



Category: Short Stories & Reflections

Winner: Kath Harper

Title: Chez Nous

And my mind is transported back to the house where I grew up on Larch Avenue, Penketh. Sounds grand but really not....a two bedroomed, tiny, semi detached, three up, three down with a kitchen the size of a postage stamp. Outside, we had reasonably sized gardens front and back but not tended well, as neither mum nor dad had the time or the inclination to cultivate green fingers.

My dad was a hard working, unskilled man. He had seen the worst which life has to offer. Born in 1902 to Irish immigrants, orphaned at an early age and taken in by an extremist Catholic spinster Aunt who promptly threw him out when he refused to go to Mass. His experience with the Catholic church was not good thus, this refusal lasted a lifetime. As a very young man he joined the Army, was stationed in Northern Ireland and later spent 7 years in British ruled India. I think he was shaped by this, he always remained tight lipped and when questioned about his Army life was economical with the details. I can hear him now "we were very cruel to the Indians." A man who knew his responsibility was to clothe and feed his wife and children. Not in the least materialistic.

Mum had also seen hardship, but hers was not through poverty. She grew up in a middle class, Liberal voting family which never felt the struggle of the poor. Mum's hardship was the emotional kind. A stepfather who ruled with an iron rod and a mother a mother too frightened to come to her defence. She had one saving grace, a lifeline, in the form of a benevolent and loving paternal grandmother whose death she mourned until her own last breath.

So these were my parents. A quiet, hardworking dad who kept his own counsel and a nervous, sometime bad tempered mum, who always wanted more than we had.

I also had a sister and a brother. Older than me by 15 and 11 years respectively.

My beloved sister: a second mum to me, quiet and affectionate, married and left home when I was 4. Years later, in therapy, I had a lightbulb moment; my sister had betrayed and abandoned me. I must now forgive her. Of course I did, but what a revelation. When her own children began to arrive I took on the role of little Auntie; I visited her home regularly and to this day I love my nieces and nephews with a passion.

This relationship is in stark contrast to the one I have always had with my brother. I feel we never formed a bond. He, the middle child, usurped at age 11. I was now the baby in the family. My memories are of being teased constantly and he causing me some confusion. From "take me with

you" to "I wish he would go away." My wish came true when at 22 he married and moved to Manchester.

I have some happy memories of my home and my childhood. My friend Janet, who lived two doors away, playing in the fields from breakfast until tea, cows, tadpoles, frogs and mud. Our home was open house to mum's friends. No need to knock on our back door. Just open and shout "are you in?" A sound of childhood which still brings a smile to my face. Poor but welcoming and hospitable. Dad offered coffee, tea, cakes and biscuits and never took no for an answer. All mum's friends loved dad.

Happy but far from idyllic. Money was an issue and mum and dad had some roof raising, baffling arguments. Disconcerting and puzzling .

Despite this I now look back on my childhood home and my parents with love and gratitude. I have inherited the value of kindness (I think), a good sense of humour and justice from my dad and a loving, caring nature from my mum.

My life now could not be more different. I was the first in my family to go to University. I became a professional and enjoy the benefits the position has given me. Not wealthy, but not struggling, a much larger house and all mod cons. The "community" feel, of course, has long gone. No more knocking and entering, people are busy, mums tend to work full time.

Being "at home" in the current climate however, is something which is alien to everyone. There is a pandemic, we are being forced to work from home, and it has us trapped. Yet, it also gives us time to reflect on life and perhaps to find other ways to fill our time. I have noticed some of that lost "community spirit" slowly emerging again. Offers of shopping for vulnerable people, giving away unwanted items and displays of indignation at the way the most needy in our society are treated. I pray we remember what matters most when this is all over. People and the planet we call home.

My mum and dad never lived through Covid 19 but experienced poverty, war and hardship throughout their lives. If I was able to ask my dad for advice about our situation at present, he would probably think quietly for a while and then tell me to read a good book, have a sense of humour, be content with what I have and stay "at home." Good advice.