

House Clearance

by Ivor John

It seemed strange going into the house. Strange rather than sad, although it was a little. I think I had been seven when we had moved there. Rachel, my older sister eleven. A 1920s semi with a large garden at the back, with a lawn, and an apple tree in the corner. It had seemed huge then, when as children we had climbed in it. We would hang ropes to make crude swings and made camps amongst its branches. The best thing was that we each had our own room. It had been a happy childhood. My dad, Gordon, was a bank manager. Mum, Rebecca, always seemed to be at home. She occupied herself cooking, sewing curtains and cleaning up and caring for us. She loved her garden and would spend hours tending plants in the greenhouse and planting them out into the borders. I don't remember them often going out together. On the occasions that they did, our mother would look glamorous in beautiful dresses, which she would make herself and high heeled shoes. Aunty Margaret would come and look after us. She would usually stay overnight, sleeping on a 'put u up' bed which dad would set up in the lounge.

We, Rachel and I were not often allowed to use the lounge, which was kept for special occasions. There was a large television, in a mahogany cabinet, a radiogram and two large leather sofas. It was kept for special occasions when we would be allowed to sit with mum and dad and watch the television. Otherwise, we would eat our dinner at the table in the dining room. Unless he was very late, we would eat together when dad got home from work. Rachel and I would do our homework while we waited for him. After we had eaten, we would be allowed to watch the small, portable television on the sideboard for an hour.

When she was eighteen, Rachel left to train to be a nurse. She came home to visit increasingly less often. She was sharing a small flat with another girl on her course and they spent most of their time together, often going on holiday. I hadn't realised at the time, that they were in a relationship. Now in her forties, she is married to Deborah. They have their own house in Kidderminster.

I joined the Royal Airforce when I was eighteen. To start with I would come home to stay when I was on leave. But it felt less and less like visiting home. I also started to question that my childhood had been happy. Whenever I visited, despite being pleased to see me there seemed to be a difficult atmosphere.

When she was in her early sixties, mum had seemed less bothered about the house, which she had always kept spotless. She was diagnosed with dementia, which provided an explanation. She died seven years later after falling in the garden. There were not many people at her funeral. Rachel, and Dad of course, his brother Peter. Mum's older sister. Some cousins. Aunty Margaret was there, whom I hadn't seen since childhood.

Dad had suffered a stroke last year, but seemed to have recovered well. It was a shock when two months ago, Margaret had phoned Rachel to say that she had found Gordon unconscious in the kitchen. He had been taken by ambulance to the general hospital, but had died a few hours later from a heart attack.

Now, I had let myself into the house they had shared. To pick over their possessions, the mahogany television, the radiogram, the big dining table, to see if there was anything we wanted, or we could sell. Otherwise we would need to clear it so that the house, could be sold. I felt like a nosey intruder as I went through their things. Mums clothes, her beautiful handmade dresses, and shoes were still untouched in her side of the wardrobe. Her collection of exotic perfumes still on her dressing table. Dad's clothes, mostly in piles on the bedroom floor or stuffed, unwashed into drawers. I felt sad that he had clearly not been coping well. Guilty that I hadn't visited more often.

I opened a drawer in a bedside table. Finding it full of clutter and odds and ends of medication, pill foils and plastic bottles, I pushed it closed again. Something was stopping it though. Jerking it a few times I still couldn't close the drawer. It didn't really matter, but for force of habit, I wanted to close it. I put my hand round the back of the drawer to see what was blocking it. Pulling out a bunch of letters, all in pastel lilac envelopes and wrapped carefully into a plastic bag. The ink on them faded, they had clearly been there for years. I felt uncomfortable, prying, as I opened one of the envelopes. Finding inside a letter, written on lilac paper which matched the envelope. In beautiful handwriting the author told Gordon how much she loved him and enjoyed her time with him in the evenings. She hoped that he meant what he said, that he would leave Rebecca, and that they would be together. They were signed and endorsed with kisses by Margaret.