

Marion Downer

AT FOUR

She couldn't remember any men in the house for those first four years. Peter was there but he was just a baby. He'd not even been conceived in the house but at Dover, when they'd been on a long train-ride to say goodbye to Judy's father, before Daddy went to India. Judy had to look after Peter, because her father had never seen him, and she had to look after her mother because she would be all alone until the end of the war. Daddy, to Judy, was the framed picture that stood beside her mother's bed and the small sepia tinted copy that lived under Judy's pillow. There were a few men at the shops. Smiling, elderly men who gave Judy treats of pieces of cheese or shiny red apples. There was a man next door. Mr. Johnson. But he frightened Judy. Her mother told her that he had been wounded in the Great War. Judy wondered if when her Daddy came home he'd be a man with a flat face.

Judy didn't think much. Life was a strict routine. Nearly every day the same and Judy felt that it would go on forever. Her mother said that they just had to keep going until the war was over. Judy had never known anything but there being a war and black-out curtains. She didn't like her Mickey Mouse gas-mask but knew she had to jump out of bed and put it on, then run downstairs and under the shelter-table, when the sirens sounded.

She was used to the itchy feel of clothes all knitted with wool used a second and third time round. Judy knew all about rations. Her mother never cried but sometimes looked very sad. Everything was always the same and Judy knew that her mother was just waiting for the war to end but had no concept of what that could mean.

It was going to be Christmas in the morning. Judy had hung socks at the end of her bed and Peter's cot. She remembered that the year before when she woke in the morning Father Christmas had been. Sweets, fruit, new bright knitted clothes and a toy. This year she really wanted a doll. A doll with a china head and blue eyes that opened and closed. Mummy had said;

"I don't know about that."

They had written a letter which flew by magic up the chimney over the small heap of burning coals so that Father Christmas knew she wanted a doll. She hoped he had enough money to get to the shop in the High Street before anyone else.

The house was quiet as Judy woke. It was a special day with no feet chattering past under her bedroom window to the munitions factory at the end of the street. No, there wasn't a sound and the thrill of anticipated excitement and surprise crept through the small plump body sitting up in bed.

"It's Christmas."

At the end of her bed lying next to the knobbly stocking Judy found the doll. As she lifted it up she heard the click of its eyes snapping open.

"I love you Alison Christmas," Judy whispered and hugged the doll to her. It was cold though and she thought of her mother asleep in her big double bed in the room across the landing. Clutching Alison to her chest she climbed off the bed and jerked the stretched top of the grey knitted stocking to carry it with her other hand.

Judy crept across the landing. She didn't want to wake Peter. This was Christmas and she wanted to snuggle into her mother's bed — just her and Alison — to wait warm and cosy for the day to begin. It was still dark. The blackout curtains kept out the morning until her mother opened them to make the day begin. Judy trotted the familiar path through her mother's door and past the huge walnut wardrobe, round the end of the bed and quietly put her stocking on the dressing table stool. She held Alison to her with both arms now and crept up to the high double bed.

Just as Judy was about to make the climb up and between Mummy's thick woollen blankets a man sat up in the bed. In the darkness Judy saw a gaunt face with black tufted hair shocked upwards and eyes staring straight through her. Judy dropped Alison and didn't notice the sickening crack as the doll's china head hit the polished board floor. Judy screamed. She couldn't move. She just stood and screamed.

Her mother pulled the light cord and the room was flooded in pink shaded light. Sitting up, looking so pink and smiling in her best bed jacket, Judy's mother's face changed to being cross;

"Don't be silly Judy. It's your Daddy home, it's the end of the war."

She smiled and hugged the lean brown man next to her.

"Everything's going to be all right now."

Judy stopped screaming. Everything had been all right until now. Now she was frightened. Judy was scared, so scared. Frightened of the big, boney man, frightened of her mother being so different but most of all frightened because she didn't know what was going to happen. Judy had known everything but now it was going to be

different. She stared at the two heads close together above her in the big bed. She'd stopped screaming. She bent down and picked up Alison. A large ragged hole stared at her from the back of Alison's head. Judy held her own head up very high. She wasn't silly, she didn't scream. She just walked with Alison out of her mother's bedroom and back across the landing.