

My childhood – Part 1

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This was lurking about, half hidden on Wattpad. I think it needed to come home though, to a place on my website. If anything could be said to have defined me as a person, it's the events in this piece of history.

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I'm going to tell the story of my childhood. I must warn you it's not a story for the squeamish, but it is true. If I'm making assumptions or I simply don't know something I will say, the rest is how it happened. It's not going to be a fleshed out piece of work, no character development. It's not that kind of piece, this is all real.

Much of this story relates to the 40's and 50's and anyone who could be punished or blamed is dead. Why tell the story now? I've always considered myself the sole survivor of 6 or 7 children. I know the names of Geoffrey and Kathleen who survived long enough to leave a footprint of toys and blankets etc, but the others have just faded nameless into history. It is for them that I'm telling this story now.

There have been a few occasions when I really did think the dead kids were with me, offering support to get me through yet another beating. I was a kid, so don't send for the guys in white coats. It was probably a delusion, but one that helped me survive.

My father was married before he met my mother and there are half siblings from that marriage still around and they mean the world to me, but of the 6 or 7 children my mother bore my father, I am the last, the sole survivor.

My mother was the problem. It was the late 40's with the war just over, rationing still on and a brand new NHS choking under the number of people needing treatment, so my mother and her antics were missed.

Today they'd call her a sociopath, a psychotic, or a personality disorder. I'm not sure if these names help and she probably didn't fit neatly into any of those headings. I visited her regularly until she died and made sure when she died peacefully at 80 that she was buried with my father. Why do this for a monster? I've asked myself that question and the only way I can make myself comfortable with it is saying "No matter what else she was my mother."

When she was quite ill I took her out for the day and she admitted to lying to me about failing my 11 plus. I had in fact passed and she'd thrown away the letter and lied to me. Why? I didn't even ask her. After all those years I knew it was just hatred and malice. She seemed to have an endless ocean of venom and malice just waiting for a chance to strike. By the time she told me about this I wasn't even angry.

A lifetime of far more evil malice had made this fact quite easy to take. She reacted to everything with the emotions of a 6 year old child. She had never had the chance to go to grammar school, so neither was her son. On one occasion she had brought in a gardener to look after her small garden. This surprised me because she was always saying how much she loved to look after it. I asked her about it and got about 30 minutes of "It's my money and

anyway you stink". When she was younger she was more clever with the insults, but it was still basically a 6 years old's emotions coming from an adult.

My father was an "anything for a quiet life" person and a wife prone to rages and violence wasn't designed to give him a quiet life. He drank too much and on one memorable occasion got fighting drunk before a school speech day and hit my chemistry teacher on the nose. In a way after the initial trouble died down it helped me get through school, as they now understood a little of my home life.

Was he a monster? No, not really. He must have known what was going on, but he chose to ignore it and make out nothing bad was happening. His entire life he wanted to leave home at 6.30, arrive back at 6.30 in the evening to a cooked meal and watch junk TV until bed time. Anything that got in the way of that he did his best to ignore. Plus my father was 17 years older than my mother and as far as I can tell from diaries started seeing her when she was just 15 or 16. They had a long affair and finally ran off to London together when she was pregnant in 1947.

He left behind a wife with several young children. He had been a big church goer and his church completely cut him off once the affair came to light. So not only did he have the guilt of running off with a pregnant girl to cope with, he was also worried about divine retribution. No wonder he kept quiet about what went on.

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My Childhood – Part 2

Of course, my parents were under pressure. My father lied to his wife and in the summer of 1947 arrived in London with my mother who was then 21 and very pregnant. They found a grimy room in a house in Highbury and paid a month's rent. The idea was for my father to then return to Yorkshire and return with his belongings. From the letters they both sent and my mother's diary it became clear that once my father was back in his comfortable house and in the bosom his family he didn't intend to leave.

She found herself deserted in a strange city with no job, no money and just a few weeks rent left on the room she lived in. Her letters to my father became more and more desperate and needy with "my beloved" ending almost every line. His in return became more distant and hinted it might not be a good time to leave his young children. He sent a bit more money for the rent, but no date for his return. My father who doesn't come out of all this well seems to have decided dumping the problem girl in London would enable him to resume his "quiet life".

Then my mother played a blinder! She sent a telegram to my father to arrive when he was at work, knowing his wife was sure to open it. She kept it short, but said she was in London, felt deserted, with child and running out of money. The result was my father being social ostracised in Yorkshire. The family were Wesleyans and it's difficult to overestimate the reaction they had to his adultery and the imminent arrival of a bastard child. Within a few days my father was in London with a suitcase and nowhere else to go. He may not have wanted it, but his life with my mother in a grubby room in Highbury was about to begin.

The pressures didn't end there. It was an age when furniture stores still only sold double beds to married couples. A man running off with a girl young enough to be his daughter was almost a hanging offence. My mother started calling herself Mrs Cowling and wearing a cheap wedding ring. Then there was the deserted wife in Yorkshire. As a couple they lived in a rather nice house inherited from my grandfather and she either wanted ownership of the

house or decent amounts paid in maintenance for the children. My mother kept some of her letters and she sounded desperate for money and close to destitution. My father who I have mentioned doesn't come out of this at all well, completely ignored her.

Today County Court judgements are ten a penny and almost a badge of street cred. In those days they were rare and a judgement for non-payment of child maintenance was very rare. My father received one from the wife he'd deserted, saying pay up or we'll send in the bailiffs.

He had no alternative but to sign the family home over to her in return for her stopping further actions for child maintenance against him.

Now my father and mother really only did have each other and a fairly austere life in London to look forward to.

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My Childhood Part 3

Thank you for sticking with me this far on the journey. I'm now going to make assumptions and tell you things about my childhood that will take you to a very dark and nasty place. But first a bit more background on the late 40's and early 50's.

As I mentioned the NHS had just started and was totally choked by the numbers of people needing to be treated for ailments we now get treated in days. The war had just ended and rationing was still in place. The welfare & social services we take for granted simply didn't exist and no one had the time or inclination to ask questions about infant mortality. If a local Doctor did say anything it was more than likely hinder rather than help, as I'll explain later.

Births and deaths were treated differently then to how they are now. You had a month to register the birth of a child and once a birth was registered a death certificate was required and people asked questions. If the child died in the first month and no birth certificate was issued, then a death certificate wasn't needed and it was as if the person never existed. Almost as though it had been a stillborn baby and it seems few questions were asked.

When my mother died, I found several small cards from Islington Cemetery that simply said "Consecrated Ground" then in the name section "Cowling" with no first name. Then a grave number. The undertaker would ask someone burying an adult if a small baby could be put in the grave as well and if the family said yes, the poor mite went into the grave, unnamed and forgotten about.

I also found a proper funeral card for Geoffrey who lived for six months. Of the baby my mother was carrying in 1947 I can find no trace. How many children did my mother have? I was the last and from the papers I've found there were at least four before me or maybe five.

I was born on 30th November 195X and rather chillingly my birth wasn't registered until the last possible legal date to do so. My father had gone into the registrar in Holloway North on the morning of the 24th December, Christmas Eve, to register my birth. No doubt giving it until the last moment in case of an incident that might have made it unnecessary.

Was my mother a poor unfortunate woman who lost several children in awful circumstances, but who kept trying for a child to love? I might have thought that if my

mother had been a loving parent who had cherished me and made sure I had the best chances in life. My mother wasn't like that, my mother most definitely wasn't like that.

When I was born my father "threw himself out of work" as my mother called it. My mother described this as the sign of him being a wastrel, but in my entire life my father left home at 6.30 am in a suit and went to work. He never took time off for colds and flu and the only time I can remember him being off work was for major surgery and he moaned about that.

For him to take six months or so off work to look after me was important to him and he'd never done it for any of the other children. My father looked after me until I was old enough to be entrusted to a child minder. There were other occasions when my father took over roles normally associated with mothers and one reason, I'm so ready to forgive his failings is that if he hadn't intervened at key moments in my life, there is no doubt in my mind that I wouldn't be here today.

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My Childhood Part 4

This is getting harder to write as I get closer to the violence, yet the whole point of writing all this has to be to get it out in the open, so I can't avoid it. We lived in several different rooms of the large old house in Highbury and even had a basement flat with access to the garden, but most of my memories are of two rooms on the top floor. Like a lot of old houses in multiple occupation there was one bathroom on the next floor down used by about twenty or so people. We were lucky in having a toilet on the top floor that only us and the old man who had a room next to us shared.

My mother hated me talking to the other tenants and this made her angry. Quite a lot made her angry and from an early age I learned that making mother angry generally meant being knocked across the room.

I was a "Clumsy child," which is strange because I've never been a clumsy adult.

Now hospitals and doctors look for signs of clumsy children and question how injuries were obtained. Then, they didn't !

Luckily things heal when you're a kid and my long-term legacy is a permanently deaf left ear, a broken nose that still looks a bit odd, a broken coccyx (tail bone) that is painful and lower back problems. If I grow a beard the old invisible scars leave trails in it, so I keep clean shaven. The worst long-term problem is having the kind of sinus problems normally only boxers get. I'm not going to write a long list of bad days, just a few events that stuck in my memory.

The problem with childhood memory is that my age is difficult to pin down. The first serious violence in public that I think of, broke my nose for the first time was when I was very small. My mother was a nightmare on buses !

I was either held so tight I couldn't breathe, or left to bounce against the seat in front. My mother chuntered to herself all the time. Some of it was audible, but most was a silent argument with some inner demon. Often when the internal argument reached the stage of her getting angry, I was bounced off the back of the bus seat in front.

On one occasion the bus braked just as I was thrown and the next thing I remember was being in hospital with a swollen face and lots of worried looking nurses around me. Why didn't I tell ? I'd been told from a very early age that telling would get me far worse.

Didn't our local doctor ask questions ? On one occasion when I was able to walk but still under school age, I was concentrating on whatever small kids concentrate on with my tongue stuck out. I must have missed my mother mentioning my name in her constant muttering and the next thing I knew was hearing "Don't you ignore me !" and a blow to the head that sent me across the kitchen.

My tongue was bitten so bad it was almost severed and blood was gushing everywhere. I remember my mother pulling and dragging me the length of Highbury Fields to our doctors and that meant another trip to the hospital.

The doctor must have had his suspicions because he told my mother that "spanking the top of the leg was harmless if she felt a spank was needed". Oh, I do hope doctors aren't still saying that ! My mother now thought she had medical authority to beat the crap out of me 24/7. I can remember wedging myself against the wall and yelling at her that I'd tell everyone about her because she was hurting me so badly. I have a permanent problem with my lower back from those beatings, but I learned a small weapon to fight back with. Screaming brought the neighbours and threats to tell about her did scare her. It didn't always work, but it was something.

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My Childhood Part 5

What caused my mother's violence ? I think part of it was disappointment and knowing she'd had to force the issue to get my father to live with her. Plus, some of it was pure jealousy of someone else getting Dad's attention.

When she was in her late 70's she said something or did something during a hospital visit that alarmed one of the doctors. He was so alarmed that he set her up with fortnightly psychiatric sessions. They seemed to do her good, but of course it was all far too late.

One good point from the sessions was her need to confess and seek some kind of redemption. I found out about my 11 plus exams and many other lies & nastinesses over the years. I asked her why she's been so cruel and first of all she tried to blame the doctor who told her to spank my upper leg. Then she simply said "That's how my father treated me."

There was no emotion to her words, almost like someone saying when it rains people get wet. Her father beat her, so she beat me. She even copied his style and nasty tricks. I am aware there is this potential dark side waiting in my psyche and all my life I've strived to keep it well crushed and under foot. Probably the reason I'm such a wet liberal is because I'm determined not to pick up family traits. Did I ever ask my mother outright about the other children ? I'll deal with that at the end of the story.

I did say this wouldn't be a list of when I was beaten, but one major event happened which needs telling, as it was a real attempt to make sure I never got older than four. The bathroom in Highbury was on the next floor down and on Sunday I had my bath night. It was a ritual I still remember and the details of the night I'm going to tell you about are still very vivid.

The routine was for me to get into my pyjamas and mum would take me to the bathroom. Then she'd run hot water from a gas geyser until there was enough very hot water in the bath, then she'd run the cold until the water was the right temperature. Then off would come my PJs and mum would lift me into the bath and I'd enjoy a quarter of an hour getting clean and playing in the bath.

This particular night was different. Mother was having a mood and the chuntering was fairly bad. The tap went on for the hot water from the geyser. How hot was it? My mother wouldn't put her hand in it until the cold had been running some time. The hot water stayed on longer than usual and there was quite a depth, certainly enough to almost reach my knees as I was about to find out. The cold water never came and even though only four I knew I was in trouble.

As my mother started to remove my PJs, I told her she'd forgotten the cold water. She had the look of hatred on her face I knew so well and held me firmly while my clothes came off. I was in a bit of a panic by then and started shouting, but she held me firm and into the bath I went.

The pain was staggering, how bad? Imagine standing in a boiling kettle. I screamed the place down. My mother had obviously decided I'd been enough bother for the last four years and I was now expendable. I was on my feet and I was determined to stay on my feet. I knew if I was pushed under the water the pain, I was now in would seem like a picnic. So, I fought back and screamed my lungs out for my father. All the time I could see her face with a look of pure hate. My father and a neighbour had heard the screaming and arrived in time. I remember the sense of relief as he lifted me from the bath. There was another trip to hospital, perhaps several and visits from the doctor. All I remember is creams being rubbed on and bandages changed and lots of pain.

My father again took time off work to look after me and I couldn't walk for a long time. I developed a pretty good technique for getting about on my hands and knees which at least wasn't painful. My mother still looked at me with pure hate and I knew for the rest of my life I'd have to watch my back with her. When I couldn't walk for several months, more threats came when Dad wasn't about. Luckily Dad heard some of it and for the first and only time I remember him threatening her if she laid a hand on me.

Next came a good part of my life. I caught TB! This meant years away from home to go the Great Ormond Street hospital and Tadworth. I was really lucky and it kept coming back, so by the time I was at home again I was a bit too big to have another accident in the bath.

It may seem strange, but I think of catching TB as a lucky break that kept me alive.

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My Childhood Part 6 (Final)

If anyone is hoping for a joke ending or a disclaimer that this is just a work of fiction, that isn't coming. As far as I can tell from my own experiences, letters & diaries and talking to those involved, this is a true story.

When I was almost five, I had the good fortune to catch Tuberculosis (TB). My life was like living in a war zone and I was terribly run down. Childhood pictures show me with a constant worried look on my face, and it's no wonder I caught everything.

Measles, Mumps, Germa Measles, constant colds and in the end, TB got hold of me. It meant a long time in Great Ormond Street children's hospital and then months in the convalescent home in Tadworth. I loved it, all the nurses seemed to be friendly Irish girls and I made lots of friends. Tadworth especially had long lawns and mysterious woods and even a farm with pigs close to it. For a gang of young London kids, it was perfect !

The TB kept coming back, so I was there until I was almost eight and by then I was big enough to go to school and keep out of Mum's way. I did make the occasional guest appearance at Finsbury Park infants and I seem to remember winning a prize for growing a daffodil, but my school life didn't really get going until I was eight.

I'd love to say the beatings stopped, but Mother was always waiting for an opportunity and often I'd find myself lying on the pavement wondering where the blow had come from. If you see this in the street, get involved ! There is no excuse for knocking kids about in the street !

When did it all end ? I was fourteen and I was doing well at school and popular. I had one of those moments when a light comes on and you realise "I don't deserve this". I was a model kid, most parents would have been proud, yet I often went home to be ambushed by my mother and knocked to the ground.

One night I got home from school and Mum was waiting behind the door and I received a blow to the back of the head. "Where have you been, school closed 30 minutes ago?" I heard and then she came for me. Breathing heavy the look of hate, fists clenched and I decided enough was enough.

I grabbed her by the shoulders and pushed her hard against the wall. I told her I had done nothing wrong and wasn't going to put up with it. I said if she tried to hurt me again. I'd hurt her, very badly ! Not the sort of reconciliation you see in a TV drama, and it was one of the hardest things I have done in my life. It worked !

She threatened to tell my father and told her to go ahead and I had plenty to tell him about her. She never did say a word and when my father got home, she was all smiles the image of a loving mother.

My mother never laid another finger on me, but the malice went on in lies and nastiness. Girl friends who were told lies, things went missing from my pockets, all my letters opened. The list of petty nastiness is endless.

Because I stopped taking girlfriends home, she punished me in her own way. She told everyone I was gay. Not that I'm anti-gay or anything, it was the spiteful intent that hurt. Of course, some people believed her, what mother would lie about that ? Mine did and about many other things too numerous to list.

In the end I went away to college and never went back. My father lived less than a year after I left home. Not that I think mother had a conscious hand in killing him, but because living with all that hate, venom and constant nagging was too much for him. He looked awful when I visited, but he should have stood up to her and sorted the problem out years before.

One event after the death of my father, now comes to mind. He died on the way to work of a massive heart attack. By the time he arrived in Greenwich hospital, there was nothing they

could do for him. My mother attacked the hospital staff, I have no idea why. I was on my way across London from work.

By the time I arrived, the police had her in the police station, because she'd assaulted them. There were no charges, as long as I promised to take her straight home and get some sedatives from her GP. To me this shows her true nature coming out, but with the death of my father and things to arrange, I'd forgotten about the incident for years.

Did I ever ask my mother about the other children's deaths? No. She was in a mood to confess before she died and started reading the bible. I learned much and there was one occasion when she started talking about the children. It would have been very easy to ask, but what then?

There is no doubt in my mind that my mother "got rid" of many of those children, but having it confirmed by her is another thing. Then I would have had to do something about it. I took the coward's way out and didn't ask. She did however admit killing off several pets who had died from "accidents" when I was a kid.

This has been a hard story to tell and before this only my friend who I've known for years had been told. I think I owed it to the memory of the kids who never got a chance to grow up. As a child you tend to respect adults, believe what they think of you. I grew up thinking that I had to be a truly terrible person, if my mother wanted to drown me in boiling water. It stayed with me, that feeling of being unworthy of love and affection. It probably explains why most of my relationships have been a disaster.

Books had been my place to escape to as a kid, worlds of fiction where heroes slew monsters like my mother. It's hardly surprising that I now write dark fiction. After that kind of upbringing, I was hardly going to write anything light and fluffy!

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~The End~