



HIGHLAND VILLAGE CHILDHOOD MEMORIES

Pride of place on our street, and indeed in the village of Inver, was given to the pub. It was not only a popular meeting place but the first building you encountered when coming into the village. At the other end of the row of four cottages that made up Shop Street lived two sisters named Jessa and Maggie Fraser at birth but called 'Nona' by all thereafter. In those days most families in the village had bye names, a relic of the time when all the inhabitants were either closely related or had first and second names the same as someone else.

Kindness was a password in the village and these two spinsters were no exception being particularly generous to the children living around them. Both Jessa and Maggie had a liking for chocolate covered caramels, but even during the strict WW2 rationing they managed to keep a few of their precious sweets to give to the Sunday School children.

Without fail from primary school days to my early teens I would be invited into their cottage on Sundays for my dinner, which was invariably mutton broth, boiled potatoes and swede, followed by cold custard and red jelly. I never did mind the repetition of the food, for this was the staple Sunday fare in the village, but I did mind the occasional tiny white bodied, black headed worm that floated in my soup.

Jessa was very short-sighted and would sometimes miss worm holes in the carrots as she scraped the vegetables clean. So I remember mother telling me to be polite and not to say anything about the extra protein on my plate, just to push it aside with the back of my spoon.

Sanitation was extremely primitive and the only form of toilet, apart from sites behind a whin bushes, were the bothans, pronounced bo-ans, at the bottom of most gardens. They usually contained cast-of enamel buckets set under a wooden seats and as toilet paper was unheard of in the village, pages of the weekly journal torn into squares, had to suffice.

At times if Jessa was caught a little short she would trot out to her drying green and with a cupped hand covering one eye, scan the street before spending a penny below the canopy of a huge willow tree. For devilment village boys would sometimes yell out catching Jessa unawares. It was rumoured that she was economical with her bloomers and most times did not wear any at all.



Jessa circa 1940

Despite her short-sighted handicap Jessa was well educated for her generation, being able to read and speak in both Gaelic and English. Her favourite reading piece was from the Weekly News. She would hold the paper close to her eyes to read it aloud and as I sat listening to her the tales of *Jean Macfarlane* come to life.

Like many other cottages number 5 had a low cupboard at the end of the lobby in which the pots and pans were kept, on the top of that facility a shelf held two pails of water drawn from the Furan well. The cupboard was far from mouse proof and at times one could see the tooth and claw marks of the rodents clearly etched on the solidified dripping. Jessa however could not see the indentations and so would quite happily use the pan to fry black pudding and eggs for her breakfast.

At that time the village boasted of no less than three shops, Mrs Mack's sold an assortment of goods from smoked fish to curtain material, and when one entered the shop a bell rang through to the attached house alerting the proprietor that a customer was waiting. Further along the street Hughie's establishment catered for some of the farming community as well as many villagers supplying bread, baking, biscuits and other goodies.

The remaining shop was known as 'Jimsie's' whose second name was Ross and he was a general merchant Selling pots and pans, footwear, groceries, nails and salt fish among possibly hundreds of other items. Jimsie, when the mood took him would stop serving his customers and gathering up his fiddle render a tune or two to the fretting listeners.

At the end of Hill Street (second street in) lived a particularly gentle soul and her husband Jimmy. Bella Mackay was born with a leg deformity but that did not stop her from doing all the household chores. Bella and Jimmy had an only son named Hamish and when the second world war was declared Hamish was called up with the rest of the Territorial Army from the village, mostly Seaforth Highlanders. Sadly before the Dunkirk evacuation Bella and her husband got the dreaded telegram telling them of Hamish's death.

Shortly after the news Bella found a wounded pigeon on her doorstep, with tender care and lots of loving Bella nursed the bird back to health. When released the bird refused to fly away and bye and bye it found a mate, they nested in a converted orange crate nailed to the Bothan wall. Soon they were incubating two eggs and later there were lots more doos about the place, much to Bell's delight.

Just across the bay from the village on the Morrich Mhor, the Air Ministry established a bombing and firing range. At times Spitfires would over fly the village at almost zero before strafing targets on the Mhor with cannon fire and rounds of 303. On such occasions Bella's pigeons would fly up in alarm and one or two got chopped up in the propellers as the planes passed over head.

During school holidays I often spent many happy hours in the upper reaches of Jessa's willow tree chasing gorillas through the branches of my imagination. One day however a Spitfire flew so low over the willow tree that its propeller stripped some of the leaves from the tree canopy. Thereafter mother would not allow me climb the tree in case I too got chopped.

The willow tree stood for many years after Jessa's demise and the quality of the bulbs that flowered in its shadow, was, I feel a tribute to her 'watering the lilies' all those years before.

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