

chapter two – with friends like these; who needs enemies

Then again, there was the 'friend' of the family who abused me in secret between the ages 9 and 14 causing me to run away from home rather than face my parents and tell them the truth about their so-called 'friend', and I got a slap in the face (two slaps actually on both cheeks) for that as well because I told someone I wasn't happy at home without giving the real reasons why, and mother just took it that I was hanging out our "*dirty laundry*" for all to see and that I "*had no right*" she spat out in anger as she went to slap me again but I dodged out of the way to miss the third slap.

So no one found out the truth. I knew I wouldn't be able to not include this since it's about the time I became very quiet, timid and withdrawn and deeply disturbed. The family 'friend' lived down the road and popped round regularly. Let's call him Uncle Tim, although he wasn't my uncle and his name wasn't Tim. He was such an expert gardener and my folks took in all the information about their petunias, sweet peas and sunflowers - all the flowers on one side - and the gooseberry bushes, strawberries, and rhubarb on the other. He used to weed our garden and always turned up with his arms full of plants, bulbs, terracotta pots, and large bags of horse manure.

I'm pretty sure he was the one that laid the patio and helped my father build a conservatory which wasn't a real conservatory really; just an extension off the kitchen with a makeshift corrugated plastic roof. He was also the one that advised my parents to buy a greenhouse, which ended up at the far end of the garden, out of view of the house, just behind the apple tree, and it was on this pretence of tending the flowers that he would call "his little helper" to the back of the garden for assistance where inappropriate touching began and escalated over time to actions unmentionable.

Thereafter I learned never to volunteer first for anything. "Who wants to be my little helper" sounded innocent enough at the time, and I virtually leapt at the chance out of me and my two brothers; one two years younger and the only interest he had in the garden was how fast he could ride his tin-plated Mobo Bronco horse on wheels around the perimeter (the younger brother got the rocking one with the large springs), digging up worms to place in my bed to annoy me, and of course his model aeroplanes with which he would jump from the lowest branch of the apple tree making 'zee-owwww' sounds – he broke his arm one year doing that - while the other brother was merely a babe

in arms, not yet crawling, so I got in first...and regretted it every day of my life since.

And I never breathed a word of it. I used to hate that blasted greenhouse with its strong earthy smells mixed with the smell of paraffin from the little heater in there to keep the plants warm, but mostly I hated the dense green foliage growing up all over the windows so you couldn't see in. It is my contention now when I look back that that was deliberately grown for concealment purposes with malice-aforethought. It's therefore fair to say my innocence died in amongst the seedlings.

A lot of the detail is missing from those early memories and it's just as well, but there are some things you simply can't forget no matter how hard you try and obviously stuff you would wish to forget and never remember as long as you live.

It makes me laugh now to think that I nearly blurted it all out when I started my periods. I know it's not in the least bit funny really but the fact that I thought that Uncle Tim the fiddler had done me some lasting damage when I started bleeding down below, convinced me that he'd fiddled a little too carelessly and since I bled continuously the whole of that first day; got blood all over my underwear, nightie and sheets the second day, and was still bleeding by the third day, it absolutely scared me almost to death, making me think that if I was going to die, I should at least tell someone. Fortunately, I told a teacher about (just) the bleeding, and she told me a bit about menstruation and I was horrified that this would occur every month until I was about fifty, and something to do with how babies are born and the discarding of the lining of the womb, but most of it went over my head. She told me my mother should have warned me of this but I knew there was no chance. I was then sent home with a huge gauze pad and a stretchy suspender-type belted contraption that I had no idea how to use and scant knowledge of the workings of young women's bodies when they reached puberty, and basically still none the wiser, but I was assured I wasn't going to die so I was at least slightly relieved about that.

'The Fiddler' suddenly left me alone at around that time as I was coming up to my fourteenth birthday and I started wearing a bra. I suppose I got too old for him or more-than-likely he'd found another muse/victim.

I became so very distressed about it all, and crept out of the house one Sunday afternoon when the rest of the family were watching the family film, and I didn't get very far because I had no idea where I was going, so I ended up calling on a girl I knew from school who lived on the council estate nearby (somewhere I'd been forbidden to go – mother didn't want me mixing with the 'common' folk) and her mum took me in and gave me a cup of tea and a biscuit, and it was she to whom I told of my unhappiness at home, too ashamed to go into any detail. She relayed this back to my mother (with all good intentions) and all hell broke loose (of course).

Mother thought I told about the beatings without ever asking me or confirming what I'd actually said and I didn't elaborate. My parents still don't know all the details to this day and to date I've only ever revealed all to one other person, but back then my lips were sealed and I just kept thinking that if anyone found out, I'd just get a bashing for it.

It comes back in flashbacks sometimes and in bits and pieces like the ending of a dream in thick fog. Maybe that's my defence mechanism, I'm not sure but much as I don't want to, I do remember the way that man used to tower over me (he was very tall and lanky) and the horrible stale smell of his bushy beard which, if I recall, always had bits and crumbs of food embedded in it. Since then and all these years later, I've never liked a beard on a man.

~~~~~

I believe the abuse episodes brought on severe headaches that developed into migraines. I suffered mysterious chest pains back then too, as well as the sleepless nights – why sleep when you can sob into your pillow all night with perpetual anxiety and self-loathing? I mean, there are various different types of crying: crying because you got beaten, crying because you're scared, crying because you feel helpless, crying because you're convinced nobody loves you, crying out of shame and embarrassment, crying because you don't want to have to do *that* thing again, and crying because you know it's going to happen no matter how much you pray it doesn't. Then there's crying because you need help and don't know where to turn, and crying because life is damned unfair. Sometimes you're just crying because you feel sorry for yourself. You'd always end up crying over something, and every night it was for a different reason; you could just take your pick.

I never even realized that my traumatic experiences were manifesting themselves in sickness. I hid many a damp sheet a couple of mornings a week for ages, embarrassed at still wetting the bed on occasion as I approached my teens, and I wonder that my parents asked me no questions when I was taken to the doctor with a case of thrush down-below when I was 10. Yet still I kept quiet. I was too ashamed to tell. And who could I trust in any case?

Much as I love my mother now and I have forgiven her, which had been a lifelong mission - and no mean feat I assure you - she could pack a punch I have to shamefully admit, and she lost her temper, it seems, every day of my young existence, to the point where I was terrified of her. I could never predict how many slaps I'd get in any given day or indeed how badly hurt I would be - it all depended on her mood and the nature of my misdemeanour on a scale of one to ten - but it was all par for the course. You do get used to it. It's fair to say that in my younger years she scared me half to death and I hated her guts. I'm sure she knew it. I should feel grateful I survived my childhood and made it through, but to be honest if I'd known I could kill myself back when I was 12, I'm certain I would have done it.

My mother was so stubborn with her brand of discipline and I had no backbone so I endured it until I couldn't take any more, and I actually think it was extremely brave of me to run away the second time - albeit fearing for my life because I "spoke back to her" for the first time in my life - and she had that murderous look in her eyes that you just couldn't mistake that day. Usually it meant a battering, but this time, it looked like I'd gone too far and this would be my very last day on this earth if I didn't act fast. So I turned tail and ran as fast as my little legs could carry me. Seems like I've been running ever since.

~~~~~


