

From the memoirs of Jean Cooke

AN IMPROBABLE JOURNEY.

Derek and I were living in Cambridge, England while he was in his final year at Clare College doing premed.

I was about 5 months pregnant and we had to move into a different flat (apartment) because our landlady would not allow children where we were. We found a great place; the upstairs of a two-story house with two rooms, a large kitchen and our very own bathroom. There was no central running hot water but over the kitchen sink was a small 'Ascot' (Geiser) and a very large one above the tub in the bathroom. These were gas water heaters mounted on the wall. When you turned the tap on, the pilot light would start the burner and 'Voila', instant hot water on tap. It was also a pay-as-you-go system. When you ran out of gas in the stove the water heaters stopped working. So, you just put another shilling in the appropriate meter. (Maybe we should go back to this system. You knew exactly how much you were using as well as the cost).

Our new flat was unfurnished so we had fun going to the many auction houses and second-hand shops around town to furnish it with the essentials. But, many of our things were still in Wolverhampton at Derek's parents. We wanted to collect them but trains were expensive and in those days none of them went cross-country. You had to go all the way to London and then take another train back north.

We asked a good friend at Clare, John Glennie, if we could borrow his car, a lovely green Sunbeam Talbot touring convertible. *"Delighted, old chap. By all means. Please do use it, but you may want to invest in some goggles. Sadly, it doesn't have a windscreen (windshield) and I can't afford to get it fixed just yet. By the way, the passenger door only works by opening it from the outside."*

"Splendid, thanks awfully," says Derek. I loved the way they spoke.

The missing windscreen and the faulty car door were not a problem for us. It was transportation. The weekend of our trip was quite chilly and because we knew the car didn't have a heater, we dressed accordingly. Three sweaters under our coats, scarves around our necks, hats, gloves and of course goggles. Everyone stared at us as we drove by but we would put our arm out the empty space where the windscreen should have been and wave back regally. We weren't even out of Cambridge when the wind whipped through the front window lifting the convertible roof to a 90-degree angle. We stopped and refastened it securely. We realized we could not drive too fast or it would fly up again.

Everything was going smoothly and we were enjoying the fresh air. We were making good time. All of a sudden there was a loud clank followed by some weird noises and very irregular thumping under the bonnet (hood). We slowed down but it didn't stop. After investigating, Derek found one of the three blades had broken off the fan. At a slow crawl we finally spotted a garage. As you might have suspected, the garage didn't have another fan. After much consultation, we decided to take the fan right off and continue our trip. This meant we had to drive fast enough to keep the motor cool but slow enough that the roof wouldn't fly off.



John Glennie under the hood of his wonderful Talbot with our friends Braec McLeod and Duncan Brock. This picture taken when they were on their way to our wedding.

We were still doing fairly well time wise. We eventually got onto the dual carriageway (4 lane highway) around Coventry that would take us to Wolverhampton. Nothing else could possibly go wrong. But our luck ran out as the fog rolled in! As the visibility got worse, we had to slow down. As we slowed down the radiator started to steam. We knew we had to stop and find some water before the rad blew up or the engine seized.

Derek pulled over to the verge (side of the road) and got out to check the radiator. I just sat in the front passenger seat waiting for Derek to give me the verdict. He folded the bonnet over (it was hinged down the middle, not attached by the windscreen) and undid the radiator cap. Out spewed steaming water, through the windowless windscreen onto my lap. The passenger door wouldn't work. I was trapped. Fortunately, my multiple layers of clothing, scarf and goggles saved me from getting scalded.

We weren't too sure exactly where we were. Then we heard voices through the fog. Oh, thank goodness. We asked a passerby where we could get some water. "There is a pub just 20 yards over there." said the gent. The blanket of fog hid the pub completely. We crawled up the embankment and stumbled our way into this wonderful warm oasis. We gratefully had a hot drink and some food in front of a fireplace, taking our time, hoping the fog would clear a little. Nightfall was steadily approaching.

The pub owner gave us a watering can of water and Derek filled the radiator. But luck was not with us. The fog was just as bad.

We finally reached Wolverhampton but the fog was thicker than ever. Derek could hardly see the way. But he knew the streets fairly well so he decided to get out, walk and look for landmarks. The plan was he would walk in front of the car and lead the way while I drove. Great idea! I had never driven in the U.K. and not only was I on the wrong side of the road, but the stick shift was on my left and not my right side. I quickly figured it all out, got the car in gear and started after him. I could hardly see him, so I drove a little faster to keep him in sight. Then I heard him yelling but I couldn't understand what he was trying to say. I still couldn't see him well so I drove a little faster. He suddenly appeared at the side window and yelled, "Bloody hell! Are you trying to kill me?"

I had almost run him over. The fog had been so thick I could barely see the front of the bonnet let alone him.

We eventually found a common speed and arrived at his home very, very late. I couldn't believe it when we looked at each other in the front hall. We were completely black from the **SMOG!** Big white circles surrounded our eyes where the goggles had been. The smog had penetrated through our coats, and my white sweaters were a dirty yellow. Even our skin under the sweaters had a tinged look. We were tense, strained, tired but very relieved. We looked at each other again and then began to laugh.

Our trip back to Cambridge was remarkably uneventful and if not for the company of my husband, rather boring!