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Abandoned

The true story of a little girl who didn't belong

Anya Peters

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Abandoned: The true story of a little girl who didn’t belong

Аннотация

Separated from her real mother at birth, Anya grew up in terror of her drunken bullying uncle. Beaten, humiliated and sexually abused by him from the age of six, she thought her life couldn't get worse. But one day it did."I was used to Daddy screaming 'whore's child' at me, over and over again. But I couldn't get used to what he made me do."Anya was too terrified to tell anybody about what her uncle did to her. But then he got careless and started abusing her in front of the other children. When her brothers started calling her a 'whore', Anya cracked and all her terrible secrets came pouring out.Anya had always coped because there was one woman who loved her deeply, her 'Mummy'. But this time love was not enough. One morning 'Mummy' just left.Determined to make a new life, Anya buried her feelings and tried to move on. But when she ended up homeless, living in her car, she knew she had to face her past if she was ever going to find happiness and security again.Top 10 Sunday Times Bestseller, Abandoned is Anya's inspirational story of her fight to find love, acceptance and a place to belong.

Содержание

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The true story of a little girl who didn't belong

ANYA PETERS

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Dedication

To Mummy,
whose love was always there
as the dock leaf to soothe the sting of him …
And to Brendan, for never letting go.

Epigraph

‘Although the world is full of suffering,
it is full also of the overcoming of it.’
(Helen Keller, 1880–1968)

Contents

Chapter 1

It's after an argument. Mummy stands at the kitchen table counting out plates. It's roast chicken, which means it's a Sunday. And I know it's after an argument because she calls Daddy 'him'.

She runs through us all in her head, tapping out numbers against her palm, then slides that number of plates along the counter from the stack she has taken from the shelf.

'Wait … who have I missed?'

I look up, nervous that it's me. My two eldest sisters, Marie and Sandra, aren't there that day so there should be seven.

'Him, Michael, Liam, Stella, Jennifer, you, me,' she says, counting us out again by name.

She always counts the plates out like that, in that order: almost by ages, except she puts the girls before me, and herself at the end. I like the way she puts me with her at the end, the way she says, '… you, me …' Always like that.

Mummy never leaves me out; she treats us all the same, but every mealtime I'm waiting for the same thing, for there to be one plate short, or not enough of something to go around. And for my uncle, or even one of the others imitating him, to look around at me and say, 'She can do without. She doesn't belong here anyway.'

It's what Daddy is always saying, screaming it out week after week in drunken arguments.

'She's not wanted here, right! She doesn't belong here. I want her out.'

I feel my brothers and sisters stiffen on the settee beside me, rolling their eyes at each other. I know they're all thinking the same thing: thinking that I'm the troublemaker; wishing I wasn't there; that Daddy wouldn't shout and argue half as much if I wasn't, that they could watch TV in peace.

'She's not wanted. They dumped her over here with you because they didn't want her over there and she's not wanted here either. I want her out,' he says, snapping open another beer, 'she doesn't belong here.'

I hold my nose to stop the tears, trying to lean back behind the others on the settee so he can't see me, staring hard at the wires at the back of the TV, not daring to watch the screen in case something on it triggers my tears. He'll hit me harder if he sees me crying. He always does.

'She's only a child; none of this is her fault. Leave her alone, you bully. Go and pick on someone your own size. She's no trouble at all. This is my home, and if I want her here, she'll stay,' Mummy yells in the background.

I wish she would just stop, not argue back. Mummy is worn out trying to stand up for me – but usually she just makes it worse.

'She's wanted nowhere, right!'

'Yes she is, you cruel drunk … Don't listen to him, Anya.'

But I have to.

'Why did they leave her over here then? Who wants her?' he

screams. ‘No one!’ he says louder, slamming the words into me.

‘Yes they do! I want her!’ Mummy hollers into the room.

I try everything to keep my tears in, but eventually they burst out, hiccupping as they come, my shoulders heaving, and he is over me, his fist raised, ready to give me ‘something to really cry about’.

Chapter 2

Mummy wasn't my real mum. Her younger sister, Katherine, who everyone called 'Kathy', was my real mum. I can't remember a time when I didn't know that. Anyway, my uncle, who I grew up calling 'Daddy' like the rest of my brothers and sisters, would never have allowed it to be kept a secret. He took every opportunity to remind me that Mummy wasn't my real mum, that I didn't belong with them, and that any day I'd be sent over 'to that whore of a mother of yours in Ireland'.

Kathy was twelve years younger than Mummy, and beautiful. She was slim and elegant, with long, soft-red curls like shiny new pennies down her back, and eyes that were almost navy blue. She had the tiniest hands I, or any of my brothers and sisters, had ever seen on a grown-up, little doll's hands, with long oval nails always painted a pearly pink colour. I was fascinated by her: by her beauty and calmness and easy laughter, by her soft Irish accent and her gentleness with me. But I was fearful of her too, always on my guard with her, determined to keep her at a distance. Determined to let Mummy see that she was my mum, not her sister Kathy.

For years Kathy wore a heavy, gold charm bracelet that clattered noisily at her wrist, and on each visit there'd be a new charm or two. My brothers and sisters would gather around her, choosing their favourite. One of my earliest memories is

watching, out of the corner of my eye, my brother Liam sitting in stripy pyjamas in her arms as we all watch TV in the small front room of our flat. He holds up her bare arm and sleepily goes through the charms one by one, trying to choose his favourite between a miniature of the Houses of Parliament and a cat with tiny, diamond-encrusted eyes. I watch her small hand stroking the back of his blond head, her red curls falling down across his chest, and feel suddenly cold and stiff, too young to put words to the mixture of jealously and hate I feel as I look on. I am eight months younger than Liam, but my uncle doesn't allow anyone to hold or touch me like that.

Kathy lived at home with her and Mummy's parents in Ireland, but I was born in England, on one of the beds in the long back bedroom in Mummy's flat. But ten days after I was born she had to go back to Ireland, and left me there for Mummy to look after.

It was only supposed to be a temporary arrangement, just until the day she could come back to get me. But that day never came. She did come back – four or five times a year on visits – but she never took me with her, though every visit I was terrified that she might, that my uncle's constant threats that 'this' time he was going to see to it that she took her 'baggage' back with her would be carried out.

Mummy had three other sisters. She was the eldest and Kathy was the youngest, still a child at the time Mummy left Ireland to make a life for herself over in England, and the only one left at home to look after their parents if ever they needed it.

She hadn't even had a boyfriend before she met my father. I didn't know who he was but I soon found out that he was a married man, and that they had been having an affair. Mummy told me that much one night after my uncle had stormed off to bed following one of their drunken arguments. My brothers and sisters had been herded off to bed earlier in the evening, but, as he often did, my uncle made me sit there and listen. It was on those nights, once he'd gone to bed, and before my brothers and sisters tiptoed back down one by one, that Mummy would tell me all her stories about growing up in Ireland.

Sometimes when we were on our own she would tell me stories about Kathy, and how she came over to England on her own on the ferry to have me in London, stories that only part of me wanted to hear. But layer by layer, argument by argument, year by year, as I, or more usually my brothers and sisters, asked more questions, I pieced together the details of my life story.

Mummy always made the stories sound romantic and exciting and sad, and we all felt sorry for Kathy not being able to be with her baby or with the man she had fallen in love with. I tried to forget that I was the baby they were talking about.

My feelings towards Kathy were always complicated, but I was shocked when I found out my father was a married man. In those days, extra-marital affairs were absolutely taboo. I looked at Kathy differently after that. I blamed her even more for the trouble Mummy was going through to keep her 'secret' for her, and for being the centre of most of the drunken arguments in

our home.

'She loved your father very much,' Mummy always told me during those talks, 'I know that much.'

I would pretend I wasn't interested in the bits about Kathy and who my father might be. As usual I wanted to show Mummy that it was *her* I wanted to be my mum, not her sister; that *this* was my family and that I never wanted to be taken away from them. But of course I always did listen. I listened hard.

'Did you know who Anya's dad was?' my youngest sister Jennifer asked one night.

We'd all asked the same question over the years. I pretended not to hear, but when I glanced up I saw Mummy look away and shake her head, and her eyes filled with tears again.

'No,' she said, swirling the drink in her glass and staring into it, 'no I didn't.'

'Would you tell Daddy if you did?' I asked.

'Yes,' she said, pulling the belt of her dressing gown tighter and knocking back the last of her drink. 'You bet your life I would. I wouldn't put up with what I take from that madman … not even for my sister.'

Chapter 3

My uncle hated me being there. From the start he wanted me out. And the main purpose of my early years was to try to make myself as silent and as invisible as possible so that he would forget about me, and let me stay, to be part of the family I saw as my own.

He must have agreed to me being there at the beginning, but it was only ever meant to be a temporary arrangement. And his hatred of me grew as week by week, month by month it became more and more obvious that I was there to stay.

What he hated most was not being told who my 'real' father was. He was convinced that Mummy knew the truth and was keeping it a secret from him on the instructions of Kathy and her colleague from work – who was the only person in Ireland to know about her illegitimate child, and who we grew up knowing as our 'Uncle Brendan'. He thought they didn't trust him and that Mummy was lying for them.

Over and over through the years, Mummy shouted back at him that she *wasn't* lying, that she *didn't* know who my father was.

'If I knew, don't you think I would have told you by now?' she'd scream, sobbing.

But he knew that Kathy and Brendan didn't like him, particularly Brendan, and he called Mummy a liar, swearing that they were all taking him for a fool in his own home. The fact

that no one would tell him drove him mad and seemed to be the spark for most of their rows.

She tried all sorts of answers on him, all sorts of ways of saying she didn't know, and, as I grew up, that I didn't know either – that I didn't have a father, that I'd been conceived in the course of a one-night stand. He never believed her. But because of it he called Kathy a 'whore', and me her 'whore's child', screaming it out in drunken argument after drunken argument throughout my childhood.

'My sister is *not* a whore,' Mummy would scream back.

'Who's the father then? Who's the father?' he shouted, over and over again, maddened that Kathy expected him to have me brought up under his roof, but still wouldn't trust him enough to tell him who my father was. 'I don't want their dirty work, their left-behinds, their whore's child in my house,' he'd shout. 'They can take her back over there with them where she belongs. And I'll make sure of it this time.'

It was the same every weekend. Usually, when Mummy managed to send me up to bed with the rest of them – even if I was yelled back down again later and forced to sit there and listen to it – we'd lie there listening to them raging at each other, and to Mummy being hit defending her sister and fighting for me to stay. When he finally stormed off to bed himself, Mummy would sometimes creep to the long back bedroom that the five youngest of us shared, to see if we were all right. Despite her assurances, I still thought with every argument that this time it

would happen, that he would see to it that I was sent from my family, over to Kathy in Ireland, who was almost a stranger to us then – the 'whore', whose visits I dreaded.

We didn't have a dictionary at home – ours was a house without books – but when I was old enough, 'whore' was the first word I remember trying to look up in the big, blue-leather dictionary in our school library. I knew it wasn't a good word and that I couldn't ask our teacher, but I was desperate to find out exactly what Kathy was, and what a 'whore's child' actually meant. Nervous in case anyone saw me, I sat on the stripy window seat overlooking the playground with my back to everyone, turning the fragile, India paper quietly, with my heart hammering. But I didn't find out. I was looking under the 'H's', assuming it was spelt as it sounded. Not realising that it was hiding amongst the 'W's' at the end of the dictionary, as if ashamed of itself.

I never understood why Kathy wouldn't tell my uncle who my father was, and, as a child, I never forgave her for it. But then she didn't know exactly how violent and abusive he became. And she could never have imagined just how bad it was going to get.

Kathy knew the *type* of man he was, and maybe hoped that since they weren't married he and Mummy wouldn't stay together long. She wouldn't have wanted to give him any information he could later use against her if they did split up. She and her lover would never have survived the scandal if news of their affair got out in Ireland, and my uncle would have known that. If he had

been able to find out who my father was, he might well have blackmailed him, or just told his wife and family what he knew. He was always threatening to write to my grandparents to tell them that Kathy had 'stashed her bastard' in London with them.

'What would your mum and dad say if they knew about me?' I asked one night after my uncle had drained the last of his vodka and staggered up to bed, leaving us all huddled around her in the aftermath of one of his rages.

'It'd kill them,' she said, 'literally, kill them.'

The others giggled and I swung my eyes away, shivering the words out of me one by one as I counted the twists of ivy repeated in the pattern of the curtain hanging across our back bedroom door. I tried hard not to imagine the grandparents I'd only ever heard stories about, dying just through knowing that I was alive.

Chapter 4

Kathy was only nineteen when she fell pregnant with me, and neither she nor her married lover knew what they were going to do. Because their affair had to remain a secret she had no one she could talk to about it either. Even if my father hadn't been a married man, life would not have been easy for an unmarried girl who found herself pregnant in the small-town Ireland of the early 1970s. Everyone was still under the fist of the Catholic Church at the time, and unmarried mothers, I was always told as a child, were still being put away in sanatoriums, their babies taken from them and put up for adoption as soon as they were born. Many chose instead to catch the boat to England or America, to have their babies and start brand-new lives.

When she could no longer conceal her pregnancy, Kathy came to England to find her eldest sister. Mummy had lost touch with her family, but Kathy knew she was living somewhere in London. While she was in Ireland, Mummy was the only one who had ever found out that Kathy was having an affair with a married man.

'Don't come crying to me when he gets you pregnant,' was the last thing she warned Kathy, washing her hands of it before she left for England.

'I won't,' Kathy said.

But two and a half years later, that was exactly what she did.

By that time it wasn't easy to find her sister in London because

she'd moved several times without giving any of the family her new address. She'd divorced too, something that would have brought disgrace on her family in the Ireland of the time, and would have been the main reason for not keeping in touch with them. But somehow Kathy found her.

Years later, Kathy told me she was sure she must have had the wrong address when, late one evening, she turned up at the one she'd scribbled on the back of her ferry ticket: a block of flats in the middle of a sprawling, red-brick council estate in a run-down part of East London. She walked up the dark stairwell to the second floor landing and knocked on the red front door, half hoping her sister didn't live there. But when her sister opened it, with Michael – who was a toddler by then – hanging off one arm, and rocking an even younger child, who she'd had illegitimately, in the other, Kathy realised why her sister had lost touch with her family. She knew then that she would help keep her secret from their parents because, staring at baby Liam, she saw that her sister had been keeping secrets of her own.

I'm not sure what Kathy planned to do once she came over to England. Maybe she was going to have an abortion and her sister or her conscience talked her out of it. Maybe her lover did. Maybe she believed he would leave his wife and his 'empty-shell' marriage, as I was later told it was, and come over to take care of her and her baby in London. Or maybe she was going to have me no matter what.

Fate made the decision for them in the end. A telegram

arrived, two weeks before I was due to be born. It was from her father. And it ruined everything. Her mother had suffered a serious stroke and the outlook wasn't good. Until that moment, post had been going only one way, with Kathy sending ever-briefer letters and postcards home, trying to edit out any clues, while making excuse after excuse for extending her holiday.

There can't be too many excuses you can use for extending a holiday when a telegram arrives bringing news of your mother's illness, but they had no choice but to rustle another one up; this time a broken leg which hadn't reset properly. For all they knew, though, their mother could have been on her deathbed. They couldn't phone to find out because neither Mummy nor her parents had a telephone then. But whatever her mother's condition, she couldn't possibly go home a few weeks before she was due to give birth to an illegitimate child. So in the end Mummy agreed to go instead.

Mummy had her own reasons for being reluctant to go home. She had divorced without telling her parents, and instead of just the three children they knew about – my elder sisters Marie and Sandra and my brother Michael – she now had my brother Liam as well.

Liam's father, my uncle, was the kind of drunken, irreligious Irishman her mother would probably have crossed the street to avoid. Mummy had never married him, but they were living together, 'in sin' as it was called in those days, which to her Catholic parents would have been worse. On top of it all they

were living in a council flat on a run-down estate.

Theirs was a good Catholic family in small-town Ireland, and their parents would never have accepted her lifestyle. Maybe, as her new partner drank more and more, and started to become violent, she was too ashamed to tell *anyone* what her life had come to, let alone her parents. A false pride I can now understand only too well, given how I ended up living years later, too ashamed to bring myself to let anyone know.

With her sister gone to Ireland, Kathy was left to deal with the final two weeks of her pregnancy alone, which no doubt gave her a taste of her own possible future as she struggled to look after her sister's four children in an already cramped, three-bedroom flat. After almost a week, Mummy decided her mother's condition was perhaps not critical, and returned to help Kathy with a pregnancy which, since she couldn't phone to find out, might already have been over. It wasn't, but within days of her sailing home I was born, already six days late, and even on the day of labour in no hurry to arrive. Maybe I realised that it wasn't the greatest ticket to come in on, and needed the extra coaxing: labour began at 2 a.m. and ended just the right side of midnight the following evening.

A few days after my birth another telegram arrived. Again it was from their father, this time even more urgent than the first. Their mother had had a second stroke, almost immediately after Mummy had left Ireland. 'Critical', the telegram said, and this time it didn't leave it to Kathy's conscience to do the right thing

– it ordered her home. No excuse on earth would have done.

Mummy rang our 'uncle' Brendan and asked him to go down to her mother and monitor the situation. She arranged for him to call her every night at the same time, on the red telephone box outside the pub where she bought her 'Irish' cigarettes. The reports that came back can't have been good.

Kathy stayed with me as long as she could. I was hastily christened, keeping her surname rather than taking Mummy's married name, the name all the other children in the family had. After all, if Kathy was going to be coming back for me there was no reason for me to have any name but hers. Ten days after I was born she flew home to Ireland to take care of her mother. There was no other option.

I can't imagine what it must have taken for her to do that. What pain she must have been in, before she shut her emotions down, taking care of her mother in that sealed-off world, without a telephone to contact her sister to find out how her baby was doing. Maybe wondering how angry my uncle was at my still being there week after week, and having no one but her married lover to tell her secrets to. Not wanting her mother to die, but knowing too that that was the only way she could go back to get her baby. As her mother's illness worsened – her mind slipping away into dementia, her behaviour more and more childlike by the day – maybe Kathy saw it as some kind of divine retribution, left there washing, dressing and feeding her, nursing her mother instead of the baby she had left behind in England.

As a little girl I heard various versions of what Kathy had planned to do as soon as her mother died or was well enough to leave. In them all she was going to come back to get me. But my grandmother didn't die, though she didn't recover either. Her condition deteriorated and Kathy stayed there looking after her at home for another nine years.

Meanwhile, I grew up in London with my aunt and uncle. And from then on my aunt was the only mother I knew or wanted. And the only one I ever called 'Mummy'. I called my uncle 'Daddy' too, just like my four elder brothers and sisters, and 'the girls' Stella and Jennifer, who came along a few years after I arrived. There were seven of us children in all.

'Don't worry,' Mummy would always whisper after their drunken – often violent – rows, when my uncle would threaten that he wanted me gone by the time he got back from work, 'I won't ever let him send you away, or let anyone come to take you from me.'

'Cross your heart and hope to die?'

'Cross my heart and hope to die.'

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.