

Health and Safety 1950s.

'Toodle pip, sweetheart,' said my father to five-year old me as he dropped me off at my school gate and walked across the road to his big school. 'Johnny will pick you up at home time.'

I loved Fridays. My mother had a part-time morning job with the Ministry of Food but also worked Friday afternoons so my father would send a boy from his class to take me to school. It was normally Johnny but not always.

As arranged, Johnny would be waiting for me and I held tightly to his hand as we crossed the busy road to my father's wonderful chemistry lab. All those weird smells, not all of them pleasant; interesting glass equipment with strange names - pipettes, burettes, bell jars and those gas taps with the piece of perished, orange rubber protruding from the spout. This was my father's domain. He was much respected having been a decorated bomber (Halifaxes, not Lancasters!) pilot during the war.

'Will we grow a crystal garden for you this afternoon, Susie G?' asked one lad, lifting me onto a high stool so that I could see. A glass tank had already been prepared with isinglass and a variety of crystals were arranged on the bench waiting for me to drop them gently into the bowl. The way the crystals sprouted and curled up the glass was beautiful and their fascinating names made the whole experience so memorable.

After the crystal garden came my favourite bit of the afternoon. Johnny would get a wooden box, probably about six inches square with a side of one to two inches high, into which he poured a river of pure silver. I played for ages, trying to catch the mercury, letting it run through my fingers and laughing. Everyone was allowed to play with mercury in those days and I still remember being told about cinnabar, the ore from which it is extracted.

School finished at four o'clock and I waved bye bye to Johnny as he left the lab. 'I won't be here next week,' he said. 'I'm playing football.'

His surname was Haynes.

Sue Robertson