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“You can take the girl out of the village, but not the village out of the girl”

Growing up in Wheathampstead

by: **Deborah de Mornay Penny**
(Born 9th October 1960)

Family

My Parents are Mr Anthony & Mrs Barbara de.Mornay Penny and my sister Yvonne de.Mornay Penny used to live at number 11 Caesars road, my grandmother Doris Penny and my uncles Bob, David, Donald and Martin all lived next door at number 15. My Auntie Beatrice (Beat as we would call her) and her husband Ern lived at number 17. There was an adjoining path to both houses at the front and back which my grannie and auntie had created. At this time other neighbours were Mrs Pike at number 9, Mrs Slough next door at number 13, Mr & Mrs Curry opposite, Mr & Mrs Baker, Mrs Onions (who pronounced her name: Oh...nions, which we found hilarious as children. The Polish family Ratusianack's lived towards the end of Caesars road and the Puddy's in the middle end corner house. Vincent Puddy has remained a friend to this day and lives within an hour's drive of me now. My sister and I have always referred to Vincent as our brother; we have known each other since we were about 4 years old.

My mother and father now live in Wells, Somerset. My mother, Barbara, a lively sort, bags of energy, bags of love and still very much the same. Mum used to be a post lady for a while and would deliver the mail all around the Butterfield Estate. My father Tony, once described by one of my friends as “quietly extrovert”, the dearest calmest father imaginable was and still is adored by all of my girl friends! Dad could fix anything, cars, shelves, TV's but most of all he was and still is famed for his amazing collection of vintage radios. Dad has restored, built and even won a prize for best radio...a hobby that he still pursues today. The smell of the soldering iron is something that will always bring back memories of our home in Caesars road. Dad would often be repairing a radio on a work top in the kitchen while mum would be cooking something tasty for dinner. Mum was and still is a great cook even won the cookery cup at St.Helens school many years ago.

My sister Eve (Yvonne) and I now both live in Glastonbury, Somerset in adjacent streets. Glastonbury only has a population of around 10,000 and like being in the village you soon get to know a lot of people. We both went to Wheathampstead Secondary Modern and

left in 1977 & 78. Eve went on to study to be a RNMH nurse and I undertook a degree in book illustration followed by training to be a teacher and various other things.

Doris Penny (Dolly) my grandmother was a real character very down to earth always wore a woolly hat, thick woollen stockings, and several jumpers and smoked Woodbines, right down to the filter! When quite old she could often be found sitting propped up on one arm at the kitchen table, with a delicate line of ash hanging precariously to the filter of her cigarette! Dolly loved her garden and one of her favourites flowers were snap dragons, she would have lots of these in the front garden at no.15.



Dolly & Korkie

Dolly would shop daily in the village. When I was quite young I remember shopping trips with her to the village on Saturdays. Dolly knew everyone in the village and a shopping trip for just a few things could take a long time due to the conversational pit stops along the way. Dolly would always tease the butcher (Simons) and insist on the best cut of meat and “not that old bit of scrag end!” she had a lovely sense of humour. I can remember one occasion when out with my Grandma that I was totally embarrassed (Dolly); at school I had been the May Queen and made to dance around the May pole. I had been paired up with Mark Seeby who was a relative of the butcher...my Grandma (Dolly) had hinted to the butcher at us getting married, she was very funny. Our trips to the village would also involve a trip to the bakers next door to the butchers (“Halls”) for some tasty white baps and a loaf of bread. Dolly used to say hello to everyone, and was quite a character. On return from the village it was round to Auntie Beats (Mrs Ibbotson) for tea and cakes (“elevenses”, she would call it). Auntie Beat had two children Jim and Margaret. Jim has sadly passed away but Margaret still lives in Knebworth.



A watercolour painting that I did of “Halls” the bakery at around 1980

Auntie Beat’s kitchen was immaculate, part of the reason being that there was virtually nothing in it! she said that it was so clean because she used to be “in service”, when I think now she could have been like another Daisy from “Downton Abbey”. Auntie Beat always had lots of cats, when my sister and I were old enough we were allowed to care for one each. I looked after Pandy, a grey and white Tom cat who had lost an eye to the cat flu. My sister was given caring responsibilities for “Cilla” (named after Cilla Black), Cilla was an unusual pinkie coloured tabby. There were several other cats and auntie Beat would often take in strays, even a pregnant cat once that gave birth in the outhouse. I remember kittens that were allowed to sleep in the bottom draw of the kitchen cupboard, the boiling and de boning of “Coley” fish and the occasional de fleaing of each cat, on the draining board! This involved a fine flea comb, warm water, Detol and very disgruntled cats! Whilst all of this was going on auntie Beat would be listening to Engleburt Humpledink on the radio “he sends me”, she used to say; we wondered where he sent her, but never asked in case we spoiled the fantasy.

Auntie Beat’s husband, Uncle Ern, originally from Yorkshire, worked at St.Albans Museum and whilst at home tended to a menagerie of wild animals and birds, these comprised of: injured starlings, slow worms, miniature turtles, a Minor Bird, a balding African Grey Parrot who would mimic the beeps every hour from the radio to name but a few. The most humorous thing of all was “The Frog House”, as we would call it. Uncle Ern used to breed transparent pink frogs! and even appeared on “Animal Magic” to talk about this passion. When asked to comment on the television he said something like “He did not know what he would do without them!” I remember my Auntie saying...(Daisy from Downton Abbey) “What about me” ...very funny at the time.

Our uncles...Uncle Bob a lovely man who would always treat us to bags of fruit and other tasty snacks. Uncle Don who would talk to us for hours about Italy and the Grand Prix...he loved Italy, fine wine, cheeses and biscuits, which he would later introduce to us when we were old enough

to appreciate. Uncle David who worked on the local farm who would drink Guinness whilst listening to "The Archers", on the radio, Uncle Martin ever chatty and always keen to hear all that we were learning at school. Uncle Martin, the only remaining uncle, still lives at number 15. My sister and I would visit our Auntie and Uncles most days and together we would chat and drink tea. There was always lots of tea. Today when not working we are often popping into one another's houses to do similarly. Grandma Penny was very generous with what little she had and would often treat us to drawing books, cakes and other goodies; on a couple of occasions I remember her buying all of our friends in the street, ice creams when the Italian ice cream van came round.

My other Grandma, Violet Davies used to live at 44 Marford Road. Grandma Davies (Violet) used to read the "Telegraph" and a book every day; she really enjoyed a chat about the news. Grandma Davies used to be a psychiatric nurse and was brought up by her aunt in Westminster. My sister and I used to love visiting and running errands for her to Marford Stores, which then was more or less opposite Grandmas house. After the visit we were rewarded with tea and more chats about her life. Grandma Davies would often sit on the front porch of her house watching everyone walk by. The front garden was lovely and I will always remember the heart shaped flower bed in the centre, roses and a profusion of lilac.

When very young dressing up was in order and Grandma Davies even had a crinoline, silk dresses and a blue ostrich feather fan, that I think belonged to Aunt Kathy. We adored dressing up and still do! Grandma Davies house had many old and interesting ornaments, paintings, books, 78 records and she was a very interesting lady to talk to. At Christmas time we would often gather at her house, she had an old organ and we had several members of the family who could play, so there was often singing around this, just like the olden days one might say. Grandma Davies husband Reginald used to be a solicitor and had an office in the village next to the newsagent. Reginald's relatives were from Wells in Somerset and my mother who now lives in Wells is enjoying visiting her ancestor's homes and my father continues to research the family tree, finding more and more interesting facts. Violet and Reginald Davies are buried at St. Helens Church.

Passing times

The last day of term in the summer could often be a real treat. I can remember that our whole class would be invited to the Swedish family's home for the day. The Watt's family had a swimming pool and we would all take a picnic. We loved these days, their lovely bungalow was situated alongside the river Lea at the very end of a narrow man made road, Clare Milton and here sister lived at the other end. I think that Grahame Watts was in my year and he had a brother called Mark, they were all very blonde and very attractive.

We would occasionally walk up to "The Dumps" from Sheepcote Farm, with Grandma Penny, Auntie Rene and Auntie Beat. We would take flasks of tea and cakes, walk along the railway line or dig for old bottles.

In the summer uncle Bob would go to Wimbledon and would come back with boxes of tennis balls. We would then all play tennis on Caesars road. There were very little cars about then.

At weekends we would often walk to Ayot St. Lawrence with Grandma Penny and either Auntie Beat or Irene, who lived in Old Welwyn (Irene, the only remaining auntie still lives in Old Welwyn.) Grandma had lived at Norfolk Cottages in Ayot St. Lawrence and had brought up all nine children in a two up two down cottage! At Christmas time she and all of the children would be treated to a visit to George Bernard's Shaw house. I can remember going on a school trip once to the silk worm farm in Ayot St. Lawrence and I am still fascinated by how those little creatures do what they do and their desire to munch on mulberries.

During our childhood we had nothing but cornfields and trees behind our house. At harvest time we would build large mountains of hay and jump onto them and for the rest of the year we would build camps beyond the corn field and go for walks with friends or relatives.

During the summer holidays my sister and all of our friends would often play in Devils Dyke. The large ditches half way along on the sides of the slopes were dug, we think by my cousin Jim Ibbotson and his friends, and we adopted these as our play houses. The tree opposite was named "The Salmon" due to the large fish shaped hole in the centre of it. We used to have lots of fun climbing up the roots to the other side. I can also remember Colin Puddy who some how had managed to get hold of a large tractor wheel, climbed inside it and rolled himself down the steepest bank in the dyke. At other times we would play French Cricket or rounders on the small piece of grass at the end of Caesars road just opposite the entrance to Devils Dyke. I think that this might now be a car park.

Our other favourite past time in the summer holidays was walks along the river Lea to Lord Brocketts Estate. We would walk down Dyke Lane, cross over Marford Road past The Lord Nelson Public House and down to the farm, where would occasionally buy fresh eggs. On route to the estate we would bask in the sun on the sloping meadow land. We would often swim in the river, picnic and run around freely barefoot.

As children we would spend our summer holidays and other times roaming around the countryside, playing in the cornfields behind our house (now an estate), building camps in Devil's Dyke, swimming in the river Lea and having picnics with friends on the Brocket estate. We would fantasise about Brocket Manor and wish that one day it would be ours.

In the summers that lead up to our late teens, with our first boyfriends we would continue to picnic on the estate and on one occasion even took a wind up gramophone. Our favourite 78, which was played over and over was "Can I canoe you up the river".

There we would all sit, on our picnic rugs, wondering and dreaming of the lives that lay ahead of us.

At school

I went firstly to St. Helens school a tiny, beautiful little building with a spire and with a very small playground adjacent to the church. I can remember the old classrooms and being made to drink warm milk from small glass bottles that were placed on top of some large old boiler. The

nit nurse would come regularly, we all had little lockers with stickers on them and there was a very large red wooden sliding door that divided the main hall in two.

I then went to the school over the road and then on to Butterfield Road School. Some of the teachers that I can remember were Mrs Mc Nally, Mr Price (who taught my mother also) Mr Parks, Mr Sharp the music teacher, Miss Finnegan and Mr. Oxley the PE Teachers, Mrs Elliot head mistress and cookery teacher, Mr Grierson the Geography teacher who once, when on a field trip to Snowdonia, was found sleep walking in the grounds of the youth hostel in his pyjama's with a ruck sack and walking boots on...Mr. Seddon the art teacher whom I just adored, was it a crush? probably. Class mates....Amanda Harding, Sally Pomfrett, Susan Strange, Michelle Hawkes, Tanya Kayne, Jackie Mersh (now sadly passed away) Alison Bunn (Bunnie), Cindy Stratton (who I have recently met up with again who is a singer and music teacher in Bath), Kevin Potter, Lesley Dimmock, James Marshall, Annette Modley, Ian Wibberly, to name but a few.

The shops

Collins antiques, Stuarts the men's outfitters and a fish and chip shop next door. A green grocer and "Fine Fare" supermarket and I do remember a very small long narrow green grocer/store which was just next to the Fine Fare building. I can remember Mrs Blackmores hardware store which was full of so many lovely items from tea strainers to scourers, saucepans and tea pots, this may be where I developed my love for hard ware stores! The chemist a lovely building at Christmas time we would buy gift sets for our relatives and they offered a free wrapping service.

Going out – the public houses



"The Bull" a watercolour painting that I did around 1980

I can remember sitting in The Bull when it flooded, as I sat with a boyfriend drinking as the water was rushing around our feet, getting deeper and deeper. The Bull was the most popular pub for young people at the time and also a few characterful locals. I can remember meeting a wonderful lady called Molly Bishop. Molly would often wear her hair swept up on top with a beautiful hair clip, her camel coat would rest just off her shoulders, style, elegance, humour and a whole lot more I sure that I was not privy to. Molly was a very well spoken lady and I have only ever met one other lady who could match her for wit and sheer nerve. Molly would place herself at the bar, attach her handbag holder to the wooden counter, demand a "Moosey and brandy" at which point she would produce a small swizzle stick from her hand bag and within minutes she would have an audience. On one occasion a whole rugby team gathered round, she enjoyed the attentions of fit young men and would lure them away in her Daimler, if she could.

The Abbot John, The Swan and the Lord Nelson were all places that I would visit in my younger years. Later on The John Bunyan was lovely place to walk to and the Wicked Lady at the end of Dyke Lane.

My sister and I had a wonderful childhood in Wheathampstead, surrounded by lots of loving and caring relatives who gave us, above all else, time. We had very little money and very little in the way of possessions but we never actually wanted for anything except to enjoy all that was ahead of us. My sister has recently retired from nursing; I still work in adult education and as a private therapist and artist. Both of our parents are still alive and we are all just a few miles away from each other.

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