

VISIBLE AND INVISIBLE PRESENCES

Life Before Sweden

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longer served a purpose, of course, as they had put in central heating. To me it felt like vandalism. My dreams stopped.

2 Hedgerley Close

I suppose there is a fairly determining difference between spending all one's childhood in a single house or moving from one place to another. For those of us who grew up in one place this house is the centre of the world; its demands and rhythms set the framework for both growth and security.

2 Hedgerley, as it was always known, was in a small cul-de-sac with only seven houses, each with its own reasonably sized garden. While our driveway and entrance could be seen from the Close, the garden itself and the large windows into the house were invisible being hidden by a large compact beech hedge. It provided shelter all year round, being green in the summer and copper-coloured in the winter. Ours was a very private world.

The whole plot is actually one third of an acre (1349 kvm). But to a small child the garden was almost endless. There were places to hide from the grown-ups – not least a large laurel tree where I tried to teach my little brother, Martin, to smoke. There was what seemed like a very large lawn for ball games. I think I felt a particular kind of affinity too with the yew tree that had been planted the day I was born and that grew alongside of me. Some recent owners dug it up and their marriage ended shortly after – I do not know if this is significant.

The garden was a sensual place of both visual delights and smells. It was full of the scent of roses in warm weather and later in the season of over-ripe fruit. The garden shed smelt of the earth and often the whole garden sometimes smelt of the bonfire at the end. On the other side of a pathway, across the middle of the garden, there was a kitchen garden. We grew a good deal of our own food: apples straight off the tree; as-

paragus direct from the asparagus bed; rhubarb that stuck up through earthenware pots. During the war and in the years immediately after, we also kept hens. They provided excitement as well as food, especially when we had failed to clip their wings, and they escaped. Although all trace of them was later removed, I somehow always felt their ghostly presence on the right-hand side of the main garden.

With the hens came rats and with the rats, the rat catcher. This was a man with a small dog which would be sent down into the rats' holes and come up with the dead rats it had dispatched by biting their necks. The dog would lay them out in straight lines on the lawn before they were taken away or thrown on the bonfire. On one occasion, I felt so sorry for the poor rats that I tried to resuscitate them by kissing them. I must have thought of them as sleeping beauties. I can't remember how the adults reacted, but I did not repeat the experiment.

Although with time, the house would undergo a few improvements, such as a gas boiler used for central heating and hot water, everything remained very much the same throughout my childhood. In my mind the house itself is associated with both light and dark, warmth and cold. It faced south with large windows making light flood into all the major rooms, both downstairs and up. But the hallway was dark, even though it was there the telephone was. There was even mysterious black chest by the door where anything might be hidden. (In fact, it contained saved up Christmas paper, bags and string.) There was a damp, shady, extra WC down a few steps on the north side of the house, to be avoided if possible, and an equally dark coal hole by the back door, adjacent to a chilly larder. There was no refrigerator when I was little. Upstairs there were two small dark rooms built for the maid.

The house had its special weaknesses too. It had been built on ground where clay meets sand, which resulted in consider-

able subsidence. Although the foundations had been underpinned when the house was fairly new, it still sloped, and a childhood amusement was making a ping-pong ball roll from the west to the east end of the building. The house had its pretensions to grandeur too. When it was built my parents installed a bell system for the maid. This was never used, as I remember, but there was a bell on a cord in the dining room in readiness. It gave the place a certain aura even if it was obsolete.

When we were small, a bedroom in the middle of the house was the nursery and in time it became my room. As it too faced south, it could get very warm in the summer and as our mother believed in routines, our bedtime was pretty early and paid no regard to the effects of summertime. In the war years there was double summer- time, and we could be sent to bed as early as what in effect was 4 p.m. However, this room had an excellent view of the garden enabling me to spy on the adults' activities, and what was going on next door. Of that more later.

For us children, the attic was the most exciting part of the house. It was reached by a folding staircase that, to start with, we could not manage. It was where old-clothes and other memorabilia were stored, including my paternal grandfather's walking stick which was also a long spear. It was there that the dressing-up box was kept with our Granny Mathews' old evening dress amongst other things. In the winter we stored apples in the attic, and it was there that our only pet, a tortoise called Ulysses, would hibernate. Unfortunately, if the weather was warm, he could wake and root around amongst the various store boxes. Once we could manage the stairs, Martin and I would play up there undisturbed – we had learnt how to pull up the stairs from within the attic – and in due course Martin made the smaller side his bedroom.

My mother was convinced that the house was haunted – by a poltergeist who, though given to moving things around, was

reasonably benevolent. The people who eventually bought the house believed something similar, as did Anne who helped my parents in their last years. There is apparently a local myth that a maid from the large house that was there earlier is buried somewhere in the garden.

To my shame as a rational being, I feel I may have encountered the poltergeist. When, after my parents' death, the time came to leave the house for the last time, I found that the mains' switch in the garage had been turned off. Convinced that I had not done this, I addressed the poltergeist sternly, telling it to behave. Perhaps it heard me for as I left, I felt that the house, that had been slowly dying as I emptied it of all signs of our family past, was alive again, expectant, waiting for a new chapter in its life, while the sun poured in through the windows.