

Lesley Nicol

My father was a GP in the steel town of Irlam, Lancashire, and the house I lived in for the first 10 years of my life doubled up as his surgery. People would enter through a side entrance and go into a waiting room. When I was about eight, I remember looking out of the loo window and seeing a patient sitting on the steps. All I could see was two bloody hands sticking out — later on in life, it dawned on me that maybe they had slit their wrists.

I didn't find it traumatic. I was used to weird things happening. In those days, people would come day and night if there was an emergency. Often, I'd be having dinner with Mum and my older brother, Philip, and Dad would walk through with a kidney dish of dressings and God knows what.

Surgery was morning and evening, and in between he'd be on visits. Then there were the night calls. I remember, when I was quite young, hearing him say, 'You wouldn't allow an airline pilot to work these hours.' He could work a full day and be up three times in the night.

We moved to the house in 1953, when I was just a few months old. It was next to a Catholic church, and was a 1930s-built detached property with funny pebbledash and four bedrooms. It was bitterly cold, as these were the days before central heating. We used to jump out of bed and rush into my parents' room to get dressed in front of their two-bar electric fire.

We had a grand piano that Dad used to play, and I would sing along. I remember watching my grandmother cry as I sang *Away in a Manger* one Christmas. I wore pink National Health glasses and Mum had put a tea towel on my head. I was the Virgin Mary, obviously. I used to sit under the grand piano a lot. I was terribly shy and that was my safe place.

My mother had a huge impact on me because, as well as being a busy doctor's wife, she was an actress. Her stage name was Sue Russell — she took Dad's first name as her surname. As a young woman, she'd been destined for Rada, but then war broke out and she didn't go.

When I was small, she worked as a presenter on *What's in Store*, which would be broadcast live every Sunday evening from ABC studios, in Manchester. We used to wave her off on Sunday morning — she'd always look terribly glamorous, with painted nails and a fancy coat. She'd leave us with a stew on the stove, because Daddy would be making supper. Then, in the evening, we'd watch her on the telly. In 1960, she had a tiny part in the second episode of *Coronation Street*. I remember her telling us they were worried it wasn't going to run the full course.

The house was noisy, as it was on a main road. In the night, I used to hear what I thought was the sound of babies crying. I assumed it was coming from next door, where a lovely, eccentric Irish lady called Miss Walsh used to live, looking after the Catholic priests from the church. I had this image in my head of her with rows of prams full of bawling babies.

When I recalled this memory as an adult, I thought I must have mistaken the babies for cats. Then, last year, a woman from the house contacted me. It's used as a day nursery now, and I told her I remembered lying in my front bedroom, hearing babies crying. She said that was odd, as she was absolutely certain that a little girl haunted the house. She said she felt a spooky presence there. It made me feel a bit weird, because, if that's true, it must have been there when I was young. Yet I certainly don't remember the house as an unpleasant or frightening place.

We moved when I was 10, and went to a quieter home in the country. Dad continued to work at the surgery, and as a teenager I used to help out on reception, which was exciting, as I got to wear a white coat. The actress in me always loved dressing up.

Interview by
Kate Bohdanowicz

✚ Lesley Nicol supports the Stroke Association's *Life After Stroke* awards, which celebrate the achievements of stroke survivors and their families and carers (stroke.org.uk/lasa)

ST 

SUNDAY TIMES SPOTIFY

Visit spoti.fi/nicol to hear the tracks that remind Lesley Nicol of her childhood home.

Not on Spotify yet?

Go to thesundaytimes.co.uk/playlists

The actress Lesley Nicol, who plays Mrs Patmore in *Downton Abbey*, recalls growing up in Lancashire

