



Back in the late 1970's and 1980's, there were half-constructed buildings, standing idle. There were more mobile homes around and I remember a tight knit community. So many people were friendly. If anybody knocked on your door, you would just open it. You didn't have to worry about bogus callers. There were tower blocks with no security intercoms. You could hear birds singing first thing in the morning and at 6 o'clock in the evening. The docks in Wapping had gloomy, derelict buildings and a park opposite that was hardly ever used. The Rotherhithe Tunnel was constantly loaded with heavy traffic. The shops were a long walk away. St. Katherine's Dock had no end of new buildings with boat houses situated nearby. There was a lighthouse and artists would paint the boats, river,



I remember a character from *The Circus is Coming*, by Noel Streatfeild: she was called Fifi Moulin and she wore a trench coat. I loved the image that girl conjured up in my imagination: such easeful elegance, such nonchalance: a certain je-ne-sais-quoi, as the Oxford dictionary might say.

Now, fifty or so years later, I still want to be Fifi and live in Paris or St Jean de Luz and be able to catch the Euro Star without having to go through customs and just arrive at the Gare du Nord. To pop in to one of my favourite cafés, like the Pré in St Germain or the Piaf bar in the 20th quarter of Paris. Buy some unctuous, creamy French cheeses and bring them back and put them in my fridge and be like Fifi.

Or to travel on across the border and hear those clear consonants enunciated in a Spanish café, as the waiter serves me with 'una tónica': a tall glass of bubbling tonic water, enveloping chunky ice cubes, decorated with a lemon slice. So sharp. So Spanish. So European.

The last time I drank English tea with milk in it was circa 1980; the last time I had a bath was in 2005. I prefer showers and being drenched in continental customs: Europe!

I remember the blissful joy I would feel, in anticipation of seeing my dad when going to meet him after work sometimes. His face always broke out into a broad smile when he saw me. My heart smiled back as I jumped into his arms, melting into a hug.

In that single moment everything fell away: The rhythmic clacking of shoes on the tiled concourse as commuters rushed to catch their trains; the nasal, high-pitched voice of the announcer over the tannoy; the whirring sound of engines and screeching of brakes as



trains arrived and departed on the tracks. As suddenly as they had left, the sounds rushed back in, crowding in on us demanding attention as we disconnected from our embrace.

With a few waves and chuckles, my Dad said goodbye to his workmates. Taking my hand in his, we left on our adventure, visiting one of the royal parks.