



A Family Secret

My shocking true story
of surviving a childhood
in hell

MAUREEN WOOD

Maureen Wood
A Family Secret

«HarperCollins»

Wood M.

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A shocking true story about familial betrayal, horrifying secrets and when justice prevails. It took three decades before Maureen felt able to talk about her dark past. Growing up in an abusive household, she was sexually assaulted by her mother, stepfather and brother for years on end. After giving birth to a son as a result of a rape, she thought that maybe, just maybe, the baby would save her. Tragically, he suffered a cot death soon after his birth, leaving Maureen devastated. Years later, with Maureen heartbroken and tormented by her childhood, her family still had not been charged with the deeply unsettling crimes they committed. That is until Maureen had the bravery and courage to approach the police. In the trying investigation that followed, Maureen's lost son once again appeared to save her, proving integral to the evidence. This heart-breaking, but ultimately uplifting tale is proof that even in our darkest moments, hope can still be found.

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Содержание

| | |
|-----------------------------------|----|
| Copyright | 7 |
| Note to Readers | 8 |
| Dedication | 9 |
| Contents | 10 |
| Prologue | 11 |
| Chapter 1 | 12 |
| Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. | 19 |

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to my angel baby Christopher and to all the silent victims of abuse. I hope it helps them find their voice.

Contents

| | |
|----|----------------------------|
| 1 | Cover |
| 2 | <i>Title Page</i> |
| 3 | <i>Copyright</i> |
| 4 | <i>Note to Readers</i> |
| 5 | <i>Dedication</i> |
| 6 | Contents |
| 7 | Prologue |
| 8 | Chapter 1 |
| 9 | Chapter 2 |
| 10 | Chapter 3 |
| 11 | Chapter 4 |
| 12 | Chapter 5 |
| 13 | Chapter 6 |
| 14 | Chapter 7 |
| 15 | Chapter 8 |
| 16 | Chapter 9 |
| 17 | Chapter 10 |
| 18 | Chapter 11 |
| 19 | Chapter 12 |
| 20 | Chapter 13 |
| 21 | Chapter 14 |
| 22 | Chapter 15 |
| 23 | Epilogue |
| 24 | Acknowledgements |
| 25 | <i>Moving Memoirs</i> |
| 26 | <i>About the Publisher</i> |

Landmarks [Cover](#) Frontmatter Start of Content Backmatter
List of
Pages [iii](#) [v](#) [vii](#) [viii](#) [ix](#) [1](#) [2](#) [3](#) [4](#) [5](#) [6](#) [7](#) [8](#) [9](#) [10](#) [11](#) [12](#) [13](#) [14](#) [15](#) [16](#) [17](#) [18](#) [19](#) [20](#) [21](#) [22](#) [23](#) [24](#) [25](#) [26](#) [27](#) [28](#) [29](#) [30](#) [31](#) [32](#) [33](#) [34](#) [35](#) [36](#) [37](#) [38](#) [39](#) [40](#)

Prologue

No doubt about it, this was how the other half lived. Leaning back in my seat, feet up, sipping my drink, I felt on top of the world. Which, of course, I was.

Peering through the gap beside my seat, I watched my children, *almost* all my children, in the row behind, chatting and buzzing, intoxicated with a mix of holiday euphoria and that peculiar strain of exhaustion that travelling brings.

‘I can’t wait to go to Harry Potter World,’ Naomi was saying. ‘Imagine walking down Diagon Alley!’

I smiled. They deserved a treat, that was for sure.

And then, with a sudden whoosh, like a wind beneath the plane, I was hurtling back through time, peering through another gap, watching another of my children. The one who had made all this possible. The one who was missing today.

It was already sunny at 5.45 a.m. that July morning when Louise arrived to collect me. I was ready, pacing the living room, my nerves stretched and taut. I didn’t say a word on the journey there; it felt respectful to travel in silence. And then, as we pulled up, I saw the glare of floodlights and the white tent around my baby son’s resting place. We had been given strict Home Office instructions that we were not allowed inside the cemetery. But there was no way I could stay away. He was mine, my boy.

We had been instructed to park across the road, so that we didn’t draw attention to the cemetery. But I had a good view from out of the car window and I watched, appalled yet transfixed, through a gap in the cemetery railings as the digging began. Forensic officers in white space suits waited, like Martian pallbearers, for my Christopher, my baby, to surface. And then, there he was; his tiny coffin looked almost like a toy from where I was standing.

‘Mummy is sorry,’ I whispered. ‘I’m so sorry, Christopher.’

As his coffin was lifted into a plain grey van, I remembered the innocence in his wide blue eyes, I smelled the newness of his skin, I felt his tiny, delicate fingers curling around my thumb. And I was overwhelmed with a tsunami of loss and despair. My poor bruised heart ached and wept to see him again. Off went the van, carrying my precious cargo. Carrying my hopes, my heartbreak and the distant promise of peace.

Christopher had saved me once, and now, twenty-five years on, I was asking him to save me again. My guardian angel was risen from the dead, bringing with him my chance for justice.

Chapter 1

‘This,’ said my mother Maureen, ‘is your new stepdad.’

She took a step back on the station platform to admire him herself before singling me out for a glare.

‘Well?’ she snapped. ‘Where are your manners? Say hello.’

But I took one long look at his orangey-brown hair and his thin, mean face and I recoiled. My knuckles were white as I gripped my suitcase, my eyes staring, downcast, at the chewing gum ground into the platform tiles.

‘Hello,’ I mumbled.

My mother slipped her arms around him and smiled, and we all trailed behind them, dragging our cases with aching arms and aching hearts. Away from the station, away from all we knew, and off to yet another new life.

I could barely remember the last time I’d seen my mother before this. She and my biological father, John Donnelly, had separated when I was just a toddler. And on Boxing Day 1975, Mum dumped my older brother, Jock, and me, with our paternal grandparents, William and Eliza Donnelly. She didn’t visit us, as far as I know, and she didn’t even check on us. I was just five years old. And yet I was quite happy without my mother; my grandparents were warm and kind and made sure we wanted for nothing. I have vague memories, too, of an aunt painting my toenails and playing house with me. Because I was the smallest, the whole family made such a fuss of me.

But later that year we were taken into care, to live in a Catholic children’s home called Nazareth House, in Glasgow. There we were reunited with our other two sisters, both older than me. It was nice to be back with my siblings, but I missed the easy affection of my grandparents’ home. The timetable at Nazareth House was strict, almost military. The home was run by nuns who, it seemed to me, chatted very little and smiled even less. We were up early every morning to say prayers, then we had to be dressed, fed and in chapel, on our knees, by 8 a.m. By the time we got to school I was already exhausted. After school there were more prayers, food, chores, then bed. We were woken at midnight for a last trip to the loo, to ensure we didn’t wet the bed. Nobody misbehaved or stepped out of line – there was simply no scope for it in a place like that. We were under the watchful, beady eyes of the nuns all the time.

I was in a large girls’ dormitory with my sisters. We had a narrow single bed each with a miserably thin mattress, and a small bedside cupboard to store all the possessions that we didn’t have. The boys’ dormitories were along another corridor, and they sat in a different area of the dining hall, too, so we rarely saw our big brother, Jock. We saw Mum very rarely at the children’s home, nor our dad, apart from one single visit, who now seemed consigned to history. We wouldn’t see him again for many years.

As I recount the facts now, it sounds like a pitiful and wretched existence, and yet it was quite the opposite. I liked being in the home. Perversely, I preferred the rigidity and the predictability there to the uncertainty and chaos I associated with my mother. At Nazareth House I was at least fed and warm. The nuns were firm and austere, but as I settled in there I realised too that they were always fair and reasonable. I never felt as though I was singled out in any way. I never felt picked on or ostracised or bullied. Life was tough, of course it was, but it was tough for us all. We were all in the same boat, and there was a comfort in the collective hardship. There was a togetherness and a camaraderie with the other girls, and though we didn’t have birthday cakes or bedtime stories or new shoes we had each other. There were plenty of giggles; chasing each other down the long corridors, tickling each other when we were supposed to be praying in Mass, or telling ghost stories in the midnight gloom of the long dormitories to scare each other half to death. I really was happy enough, day to day, in my little routine. There was a security and a feeling of safety about the place that I clung to. And though I

didn't know it then, the children's home, with the chilly dormitory and the strict and distant nuns, would be the last place I would feel safe for a very long time. I knew where I was with the nuns. I knew where I was supposed to be at every hour of every day. And for a small child, such certainty is golden. I would only appreciate that, of course, after it was snatched away.

Three years later, in 1978, my mother arrived, without warning, to take us back out of care and into the new life she had fashioned for herself, and which she expected us to fall into without complaint.

'Come on now,' she said, clapping her hands as we walked out of the children's home and into the sunshine. 'We've a long journey ahead.'

Stepping onto the train at the station in Glasgow, I felt a ripple of both excitement and anxiety. The train itself was thrilling – whizzing past towns I'd never even heard of, giving me snapshot glimpses of what life I had been missing whilst I had been cocooned behind the huge doors of Nazareth House.

When we got off the train, in Stoke-on-Trent, our new stepfather, John Wood, was waiting. We had a little brother, too. It was all change, all different.

Our new home was a three-bedroomed semi on a long and busy street in a suburb close to the town centre. We settled in quickly because we had to. We soon picked up that Mum was not someone who liked her patience tested. She worked in a pub and John Wood was a miner, so they were often out of the house until late in the evening, and this gave us the perfect opportunity to run riot.

It was the summer holidays of 1978 when we arrived, so we had no school. All structure, all routine, was abandoned, and we went wild. The feeling of having nothing to do and nobody to answer to was at once exhilarating and frightening. I was seven years old, and I felt like I'd broken free.

At first, all five of us kids slept in a double bed until the new furniture arrived. Then I shared a bunk bed with one of my sisters – I had the bottom bunk, and though it got me into trouble, my blankets were always crumpled and messy.

'Why can't you keep yourself tidy like your sisters?' Mum complained. 'You're always the problem. Always.'

I loved to pull threads out of the pink bedspread that covered my blankets. It earned me a thick ear from Mum when she saw the strands all over the floor, but it was a nervous habit and I just couldn't help myself.

We each had a set of rosary beads on the bedside table and we prayed every night. I looked forward to Mass on Sundays; Mum didn't go to church, but I would happily go by myself. I enjoyed the familiarity and the reassuring routine of the service; it reminded me of Nazareth House.

Mum worked long hours, but when she was home there was discipline and order. We all ate together, in a heavy silence, around a large pine table. After tea we were allowed to go out to play in the street.

'Until the streetlamps are lit!' my mother would shout. 'And no later!'

There was a load of local kids our age, and we formed straggling, giggling teams, with mass games of tig and football. We played rounders on a big field behind the estate or 'two ball' against the back wall of the house.

'If I hear that ball one more time, I'll slap you so hard you won't sit down for a month,' Mum would yell.

We couldn't see her, but we could imagine her, hand on hip, wagging the obligatory finger, her face screwed up in anger. We sniggered, with the safety of a brick wall between us, and waggled our fingers back for good effect. I made a best pal, Joanne, who lived just across the street. She and I would play skipping or hold imaginary tea parties for our beloved dollies on the pavement. As we grew more adventurous we'd play 'Knock-a-door-run' on houses further up the street. It would take us ages to pluck up courage to tap on the first door, but after we had done so it was strangely addictive and we would run along the entire row of houses, knocking on each door and then running away,

helpless with laughter, as the occupants swore and shouted after our disappearing heads. There was one occasion when a woman chased us along the street in her slippers, and we hid behind a hedge and chuckled as she shouted furiously for us to show ourselves. Another time, one of the neighbours set the hosepipe on us for knocking on his door. Again, we ended up guffawing in a heap behind some dustbins. I was never the ringleader; I was a shy kid and I would generally follow the older ones into trouble, but I enjoyed every minute of it. There was nothing funnier to us kids than winding up adults and watching them blow, like fireworks.

The days were long and sunny, and we had lots to be happy about. We were well fed and well dressed – Mum always made sure of that. We had a little dog, Nipper, and a cat called Toots. To the outside world we were a run-of-the-mill, average sort of family. Later in the evenings, before bed, we'd all gather in the long living room that ran the length of the house, with a coal fire in the middle. Coal was free and plentiful, because of John Wood's job down the mine, so we had physical warmth, at least. The rest, we could do nothing about.

Starting school that September was tough. That first day my stomach swirled with excitement and trepidation. We had strong Scottish accents, which I'd already discovered were not always that popular in Stoke-on-Trent. And when I stood up in class to say my name, I might as well have been speaking in Swahili.

'What did she say?' shouted one kid. 'Sounds like mumbo-jumbo to me.'

The teacher, probably trying to help the situation, asked me where I was born. But she would only make matters worse.

'Germany,' I replied. 'My dad was in the army.'

There was a chorus of jeers and boos around the classroom.

'So you're a Kraut!' they shouted in delight. 'A Nazi!'

I tried to explain that I'd moved to Scotland when I was a baby and had no memory at all of my time in Germany. But that didn't make any difference at all.

'We've got the enemy standing here in Stoke-on-Trent!' they laughed. 'Lock her in the cleaning cupboard.'

Most of the kids let the joke go after that first day, but one boy in particular was vile. He nicknamed me Hitler, and it lasted all through school. Every time I walked past him he would dig me in the arm or do a Nazi salute.

For months I kept myself to myself and I had very few friends. Instead, I sought solace in books. I spent my playtimes and lunchtimes reading Enid Blyton and Clive King. Even in the playground I'd sit on the tarmac, with my face buried in a *Famous Five* novel. I could lose myself completely in a far-fetched adventure, slipping into the role of my favourite characters, transported to another town, another story, another life. My favourite character was George, a tomboy who was always getting herself embroiled in trouble. She was brave and fiery, too, and probably a little bit of me was envious of her. As I turned each page I felt every victory, every disappointment, everything. I was a loner, quite a solitary kid, and it wasn't just because of the bullies and the new school. By nature I enjoyed being on my own. I was quite happy with my own company. And, of course, there was nothing wrong with that. But I look back now and wonder whether that is why I was targeted. Whether that is why it all began.

My mother and John Wood were married at Newcastle-under-Lyme register office and afterwards they had a reception in the local pub where Mum worked. It was a great party; I remember I had a new dress and I was allowed to invite some of my pals from the street. I stayed up later than I'd ever been allowed. From that day we all called John Wood 'Dad'. It was expected, and we didn't question it or object. We fell into line. All, that was, except Jock.

'You're not my dad,' Jock told him angrily. 'And you never will be.'

Jock was twelve, five years older than me, and already surging with hormones and aggression. He made it clear, right from the start, that he hated Dad. Jock was fiercely loyal to our natural dad,

whom he remembered far more clearly, and with much more affection, than I did. There were regular flare-ups between Jock and Dad. Jock refused to do what Dad said and regularly swore at him, and unless Mum was in the house he did just as he pleased.

‘You can’t tell me what to do,’ he said angrily. ‘You’ve no right.’

Dad was only 5 foot 7 and not particularly well-built, and although Jock was not yet taller than him he seemed to tower above him. Mentally, at least, he had the edge. In one argument, Dad broke his own hand trying to punch Jock, when he ended up hitting the wall instead. Mum punched Jock black and blue for his bad behaviour, so violently he probably wished he had the broken hand instead. To the rest of us it was seen as quite a comical incident, and we would snigger every time we passed the dent in the wall.

I stayed well out of the way of all the trouble. I liked peace and quiet, and when I was inside I spent most of my spare time reading. I’d often hide myself away, in the still of the bedroom, engrossed in my latest book, whilst all hell let loose downstairs. Dad himself was a keen reader, too.

‘You can travel the world in a book,’ he used to say. ‘Get away from it all.’

It was just about the only thing he and I had in common. He enjoyed the odd classic, *Oliver Twist* and *Great Expectations*, which he passed on to me. But mostly he read books on horror and crime. It did not bode well for the future, and later I would look back and shudder at the irony.

Dad would often treat himself to a new paperback, especially if he had time off work, but I was never allowed to buy a book. All my reading material came from school or from the local library. Aside from his love of books, which didn’t really fit with the rest of his character, Dad was a straightforward, no-nonsense sort of bloke. And unless he was dealing with Jock, he was a quiet and taciturn character; Mum did most of the shouting in our house. But the notion of escape, of broadening my horizons, through a novel really appealed to me. And the seclusion, as I read on my own, hour after hour, was bliss. My usual nickname was ‘Mo-Jo’ but Mum gave me the nickname ‘Dozy-Mosey’ too, because I was forever tripping up as I walked around the house with my nose in a book.

I loved having a nickname. Mum rarely showed me any attention and never much affection either. She was not a tactile person, and not given to easy shows of emotion. So her choosing a nickname for me was a small sign that she had noticed me and that I figured, to some degree at least, in her thoughts. It gave me a feeling of belonging and I grasped it with both hands.

Apart from the bust-ups between Dad and Jock, it was Mum who doled out the discipline in the family. She had a fearsome temper, and her punishments, more often than not, were brutal. When we got up in the morning we had to tiptoe around the house, speaking in whispers. Waking Mum was like waking the devil; she would hit the roof if her lie-in was interrupted. One morning I woke her by shouting at one of my sisters. Mum marched downstairs, her eyes blazing with fury, and whacked me across the knee with a poker. Over forty years on, I still have the scar.

Whilst our lives were in some ways chaotic, spent running around outside with droves of other kids, they were strangely regimented, too. We had lists of chores to carry out: hoovering the bedrooms, changing the beds, dusting, polishing, washing and ironing. And Mum was always handy with her fists if our efforts weren’t up to scratch. To me, she was a bit like a dormant World War 2 bomb, lurking upstairs. One false move and she could explode, at any time.

We had a rota taped to the pantry door and all chores had to be carried out straight after school. If we went out to play without finishing them first, we had Mum to answer to.

One day, much to our amusement, Jock simply refused to do his tasks.

‘If you want the bathroom cleaning, do it your fucking self,’ he told my mother.

We watched, transfixed and delighted, as she grabbed him by the throat and rammed him up against the wall. She was only 5 foot 2 tall, plump, with a round face and glasses, but she was more than a match for Jock.

‘You will do as you’re told or I will fucking kill you!’ she seethed, her hand on her hip.

I was scared, but I was used to being scared, so it was no big deal. There was an undercurrent of fear and uncertainty in the house all the time, and I just got used to it. Another time, Mum had told me to change the beds, but I was only eight years old and getting a pillow back into a pillowcase proved much harder than I had anticipated.

‘Do I have to do everything, you dumb bitch?’ she spat.

She cracked me hard against the back of my head before grabbing the pillow from me. I shrugged it off and quickly learned how to do my chores to her standards. But what I really wanted was to learn how to cook. Even as a little girl I enjoyed being in the kitchen; we had a large ceramic sink and a wooden drainer and an old black cooker. To me, it felt like the warmest and friendliest room in the house. Mum was a good cook, too; she enjoyed baking and trying new recipes.

‘Can I help?’ I asked, poking my face round the door of the kitchen.

But Mum flew at me as though I’d done something wrong.

‘Get out of my bloody kitchen!’ she shouted, swatting me with a tea towel. ‘Don’t ever come in here again.’

Again, I sauntered off without giving it much thought. I was used to her. Yet after she had finished cooking she always called us in to wash up and clear away her mess. My sister washed, and I dried. The shared hardship might have brought about a camaraderie, a sense of togetherness, but somehow it drove a wedge between us kids, and our chores were done in silence, under the watchful, waiting eye of our mother.

But if I was wary of my parents, I idolised Jock. He was my big brother and I looked up to him and loved him with all my heart. Of all my siblings, he and I were the closest. To me, he was the tallest, strongest, bravest brother I could have wished for. And I was indulgent of his moods and his grumpiness, too. I knew he reserved the worst of his temper for Dad.

One day I was walking home, glued to my Enid Blyton book as usual, and one of the older boys from my school started to make fun of me.

‘You’re a swot,’ he teased. ‘What a nerd, always stuck in a book.’

And with that he punched me in the face and my nose just exploded. There was blood everywhere. Gasping with pain, I ran home sobbing, blood staining my school uniform. As soon as Jock saw me he demanded an explanation, before grabbing his leather jacket and going out to find the offender.

‘I battered him,’ he told me later, in a matter-of-fact manner. ‘He won’t be bothering you again. Don’t worry, Mo-Jo.’

Jock didn’t make a big fuss about it; he was well-known for fighting and getting into trouble in our neighbourhood and the other kids were terrified of him. It was no big deal for him to be throwing punches. He was a big lad with an even bigger attitude. The next day I spotted the same boy as I walked to school, and he ran off in alarm. He never even looked my way again. I played it cool, but secretly I was beaming and bursting with pride. I felt completely untouchable. My Jock, my protector, had laid down the law.

But whether Jock really did it for me or simply for his own amusement, I would never know. I didn’t give it much thought at that age. I just felt as though I had someone on my side for once, and it felt fantastic. But though I was in awe of Jock, I never wanted to be like him. I marvelled at him, but I did not admire him. I think I sensed, even then, that he had hidden depths and they might well be swirling with filth. But for now he was a typically wayward teenager. He wore a uniform of skinny jeans, a white T-shirt, Doc Marten boots, and spent most of his time in his bedroom, with the Sex Pistols blaring out and Mum hollering up the stairs at him.

‘Turn that crap off!’ she screamed.

It wasn’t until she was hammering on his door, ready for a fist fight, that he complied. Sometimes he took it even further than that, and he would wait until she was battering him before

he gave in. One day he came home from the barbers smirking and with a shocking Mohican and, again, Mum flew into a rage.

‘What will people think?’ she screamed.

But Jock didn’t seem to care at all. He was in regular trouble, and he took it all in his stride. Authority – and the threat of authority – never seemed to bother him one bit. I wondered whether really he quite enjoyed all the fuss.

Although I didn’t have many friends at school I had lots of mates on our street. Joanne and I were part of a much larger group and there was often a big gang of us playing manhunt on the field behind the houses, or swimming up at the local pond. One time I fell off a rope swing into the pond, and after that I learned to swim pretty quickly. Now, even though I was just eight years old, I loved splashing around and diving in with the bigger kids.

Our local lollipop lady, Jane, had a heart of gold, and she would often pack a big picnic for us all on sunny days. One July day, at the start of the 1979 summer holidays, was a real scorcher, so hot the tarmac was bubbling up on the road outside. The street was swarming with wasps and kids; we were the only ones with any energy in the baking heat. There were mums in deckchairs outside their front doors, fanning themselves with rolled-up newspapers. There were dads with hankies on their heads and socks on, knocking back cans and gearing themselves up for a brawl later on.

‘Water fight! Water fight!’ screamed one of the boys.

And that was all it took. Word spread through the kids like an electric shock and suddenly we were all racing down the street to fill old Fairy liquid bottles with water. Our water supply was temperamental in the house, because of the summer drought, so we had to queue to use an outside tap further up the street. Seconds later it was all-out war. We raced up and down the paths, hiding behind fences and bins, squealing in horrified delight when we were sprayed with ice-cold water.

It was the best and the worst of shocks, all at the same time. But as the heat began to fade I found myself soaked to the skin and ready for a hot bath. Our home-made weapons discarded for another day, we all trooped inside, glowing with the excitement of the fight, shivering with the cold.

As I went upstairs I could hear Pink Floyd blasting out of Jock’s bedroom. His door was closed, as always. He was too cool and too angry for water fights. I slipped into the bathroom, closed the door behind me, and stripped down to my undies. To my surprise, the door opened again and there was Jock, standing right behind me.

‘What do you want?’ I said, hugging my arms around myself, suddenly self-conscious.

He didn’t speak. Instead, he leaned towards me, put his hand down my knickers and started to touch me. I was scared and anxious. It didn’t feel right, but I didn’t know what it was. Fear overwhelmed me and, though I tried to shrink back, he just pushed himself further into me.

‘Stop,’ I pleaded, my voice wavering. ‘Please, stop.’

It felt like a lifetime before Jock took his hand away. He looked me in the eye and said: ‘If you breathe a word, we will all go back into care, and it will all be your fault.’

He stomped back to his room without saying anything more and I was left, shivering now with shock, wondering what on earth had just taken place. Suddenly nauseous, I ran to my bedroom, slammed the door, and cried on my bed for hours.

When Mum came in, she tutted impatiently and said, ‘What are you crying for? What’s the matter, for God’s sake? Shut the bloody noise up now.’

I shook my head and said truthfully, ‘I don’t know. I really don’t know.’

‘Well, I’ll give you something to cry about if you don’t stop,’ she snapped.

I had no name for what had happened to me. And even if I had, I couldn’t have confided in her. She just wasn’t that sort of mother. I had the responsibility, too, of keeping the rest of my family safe, for hadn’t Jock threatened that we would all go back into care if I told anyone? Instead, I pushed it to the back of my mind, convinced it was a one-off, some sort of aberration in Jock that he would

not repeat. And when I saw him the next day he acted completely normally. I could almost imagine it had never happened in the first place.

It was a couple of weeks later that Mum sent us out blackberry picking, so that she could bake a pie. She was a walking contradiction; on the one hand, she would attack us for the slightest transgression, yet she would also bake and cook wonderful meals and insist that we all ate around the table together at 5 p.m. each night. And again, we were left to our own devices, fighting and running wild. Yet there were also things expected of us; we had responsibilities. She was impossible to predict, and that made her all the more tricky to deal with.

On this particular day we were packed off to Black Bank, an area near our house that was famous for plump blackberries. The path took us past the pond, through ferns and grasses to a large banking. To me, as a little girl, it was like a forbidden forest. There was a whole gang of us from the street searching out the best berries. It was like a day out. But as we picked and chatted I suddenly noticed Jock creeping up behind us. And then he grabbed my arm and steered me into the ferns, away from everyone, where it was quiet. None of my friends even looked around, but of course they all knew Jock, so they presumed he just wanted to talk to me. Besides, they knew his reputation, too, and none of them would have dared question him. I could feel his nails digging into my flesh. My heart was in my mouth. I felt my insides churning.

‘What are you doing?’ I asked.

But my voice was smaller and thinner than I’d hoped. I was no match for him. Once we were away from the others, he pushed me heavily onto the grass, lay down beside me, and pulled up my skirt. I screwed up my eyes and held my breath as he forced my knickers down and thrust a finger roughly inside me.

‘You’re hurting me!’ I squealed. ‘Leave me alone! Please, Jock, stop. Please!’

‘I’m enjoying it too much,’ he grunted.

I tried pushing him off, but he was too strong. His breathing was loud, rasping and uneven. He didn’t even look like Jock. My Jock. In my child’s mind he looked like a monster, a ghoul, a bogeyman, and nothing like my brother at all. On the other side of the brambles, I could hear the rest of the kids laughing and playing. But they might as well have been on the other side of the world, they were so out of reach. For me, it lasted hours. In reality it was a matter of a few minutes. When he was finished, Jock just got up and walked away. With shaking hands, I pulled my knickers up, the long grass itching my legs, as the tears streamed down my face.

I couldn’t face the other children, so I stumbled off in the other direction, my thoughts clouded by the physical agony Jock had inflicted. I felt like I was burning inside. But I eventually detoured back to get some blackberries, because I knew I would be in trouble if I went home empty-handed.

To a little girl, a beating from my mother and a sexual assault by my brother were both much the same. I was too young and too innocent to understand the distinction. I knew simply that they brought pain, and I would try to avoid them at all costs. Afterwards I made my way home, but the attack dominated my thoughts. It never occurred to me to tell anyone, though; Mum was not someone I could approach. I knew that from bitter experience.

I had once come home from school crying because another child had hit me. Instead of the sympathy I was kidding myself she might show, Mum had shouted:

‘Get out there and belt them back or I will give you a good hiding. And stop crying, for God’s sake. Your face will stick like that if you’re not careful.’

So I knew it was pointless to ask her for help.

The blackberry pie stuck in my throat like shards of glass as we sat around the table in silence. Jock didn’t even look at me, but then, he never usually did. He kept himself to himself. As time went on, I managed, once again, to shut it out. I still didn’t know what it was. I didn’t have a way out either, so the only option open to me was to block it out entirely. I no longer felt safe with Jock. But he was still my brother, and I still loved him. I couldn’t change that, whether I wanted to or not.

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