

Hope and Shame By Stephanie Albrow

I was the eldest, then our Peter, Lynn and our Gail. Times were hard and me Mam and Dad didn't have much money. Things were rough for us, our Gail slept in me Dad's old toolbox when she was a baby. Me Mam did what she could and always made sure we had smiles on our faces and food in us tummies. We had some good times in those days, we made our own fun.

The summers were best. We spent hours playing in t'woods, We'd be off bird nesting, making dens, putting up rope swings and scrumping apples. I'd turn up back home before it went dark, dirty from head to toe with cuts on me knees. Me Dad used to say to our Mam that we "slept better if she put us to bed mucky". They were wonderful times them summers but they quickly came to an end and we'd start school again wearing pass me down shorts and miserable faces.

Mrs Wicks was our Teacher. We all fought over seat places and after messing around for a bit, settled in our seats and did our best to concentrate. She told us that we were going to be doing potato prints that week. You know, cutting a spud in half then carving out a pattern, dipping it in paint and stamping it on paper. I liked doing stuff like that, I'd always have a big smile on me face when we were allowed to make something. She said we needed "to bring a knife in from home, so we could carve out our patterns on the potato tops". You were allowed to bring things from home like that back then.

The next day we started on our potatoes. Most of the kids had penknives to carve out nice patterns. Patterns you could get right clever with if you had a penknife. I didn't have a penknife. Me Mam had given me a whacking big butter knife to take, which put butter on bread lovely but was rubbish for carving into spuds. I tried making an "M" for me name, that just made a mess. Mrs Wicks gave me another to try but it was no good, You just couldn't do any detail with a butter knife, it was like using a spoon. I looked around at the other kids and what they were carving: Stars, faces, love-hearts, a cat and a fancy "S" for little Sal. I sat down and watched as all of them carved their wonderful intricate designs. All I could make was some sort of a blob. I told Mrs Wicks it was a cloud. She said smiling, "Well done Mick that's nice" and she walked away. She knew it was rubbish too.

As I left school that day I was right fed up. I had to walk home through the woods and onto the waste ground that was at the back of our house. While I was walking, I was thinking about how much I wanted a pen-knife like all the other kids. My potato stamps would be as good as theirs if I only had a proper knife to cut with. I walked further across the spare land. It was smelly and nothing much grew on it. I walked on kicking stones with me boots. I really wanted a penknife ... If I prayed to God ... he

might get me one. If I said The Lord's Prayer. On me knees. Then he might get me one.

I looked around to make sure no one from the houses could see me holding me hands together to say a prayer. I got on me knees, held me hands together and shut me eyes, right tight like. "Our father who art in heaven, hallowed by thy name..." I said it from start to finish. Only time I'd ever meant it to be honest. Amen.

I put me hands into the ground and started to dig. I scratched away more and more earth, the smell was almost enough to make you sick. I dug deeper and deeper for a good five minutes until it made me hands sore.

I stopped digging and in the bottom of the hole I'd made I could see something. I dug around it and pulled it out. It was covered in hard mud and rust. I rubbed it on me shorts and could see its shape. It was a pen-knife.

I ran straight home dead fast, jumping over piles of rubble and not caring that I was missing any good skimming stones on the way. I hopped over our back fence and landed on me Dads grass roller, picked meself up, shot off up the garden, dodging the sheets on the line and into the kitchen. Me Mam and Dad were sat by the range. I were out of breath and all sweaty. "Our Mick what have you been up to? You'd better of not been scrumping at the vicar's again?" I was a bit unsure to tell them what I'd found, in case I got in trouble, but I had said The Lord's Prayer and he thought it was ok. So I told them what I'd done. I don't think they believed me for one minute, but Me Dad took it over to the sink and cleaned it up for me. He made a proper job as well. It was a nice little knife with a tortoiseshell handle and two blades. After he had oiled them they opened right smoothly. I took it from me Dad's hand, and held it up to the light. It was beautiful, not ornate like, but beautiful to me. I had a pen-knife, Mick White had got a penknife! I was on top of the world.

Weeks passed, and I took me knife everywhere with me. I carved me name in trees, dug out worms from the garden to go fishing with, even pulled a stone out of Uncle Terrence's work boots. It was great. I slept with it under me pillow and put it under the clock on the mantle- piece while we had our tea.

Time passed. It was a dry and sunny Saturday morning. A good day for drying. Saturday mornings were always good fun. Flash Gordon was on at the picture house and all the kids went. We set off through the woods. We walked for a while then I stopped. I told them all that if anyone tried to grab us I could protect us all. I stood on top of an old tree trunk and took me knife out, waving it around, "Just let anyone try anything in here... I'll get 'em, I'll get 'em". I wanted to protect all of us if someone might try and grab us. I was eight years old and thought I were John Wayne.

Handsworth Plaza was full of kids on a Saturday morning. Sneaking in for free was

half the fun back then. We'd all rush through the big double doors, charging down the steps clambering onto them lovely red velvet seats. They were roomy in them days, comfy too. I sat down. There were some lasses sat a few seats on from me. They were smiling at me and started giggling. I wanted to impress them. I thought to meself "I know, I'll slash the seats with me knife". I pushed meself a little bit higher up on me seat and took the penknife out of me back pocket and the put the knife down to the velvet. I made sure the girls were looking, I was just about to start slashing away, when I dropped the knife on the floor. I had to be quick because the cartoons were on soon and I'd not get to see 'em. I got down on me hands and knees and searched for the penknife. Well, I had sticky ice cream wrappers stuck to me hands, there were chewing gum and tab ends all over the floor. I looked under me seat, the one in front and as far as I could crawl along. The cartoons came and went and I was still mucking about on the floor feeling with me hands trying to find that knife. By the time Flash Gordon had started I was covered in sweet wrappers, pop and cigarette ash. I couldn't tell the usherette what I was looking for or she'd throw me out. It was nowhere to be seen. It had vanished as quickly as I had found it. My penknife was gone.

I'm 66 now. When I look back, all those years ago, it's hard to believe the story of me and that beautiful penknife. I truly believe I found it through goodness and lost it through evil.

A lesson that took me many years to learn.