

FOLLOWING THE LONG THREAD HOME

This is dedicated to my Dad Steve, my aunty Shirley and my sister Sophie.

Homes are special, but family is precious.

When I think about where I feel most at home these days, it's here in my living room in Crownhill. There's a coffee-brown leather armchair in the window, perfect for curling up with a book or sitting cross-legged with my laptop to write. This is not just home, it's a portal, a gateway to many other times and places. If I close my eyes and picture myself opening my living room door, I can step through to the last place I called home.

Shutting that door behind me, I'm back in the shared bedroom of the semi-detached house in Leicester where I grew up. It's decorated in the vivid 80s colours of my childhood, violet and pink My Little Ponies skipping across the wallpaper, 'Save The Panda' duvet covers on two tiny single beds. The room is dimly lit by a ceramic nightlight in the shape of a fairy-tale cottage filled with little mice. I open the bedroom window and push myself up onto the sill. I crawl through carefully, and travel back into the past.

I drop down from the sill on the other side and look around. My parents' first home together, a small flat near the top of a pair of tower blocks in Leicester city centre. It would be years before they would be able to buy the house, a long time before me and my sister will even be born, but this is where home began for our family. The view across the night city is spectacular with sparkling ropes of streetlights threading the darkness. It's snowing outside but the vortex between the buildings swirls the flakes upwards rather than down. I pay my respects to any lingering ghosts, and leave through the front door.

I emerge in turn in the hallway of the house where my Dad grew up. I do remember this home, a two-up, two-down terrace in an older part of Leicester. My grandma raised seven children here on her own, but I mostly remember the warmth of the sitting room and the hot-dust scent of the electric fire. I'd sit on the rag rug she'd made, and play with the collection of buttons she kept in an old biscuit tin, hunting through for bright treasures. If I imagine opening the back door and stepping further back into history and through into the first place she called home, I would find myself in a similar cramped house just a few streets over, no indoor plumbing, a tin bath steaming in front of an open fire.

I could go further back still, passing through one portal after another. I'd go from terraces and tenements to Regency homes, from Anglo-Saxon halls to Roman villas, from Bronze Age roundhouses to Neolithic huts, all the way back to eventually emerge blinking into the smoke of our first fire-lit cave.

Our homes are all linked behind us, a thread traced by memory and imagination, winding through all our pasts and back into the stories we will always share.

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