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My Childhood

by Sue Hitchcock

My childhood seems to belong to another world. Strangely the house I now live in is almost identical – a Victorian terrace house, but the context is a different world. This house is rather trendy, in the desirable old part of town, affirmed by the fact that several of my neighbours are artists.

The world I grew up in was a run-down part of London where, due to bombing, housing shortage made it necessary for two families to occupy most houses. We had the ground floor, consisting of three rooms, a scullery and an outside toilet. The Bannister family upstairs had the same, except their toilet was inside of course. There were no doors between the flats and we lived together in respectful harmony until I was eighteen, when we moved away.

You might have expected us to become close friends, but distance was essential. The only time we were bothered by them was when they had a knees-up at Christmas; they and all their family were fat. Bill and Dolly Bannister had a daughter, Pamela, who was a year older than me, so we were never in the same class at school, but we were a gaggle of girls living only a few doors apart. My best friend, Ann, lived two doors down and Pamela's granddad lived in the flat downstairs to Ann's family. When we got to the "best friends" stage, Ann, Pamela and I were always swopping about. I hated being the one left out.

Because there were so many children nearby, we went to school to a school a few streets away without a parental escort from the age of five. Cars were so few and far between that it hardly worried anyone.

We used to play cricket or rounders in the street and when occasionally a car rounded the corner, there would be a shout, "Car's coming!" and we'd stand back to watch the event.

Our other favourite playgrounds were the bombsites. We lived at number 68 and the last house on our side was number 86. It was a good shortcut through to the greengrocer's, owned by Mr Satterthwaite, our Sunday school superintendent. The other bombsite, closer but on the other side of the road was enormous. Maybe six or eight houses were gone. We loved it, flowering with dandelions and daisies. You had to pick your way through the remains of the brick walls and it had a crater surrounded by a four-foot high circular wall. We weren't supposed to climb over it, but the big boys did.

I never felt deprived because I had no idea how the other half lived. We were all poor and our parents were mainly happy – the war had ended and there were jobs in the factories at Park Royal. We could wander about and explore the streets, as our mums knew we would be back for food.

The only time I was punished by my mum was when Ann and I ran across the main road, the Harrow Road, on our way back from Sunday School. We had actually got into more mischief than that, but it was undiscovered. One Sunday my mum, who was a Sunday School teacher was chatting before going home. Ann and I decided to explore and went into the vestry. It was on the first floor and the window, which was open, looked onto a slope of the roof.

We thought it might be fun to climb out on the roof and proceeded to clamber up to a flat area behind the altar windows. The view was amazing, but we thought we would clean the stained-glass windows with our hankies. When we'd had enough, we came back down into the church building and found ourselves locked in.

Fortunately we were soon missed and my mum returned with Mr Satterthwaite and the key and let us out. They never asked where we had been.