



Vina
BAWDEN

IN MY OWN TIME

Almost an Autobiography

In My Own Time



ALMOST AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Nina Bawden

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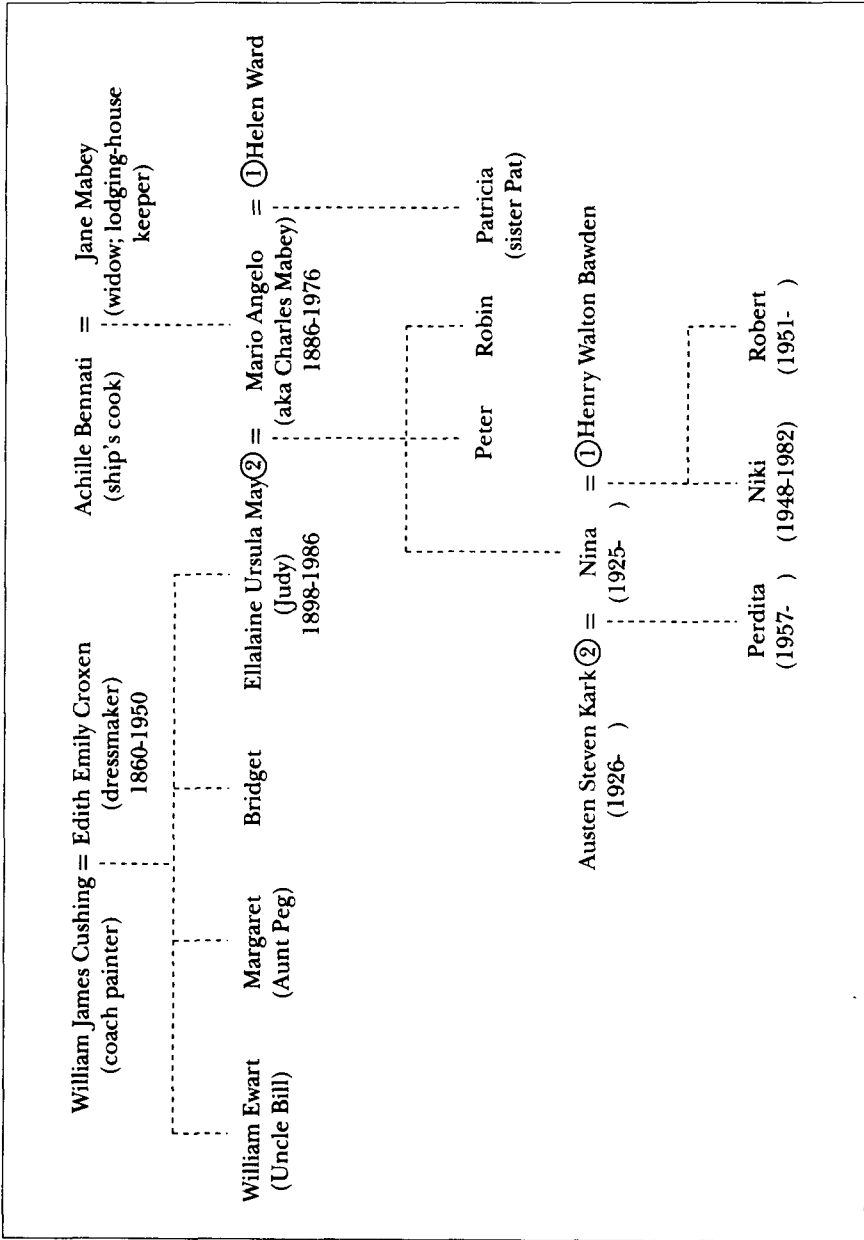
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Printed in Great Britain
Type is Baskerville.

*To all my family and friends –
especially, perhaps, for Jean*

Family Tree



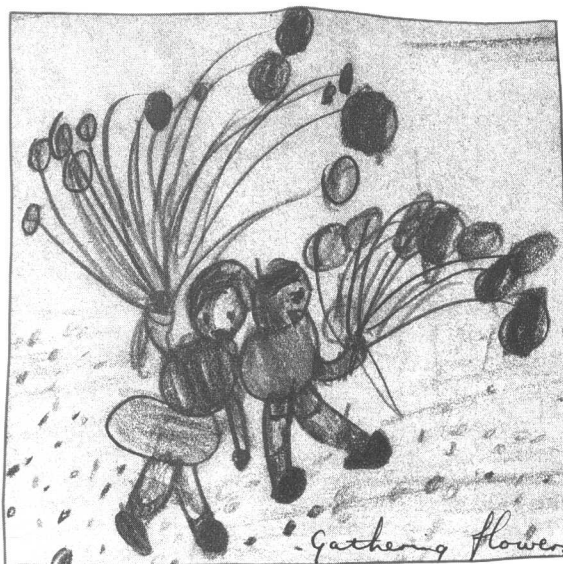
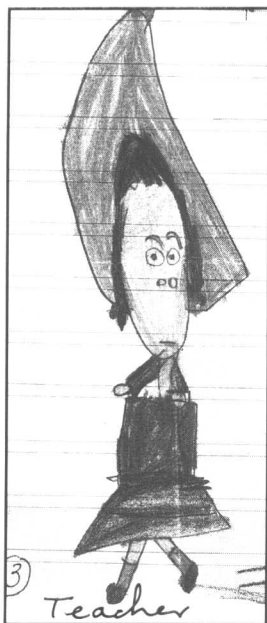
Right: Edith Emily Cushing, my grandmother

*Below: Aunt Bridget, Uncle Bill, Aunt Peg and
Judy, my mother*

*Bottom left: Ellaline Ursula May, my mother, known
as Judy, and 'Poll' in The Peppermint Pig*

*Bottom right: Charles Mabey, my father, born
Mario Angelo Bennati*





*Opposite page:
some of my drawings,
age 4, as exhibited by the
Royal Drawing Society*

*Right: in 1936 wearing
a party frock made by my
grandmother*



*Left: rolling at the
farm, 1942*

*Below: my year at
Somerville – back row,
sixth from the right, with
Margaret Thatcher (née
Roberts) to the right*





*Left: a studio portrait,
1953, the year
Who Calls The Tune
was published*

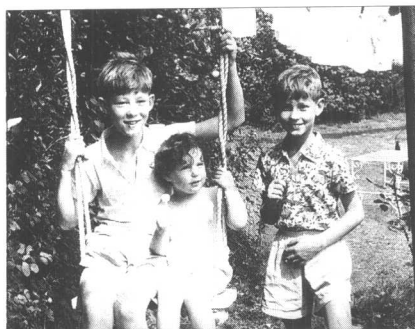
*Below: 1976, at my
desk in the house in
Weybridge*

*Bottom: on the set of
Carrie's War, with
Matthew Guinness and
Rosalie Crutchley, 1976*





Niki



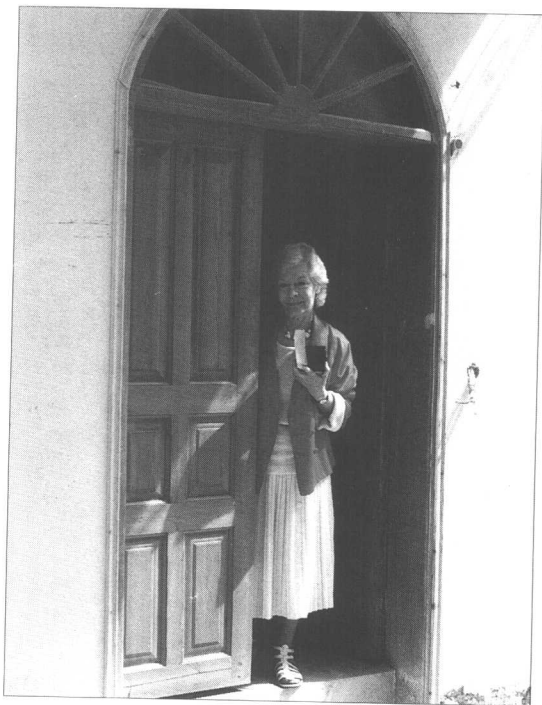
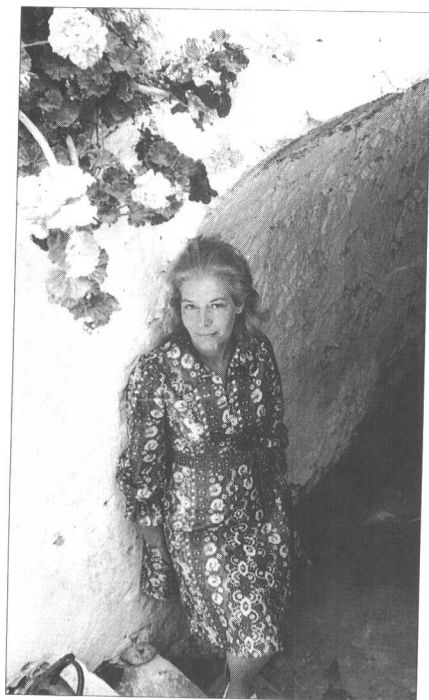
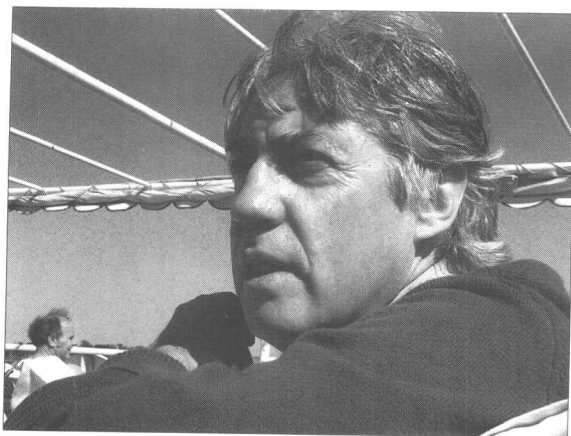
Top left: Niki, Robert and Perdita, 1959

Top right: my mother, Niki, Robert, me and the dogs, early 1960s

Above: Robert, Terry, Cathy, Perdita, Sue (Robert's wife) holding Sam, Niki with Seth, our two oldest grandsons

Right: with my dog





*Top: Austen on
the Nile*

*Above left: in Turkey, the
selling for
George Beneath a
Paper Moon, 1972*

*Above right: in the
doorway of our Greek
house*

Right: at the taverna





With Austen, forty years on

CHAPTER ONE

Chinese Whispers

My mother was once long-jump champion of Norfolk. I have no evidence of this but I have always believed it to be true, and it would not have been, for her, an unlikely achievement: she was long-legged and athletic, still fit enough in her seventies to turn a neat cartwheel. Perhaps the fact, the truth, is recorded somewhere. If not, there is no one left alive to ask. I have to rely on what I remember.

All our stories begin before we are born. Not just the blue eyes or flat feet we inherit, but the stories we hear from uncles and aunts, from grandmothers and grandfathers. Even if oral history is no more reliable than the party game of Chinese whispers, everyone bringing to it their own subjective lumber of myths, half-truths, fancies and deceits, it is still these family stories that tell us who we are and help to shape our lives.

My maternal grandmother's name was Edith Emily. Born in Norfolk in 1860, she married William James Cushing, a carpenter and coach painter, and had four children: Billy, Peggy, Bridget, and Ellaline Ursula May, who was to be my mother. My grandfather, a keen theatre-goer, had named his youngest daughter after his favourite comedienne, Ellaline Terriss, or, at least, he had registered her birth in a variant of that name, but my grandmother preferred the name Judy, so Judy my mother became, and remained.

My grandmother was a dressmaker by trade. I can remember

sitting on her lap and feeling the tips of her fingers which were rough with pin pricks. But what drew me to her, as a child, was a feeling of kinship. I guessed that, like me, she was more interested in other people's lives than in her own. And as a result, although she had lived all her life in small market towns in East Anglia, she had never been bored. She had a brother-in-law, Harry, who had travelled the world and was the dullerest man you could meet. It was as if he had never been anywhere, my grandmother said. Whereas she, Edith Emily, was surrounded by drama. Her friends, her neighbours, the women who came to be fitted for a dress in the front room of her cottage – in the private theatre of her imagination they all became creatures of infinite richness and complexity, characters in a never-ending story I seemed to spend most of my early years listening to.

My grandfather died when I was eight. My mother refused to take me to his funeral, which was a grief to me, chiefly because I fancied playing a touching part in the ceremony, laying a posy on his grave, and seeing people shake their heads and whisper sadly to each other as they observed tears shining in my eyes. My mother said, reproachfully, 'You wouldn't want to see poor Granny crying, would you?' I suppose I denied it, but it was precisely what I did want to see; I was hungry for some real-life drama that could be seen and heard and stored away for future use.

My grandmother came to live with us for a while and later, when she moved into a small house in Romford, a bus ride away, I sometimes stayed with her, to keep her company. I shared her billowing feather bed. We ate at odd times. We went to the cinema, often watching the programme round twice; the main film, the 'B' feature, the news, and the main film again. We were usually there when 'God Save The King' was played at the end of the evening, and my grandmother always insisted we stay in our seats while the rest of the audience rose obediently. 'We don't stand for that family,' was all she would say in explanation, although one of my aunts later suggested that it might have something to do with an incident on a road near Sandringham when a minor royal had driven past my grandfather and splashed mud on his only suit. Other evenings we sat by the fire, sipping home-made blackcurrant wine which my grandmother affected to believe

was non-alcoholic, while she told me stories about her girlhood and womanhood and the people she had known.

Her father had been a postman, her mother the local busybody – the wise woman, the midwife. When my grandmother was young, her mother had nursed the village through an outbreak of plague. (There were still outbreaks of plague in East Anglia in the 1870s.) My grandmother could remember her mother coming home, taking off her clothes in the outhouse and bathing in the heated copper before she came indoors. The doctor, who was frightened of infection, had leaned on her heavily, refusing, on one occasion, to attend a woman in labour because there was plague in the house next door. The birth was a difficult one, but by the time the doctor came, at last and reluctantly, my great-grandmother had delivered the baby and handed it, screaming, to its mother. When the doctor arrived and called from the bottom of the stairs, she stood at the top, with the afterbirth in a bucket. She said, 'I suppose you've come for your half-crown! Well, you can have this instead.' And she emptied the bucket over his head.

Edith Emily was proud to tell this story about her mother. She was anarchic and undifferentiated herself; entirely 'respectable' in her manners and behaviour, but not in her opinions. She was a small woman, with a tiny waist and delicate hands, but she was physically strong and apparently fearless.

One Harvest Fair, when she was an apprentice dressmaker, a suitor came after her with a shotgun. Of all the young men who hung around the draper's entrance to escort her home after work, or lingered in the church porch at the end of the service on Sunday, Saul was the one she had taken least account of. He was the gamekeeper's son, nineteen years old with a pasty face and long, narrow jaw, and he hardly ever spoke. He had left bunches of flowers on the low wall in front of her family's cottage, and once a basket of plover's eggs. Edith Emily took the eggs indoors to her mother but she left the flowers to wither.

'Fetch them indoors at least,' her mother said. 'He may be too quiet for you, but that's no reason to shame him.'

Edith Emily said, reasonably, 'If I don't want him, it's best that he

knows it. And it's not just that he's quiet. There's something about him gives me the shivers.'

She was at the coconut shy with two little brothers when Saul appeared with the gun. She had her back to him. She had just won a coconut. The first thing she knew was the silence. Or the partial silence. One minute, the Fair was all busy bustle and laughter; the next, the only continuing sound was the tinny music of the merry-go-round floating thinly on the blue, evening air. Even that slowed and stopped as she turned, her coconut prize in her hands, and looked down the barrel of the gun.

No one was near. A shocked circle of townsfolk stood still and watching. In the yellow light from the naphtha flares, Saul's face was sickly pale. The gun trembled as his hands shook but it was steady enough for his dangerous purpose. He spoke into the awful, stunned silence. He said that if she wouldn't marry him, he'd kill her, then her brothers, and himself after. Behind him, the blacksmith took a step forward. And stopped. Saul said, 'And anyone who moves, I'll make a hole in him, too. I'll just ask the once more. Will you marry me, Edith Emily?'

'Say you'll marry him, Emily,' her mother hissed from the sidelines. No one else made a sound.

Emily looked at Saul carefully. Then she said, loud and clear, 'I wouldn't have you at any price, not if you were worth a thousand pounds a year. So you'd better put that gun back before your father misses it, or you'll be in trouble. Better still, give it to me.'

She was still holding her coconut. She gave it to her little brother beside her and held out her hand for the gun. And Saul gave it to her.

What happened to Saul, no one seemed to know. Perhaps he was marched off by the blacksmith and taken home to his father the gamekeeper, who kept a more watchful eye on his guns in the future. The story, as told by my mother (it is not one, as it happens, that my grandmother told me) said nothing about what happened after except in one romantic particular. A witness of this event, of Edith Emily's successful mixture of fearlessness, bravado and judgement of character, was a young coach painter, working in London, who had