ch. 5 england: putting it back together

a real story — not a hollywood film

2nd edition

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chapter 5

england: putting it back together

The Street

In the ‘street-in-my-head’ reside the names and faces of the families in Lydford Road who live in the even numbers from 60 down to 32 and the equivalent odd numbers on the other side of the road. I can see them all coming and going, inhabiting the street in their own ways. I am sure that the only person from our road, apart from my father, who has been directly affected by the war, is old Harry MacDonald, who lives on the corner at number 60. My mother is a friend of Ellen MacDonald, who she sees at the club on a Saturday night.

“Lovely woman,” my mother says, “it’s a shame, Harry suffers with his nerves; he was shell-shocked serving as a soldier in the war.”

Every child has their two parents. No young ‘one-parent families’ live in Lydford Road except for us; not that anyone would use the expression to describe the phenomenon.

Perhaps the notion doesn't exist if it hasn't got a name, and, conversely, once it gets one, it and the associated stigma, thrive. Just as well for us it hasn't yet been named if the experience of Mrs Martin at number 42 is anything to go by — the one woman in the street who is "d.i.v.o.r.c.e.d" is spoken about in the hushed tones and with the supercilious looks of decent people who recognize a wicked witch when they see one. The fact that other children have two parents doesn't usually affect us. A testimony, if one is needed, to how well my mother put her life and our lives back together after my father's death.

Poignancy

But one or two poignant moments stand out, for example, when we are a few years older: we are looking back at our infancy through the black and white photographs of the street parties celebrating V.E. day; I recognize many of the children in the street, some my friends with their parents having a good time; auntie Mary, uncle Jim, Brian and Ann too.

My sisters and I are in the photos; but not my mother, not my nanny-round-the-corner and, of course, not my father. Sad, empty moments which give rise to unfamiliar, lost and incomplete feelings. Feelings that make a lasting impression on me: make me different from the other kids in the street.

The up-side of not being really awake most of the time to my father's absence was that, as a child and a young boy, I never *consciously* felt disadvantaged being without a father.

Mostly, it felt normal to me to be as we were. My mother played in the street with us and, what was really important, was better at cannons and rounders than all the boys in the street, including the ones older than me, and the one or two fathers who made time to play.

One summer evening in the street, we are playing rounders and I am in the opposite team to my mother. She is one big hitter and goes on slogging the ball, getting rounder after rounder and we just can't get her out. So, unable to get a turn to bat, we have to go on fielding. I whinge on and on about letting us have a turn to bat. I am so frustrated and fed up; I can't stand that her team are so together and so proud of her. Of course I am proud of her too, but not when she is on the other side giving me such a hard time. In the end, I throw a huge tantrum. Total disgrace. Bedtime!

100 pages: Don't Take Less

Living in number 50 Lydford Road is fun, mainly, because it is life in the street. No friends come in to visit; that's no hardship; just stepping outside means meeting up with friends. I see the inside of very few of the houses; John O'Connell's (35) is an exception, four or five of us go in regularly to play monopoly and other board games. I go to pay the club money for Christmas and holidays to Mrs Hiscox who lives at number 44 in the basement or "area" as we call it. Her door is stood open — she is the "Doll" of the street, the hub of the social services for the neighbourhood — you are expected to go in to see her. Besides, she has 'bad' legs and can't come to the door.

Every week, she sends round comics to number 50, including the highly-prized American DC comic (‘100 pages. Don’t take less’) with Superman, Batman and other titles. The comics arrive at my auntie Mary’s on a Tuesday and are intended for all the children in the house. It is a big event for us, a weekly treat. Auntie Mary tries desperately to make sure that we get to read the comics but uncle Jim and Brian, my eldest cousin, thwart her attempts to share them out by sitting on the pile of comics, dog-in-the-manger fashion, refusing to let them go, as they each read a comic.

When we are indoors the kitchen is where we live day-to-day. A small table for four, with a gingham tablecloth, stands next to the sink in the corner; continuing round the room: the gas stove by the door, opposite the door, the window which opens vertically on rope sashes with weights, overlooking Mrs Stephen’s garden at the back of the house. A washing line hangs above the table for indoor drying; a long line is strung outside the window from a pulley to the opposite factory wall at the back of the garden for the bulk washing. All our washing is done in a bucket on the stove or by hand in the sink by my mother.

The relay wireless, with the switch registering four stations, is attached to the wall next to the window. Religiously, we listen for the characteristic theme music on the light programme for Dick Barton — Special Agent, with Snowy and Jock his sidekicks. When the familiar, pacy, theme tune blares out, we rush in from the steps every weekday evening at 6.45pm.

Joe Louis KO — OK?

It is a special treat to stay up late with my mother to listen to the boxing. Sometimes, if the contest takes place in the States, we stay up to the early hours of the morning to catch an important fight. Important is Joe Louis. My mother and I are big fans of the ‘brown bomber’, as he is nicknamed. As she says, he has to knock them (white boxers) out, to be sure of getting the decision. She supports the British boxers, cruelly dubbed horizontal heavies, who are invariably unsuccessful in world title fights in the heavyweight division. Bruce Woodcock is the latest casualty.

We have gas lights fitted with mantles in the kitchen and in the two rooms upstairs. A small coal fireplace sits under the mantelpiece in each of the three rooms; the fire in the kitchen, apart from a quick blast from the oven on freezing mornings, is our sole source of heating and is lit every evening in the winter. Coal is stored in a shed in the back-garden, to be fetched by me every evening after school. Friday night is bath night. The oval tin bath is lifted in by my mother through the window in the kitchen from its hook on the outside wall. Two buckets of water are heated up on the stove and emptied into the bath for the twins to take their bath together, in front of the coal fire. It is my turn after the twins but not before the dreaded ritual of Stephen’s powders from a paper sachet; followed by cod liver oil and malt. At first, I would take the medicine without a murmur and my mother would hold me up as an example to my sisters. After watching Jean pull faces, wretch and refuse to take it, I must confess to being influenced by her example and starting to shiver and shake and be difficult when my mother produces the teaspoon to administer the awful doses.

Pie Mash

We attended Our Lady of the Seven Dolours school on the other side of Lock bridge over the Grand Union canal. The school was located on Cirencester Street which ran down to ‘the steps bridge’ close to ‘rat island’, later to be named, we thought, somewhat pretentiously ‘Little Venice on the Grand Union Canal in Maida Vale.’ A name that didn’t have quite the same ring as the name that we gave it to describe what it was: ‘Rat island on the cut in Paddington.’

It is good to see, if somewhat belatedly fifty years on, that the rest of the canal in Paddington, “the basin”, is to be modernised and turned into an attractive feature for the other side of Paddington.

One day, when I am seven, the kids are talking about what is a taboo subject: free school dinners. Somebody says that free school dinners are intended for war orphans. To be fair, it is said in recognition that poverty exists, and not as an attempt to blame or stigmatize those in the poverty trap. I decide to interpret it as a slight and, consequently, I protest indignantly at being referred to as a war orphan; I have my mum so how could I be described as an orphan? Apart from the social stigma, there is a further drawback of having free school dinners: the older kids not on free school dinners, in the time-honoured tradition of schoolkids, keep some of their dinner money and spend it on alternative treats from sweets to fags.

My favourite — if I had some dinner money to hold on to

— would be pie-mash from the Pie-Mash shop next to the Coliseum cinema (otherwise named ‘the flea pit’), on Lock Bridge. The pie-mash is served with a ladleful of what many imagine to be an evil looking, murky, witch’s potion, but turns out to be a tasty, green liquor. I dream about having dinner money to spend on pie-mash with green liquor for lunch instead of the standard meat, two veg and gravy of the school dinner.

Jellied Eels

In the mornings on the way to school, Jean, Mary and I pass the cafe. Sometimes we press our noses to the window, picking up the unique atmosphere of the shop with its closely packed wooden tables and benches, and the wall decor of light and dark watery green tiles on the lower half of the walls. Squirming, we are intrigued by the live eels slithering over each other in steel trays, willing them to get out over the overhanging lip of the tray — they do sometimes to our delight — to avoid the inevitable fate that awaits them: the chop.

Sometimes we are lucky enough to witness, in ghoulish fascination, the eels being chopped up on the wooden block and their grisly writhing in pieces but still alive.

‘I wonder whether they have any idea in their steel tray world, that a parallel world outside theirs exists in which it is decided that they are each for the chop.’ I shiver and dismiss the thought that it conjures up: that it may be true for our world too.

An Immigrant Thing

My mother doen't share my taste in pie-mash and green liquor — in her eyes it isn't proper food — it is what the poor(!) kids eat. Winkles. cockles, whelks, in fact any sort of shellfish, prawns, shrimps, fish — or the dreaded jellied eels, yes, that is good food. A pint of winkles bought from the barrow on the Harrow Road outside the Windsor Castle, turns Sunday afternoon tea into feast-time, definitely Sunday best. The problem with winkles is twofold. One, that it takes great skill with a needle to 'winkle' them out of their shells in one piece, just the right amount of spin with the right amount of pull. Two, that you need a lot of winkles to make a satisfying mouthful. That's where the white-bread-and-butter-winkle sandwich comes in. A lot of mouth-watering patience to make one, but what a result.

A proper cooked meal is bigtime in our house. The meat and two veg meal is cooked every day when my mother gets home, apart from Fridays which is fish day. Sitting down to eat together is more than a meal, it is a sign that we are as good as the other families in the street, some of whom, according to my mother, are poor unfortunates who rarely have a square meal to fight on.

Another way in which we demonstrate our equality and moral superiority is the cleanliness in the house; the lavatory sparkles, everything that stands still is scrubbed, dusted or polished — ourselves included. Nits which are evergreen, everywhere in school, do not last long with us; they are caught and dispatched with the help of a fine steel comb and a wash in Neko antiseptic dark blue(!) soap. And we dress up in our Sunday best for Mass.

The Irish we hear often described as stupid and dirty and living with animals in their houses in Ireland. Is this perseverance to be superior or at least equal to our neighbours in living standards a reaction to this prevailing prejudice? Or is it an immigrant thing?

Townies

Seldom, did I feel that my mother wasn't enough for me. And it was not that my mother wasn't there for me, she was. But she had enough to cope with and I didn't want to be responsible for adding to her burden. I felt strongly that I should be helping and supporting her. One way of doing that, as I saw it, was to reduce her responsibility for me. So there were times when I took on things alone; sometimes it felt too much:

The kids who live on the other side of Lock bridge are called the 'townies'. The older boys at the Dolours often belong to gangs and one of the gangs in the first year of the seniors is led by Charlie Mahoney and 'Duke'. My cousin Brian is in that year, one year above me. He is not gang material and is bullied and terrorised by this gang. Their special form of bullying is to get hold of you, bend you over in a headlock, and several of them rain down their elbows in the small of your back. Brian has suffered this treatment a few times and it is extremely painful.

I, too, am not a fighter although I enjoy wrestling in the cub scouts and am quite a wiry freckled stick with an auburn top, at ten years old. My turn is bound to come; up till now I have escaped fights by being alert and by being a quick runner. The problem at the Dolours is that the playground for the short breaks is on the roof, surrounded by wire mesh and with one exit. It is easy to get cornered here — and one day I am — surrounded by Mahoney, Duke, Finnegan, Cronin and two or three others.

Gangs — An Irish Legacy

It is ironic, and never makes much sense to me, that the townies, all cockney kids intent on beating up Irish kids, should have so many Irish names among them. Of course, ironically but painfully too, they claim to be English to justify their bullying. My mother, clued in to this phenomenon, when much later on I mentioned that Kevin Keegan played football for England, replied, in mock astonishment,“Who? Where do you think he comes from in England then?”

Pretence at a chat kicks it off; I pick up the menace in the atmosphere so I am prepared for the agenda. I’m not listening to what they’re half-whispering to me as I’m looking desperately for an escape route.

‘No teacher in the playground, and the gang have the exit blocked.’ The adrenalin is peaking and my heart is thumping.

‘Shall I give in without a fight and hope that it will be over quickly and they won’t hurt me too much, or shall I try to break out of the hostile circle and stay out of reach as long as possible.’

A crowd begins to gather in the corner of the playground where the action is taking place. I have decided to try to break out when, luckily for me, a different opportunity presents

itself when Finnegan offers to Mahoney,
“I’ll do him.”
Finnegan belongs to a boxing club at Stow Youth Club and fancies his chances. Mahoney signals his agreement, and suddenly, here I am, fighting Finnegan.
“Fight, fight!” the chant goes round the playground.
‘I can’t outbox him, I could play for time and hope for a teacher to appear, or for the bell to ring for the end of playtime.’
The fight is on. My heart is pounding. He catches me a couple of times with punches — it doesn’t hurt — until afterwards! Eventually, I manage to grab on to him, get my arm around his neck and wrestle him to the ground. He isn’t able to punch me anymore and I am choking him. I ask him if he wants to give in, he refuses so I choke him again. I am careful to be ostentatiously fair; I don’t want to give the rest of the gang an excuse to jump in and mob me. Finnegan looks pretty distressed and gives in quite quickly. Relieved, I let him go and get up, looking cautiously at Mahoney to see if that is it. Finito? The next thing I know is that I am unceremoniously dumped on the ground by a right hook from Finnegan, who has jumped up, unbeknown to me, when I took my eye off him. They are all cheering Finnegan on. The fight is on again.

Dan Dare

In Boy’s Own, Dan Dare, schoolboy stories ... when somebody surrenders, that is it, you shake hands, and it is over. Don’t they know the rules? They obviously don’t abide by them. I don't have time to speculate further right now about the world I am living in. But something has changed, radically; I am really angry now. Fear takes the back seat. Whether it is because he has hit me after I'd won, or because he's broken Dan Dare's universal rules of fair play and gallantry, or that my pride is stung or all three, doesn't matter. 'Or am I spurred on to have another go because I reckon I can do Finnegan again?' The reality is that I am in a fight whether it's a continuation or a rematch.

I get up, slowly, my head is clearing and I set about getting him in another head lock or any hold where I can get him to the ground. He is warier this time and tries to keep his distance by bouncing on his toes like a boxer. The crowd of onlookers works in my favour: the circle of boys surrounding us bounces him into me as he tries to back away. I get him in another headlock. This time, I choke him until his face is a glowing red; turning slightly blue. By now, I am steeled up to threaten to strangle him to death if he doesn't give in and mean it. At this moment there can be no more joyful sound: the schoolbell rings, and both Finnegan and I are saved by the bell. An honourable stalemate: Finnegan for not giving in; and me for re-asserting the upper hand in the combat. The bell also saves me from any further intervention by the gang. As we race inside, I am pleased to escape with the outcome, my bruises and a reputation.

I wanted to talk to someone (my father?) about the bullying and the fight; alone, I am fearful that I will be found out by the teachers, and through them by my mother. I speak to no-one. I gain a fair level of notoriety from the fight, particularly from the second attempt to strangle Finnegan. But crucially, afterwards, Mahoney and the members of his gang nod to me when we meet in school or out on the street; nothing is said but they don't try to get me; nor do they pick on Brian again. Respect — of a sort.

Spin

Vanity sets in. I am sucked in and believe in the publicity and notoriety I have generated. Later that year I am walking through Warlock Road with John Gibb, who lives in Walterton Road, when a guy called Brian Capp gives us the verbals in the street. He is another boxer from the same club as Finnegan. John Gibb, a friend in the cubs, also believes in my publicity, returns the verbals in a loud voice and, sidestepping neatly his own involvement, encourages me to do 'Cappy' over. Foolishly, where my instincts would previously have taught me to ignore the crap or hand it back to John who would have run a mile, I stay and take him on.

I find out painfully, that he can deliver a straight left which I walk into several times; it does enough damage to make me feel dizzy by the time I get hold of him and get to the ground. I can't make a winning position of it. My blushes are saved by some adults pulling us apart. We both protest that we want to carry on the fight, pushing hard against the restraints; but not too hard from me — my heart's not in it. I come away with a new respect for boxers, respect for older boys and renewed belief in my previous position: 'avoid aggro until you can't'. I have gained respect in Warlock and on the surrounding streets too. But I don't want to become a renowned gunslinger that all the would-be villains want to take on. Luckily, my mother doesn't find out about this latest escapade. I make sure I squeeze John Gibb's neck with interest, when we have our next wrestle.