

Where the Past
Still Breathes

By Shelley Ann Miles

Published by

The Endless Bookcase

Suite 14, STANTA Business Centre, 3 Soothouse Spring,
St Albans, Hertfordshire, AL3 6PF.

Copyright © Shelley Ann Miles 2025

All rights reserved.

Paperback Edition

Also available in multiple ebook formats.

Printed ISBN: 978-1-918379-00-6

eBook ISBN: 978-1-917061-99-5

Available from

www.theendlessbookcase.com

This book is dedicated to my great-grandparents,
my grandparents, my parents, my sister, my children,
my husband, my grandchildren and
my whole family and friends.

Without them this book could not exist.

About the Author

Shelley Ann Miles took early retirement in 2021 and moved from London to Southend in Essex. It was then that she started writing this book.

Shelley had worked in the care profession for over 25 years and loved working with people. She would say her greatest strength is her sense of humour, which she needed in the profession she worked in.

On retirement Shelley first wrote a children's book, which was previously published, so this is not her first work, but it is her first fiction book aimed at an adult audience.

Shelley has moved around the country for her work and has enjoyed meeting all types of people. She loves to travel.

She has two children and four grandchildren whom she loves spending time with. She is also a member of the WI and attends lots of clubs, including a book club, which she really enjoys, as she loves a good book.

Shelley hopes that you enjoy her book and will maybe discuss it at your book club one day.

Chapter 1

The Beginning 1956

Rebecca, oh Rebecca, born in Essex in 1956 to a working-class family whose parents, Elizabeth and John, had moved from London as many families had after the end of the Second World War, to a council house on a new estate. They shared the house with Elizabeth's parents and their first child, Susanne. Then along came Rebecca in 1956, who was born in hospital in Romford, making her a true Essex girl. Rebecca had an unexceptional life to most who knew her, but they never knew the true Rebecca and what happened during her lifetime.

Rebecca's father, John, was a hardworking man who, at that time, was working for a company that made one of the first record players produced after the gramophone. He travelled every day into North London, where he had originally come from. Elizabeth, Rebecca's mother, was very ambitious and wanted more for her family than a shared council house, so John worked hard so that one day they could achieve this. The couple's first child, Susanne, was born in 1951, and when Rebecca arrived in 1956, John knew that Elizabeth, whom he loved dearly, must be kept happy.

John was good at his job, and very soon he was promoted to Shop Floor Manager at the company and was highly respected by his Jewish bosses, who treated him like a family member. They recognised his potential and encouraged him to do well. John also had numerous other jobs that he worked on weekends and evenings to give

Elizabeth and his girls what they wanted. Life was good, and expectations were not too high, especially after going through the Second World War, where they underwent hardship. Elizabeth and John had been children during the war and evacuated to different parts of the country. John went off to South Wales to a little village called Bishopston, to a childless couple and their spinster sister. He was chosen with another small boy when they arrived at the station in Swansea, frightened and not knowing what was happening. John's sister, who had travelled with him, had been taken by a farmer also to Bishopston, not far from Swansea. John and his young friend Jack had a lovely life in Wales in a beautiful village with lots of fresh food and the freedom of the countryside to run and play.

The cottage where they stayed was next to many green fields and the air was clean. John never wanted to go back, coming from London from a poor family where his mother, Violet, went out and did three cleaning jobs in one day and his father, who worked when he could, was in India during the war. John thought he was in paradise in Wales, and the people he lived with were so kind and loving. Unfortunately, his sister did not have such a good time as she was made to work hard from morning to night on the farm and was very unhappy. John and his friend Jack were able to meet up with Minnie, John's sister, on some occasions, and one day, Minnie was so unhappy they all decided to run away and go back to London, even though the boys didn't really want to. They arranged to do this one afternoon for Minnie's sake, and the whole village went out looking for them. They didn't get very far, and they were all found. John and Jack promised the old couple that they would never do this again and were very sorry for upsetting them, but poor Minnie was still unhappy and was made to work even harder after she had run away. John felt very guilty that he was so happy and Minnie was sad. Eventually,

John and Minnie's mother, Violet, came to visit and decided to take them home back to London, where they had to live through the blitz and the bombings. John and the old couple were heartbroken; they had become very close, and he was also sad to leave his friend Jack. Minnie, however, was glad to go home. John always had the memory of being at the station in London with his little case and his name label on and being transferred to Wales, and then waiting at the station in Wales to be chosen. This must have been so frightening for all the children who went through this during the Second World War; John was one of the lucky ones and took his family back to visit the lovely kind couple in Wales for holidays nearly every year while the girls were young, which they loved, as it was such a picturesque place with stunning beaches.

Elizabeth had gone with her mother, Nancy, and brother, Jack, to Devon during the blitz and stayed with a family in Totnes. Joe would come and visit them during his leave from the army. Elizabeth loved her father, Joe, whose parents had come from Poland just after the First World War to get away from the Pogroms. There was fighting between Poland and Ukraine within both countries. They had settled in London, but Elizabeth's Polish grandparents never spoke English, and Elizabeth always had the memory of them speaking Polish. Ironically, they were killed in London during the blitz of World War Two. Elizabeth loved spending time with her father, especially before the war when he would take her to Petticoat Lane and buy her a comic and a glass of sarsaparilla. Joe loved people and would often bring a vagrant back home with him and sit him down at the table in their home and make sure he had a good meal. As a child, Elizabeth caught diphtheria while living in Hoxton, London. In those days, if you caught diphtheria, you had to go away from home for some months to a sanatorium. Elizabeth was made to go, much

to the distress of the whole family, only being allowed one visit from her mother in all those months. During that time, Elizabeth had her long hair cut very short, and when her mother was finally allowed to visit her, she bought her a doll, and when Elizabeth's mother left, the nurse snatched the doll away from her and never gave it back. Elizabeth was so happy when her mother came along and finally took her home. Joe had been called up and sent to France to fight in the Second World War, and the family missed him.

Life was hard. John's mother went out to work for many hours, leaving him and Minnie alone quite a lot. One day, after coming home from school, the air-raid warning went off. John, not having time to run to the shelter, ran to his bedroom when the sound of the doodlebug came along. John had a Bullmastiff dog at the time that went everywhere with him. The dog pushed John to the ground and laid on top of him to protect him. The doodlebug dropped the bomb, which went off right over the top of the house. Then it went quiet. When John pushed his dog off, the dog had pieces of debris in his back, which would have certainly hit John. The dog was fine after someone attended to him, and they remained very close after the dog saved John's life.

John and Elizabeth were only teenagers when the war finished. They met at a fair when they were both 14. They married when they were both just 18 in 1949; they were still on rations then, and family helped by giving their ration coupons to Elizabeth's family to buy food for the wedding breakfast. Forty guests attended the wedding; this included going back to Nancy and Joe's flat, where Nancy cooked everyone a roast beef dinner. In the evening, a piano was borrowed and wheeled around on a cart to the flat for a good old singalong and knees-up. John then had to serve two years of national service, which he did in the catering corps, and luckily was stationed in London. Elizabeth was

working as a seamstress. During that time, Elizabeth suffered a miscarriage, and John went AWOL when he heard and came straight home to be with her. They had a very tearful reunion, and then the army police arrived to take John back; he spent two weeks on “Jankers” peeling potatoes. When he finished his two years of national service, he did anything to earn a living; this included a market stall in Chapel Street market where he sold anything. He also had an ice-cream cycle which he drove around North London selling ice creams. One day, unfortunately, while turning a corner, he tipped the whole lot over in the road, with ice cream going everywhere and a round of applause from all the passers-by. He applied for a job at the Dansette record player factory and got the job. Luckily, John managed to get an old battered car which he was able to use for transport to and from work to where they now lived in Essex with his in-laws, wife, Susanne, and the new baby.

Time passed, and Elizabeth enjoyed the days spent with her mother chatting and cooking for the family in their council home. But one evening, when Rebecca was now four, Elizabeth said to John while lying in bed, “Let’s try and buy our own home; it would be so lovely for the girls.” John went to work the next day with this on his mind, and at his lunch break, he mentioned it to one of the family who owned the company.

John was surprised when Solly, the boss, said, “We will lend you the deposit, you deserve the start.”

John couldn’t wait to go home that evening. Elizabeth would be so excited, a home of their own. That would be wonderful. John opened the door that evening to the usual scene of the girls playing and the two women discussing the day and cooking a meal for the whole family to enjoy. John waited until Joe came home, and they were all sitting down for tea, even though he was bursting with the news.

When they had all finished, John said, “I have some good news.” The family looked at him with excitement. “Solly is lending us the deposit for our own home.” Elizabeth was out of her chair like a rocket, with her arms around him; they hugged and hugged, the girls, not wanting to be left out, joined in. Although John’s in-laws would be sad for their daughter, son-in-law, and granddaughters to move out, they were very happy for them, and they would always be close.

Chapter 2

A Home Of Their Own 1960

After a search for a couple of months, a new home was found. It was a bungalow in an upmarket area in Essex. It was a little more than what they had wanted to pay, but with the loan of the deposit and John's extra jobs, they would be able to afford it. Elizabeth was also willing to do some homework to supplement the money whilst she cared for the girls. John was able to bring some work home for Elizabeth to do, and even the girls tried to help.

The bungalow was fantastic, and the young mum soon made friends chatting to all the other mothers at the local school where Susanne went. Elizabeth thought she was quite a girl of her time when she started to read *Lady Chatterley's Lover* by D. H. Lawrence; the publishers were even taken to court over this book because it was said to be so racy in those days. It was quite a thing in the early '60s, and she was relishing her new lifestyle as a young mum with their own home. This was such a good era, with so much community spirit but also a time of great change, including fashion, which Elizabeth loved to join in with, following all the latest trends. Nancy often came to visit as it was just a short bus ride away; they would walk to the park with Rebecca and then pick Susanne up from school at the end of the day, then Nancy would get her bus home.

Susanne went to the local school, which Elizabeth knew to be a good school; Rebecca stayed at home with her mother as children didn't usually go to play school in those days. Rebecca was such a lovely child, and Elizabeth

received so many compliments about how she had raised her. Elizabeth was a great and caring mother and loved her children dearly.

One day after school, Susanne had a friend home to play and have tea. Whilst Elizabeth was cooking the tea, the little girl told her that the nurse who had lived in the house before them had put her head in that oven and killed herself, this was the same oven Elizabeth was using. Elizabeth was horrified but did not push the child for any more information as she didn't want to upset her.

When John returned from work that evening, Elizabeth was not happy, telling John the story of the nurse, saying, "John, we can't live here now, I couldn't bear it knowing someone had killed themselves in this house. I can't bring our children up here."

John went into work the next day feeling very low; he told Solly the story. Solly said, "I understand how she feels John, she's a young woman and wants a happy home to bring young children up in, not a home where there has been such sadness."

"I suppose you're right," said John, "but at the moment we are not in a position to move." It was a shame as the bungalow was lovely, with such a wonderful garden and a rope swing on a large oak tree, which the girls loved. During this time, Rebecca was called to go into hospital for a small operation on a hernia caused by the cord being cut too short at birth. This was something that John and Elizabeth were expecting to hear but dreaded the day when their little Rebecca would have to go and have this procedure.

This was a very distressing time for Elizabeth and for Rebecca, who had never been apart from her before. In the '60s, parents were not invited to stay with their children in hospital, and Rebecca was taken away from her mother in the ward, and Elizabeth was told to come back at visiting

time. Rebecca didn't know what was going on and was distraught. This was such a barbaric way to deal with children, and thank goodness things have changed over the years. Rebecca always remembers the feeling of being separated from her parents, but returning home from hospital to a beautiful present, which was a fully equipped toy kitchen that she played with for many years. Although John worked hard, he always tried to give his family the best.

The weeks passed, but Elizabeth was unhappy, and John could feel that. Elizabeth's parents often came over on Saturdays and spent the day with them and the children, and stayed for tea, which was always sausage, mash, and onions. Another thing that always happened on Saturdays was the checking of the football pools coupon, which John and his father-in-law did religiously.

John and Joe sat by the TV, which John was proud to own as not everyone had TVs in those days, and as the results came in, they checked them off. "Lizabeth, Lizabeth," John shouted, "I think we've won!"

Lizabeth stopped frying the sausages and said, "Don't mess about."

"No, I'm not! We have," said John.

"Oh, my goodness, how much?" said Lizabeth, as John affectionately called her.

"I don't know, but look at what I've crossed off; we will have to wait until we are informed." They all sat down to tea, very excited, and wondered how much they had won.

A week or so later, after the coupon was handed to the representative from the pools company, they were told they had won £300, which was exactly what they had borrowed from Solly. They were soon making plans to move from that lovely bungalow to a new three-bedroom house a little nearer to Elizabeth's mum and dad, and the loan was paid back to Solly.

Chapter 3

Another New Home 1961

The new house was a happy home; the girls had their own bedrooms, and everyone settled in well. Susanne and Rebecca started local schools, as Rebecca was now five. Elizabeth found friends in the local area, and they had a nice little group going on. The family would continue to go to Wales for their holidays, and once or twice went to Devon when Nancy and Joe also came along. It was a long drive, and they both had very old cars, but they somehow made the long journey. Rebecca had such fond memories of these long car journeys and wonderful holidays when the girls would sleep on a mattress in the back of the estate car while John drove through the night. One night, as they made their way on holiday, they were stopped close to their home by the police, who were looking for a chap who had escaped from the local mental health hospital. They were very surprised when they looked in and saw Susanne and Becca lying on a mattress in the back; there were no seatbelt laws then. Becca had been given a pair of glasses without the glass in them by Grandad Joe, and she popped her head up in the glasses when the policeman popped his head in. He must have wondered if this was another escapee.

Elizabeth was a Catholic and the children were brought up as Catholics. John always supported their religious beliefs and went along to the weekly Mass with the rest of the family, even though he was not Catholic. In the 1960s, the Mass was still said in Latin and was hard for the

children to follow. Rebecca found this a bit boring and spent most of her time fidgeting and wanting to go home for her breakfast. Mass was at 8 am in their local area, which was held in the chapel at the local hospital. After Mass, the family went home for breakfast, as there was no eating before communion. There was always a full English breakfast to go home to, or sometimes the family would drive to Petticoat Lane and buy food from the Jewish deli, eating bagels and cheese buns on the way home. Elizabeth would buy platzels and pickled herrings for tea, which Becca hated. Elizabeth and John loved Jewish food and many other nationalities' food, having been brought up with many different nationalities around them in London. It was while eating breakfast one Sunday that Elizabeth was reading the newsletter from the local parish when she saw the notice about adopting a child from the Catholic Children's Society. Elizabeth was very interested in this and said to John that they should do this; they were comfortable here and could open their home and hearts up to a child in need. They had been in the new house for a few years now, and Rebecca was now 8 years old.

There was some discussion throughout the family, including Elizabeth's parents, Joe and Nancy, and then they applied.

There had been a few visits by Elizabeth and John to the children's home, and finally, they were accepted. A child was chosen by the home, and Rebecca and Susanne were taken along to meet their new sister. This was very strange for the children, who took the little girl some sweets. Years later, Rebecca could always remember the smell of that children's home, and it didn't leave good memories.

The child was called Grace, aged five, and had been in the children's home since birth. She was a very sullen and sad child, but Elizabeth and John were sure that they could give her the love she needed to help her settle into the