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Seven Into Five Won't Go.

Belfast is a bustling, industrial city of around 300,000 people. It is constantly updating itself with the latest technological advances. It is also a city that preserves its past. Intermingled with reflective glass and steel office buildings and climate controlled warehouses are Catholic enclaves where families live in homes constructed in the early 19th century. In the late 1960's and early 1970's my family and I lived in one of these homes.

Our house was in one of the hundreds of rows of identical, red brick houses that the planners had deemed suitable for the large catholic families of that era. Industry was booming and workers were needed. By building interminable rows of these identical boxes, the barons of industry could be assured of their ready labor force.

These homes were basically two rooms on the first floor and two rooms on the second. Each house had a small, enclosed concrete yard where the outhouse was located. Plumbing was added as an afterthought in the mid 1900's, but this was only to accommodate the kitchen sink and upgrade the outhouse to a flushing toilet.

The front of the house was exactly the same as all the others in our row, one window to the left of the front door and one above. The red bricks and mortar gave evidence of years of bike scrapes, stone throwing, and lovers' initials carved into them.

The roofs were all blue slate with the occasional gray or black slate tile, which had replaced those blown off in the storms. The front doors and window frames were the only things that differed. Walking down the street was like walking through a rainbow, there was a kaleidoscope of colors and hues each door being different and all of them vying to be the brightest. Some had wrought iron numbers and knockers, some wooden, others brass.

Our front door was red with brass numbers and letterbox. There was a semi circle of bleached paving stones in front of the steps where my mother had knelt and scrubbed the ground clean. You could tell the clean houses by this symbol. The mothers cleaned them once a week and spent the rest of the week looking askance at those women who merely threw water on their pavement. None of the houses had yards with grass or flowers.

I didn't miss having a yard. I thought our house was wonderful. It resembled a train station at times though, with people being shunted from one room to another. Friends and neighbors were constantly popping in and out. Dad and his friends would stand talking together in the hall. Dad didn't work. At least, I don't remember him working. He spent his days in the pub and his evening ensconced on the sofa with his feet propped on the mantle, smoking endlessly and drinking huge pint sized cups of tea.

The fireplace was tiled and the opening had a brass surround. We burned coal and turf in it and it was the only form of heating in the entire house. There were dozens of brass ornaments and figures on the mantle and at the end closest to where dad sat, there was always an ashtray and the inevitable glass of water mixed with bicarbonate of soda with which he doctored his ulcer.

We knew not to sit on his side of the sofa. The furniture was old and covered in black vinyl, which had been patched, where it had cracked, with dad's insulation tape. He was an electrician but I had never seen him use the tape for that purpose. Since there were seven of us in the house, it meant that two of us had nowhere to sit. This usually meant my sister Fiona and I had to make alternative seating arrangements, as we were the youngest of the five children. We sat on the hearth on either side of the fire, only changing sides when our faces started to look like a signal flag.

Fiona was closest to me in age. There was only eighteen months between us, but I had 3 other sisters. There was only 6 years between Donna, who was the eldest, and me, the youngest. We all slept in the same bedroom. When we were smaller we all slept in the same bed, but as we got older my parents had gradually filled the room with a wardrobe, chest of drawers, blanket box, set of bunk beds, a full size bed, and a cot, which was put up every night. The room was wallpapered with wood chips, which had been painted over. There were places at the sides of the beds where my siblings and I had enjoyed an hour or two picking the wood chips out. Linoleum covered the floor, but since we rarely saw it, I can't remember the color.

Donna had claimed the cot so that she got to sleep alone. The rest of us played musical beds every few months depending on whom we were talking to at the time. A patchwork quilt my mother made covered the full size bed, and there were sleeping bags on the bunks and the cot. My mum had decided this would save her making the beds; she was only 4ft 11 and hated trying to make the top bunk. However, she got the sleeping bags in a sale, and they were a hideous color. They were muddy brown with a fluorescent

orange lining. The only window in the room looked down onto the street. During the long summer days, my sisters and I would sit in the window, watching life passing us by.

My mum was wonderful at 'making do.' Years later I wondered how she had managed with all of us in that tiny house. She was most often found in the kitchen. She hated cooking, but with a family of seven, she had little choice. The scullery was tiny, less than 8 ft wide. The back door was on one wall, and the right wall was entirely taken up by a dazzlingly white porcelain box sink with a small bleached wooden draining board to the right of it. The cooker and a small set of shelves tucked under the stairwell completed it. The opposite wall was taken up with a drop leaf table, which my father had made and installed. It was solid pine, two inches thick, and when opened, it was three feet square. This was to be mum's worktable, for when it was up, there wasn't room for anyone else in the scullery.

Fiona was often to be found under the table either eating sugar from the bowl or dipping her finger in the butter and sucking it. There was also one memorable occasion when I was desperate to visit the outhouse, and not wanting to disturb my mother who was filling a huge pot on the table with potatoes, I decided just to crawl under it. Unfortunately, I hit the leg on the way through and the table and all its contents hurtled down onto my head. My mother was less concerned with the two-inch cut I received than the ruined potatoes.

We had no fridge in those days and the perishable foods were kept in the wee room. This was a small room beside the kitchen that opened out into the living room. Some of the smaller families used theirs as a dining room, and others had knocked down the interior wall between this room and the scullery to make a bigger kitchen. This

actually meant we had three rooms downstairs instead of two. Our extra room held a huge bucket of ice-cold water for the milk and butter. A small cupboard stood in the corner, which the remainder of the food stayed in. This room also housed the washing machine and the terminally full basket of laundry. My mum worked as a seamstress in a clothing factory and she kept her old but reliable Singer sewing machine in there. She always had a huge box full of material of every color and pattern there ever was. My sisters and I often spent hours in there dressing our dolls with the unneeded scraps. There was only a tiny window high up in the wall in there, and since the only form of heating in the whole house was the coal fire in the living room, it stayed cold. No doubt that was why we stored the food in there.

The house was always cold in the winter. The heat from the fire in the living room never seemed to reach the bedrooms. Bedtimes meant gathering up your hot water bottle and dressing more warmly than you had during the day. Socks were kept on; singlets and cardigans went under and over pajamas. There were at least 4 blankets on the big bed, and those of us with the sleeping bags got an extra one.

Despite the hardships that we endured while we were growing up, my sisters and I remember that house with fondness. We were closer then than when we eventually moved to a bigger house that had four bedrooms. We didn't play together as we had before when we had crowded into that overfull bedroom. Sometimes things don't change for the better. Sometimes seven into five will go.

