by Dorothy taking the box away from him, saying, "Let me get that for you." She said it like he was old.

She said, "Olive won't be too long. She's just gone to the library."

He was tempted to say he wouldn't wait, he would come back another time, but felt it would be impolite. And he wasn't sure she would permit him to leave, had visions of her tackling him to the ground, if he was honest with himself. He sat at the fold-out kitchen table, more out of habit than anything else. He expected her to take the seat opposite him, but she didn't.

"Thanks ever so much for bringing those bits over," she said, briskly, sitting down on the sofa with a thump and kicking off her shoes. "'Specially the teapot. Not something a girl wants to be without. Do you want tea?"

Reg shook his head. "No, no, thank you."

He was struck by her use of the word 'girl'. Hardly. She was Olive's

age and Olive was thirty now, he realised with a jolt. He and Madge had started late, not through any fault of their own—it just took them time to meet. And they had courted too long, in retrospect. They would have liked a bigger family.

Like so many of his ideas these days, the thought, buried somewhere deep but undeniable for all that, that both these women ought to be married, with broods of children running rings round their thickening ankles, felt inappropriate, antebellum (Reg didn't use that word for it), on a level with sugar, butter, Empire and the assertion that the bomb would never be used. He looked at Dorothy and thought, going by the almost imperceptible smile playing at the corners of her red lips, that she knew exactly what he was thinking.

He was saved by the door knocker.

"Still only got the one set of keys," Olive said, as she hugged her father, placing her satchel, which was now open and bulging with books (she had always liked reference books, but Reg could see something by Hardy poking out of the top of the bag), on the table.

He realised that, though he had seen Dotty Tweddle many times with her parents, and though Olive had been talking about her 'best friend' since they were at school together, he had not seen the two side by side since they were teenagers. He was struck now by the contrast between them. Olive was diminutive beside Dorothy, and it wasn't that Olive was less attractive—he had always felt she was a fine-looking girl, with her mother's lovely bone structure—but she was, in many ways, less vivid than her room-mate. She had kept her own mousey brown hair, unlike Dorothy's dark cap, which had to be from some sort of bottle. She sometimes wore glasses for reading, and she never wore make-up of any sort.

He considered now how Olive had always spoken about Dorothy. Whilst it had never worried him exactly it had made him wonder whether there wasn't some sort of girlish hero-worship going on. There were tales of pranks played on unsuspecting mistresses and Herculean exploits on the hockey field. When Dorothy had been accepted at Leeds (Olive had shown less interest in further education), his daughter had pined for her friend, and had been thrilled when Dorothy had returned home to take up a secretarial post and be nearer to her mother. They had remained friends ever

since but, and now he wondered whether this was odd, he had not seen much of Dorothy since then. Olive had kept her at a certain distance, not from her, but from him, he realised now.

Olive was sitting beside Dorothy. Reg couldn't put his finger on it but he thought her face and body had changed, somehow. Then he remembered when Gunner had trod on a jagged edge of broken glass, not the moment of the injury itself—he had yelped, loudly—but when the surgeon at the sanatorium had injected him between his toes with a painkiller; his whole body had relaxed its tense stance, his shaking had subsided, and he had let out a tiny whimper of relief.

It reminded him of that.

He didn't stay much longer, having a crop of squashes that needed to be taken off the ground that week, and a long list of other tasks he needed to get underway before the cooler nights set in.

31st October, 1947

Dear Will,

I'm writing this letter sitting by the first proper fire of the year. It isn't that it's cold—I'm actually beginning to miss that bite in the air you usually feel when the leaves are turning—no, more an old man's daft superstition that it might not be the best idea to sit alone on Hallowe'en without a fire to keep the ghouls away! I recall now how much you used to enjoy dressing up—it didn't matter how many times your mother told you witches were women; you still just wanted to ride your own broom. With Olive it was always cats, wasn't it? Black ones.

Olive has a cat now, a big tom she's named Murgatroyd, of all things. He's not black, though, he's tortoiseshell. I think he just turned up outside the pub and they decided to keep him. I haven't seen him yet, having been so busy with the allotment, but I intend to watch the Memorial Service with her. I might give her a tin of sardines for him.

Thinking of you, as ever.

Dad

Reg had fallen into the habit of accompanying Charlie and Jack to the Isaac Newton most Thursday nights for a pint or two. Being a bit younger, with young families and, as it happened, simultaneously pregnant wives, they wanted to go a bit more often. They would always ask Reg but he usually declined unless it was Thursday; on Fridays the wireless was a bit loud for him, Sunday was a church day, and he was a bit long in the tooth to be propping up a bar mid-week. But on a Thursday he enjoyed nursing a pale ale, listening to talk of petrol coupons and the royal wedding.

Tonight, Jack was like a dog with a bone, trying his hardest to steer Charlie toward the minefield of United's chances in the League, and Charlie was striving to avoid getting into it.

"Do you think they'll do it this year?" Jack asked, his expression laden with the innocent sharpness of someone who wanted his opponent to falter, the better to eviscerate him.

Charlie's shrug was equivocal. "Delaney's alright. They're sound at home."

Jack pounced. "Rooke's better."

Charlie beat a retreat, saying, "Another?" Jack raised his jug in the universal signal of surrender. Then, when Reg shook his head, Charlie walked off to the bar.

"Not staying tonight, Reg?" said Jack.

"Just this one," Reg answered.

As a younger man, an evening at the Newton had ended when the bar staff threw him and his friends out. Then they would stumble down a pitch black country lane—there were none of these trams. To think now of those far-off years made his glass feel heavy in his hand. He put the thought of the lads who hadn't come home out of his mind—no point dwelling on morbid ideas.

Reg had been in the North Lancashires, the same as Will. The difference was that Will had been an eager volunteer, the first to enlist in the whole town, and Reg had waited until '16, when he had received notice that he was going to France. He hadn't expected to come back, not really, but had, sporting a slight limp, and he'd hoped then (and who wouldn't?) that his children would never see war. So much for that.

"Olive alright?" Jack asked, after a couple of minutes' companionable silence.

Reg grunted and studied his beer mat.

"Heard she moved in with that Tweddle girl. Bit queer, isn't she?"

Looking up, Reg said, "How do you mean, queer?"

"Nothing, just what I hear." Jack chugged off the rest of the liquid in his glass in anticipation of Charlie's return from the bar, but Charlie had gone to spend a penny, so there was an awkward moment, with Jack looking like he was regretting his comment and Reg reflecting on what it meant. He wasn't one to talk about family matters, though clearly others seemed to be talking.

"Nothing being said about my Olive, is there?" he asked.

Jack shook his head and changed the subject, to the coal ration this time.

The Remembrance Day Service at the Cenotaph was being broadcast on the radio, and it was something of a tradition for the Taylors to listen to the proceedings after Mass. Reg had been going to Mass alone since Olive had moved out, which he didn't mind particularly, not on its own terms, but he wished she would show her face sometimes. The arrangement today was that he would go to church first. Then, instead of cycling straight to the allotments, he would go home and Olive would come to him for a cup of tea at around 10.15 a.m. They would sit down to the service at 10.45. There was to be a lunch, roast partridge, as it was something of a special occasion. The bird hung in the pantry, ready for Olive to put in the oven.

But Olive was late, and she wasn't alone. Gunner jumped when he heard the sound of a key in the lock, and Reg heard his daughter's voice and another in the background, which he recognised as Dorothy's. He frowned at Olive's decision to bring someone home without an invitation.

As the two women came in, both flushed and wearing cycling culottes, he noticed that Olive had put on some weight—she had always been too thin—her cheeks were pink, she was wearing a salmon-coloured shirt that suited her, and there was something in her step that spoke of contentment. This, even on this day, made him pause in his instinctive reaction to Dorothy.

An apology for the lateness was made and accepted. The service hadn't yet started.

The radio was in the front room, in pride of place between the fireplace and the window. Olive placed the teapot and cups on the coffee table. Reg sat himself in the chair he still thought of as being his, despite all seats being equally available to him now, and Dorothy and Olive sat together on the sofa. The broadcast was duly switched on and the conversation between the two women—he gathered that Murgatroyd was soon to be allowed out—subsided, to be replaced by a gentle crackling as the wreaths were deposited in front of the monument. He imagined the procession of uniformed men and women, and the crowd, silent, row on row.

There was the two minute silence at 11 o'clock. The polished fingers of Dorothy's hand moved towards Olive's knee. Olive's face grew grave and she looked through the nets into the branches of the elm that stood outside the house, breathing calmly and deliberately through her nose. Then it was over, and Reg switched off the radio.

Dorothy stood and crossed to the fireplace. She had one hand in the back pocket of her trousers and studied the line of photographs in their silver-plated frames. There was one of Reg and Madge on their wedding day, with Reg in his only suit and Madge in a pretty frock (it had been blue). There was one family photograph: Will was very serious, Olive was wearing a dress. Madge looked more worn, but as pretty as the day he had married her. Dorothy picked up this one and ran her finger over Olive's unsmiling, captured face.

"I remember you talking about this being taken," she said. "You were beside yourself about that dress."

Dorothy then turned to the third photograph, of Will in his dress uniform. His strong features were stamped with youthful pride. "It must be very hard," she said, "losing him like that, so close to the end of the war."

Suddenly, the silence was a thief, ransacking the room of air. Reg felt his chest tighten, and it was Madge's voice he heard, as clear as if she was there with him: "Now, don't get yourself so worked up, Reg, no good will come of it." But it was no use listening to that: Madge was gone and he felt like he was watching from outside his body as he shoved aside the coffee table. The cups and teapot fell on the

floor and hot tea splashed against his leg. He barely felt it. He took three quick steps towards the fireplace, grabbing the girl by the top of her arm. He was conscious of several things at once: Dorothy's frozen mask of shock at the sudden eruption, Olive's anguished gasp and Gunner's whine of terror.

He hadn't known he could shout as loud as he did, nor that this anger had been buried inside him all this time. Dorothy cried out as he roared, "You damned baggage, get your hands off that! Get out of here"—now he was dragging her to the front door—"and don't come back!"

Dorothy was sobbing as he bundled her into the street. He saw Mrs O'Brien wielding her brush on the front steps over the road and gave a savage nod—he didn't care that her eyes were on stalks, or that, as soon as he closed his front door, she would be leaning over her fence to tell Mrs Graham what she had seen. None of her bloody business.

When he turned back and slammed the door he saw his face in the mirrored surface of the grandfather clock, and it was red and furious, and frightening. Olive stood in the front room, still, as unmoving as the Cenotaph itself. Reg stalked through to the kitchen with Gunner on his heels and turbulent thoughts—had he gone too far? Had he hurt the girl? Heavily, he sat down at the table.

Standing in the doorway with the colour drained from her face, Olive looked very young. Reg almost stood to comfort her as he had done when she was a child, but was uncertain of his position after this, their first adult confrontation, with no Madge to mediate a peace between them.

"Dad," she said, and her voice was low and steady. "You can't… You can't treat Dorothy like that."

It was the wrong thing to say. Reg felt vindicated as his daughter took her friend's side, and it made him stubborn. "I'll talk to her any way I damned well please, in my own house."

Olive pressed forward. "No, Dad, she didn't deserve that. She didn't know… didn't know you…" She stopped, breathed deeply. "Dorothy didn't know how you've been about Will's death. I hadn't told her."

"Your fault, then," said Reg, dogmatically. "Do you think I want someone in my house, pawing over my son's things and touching…"

He stopped, unable to articulate the other ways in which Dorothy had offended him.

Olive sounded angrier, then she said, "What do you expect me to tell her? That you write to Will, even though he's dead? That you haven't sorted through anything? It's 1947. He's been gone two years. Do you want people to think—"

"I couldn't care less what that woman thinks. I don't want her sort in my house."

"'Her sort'?" Olive's face was grim now. "Her sort being my sort?"

Reg didn't answer.

Quietly, Olive said, "I love her, Dad."

There was a moment before her father's reply when he could have pulled back, but the memory of Dorothy's hand on Olive's leg compelled him, and he said, "Then get out and don't come back. This is a decent house."

On 18th December, Reg received the news that the allotment was being turned back over to its original use. Rationing was easing, and home-grown produce, though it would always be important and he was welcome to continue his excellent contribution from his own back garden, would be less vital in the future. There had been lobbying from important quarters, with a resultant feeling that the people of the town had been deprived of their recreation ground for long enough. He, Charlie and Jack would be needed to do the destructive work of turning potato beds back into tulip banks, of taking down frames and lattices, of levelling raised beds and bagging up compost. The fruit trees would stay (Reg wondered whether that had something to do with Councilman Lassiter, who was known to be partial to a crumble). Once that work was completed, there would be some landscaping, but that could be taken up by the Council.

"So, it looks like I'll be at something of a loose end. Never mind, I can use the time to walk Gunner. Stop him getting fat, won't it? And my knees were knackered anyway."

Reg was beyond the perimeter of the allotment, through the lovers' gate, in the cemetery. He was standing beside a grey headstone that said, first, 'Margery Taylor, beloved wife and mother, 1880-1930', and then, beneath, 'William Armstrong, beloved son,

1907-1945.' There was ivy, browning now, crawling over the marble. The afternoon was crisp and cold, with a breeze and a cornflower-blue sky that hinted at an overnight frost.

In his hand he held a letter, which he now read aloud.

28th December, 1947

Dear Dad,

I was very sorry that you returned our Christmas card. But it doesn't matter too much. You should expect to receive one next year, the one after that, and so on—perhaps one day you'll send one back.

We sail for Canada next month. Dorothy has relations in Montreal who are happy to put us up in the short term, until we can find jobs. I imagine you won't quite be able to bring yourself to be happy for us, but I hope you can understand our reasons. We just feel it will be easier on everyone.

I want you to do something for me: visit Will's grave, won't you? I won't be here to look after it and last time I was there I had to pull up quite a few weeds. I know you too well to think you'll be able to stand the thought of that. And it's time. You can't grieve forever. Think what Mother would have wanted. Think of yourself.

I have a second favour to ask you, a cheeky one. We won't be able to take Murgatroyd, so I need to find a good home for him. I could take him to the cats' home but I think he would be happier with you and Gunner. Could you call round, let us know if you can take him?

With love, always,

Olive

Reg folded the letter meticulously and placed it in his pocket. He looked at his watch. There was time to call at the flat that afternoon, if he worked quickly now. To nobody in particular, he said, "Well, time to become something else." He stooped, and began to pull the ivy from the stone.