

WALKING
OVER
EGGSHELLS



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1 DUBLIN EARLY CHILDHOOD

The first time I tried to leave home, I was three years old. Not that I could have told you at the time, but many years later, while looking at some childhood photos I asked my mother what age I was when I wore the red hat and coat. "Three," she replied and I remember quite clearly putting them on for my first intended escape into the outside world.

It was a cold, overcast day in a quiet suburb of Dublin at the beginning of the fifties. We were in the lounge, and my mother was sitting by the fire listening to the radio. I walked quietly to the door, hoping she wouldn't notice, but as I reached up towards the door handle, she reminded me in her cold, hard voice, not to let the cold air in from the hallway. I opened the door just wide enough to squeeze through and pulled it shut behind me.

I dived under my bed and pulled out a small brown, cardboard suitcase. I'd thought about this departure for some time and had already made a mental list of what I would need on the journey to my new life. I packed three Noddy books, my favourite doll, a comb and a clean pair of underpants. I struggled into my coat and hat and I was ready to run away.

Quietly I crept back along the hallway to the front door and gazed up at the door latch, it was way above my head.

"And where do you think you're going?" My mother stood in the lounge doorway, her arms folded across her chest and she looked furious. Having got this far, there was no turning back.

"I'm leaving home," I squeaked.

"Oh, really, and where are you going?"

"I'm, er....." I knew exactly where I was going, I'd thought about it very carefully, but I was not about to tell my mother, then she would know where I was and maybe, just maybe, come and try to bring me back.

"Little girls who want to leave home should be tall enough to reach the door knob. If you go, then don't bother coming back, I never want to see you again. I don't want you, you're nothing but a nuisance. I wanted a good little girl who would do as she was told, not a bad, bad little girl like you." My mother went back into the lounge and slammed the door.

I blinked back the tears, why couldn't my mother love me? I tried so hard to be good. Earlier that morning I had broken a glass full of milk, it slipped out of my hands and crashed to the floor.

"Look what you've done now!" screamed my mother.

"I'm sorry Mummy, it fell," I burst into tears.

"Clear it up right now!"

"Yes, yes, but please don't be cross with me, please. I'm sorry, I'm sorry." I was shaking as I looked at the mess on the floor. The milk was slowly disappearing under the stove.

"You never give me any reason to like you. You're always saying 'sorry.' If you really meant it you wouldn't do the same thing again and again and again. You said 'sorry' when you broke my best cup, I suppose that just fell too? Don't say 'sorry,' 'sorry' doesn't mean anything to you."

As soon as my mother had gone back into the lounge, I dragged a chair from the kitchen, climbed up and opened the front door. I jammed the suitcase in the gap and returned the chair to its place in the kitchen. Then as quickly as I could, I grabbed the case and ran down the front driveway.

I was petrified of my mother, she was so cold and always so very, very angry, I could never, ever please her. The slightest thing I did upset her, and then I knew I would get a hiding and that hurt a lot. Not surprisingly I cried when the slipper was applied to my little legs, but the more I cried the more she hit me, "to give you something to cry about."

I wanted it all to stop and I wanted a kind, loving mummy, so the only solution I could think of, was to leave home get away from her and find a new mummy.

Five houses along the road lived Aunty Gladys and Uncle Douglas, who didn't have any children, so I knew they had a spare room I could have. They were always cheerful, always smiling and very kind. Sometimes Aunty Gladys would even give me a cuddle, so I'd decided I was going to live with them. We would laugh a lot, they would hug me every day and be nice to me and I would be happy.

I had to stand on my suitcase to reach their doorbell, and it took several attempts before I finally heard the echoing chimes from the other side of the door. It never occurred to me they might be out, and there wouldn't be anyone there to welcome me in.

I was just about to climb on my case again and ring a second time when the door opened. Aunty Gladys looked puzzled, she knew I was not allowed out of the garden by myself.

"I've run away from home and I've come to live with you," I blurted out. Uncle Douglas appeared in the doorway.

"What's this all about?" he asked.

"Lucinda has run away from home and wants to come and live with us," repeated Aunty Gladys.

It was getting chilly on the doorstep and I couldn't understand why they didn't sweep me into their arms and carry me inside. I had imagined Aunty Gladys would take me into the kitchen, offer me some hot chocolate and then we would make plans for all the wonderful things we were going to do together.

But that didn't happen, they just stared at me. What was wrong? This wasn't the way I'd planned it or dreamed about it. Why weren't they pleased to see me?

Uncle Douglas broke the silence. "You can't come and live here," he said.

"You must go home," added Aunty Gladys.

"But...." I couldn't think of anything to say. If I was not going to live here, where was I going to live?

Large tears ran down my cheeks as I just stood there. I could never go home, I knew what would happen, the slipper, Mummy screaming and shouting, I would be sent to bed with no supper, and then would come the silence and that was the worst punishment of all.

Of course I was dragged home after they telephoned my mother and told her to come and collect her daughter. It didn't take too long for the pain on my legs to wear off, no matter how hard she used the slipper, but the silence could last for days and days. When I look back, I think the record was just over a month, not one word spoken directly to me. There were plenty of asides, and remarks made to the dog, about how ungrateful the younger generation was, how badly behaved it was, and how disrespectful it was to the older generation.

At first I would beg for forgiveness, I was sorry, I would never, ever do anything wrong ever again. Please, please talk to me, please let everything be all right. I would throw my arms around her and try to climb up on her lap to kiss and make up, but she always pushed me

away.

After several days, I would get frustrated and angry and then of course, I would say or do something wrong again, and the whole cycle would start over. There were very small islands of calm among the oceans of misery, but they only lasted a day or two and then I would, often without realizing it, upset her again in some way and the beating, the anger and the silence would begin all over again.

I was born long before the days when children had rights, before children were considered real people. Then, they were regarded as the property of their parents and you were either a good child or a bad child. It was also long before the advent of Child Line, and the terms physical, sexual or emotional abuse were not everyday terms.

To the outside world, all appeared normal and content. We lived in a three bedroom bungalow on the outskirts of Dublin. We had all the modern amenities, the indoor bathroom, the telephone and the car. I'm sure there were millions of children worldwide who would have envied me my standard of living, my pretty clothes, my books and toys. I was given adequate food and I was seldom cold. But no material possessions could make up for the lack of love and the constant recriminations. Had I known there were beggars on the streets, or starving refugees with loving, caring families, I would happily have exchanged places with them.

But I had little knowledge of the outside world, mine was confined to the house and garden, with occasional trips to go shopping in the city. Even that sometimes led to disaster. I remember one particular occasion when we had met up with one of my mother's friends and her son, and we had gone for coffee in one of the smartest department stores in the city. Too young to drink coffee or tea, I was handed a fizzy drink. In those days we were not asked what we would like, it was decided for us. Gordon, two years older than me, challenged me to a race as to who could finish first. I had no idea it wasn't wise to drink fizzy drinks quickly, so I not only lost the race, but also brought it all back up over my new outfit. My mother was apoplectic and I was hauled unceremoniously out of the shop, thrown into the car, and taken home for a good hiding. Once the slippers were back on, I knew I faced several more days of silence.

In later years, I have tried to understand my mother and the way she behaved, and if I'm honest, her life had not been idyllic either.

Born to rich, colonial parents, her father was an important businessman living overseas. He owned large tracts of land, office blocks in the city, and an estate up in the hills to escape the summer heat.

My grandmother was quite a socialite in her day, and with an army of servants to care for the houses and gardens, she had little to do but play bridge and plan evening entertainments. Then of course, there was the colonial club, the races and a host of other functions to attend.

My grandfather owned and ran a widely read English language newspaper, and he was also a stringer for the Daily Mail and The Telegraph in London. He told me he hated writing, but he'd inherited the business. His family originally came from Scotland, but my great, great, grandfather was sent to China as a missionary, and soon lost his religious zeal in pursuit of commerce and journalism. His father was very successful, and while my grandfather professed to hate journalism, he certainly seemed to make a success of it.

My mother Margaret was the only surviving child, after her younger brother died at the age of two from yellow fever. I don't think she was lonely, and I don't know how much or how little affection she received from her parents, but they obviously cared for her and gave her the best of the material world.

She had her own full time nanny, and I was told she did not even visit the toilet by herself until she was seven years old. I believe she was very spoiled, had a high opinion of herself, and she would throw big temper tantrums when it was time for her to leave the adults and go home to bed. She had friends her own age to play with, sons and daughters of other colonials, and there are albums full of pictures of picnics and outings in the hot sunshine.

But war clouds were gathering on the horizon, and it was thought suitable my mother should return to England to continue her education. So my grandmother brought her back to England and Margaret was left with the Bath branch of the family, and sent to an exclusive private school. Granny returned abroad soon after.

In those days, people closed ranks on discussing anything with the youngsters that was critical about the older generation, and I only

guessed from the odd remark I overheard, that my mother created chaos in the household. She expected everyone to wait on her, and she complained bitterly about their harsh treatment. She was not used to being a member of an ordinary family with several other children, and she certainly didn't like to wait her turn for anything.

She once told me her father had sent money to buy her a new bicycle and they only got her a secondhand one. She kissed a boy, and was petrified she would get pregnant, she complained they had never told her the facts of life. However, apart from these two complaints, she never told me anything else about her time in Bath.

But even if the family loved her, it must have been hard, as she didn't see her parents again for seven years. In those days, it wasn't possible to hop on a plane and visit offspring in the school holidays. The voyage by sea took six weeks each way and it's unlikely my Grandfather could take that amount of time away from the business.

My mother was a very average student, moving on to an equally exclusive private high school for the daughters of gentlemen farmers, where the main subjects would seem to be how to catch and keep a husband. At some point my mother learned how to type and do Pitman's shorthand, but I don't believe she ever saw herself working.

Overseas things were going from bad to worse. My grandmother was sent home to England for her own safety, and my grandfather was interned as a prisoner of war by the Japanese after they invaded China. My grandmother was reunited with her daughter just before the outbreak of World War II.

It was 1939, my mother was just 18 years old and was keen to join up. She enlisted in the Army and was in the Fanny's, first learning to drive and then becoming an instructor and eventually an instructor's instructor. They drove vehicles of all kinds, lorries, ambulances and trucks.

When it was decided that Princess Elizabeth should also join the forces, the Army put together a unit based near Windsor, which would allow the Princess to return home each night to sleep at the castle. There are photographs of the unit taken in 1945, with Her Royal Highness sitting in the same group as my mother.

Even in the army, my mother must have wielded influence, as she often boasted how she would get the other girls to bring her breakfast

in bed every morning. How she got away with this I have never figured out, but she always hated early rising.

Through personal intervention by Winston Churchill, my grandfather was eventually exchanged for a Japanese prisoner and was repatriated to England. He arrived in London, with half a crown in the pocket of a borrowed suit. After a spell in hospital, he was released, and because he talked in his sleep, my grandmother discovered he had been working for MI 6.

I worshipped my grandfather. There were whispered tales of brave deeds and secret meetings. He, along with others, had informed the Americans and the British of the imminent bombings at Pearl Harbour and as we now know, these warnings were ignored with the objective of bringing America into the war. My grandfather had met and interviewed Lawrence of Arabia and he was friends with Chaing Kai-shek. As such, he was not a favourite of Mao Tse-tung who ousted the former leader, exiling him to Formosa, now known as Taiwan.

Grandfather had been kept in solitary confinement by the Japanese for over two years and been tortured. He was taken out into the yard several times to face a firing squad. The soldiers fired blanks at him. The only reason he survived was the attention of the local people who had once worked for him, and who slipped him extra food and blankets. In prison, he kept his mind agile by reciting everything from times tables to chemical formulae. He drew imaginary pictures on his cell wall and never gave up hope that one day he would be released.

I wish I could expand on his life, but I know only those facts I have written. Had I been older or more aware, I would have asked him numerous questions and perhaps written about his life instead of my own.

His arrival back in England upset my mother, who had formed a close bond with my grandmother, a quiet, gentle soul. But now my grandfather was back, all that changed and my mother was forced to take a back seat. She was very bitter about the loss of wealth, the servants and their privileged position in society. There was no recompense for the loss of all their property overseas, much of it destroyed, nor for the newspaper empire. The British Secret Service, neither then nor now, publicly welcomes or acknowledges any of their employees.

My grandparents moved into a small flat on the outskirts of London, and as my grandfather recovered, he took a job in Baker Street working at the head office of Marks and Spencer.

In the meantime, my mother had met a young Irishman, they became engaged, and the wedding took place in 1946, in Sutton, Surrey, after which they left England to settle in Dublin, where my father went to work for a major international insurance group.

I made my appearance in 1948, in a private Dublin nursing home and full of enthusiasm, my father rushed off to register me as Lucinda Elizabeth, much to my mother's horror. She planned to name me Pita, Russian for girl.

Several months later, the three of us moved to Cork and there was talk of my father being sent to Cape Town to help spearhead an insurance company in South Africa. Maybe that's another stranger than fiction fact, as fate was to prove much later.