

Never The Gentleman

The Resilience to Overcome the Trauma of My Stolen Childhood

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This book is a memoir. It reflects the truest recollection of my personal experiences over a period of time. Some names, including locations, have been changed in order to provide anonymity for those who are still living. Based on the original conversations, some dialogue has been reconstructed. Undoubtedly, I've remembered some of the narrative events differently than others but have recorded them to the best of my ability and recollection. It is not my intention to compromise another's integrity or to bring undue hardship to others.

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Trigger warning: This book has explicit sex scenes and graphic descriptions of self-harming behavior such as self-inflicted injuries

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On a visit to her mother's gravesite, Yvonne comes across her father's headstone. Enraged to see the word 'Gentleman' engraved into the stone, Yvonne vows to have the word removed.

Chapter Five, The Box Room

When Yvonne is given her own bedroom at the age of ten, she is thrilled to have a space all her own. The room quickly becomes a horror show when her father appears in her bedroom one evening with a tin opener, wrests her legs apart, and inserts the kitchen tool into her vagina. A few nights later, despite her soreness from the first violation, he penetrates her vaginally stripping her of her innocence. It is the first of many years of sexual violation.

Chapter Nine, Escape

As Yvonne gets older she inches her way to independence and begins to desire nothing more than to escape her father's clutches once and for all by running away. Yvonne's sexual abuse continues even as she becomes more aware of the risks of pregnancy. With no sense of self-worth, she is quite promiscuous. Leaving school at the age of sixteen, Yvonne has a steady boyfriend Pete who is a good influence on her and helps her to escape.

Preface

Graveyard Rage

After my father died, I knew it was too late to ever get the closure I sought from him. There was no apology for the prolonged years of childhood sexual abuse in which I suffered in silence, meek and voiceless, living in the long shadow he cast over my life. He masqueraded as the quintessential Irishman, both charming and handsome, never admitting to those closest to him the suffering he caused me, as the eldest daughter of his eight children. Perhaps he never saw himself as a predator.

I didn't attend my father's funeral because I didn't want to cause a scene. I was afraid of what I might do. At the same time, I was mad as hell that I didn't get to tell everyone in attendance the dirty truth about him. I grieved privately, though my feelings were so visceral I did go temporarily insane.

When I'd recuperated, which took some time, I still made my annual trip to England to visit with friends and family, and looked forward to paying respect to my mother at her grave. Mum had passed away years before, and she was buried in a cemetery in Leicestershire. Standing before her headstone, I would chat with her, as I might if she were still flesh and bone, saying, "Hi Mum, hope you're having a good time up there with Grandma and Uncle Ernest," and dusted off her headstone with one of Grandma's old handkerchiefs, a keepsake I've always kept.

Although my mother wasn't perfect, by any stretch of the imagination, fresh sorrow always washes over me when speaking with her. I'd never quite fulfilled the mother-daughter relationship I'd always wanted with her but never had. Before leaving, I laid fresh flowers at the foot of Mum's grave and said a prayer.

In the surrounding area, there were headstones with heartfelt inscriptions of those who'd now passed on: Beloved wives, courageous sons, special daughters and loving grandparents. It is then I came across my father's headstone, which was just a short distance from my mother's. All of my sisters and I were under the impression that my father would be buried with his parents in a different cemetery. However, my brother Seamus, against all of our wishes, insisted that our father be buried alongside Mum. I didn't know, however, that my father's final resting place was so very close to my mother's plot. They were estranged from each other for decades. There was no reason they should be bedfellows now in death.

When I read the inscription on his headstone, "Dad, Grandad, and Gentleman," the shock stopped me in my tracks. I immediately felt dizzy and nauseous. I began grabbing dead flowers from a nearby dustbin and threw them all over his headstone, which scattered on the surrounding soil. It's all he deserved for all of eternity, and I then screamed, "Gentleman? Gentleman?! You're no fucking gentleman, you bastard!!" I then picked up a rock and began hitting the headstone with everything I had, as if somehow I could chip away at the enormity of the lie.

A gentleman? He was a *monster*. The man who made my life unbearable. Who tormented and used me all through my childhood. He, who took away my hope, my trust, and my confidence. He took everything, that monster of a man who called himself my father.

A tidal wave of rage overcame me and unleashed something deep inside of me; soon my entire body was shaking as tears began pouring down my cheeks and I began screaming, crying, and cursing like a madwoman. There was a couple, a woman and a younger man, staring at me and I remember yelling at them, "What!? What are you looking at?!" I had momentarily lost my mind. My behavior must have appeared mad but I didn't care a whit and they soon turned away, either fearful or full of pity for a troubled stranger, I'm not sure which.

Eventually, I made my way slowly back up the path to the car where my friend Kathleen continued to witness my personal meltdown. I was desperately searching my bag for cigarettes and a lighter, still seething. When I found the

cigarettes, I threw them back into my bag and burst into tears. Feelings of helplessness, which has been my constant companion for much of my life, hidden behind a strong veneer, began to overwhelm me. I'd always wanted to be in control of every aspect of my adult life. This time, the dam had broken, and I was in pieces. Though dead, somehow he'd won again. The way he always did.

I was determined to turn a corner in my life, to rid myself of the nightmare, and here I was, feeling like a frightened girl again, after having stumbled upon his headstone. There he was, waiting to claim me all over again.

Not this time, not ever again, I resisted. I was going to break free of his power. This time I'd *not* let him win. I would *not* be going to *my* grave knowing that the inscribed words on his headstone were so blatantly untrue. I vowed right then and there that I would remove the word "Gentleman" no matter what the cost.

In the days after the graveyard visit, once I'd returned to the United States, it took me a few months, but by the Grace of God, I finally happened to reach the right person in the United Kingdom by phone who granted all my wishes. The word "Gentleman" was removed. It took some work as they had to remove the whole headstone, resurface it, and recenter the remaining words. I would never want my daughter or grandchildren to have the impression he was a kind or caring man, as the word gentleman implied. He was never a father to me, not in the true sense of the word.



Setting the record straight about my father, an abusive incestuous pedophile, was enormously empowering for me. There was a huge mixture of emotions, both positive and negative, which stirred up inside of me. This inner unrest set me on a path that ultimately led me to write this book as a resource and a comfort to other survivors who are coping with the lifelong effects of their horrendous abuse. It was a path of exploration and understanding that would last for many years to come. I needed to look back, in detail, at what happened to me as a child and to face the devastation it had brought to my adult life. I wanted to examine how I had coped

and survived, and to be honest, I also needed to share how hard the journey has been, and how hard it still is to press on with dignity.

This journey of acknowledgment, empathy of others, and self-forgiveness, after many years of therapy and the support of close friends, has led me to eventually finding my authentic voice. The catalyst of this enormous positive shift which took place released all the anger I'd suppressed for so many years, which now rose to the surface. The potency of my anger gave me the powerful courage to speak out. It was time to come clean and tell My Truth.

For those who'd like to know how on earth I survived continual sexual abuse by a biological parent as a very young child during which I was groomed for increasingly explicit acts until the age of sixteen, I want to assure you that it is possible to survive the most harrowing of circumstances.

Now that I'm on this side of my recovery, I can assert that I was never a victim. I can stand from where I am now in life and boldly reclaim that I'm victorious. I was, and am, a survivor. Out of everything, all the memories and the emotions, this one thing rose, strong and true:

I am a survivor.

This book is a testament to my own survival, and I have written it for all survivors everywhere. Most of all for those who are still entrapped who are enduring abuse and living in fear at the hands of a family member and suffering silently; this is the highest betrayal of trust. You are not alone and I believe you.



Chapter Five

The Box Room

I didn't hear my father's footsteps on the stairs, as I was asleep in the bottom bunk bed. I awoke to feel him shaking me, but I pretended to stay asleep, hoping desperately that he would give up and stumble out of the room. Maybe he would trip, careen down the stairs, and kill himself. I used to dream of him tumbling down the stairs all the time.

He slid into the bed beside me, tugging my nightdress up, as he always did, so that he could rub his penis against me masturbating; his hot, whisky-sour breath made me gag as he'd whisper into my ear, "Stay quiet and enjoy it." I was terrified of him, so I never dared make a sound.

The salinity of the tears burning my eyes, I prayed for Mum to wake up and rescue me. I always hoped she would come in and discover him violating me, but she never did. It was a full house and when she wasn't at her night job cleaning, she was asleep and dead to the world by nine o'clock. That is unless my father, in his drunken stupor, yelled at her to wake her up and get him something to eat.

Angela slept in the bunk above mine and I wondered if she was awake and if she knew what he was doing all along. She never said and I never asked. She was just six, three years younger than me, so even if she did hear, what could she have done? It was better that she was asleep, or pretending to be. I didn't want him to start up with her; I felt if I did what he wanted of me, I might be protecting my little sister. This pattern continued for a while; my father waking me at night when

Mum was out or asleep, then either climbing in with me or hauling me downstairs to the kitchen for the lemon-curd scenario.

Then, when I turned ten, my father announced that it was time I had my own bedroom. There were six of us sharing the big bedroom by then and it was getting crowded. Not that we ever noticed, we were just kids, and that's the way things went in our house. My baby brother slept in a cot and the rest of us were in bunk beds, but Mum was about to have another baby soon who would need the cot, which meant my youngest brother would need a bottom bunk...mine.

My father cleared out the little box room that was an offshoot of the big bedroom and set up a little bed and a small chest of drawers for me. It was a tiny space, with grubby brown walls, and a small window which had no curtains. The bed had purple, brushed nylon sheets, a faded, yellow, little pillow, with a heavy, itchy, grey blanket laying atop of the bed. It was hardly the pink princess room I'd dreamed of, but it was all mine and that meant a lot. I was thrilled. I couldn't wait to show off by telling some of the kids at school, "I have my very own bedroom now."

I arranged my small collection of toys, a scruffy teddy bear, and several cardboard picture books. On top of my chest of drawers, I proudly placed my best, plastic, pink bracelet. Inside the drawers, I put my school uniform and the few clothes I owned.

Giving me that room was the first, kind thing my father had ever done for me. I felt so happy with my own little space. I let my brothers and sisters come in and see it and then shooed them out, warning them not to go in when I wasn't there. I wondered if my father felt badly about the things he did. Why else would he let me have my own room? The only good answer I could come up with, as a ten year old, was that I had privileges as the oldest child.

I was so innocent, and just a little girl. I had no idea what he had in mind, but one evening soon after, I discovered why he had given me my own room when I found him, once again, looming over me in the middle of the night.

“Wake up, Yvonne darlin’, will you? We’re going to have some fun,” he whispered, his breath foul in my face, reeking of whiskey as usual.

My stomach was knotted up with fear. What did he mean? Was it more of the lemon curd kind of ‘fun’? He pulled the covers off me telling me, “Hush now.” When the nightgown was cinched up high enough to reveal my bare legs, he instructed me, “Now open your legs; I’ve something here that will help to break you in.” My stomach clenched in fear and anxiety.

He pulled a tin opener out of his pocket. I recognized it from the kitchen drawer where it was normally kept. It was the kind that was common in those days with a thick, wooden handle a couple of inches around and about four inches long in length. What was he doing with it in my room?

A moment later he’d wrenched my legs apart and started pushing the thick handle into my small vagina. “Dad, don’t, don’t,” I begged, with tears streaming down my face. “Please Dad don’t, what are you doing?” I sobbed. “It hurts.”

“It won’t hurt for long,” he said, “You’ll see, you’ll soon be grand. Now put your legs up on this pillow and keep that inside you tonight darlin’. It will open you up a bit, and get you ready for me. Then we’ll have more grown-up fun. You’ll be my special girl then, won’t you?”

He covered me with the blanket and I could feel its rough wool fibers chafing against my skin. “Now you stay here like a good girl and I’ll be back later tonight to take it out, alright?” He staggered out of the room, pulling the door closed behind him. For a long time I lay there, too scared to move a muscle, utterly shocked while waiting for him to come back. He never did return, most likely passing out from his drunken stupor. I swam between consciousness and unconsciousness.

I was shaking violently with shock, vacillating between hot sweats and cold chills. The foreign object he had stuck inside me was causing me agonizing throbbing pain; I didn’t dare cry out or move at all. He had propped my legs up in

an awkward position, and I felt like a circus contortionist, laying there, prone, helpless, and terrified.

After what must have been a few hours, I couldn't stand it any longer and I put my hand down and tugged cautiously at the tin opener, pulling it out of me. I still experienced spasms of pain which made me nauseous. I felt as if I was going to vomit, but eventually I got the tin opener out of me and threw it across the floor. Then I got back under the blanket and curled into a fetal position. I could feel a wetness between my legs. Turning the light on, I put my hand down towards my vagina. When I looked at my fingers, I saw the blood and thought, *What has he done to me?* I was petrified, and thought, *Was I going to die now?*

I lay in a huddled mass under the blanket and felt all alone in the world. There was no one I could tell, nothing I could do. I was afraid he would come back at any moment and find that I had taken the tin opener out and be furious with me. The hours crept by slowly until morning as I lay, unable to sleep, terrified.

The memory is imprinted into my mind as if it were yesterday, and although I wouldn't know it until much later, it left me with a tilted womb which would have major consequences for me in adulthood.

When Mum came to wake us for school, I crawled out of bed. My purple sheets were stained crimson red with blood. I tossed a blanket over the soiled sheets and then picked up the tin opener and hid it where it wouldn't be found. Once I got to the bathroom, I cleaned myself up as best as I could and wiped away the blood between my legs. I got into my school clothes and went down to the kitchen where I sat pale-faced and sullen over my bowl of cereal, unable to eat.

“What's wrong with you?” Mum demanded to know. “Are you sick?”

I looked up at her, in a daze, wishing I could tell her what had happened. I wanted to scream “Yes,” and crawl into her arms feeling the warmth of her holding me protectively with a gentle, soothing voice. I needed to hear her telling me, “It's going to be alright, Yvonne,” but that was a mere fantasy. I snapped back to the present; at least in school he couldn't get to me.

“I’m okay,” I whispered, knowing there was no hope of escape. “I’m just not very hungry,” saying somewhat apologetically. My mother clearly didn’t know how to read my signs of distress. Minutes later, all of us were packed into the car and Mum drove us to school. Dad was still passed out in bed. To my parents, it was just another normal day.

As I slumped over my desk, I felt waves of nausea and painful stomach cramps all day. I put my hand up during class to be excused to go to the bathroom so that I could check my knickers and replace the bloody, soiled toilet paper with clean paper. It was the cheap, shiny toilet paper that was issued in those days to schools.

When the bell rang for recess, I hid in a corner of the playground. I felt desolate and longed for Grandma and Uncle Ernest, the only two souls who I felt were truly family to me. I envisioned being in their small, cozy front room, sitting in front of the fire with Grandma’s comforting words and Uncle Ernest’s jokes making me giggle.

Over the coming days, every time my father walked into the room, my anxiety skyrocketed. Mum asked me to take a mug of tea to Dad. Handing it to him, I said, trembling, “Dad, there was blood, lots of it. It was all over the sheets; I don’t know what to tell Mum.”

He laughed. “Ah, so my little trick worked then. You’re a woman now, Yvonne.” Seeing my tears perturbed him and he suddenly turned gruff and said, “Now wipe your eyes.”

It sounded as though he had known there would be a bloody mess to clean up. *Had he meant to make me bleed?* As if reading my thoughts, he said, “Don’t worry about Mum. She’ll be fine; I’ll have a word.” Was he saying that Mum would think me bleeding was alright? How could that be? I didn’t understand and my head began spinning with new misery.

The next morning, I overheard him telling mom, “She’s started the red stuff. The bed needs sorting out.” I thought, *What was the ‘red stuff’?* It wasn't until much later that I understood he was telling Mum that I had started my period. I hadn't, I still had no idea what periods were, and it would be another two years before I got mine. As usual, she believed his pony and trap and it explained the blood on my sheets. Mum never came to talk to me about my ‘becoming a woman’. She seemed happy to accept whatever he said.



On a subsequent evening when Dad put my younger siblings to bed, he ordered me to get to bed as well, though I couldn't know at the time what he had planned next, I knew that he would eventually be coming into my bedroom.

Would he use the tin-opener again? Please God help me, I said to myself, my restless thoughts keeping me awake. I heard my bedroom door creak open and I peered into the darkness and saw the silhouette of him taking off his clothes, without him knowing, as I'd always pretended to be asleep. Undeterred, he still climbed into bed beside me, stinking of whisky and sweat. He shook my shoulders and said, “Wake up, Yvonne.” He leered at me saying, “Are you ready for me now?”

I whimpered, “Please don't hurt me again Dad, please,” still curled into a tight ball with my stomach in knots.

“Ah, you're fine. Stop banging on Yvonne. Come on now, be a good girl, and I'll give you a nice present,” he muttered, pulling up my nightgown.

A moment later, he heaved himself on top of me, and pushed his penis inside of me, penetrating me for the first time. I felt truly sick and struggled not to scream; I couldn't even cry out if I wanted to as I was paralyzed. If the tin-opener had hurt and shocked me, this was worse, so much worse. At ten, I was not physically mature enough to understand sex and my poor vagina was still very tender and felt badly bruised from the first violation. He didn't care that I appeared

injured, and he never inquired. Most despicable of all, he had no qualms with injuring me still further.

So I lay there helplessly in my small bed with my drunken father. All I knew was that I was a scared little girl; it hurt dreadfully, and I wanted it to stop. I was left dizzy with confusion. One minute my father was bearable, then come nightfall the nightmare would start up, my stomach constantly in tight knots, riddled with anxiety and fear. I'd find no sense of true peace for a number of years to come.

Eventually he rolled off of me, leaving me in a sticky, bloody mess. He got out of my bed, and in an attempt to put his pants back on, he began cursing when, dressing in semi-darkness, he put his pants on backwards. Then he finally got his pants on, and ambled out my bedroom door without another word to me.

I understood now that the tin-opener was to 'prepare' me for my small frame for what he had just done to me, and would, I knew, do again. Why didn't any of my siblings wake up? How could Mum not know what he was doing to me? It was after this awful deflowering that I started to look at Mum as one of us, just another one of the children, who was as helpless as we were.

A day or two later, my father came up to my room again. It was mid-afternoon. "Now then Yvonne, I've got you a little present for being a good girl," he said. "Your Daddy's special girl, eh?" He never failed to use those words; it was one way he was grooming me. He winked and then handed me a porcelain Cinderella doll, with a child's watch wrapped around her blue gown. Cinderella was a bit battered, goodness knows where he had got her from, but I had longed for a doll and, although I understood that this was a bribe because of what he had already done to me, I couldn't help reaching out for her and gazing at Cinderella in awe. My father nodded, happy to see me appeased and disappeared. I laid down on my bed, and cuddled the doll close to me. I felt she was my friend, the only friend I had.

Mum's blindness at that time was, in part, because she was once again heavily pregnant and a couple of months later she gave birth to another little girl, Sinead. She was a lovely baby and I adored her as if she was my own. The

emotional void in me was filled by my affection for my baby sister, fussing over her and cuddling her whenever I could. I had a strong mothering instinct; playing with her as she grew into a toddler always comforted me. In some ways, I was giving her all the love and attention that I was being deprived of.

My father continued to inflict pain on me as the years went on. He came into my little room every two or three nights. There was no escaping him, and no help to be had. At that time, my life was all about survival. I tried to find ways to avoid him, like pleading with Angela to come and sleep in my bed with me. But my father would just push Angela out, telling her to get back into her own bed. Awoken from her slumber, she did as she was told.

Most of the time, I coped through out-of-body experiences. I felt myself flying up to the ceiling and looked down at the scene as if I were watching a movie, as though it was happening to someone else, and not me. Inevitably when it was all over, I always returned to myself and what he did to me continued to be physically painful.

This made me feel sick, dirty, and ashamed. I was wetting the bed nightly and sometimes I had accidents at school during the day. Upon waking, I would hide my wet knickers in my chest of drawers. That made my other clothes smell bad but I didn't know what else to do. I was emotionally and physically traumatized and I slowly began to shut down.

I hated my father for what he was doing to me. When I wasn't imagining him falling down the stairs I dreamed of him dying in a car accident. I channelled all my helpless anger into fantasies of him meeting a grisly end. I wanted him dead.

His uncaring behavior affected all of us. We were all ordered around, made to do chores of every kind, and treated like slaves. After school, instead of homework, which he didn't care if we completed or not, we had to scrub the floors or help fix the fences. These were not child-appropriate tasks; it was manual labor, fit for an adult. I think he just enjoyed his control over us, as he strutted around checking on our work like a sergeant major inspecting his young recruits.

The term coercive control hadn't come into use then, but it describes my father to a tee. That's exactly what life at home with him was like. He exerted obsessive control over all of us, including Mum. We all had an atrophied sense of self, if we had one at all.

One time he made us sing for our supper, literally. When Christmas came he insisted we children had to go out and sing carols for money. "We don't know any carols," I griped. "The only one I know is *We Wish You a Merry Christmas*." "Well sing that then," Dad barked, "Now get going, and mind you keep the money and bring it back."

It was like something out of a Charles Dickens story, only this was real life. The five of us went out into the cold and stood at a neighbor's door and warbled, "We Wish You a Merry Christmas, We Wish You a Merry Christmas, We Wish You a Merry Christmas, and a Happy New Year," while Seamus pressed the doorbell. A woman came to the door, smiled at the sight of our bedraggled little crew and gave us sixpence.

On we went to the next door, where the whole scene was repeated. After we'd sung the carol a dozen times, Seamus and I struggled to think of another carol, but we couldn't, so we carried on repeating the same one, sometimes several times over on each doorstep. Some people told us to get lost, I can't imagine we sounded great, while others took pity and gave us a few coppers.

A couple of hours in, my youngest siblings were beginning to cry and complain of the cold. Seamus and I dragged them home, hoping we had done enough to keep Dad from going mad at us. We got home shivering, our lips blue with cold. "Well, how much did you earn?" Our Father demanded, holding his hand out. I gave him the pile of coins from my pocket. "Not bad," he grinned. A moment later, he was gone, as we heard the door slam behind him.

He liked to find new ways to humiliate us children, especially the girls. He'd ask the boys to sit up on the bed next to him; then he'd make us girls line up at the end of the bed and stand there while he and the boys judged our looks and our

clothes. He belittled us and made us feel like worthless objects and he taught the boys to treat women with contempt.

He continued to call Seamus his 'first lieutenant'. Seamus bonded with Dad because, as is common with little boys, his father was his number one hero. Dad doted on his first-born son, making Seamus feel special while creating an unhealthy father-son bond often teaching him the wrong lessons, such as putting women down. The other boys were caught up in it too, but not as much as Seamus. Our father manipulated all of us, to his own ends, often pitting the boys against the girls.

Mum, now that she was driving a lot, we'd visit Grandma more often. Much to our delight, we'd all herd into Mum's car to go to visit Grandma Eileen's house. Once there, we all felt a sense of freedom and my natural exuberance and humour, so often crushed or suppressed at home, would surface joyfully. I'd play with Uncle Ernest and Grandma would spoil us all. Sinead didn't really understand what was going on, but she loved coming out with me and Uncle Ernest. We'd put her into the pram used for scrumping and off we'd go. When we spotted bottles of milk on a doorstep we'd swing into action. "Come on, Sinead, walk into the garden," I'd say, leading her by the hand. We wanted her to distract anyone who might otherwise be watching us.

While she toddled around, Uncle Ernest would grab the milk off the porch, then I'd grab a hold of Sinead and run for it. We'd place Sinead back in the pram with the milk bottles hidden behind her. After a few rounds of this there was so much milk in the pram that Sinead could hardly squeeze in. We pushed the pram back to Grandma's, laughing over our stolen hoard. We were little Oliver Twists, full of innocent laughter.

Our visits to Grandma's never lasted long; if only we could live there permanently. When Dad came home to find us gone, he'd get back into his car and hurl himself through the countryside driving like an inebriated lunatic to my grandmother's house, which was an hour away.

By the time he'd arrive at Grandma'a, our father would've pulled himself together and ambled around to the back gate. If the rear door was closed, he'd pop up in the window, and say, "Ah, Eileen, I've missed you. Drove all the way down here just to give ya a kiss." He was quite the charmer, always dapper and good-looking, and always ready with a line of blarney.

"Ah, go on with ya," she'd say in her Southern Irish lilt.

Hearing her husband chattering, Mum would crack a smile, her cheeks flushed at the knowledge that he'd pursued her there. She would tell Grandma, "You might as well let him in, he won't give up." Grandma Eileen would then open the back door, and we'd see him sneak her a ten shilling note and wink at my grandmother.



Chapter Nine

Escape

The following spring Mum moved back, this time to Leicester, which was only twenty-five miles or so from where we lived in Rugby. Mum may initially have had second thoughts about moving so close to where our father was, but her younger brother offered her the use of his house. He had recently split up with his wife, who had moved out along with their two children, and he was returning to sea as a first-class, silver service waiter on a passenger cruise ship.

The offer of a free place to stay was too good to pass up. Mum had always gotten on really well with Auntie Bridget, our father's sister. Now that they were living in the same city, they would become even better friends. I like to think that perhaps Mum wanted to be closer to her three eldest children too, although it was a few weeks before we heard that she was back in the area.

When we did hear from Mum, Seamus, Angela, and I went over by bus for a visit. The house was a smart, semi-detached home with bay windows and three bedrooms. It was probably the nicest house Mum had ever lived in on her own. She was pleased to see us, and our younger siblings came running towards us to hug us.

“Where's Sinead?” I asked Mum. I always missed little Sinead the most.

“She's staying with some friends in Dartmouth,” Mum said so casually that I wasn't sure I'd heard right.

“Staying for how long?” I pressed.

“Oh, for a while, I’m not sure. She’s with the Evans. Sinead gets on well with them and they dote on her.”

I was stunned. Mum had left six-year-old Sinead with the Evans? She left Sinead behind with friends of hers in Dartmouth. I knew about them, as my mum had mentioned that Sinead often enjoyed spending time there. They were an older couple whose only son had left home and they adored Sinead. Surely that didn’t mean that Mum could just give Sinead away to them?

“She is coming back, isn’t she Mum?” I felt furious, but I tried not to show it.

“Of course she is,” Mum said nonchalantly. “She can come home whenever she wants to.”

And that was that. Sinead stayed with the Evans for five years. She was eleven by the time she came back to live with Mum. By that time, she had spent almost half her life with them, and thought of them as her parents. She loved them very much. Neither Mum nor my father ever acknowledged that leaving Sinead behind was a strange or cruel thing to do.

Now as an adult, Sinead recalls that time in her life when she was left behind by our mother, who took her siblings, but not her, back to Leicester. Though the Evans were wonderful people, Sinead must have missed all of us. She had already been torn away from me, Angela, and Seamus. Now, she was separated from everyone else too.

Both of us would develop a lifelong fear of abandonment that would lead to ill-judged relationships and a great deal of heartache. Both of us were also sexually abused by our father, something we were only able to talk about many years later.

Alongside the trichotillomania Sinead developed as a teenager, she would suffer from depression, lifelong sleep paralysis, as well as epilepsy. The legacy of being abused by a father and abandoned by a mother is a painful one. Our other sisters, Angela and Claire, have denied that they were ever molested by our father.



Mum, who was still young at thirty-five, was free and single again. By this time, Malcolm was history, and she was now in a big city and was ready to have some fun. Aunt Bridget was also recently divorced, so the two of them would put on their full party regalia, from false eyelashes to tiny mini-skirts, or long flowing dresses, and they'd go out looking like two dolly birds hitting all the nightclubs in one evening, starting with their favourite, the Palais de Dance.

I sometimes went over by bus to babysit and Mum would waft out of the house on a cloud of perfume looking beautiful and ready to let loose. It was as if she was trying to erase the years of torture my father had put her through. She was an innocent woman really. Two glasses of wine and she'd be ready to pass out. She felt carefree for the first time in her life, and was enjoying every minute of it.

She often brought boyfriends home, but none of them lasted very long. It was a wild time in her life, and she wasn't ready to be tied down by anyone again. She took in lodgers to help make ends meet, and I think she felt in control of her destiny for the first time.

From the moment Angela knew Mum was back, she'd plotted her escape. She was determined to live with Mum and the little ones. We used to get off the school bus and wait outside the Bull's Head, a pub our father frequented, in his blue minivan. Eventually he'd stagger out of the pub and take us home.

One day after school, Angela announced, "I'm leaving. I'm going to see Mum on Saturday and I'm not coming back."

"What? You can't," I gasped. Angela was like my anchor, and the thought of losing her too was unbearable. Trying to discourage her, I threatened, "I'm telling Dad."

“You can’t! It’s a secret,” she pleaded.

I wasn’t really gonna tell him; I wouldn’t have done that to Angela. What I wanted was to join her and Mum, but I was too afraid.

A few days later, true to her word, Angela announced that she was going over to visit Mum. She caught the bus to Leicester after school that afternoon, and the next day Mum phoned our father announcing that Angela was going to stay with her.

He was furious, and completely taken off guard, yelling into the phone, “Dirty little traitor!” He couldn’t bear anyone leaving him, and threatened Seamus and me within an inch of our lives. After Angela left, I felt even more isolated and trapped. I’d been brainwashed into believing that I couldn’t leave, ever. My father had told me so many times throughout the ten years of sexual abuse that he would kill me, and I was paralyzed with fear. Now there was just me and my brother Seamus.

My father was getting what he wanted from Jackie, until the day we found out she was pregnant with his child. Jackie living with us had freed me from his clutches for a short time but now that she was expecting, his visits to my bedroom resumed. Perhaps my father was put off by the sight of a pregnant woman.

To add to my humiliation, my father started paying me for sex. He would put a few coins on the dressing table and say, “Take that, sweetheart.” It made me feel even worse that he was treating me like a prostitute. Sometimes he would entrap me in the barn and make me masturbate him. When he’d finished, I would stand there, with my head bowed, and whisper, “Can I go now, Dad?” Getting his permission, I’d creep out feeling nothing but shame, and I’m sure I must have looked like a frightened deer caught in headlights.

I had absolutely no sense of self-worth or any knowledge of how to keep myself safe. What I did have was a deep and desperate longing to be loved. When boys began taking an interest in me sexually, I let them have their way with me. I

was so shut down that I can hardly remember what it was like the first time I had sex with anyone other than my father.

What I do remember is that the boy had red hair and we were in a field, surrounded by haystacks. I don't remember it as vividly, as many girls might when losing their virginity, because it wasn't the first time I'd had sex.

After that I became quite promiscuous because I had no sense of boundaries. I didn't know that I could say no, because I'd never been allowed to say no to my father. I could never be sexually intimate without some sort of drug to relax me, most often alcohol. I was fifteen and began smoking pot.

I lived in two states of mind. To the outside world, I must have appeared like a normal teenager, a funny and outgoing girl. At home I was still a timid, frightened teenager who didn't dare stand up to her abuser.

When I turned sixteen, I left school because there was no healthy encouragement to continue my education. I thought it was more practical to get my first job. It was in a boutique and I was earning six pounds a week, although my father made me hand over most of it for my room and board. With whatever I had leftover, and with my employee discount, I finally bought some nice clothes for myself.

I was glad to have put school behind me and to begin working. I felt grown-up and I wanted to remake my image, vowing I'd never be that sad, oddball kid that I'd been at school ever again. I worked hard to be accepted as one of the in crowd, and I hid all my misery and hurt under the social personality of a jokester. I quickly became the fun girl, someone who was always up for a laugh and who wanted to go out and have a good time.

Of course, my father did his best to stop me from having any kind of fun. It seemed like Seamus had more privileges because he was a boy. He managed to get out of the house more often, and we barely saw each other. There was a terrible double standard. My father was seemingly okay with Seamus having a social life, but my father didn't like me socializing with other boys my age.

I remember once when there was a village disco I wanted to attend, I asked him nervously if he'd mind if I didn't pay board that week so that I could buy a trendy outfit I had my eye on. As soon as the words escaped my mouth, I knew it was a mistake.

He glared at me, his face red and enraged that I would have the audacity to ask such a thing. "How dare you ask me that," he spat. "You owe me a lot more than your pathetic wage. I put a roof over your head and don't you forget it!" He sounded just like an ogre. "Now hand over that money. I want all of it. You can walk to work this week as a punishment for your cheekiness."

Trembling with fear, I gave him all my money, even my bus fare. "Don't try anything like that again," he warned. "I didn't give you everything for you to go to a fecking disco." That scene, and so many others like it, are forever etched into my memory. His rage was terrifying, with the possibility of violence always brewing just under the surface, never knowing what awaited me at home.

Despite my innate timidity and his best efforts to control my every move, he couldn't stop me from growing up. The rite of passage from submissive child to teenage adolescent brought with it a quiet tide of inviolable autonomy. He could abuse my body and curb my sense of personal freedom, but he couldn't stop Mother Nature from taking her natural course.

I was blossoming into a young, attractive woman, and I mustered just enough resolute pluck to explore the greater world around me, places beyond my father's authority. I kept going out with my friends behind his back, refusing to exist solely for his sexual gratification.

I was skinny with a small waist and big breasts, so boys often noticed me. Soon after starting work, I met my first boyfriend. His name was Pete and I thought he was wonderful. He was nineteen, three years older than me, and tall with shoulder length, blond hair. He worked as an engineer at a local company.

Pete was cheerful and funny; he made for very good company. He had a red Mini and he would blast Elton John songs from his car speakers, bopping his head to the music as he was driving. Having a car was a big deal back then and I loved zipping around town seated next to him. Pete loved his football, he supported Coventry City. He would often pick me up after work and take me out for dinner and a movie. I felt happy and carefree with him, like a normal teenager. We would sit in his car and listen to music and chat for hours; I never wanted the night to come to an end.

It was around this time that I also met Ann, who would become a lifelong friend. When all of us went out dancing, I sometimes stayed over at Ann's house if I'd missed my father's curfew. Most of the time I deliberately missed the bus. "Please Ann," I would beg, "Let me stay over, it's too late to go home at this hour. I've already missed the bus." Anything not to have to go back to the house on the hill.

One evening Pete brought me home at half past nine o'clock; it wasn't late, and we were sitting in his car at the bottom of our drive when suddenly my father appeared, running down the gravel drive in his white underwear with hippie beads around his neck. I guess he thought they made him look groovy. Much to our surprise, he was carrying his rifle and pointing it at us.

"Get out of the fecking car," he shouted.

Hot with shame I turned to Pete, who was transfixed by the sight of my father. "Go, just go," I said, and I jumped out of the car as fast as I could. Pete revved up the engine and had soon sped away as I ran towards the house with tears streaming down my cheeks, terrified that my father had ruined the one good thing in my life.

Thankfully he hadn't, because Pete appeared after work the next day and we went to a fast food spot for a meal of burger and chips. "Your old man is something, isn't he," Pete said. "What was all that about? Is he stuck in the last century?"

“Something like that,” I mumbled. I hadn’t told a soul about the abuse, not one single person, so Pete just thought my father was a nutty, controlling parent. After that, Pete never came near my house again. He would drop me a little ways down the lane and I’d walk the rest of the way home.



It was Pete who ultimately encouraged me to leave my father’s house for good. Now that he’d witnessed his dark side, Pete urged me to break away. I wanted to, so very badly, but it took one final incident to push me over the edge.

Mum received £5000 in the divorce settlement, enough to buy a small home of her own. She could have gotten a lot more, but she accepted the £5000 without seeking legal counseling, perhaps preferring a quick settlement rather than more fighting with my father. She chose a two-bedroom, terraced house in Steele Street in Leicester, which is what she could afford at the time. Angela, who was the first to leave us, Claire, Liam, and Michael shared the two bedrooms. The boys had one bedroom and the girls the other; Mum slept on the pull-out couch in the living room.

It wasn’t long after their divorce plans were finalized that I wanted to go visit Mum. My father, who was still bitter about the divorce settlement, ordered me to bring back four oil paintings he wanted. They weren’t his, they’d actually been Grandma’s, and they were precious to Mum. They were just about the only nice things in her house and she’d kept them carefully wrapped up and hidden underneath the stairs. That’s why my father wanted them, not because he liked them but because he knew they were worth some good money.

Wanting to introduce Pete to my mother, he came by the house on the hill, and off we drove to visit with Mum. The whole time while there, I was terribly anxious and didn’t enjoy my visit; all I could think about were the paintings and the threat behind his expectations. It never entered my mind to take them, I could never have stolen from Mum, but I knew my father would be livid when I returned without them.

Afterwards, Pete dropped me off close to home as he always did. It was late in the evening and I hoped my father and Jackie would be in bed. As silently as I could, I put my key in the front door, carefully opened it, and slipped into the house. I crept up the stairs, my heart pounding, hoping I'd be able to hide in my room. He must have been waiting for me because as I reached the top of the stairs, he shouted, "Yvonne! Come in here."

I poked my head cautiously into the room, hiding behind the door. He was lying on the bed and the first thing I noticed was a thick pint glass sitting on his side table. He got straight to the point and shouted, "Where the hell are they?" I stood in silence, unable to speak.

"For feck's sake. Are you deaf? I asked you a question."

I lowered my head, already feeling sick, and nervously said, "I'm sorry, Dad. I don't have them."

A split second later he'd grabbed the pint glass, it was a heavy one with a handle, and he threw it at me. It missed my head by inches and smashed against the door frame instead.

I ran to my room, shaking and scared. I could hear poor Jackie cleaning up the shards of broken glass. He'd probably fallen into a drunken sleep. Fearful, I didn't sleep at all that night, thinking that he could have seriously injured me.

I was terrified of having my face cut. I questioned why this isolated act of my father throwing the glass at my face gave rise to so much anger within me. While I didn't care a lot about my body, perhaps because he'd groomed me from such a young age, my face felt like the only part of me that was still mine. I was determined that he wasn't having that too. I was sixteen, and I'd finally had enough of his abuse.

If I didn't leave by the following morning, I felt sure he would kill me one day. After the house fell silent, I got up and packed a few of my belongings into a

plastic carrier bag. Then, I laid awake on my bed waiting for daybreak. It was summer so it was light by five in the morning. I got dressed, took my handbag, the plastic bag I'd filled, and tiptoed down the stairs, avoiding the creaky step, and slipped out of the back door so that he wouldn't hear me.

Even though it was much earlier than he usually woke up, I was still petrified. He had such power over me that I looked at every tree and bush, imagining him lying in wait with his gun, ready to shoot me at any moment. I counted each step I took telling myself, *Get to the door, get to the road, get around the bend to the main road.* I wanted to break out into a full sprint, but I walked down the drive as unassumingly as possible trying to look as though I was just going into work a bit earlier than usual. Knowing I was leaving, my senses were hypervigilant, and I imagined my father awake and standing at the window watching me with his gun at the ready. I didn't dare look behind me and was so afraid I was going to take a bullet in in the back.

It was the longest walk of my life; though my legs were shaky I knew with every step I was distancing myself from the constant abuse I'd endured for over ten years and the deep fear he'd embedded in me. I was breaking away from my father for the first time. Once I successfully got onto the gravel road that led to the main road and rounded the bend, I knew I was out of sight and I ran as fast as I could, a mile downhill, to the bus stop. It was only once I was on the bus that I felt I could breathe again. Once in town, I waited until the boutique opened and phoned Pete. I burst into tears, and said, "I've done it, Pete, I've left. Will you come and take me to Mum's?"

Pete told me he'd be there as fast as he could. Then I told my boss that I was leaving. I explained that I'd be moving out of Rugby to go live with my mum. He wasn't happy about my sudden departure, but he could see how distraught I was.

When Pete arrived, I ran, sobbing, to the car and got in. He hugged me and then drove us to Mum's. When we got there, he walked in and said to Mum, "She's finally left Hitler. It only took her sixteen years to leave the lunatic." Mum took one look at me and knew I was here to stay. Pete had to return to work so he left. Mum then rang Auntie Bridget to come over. My father was her brother, but she

was much closer to Mum and to us kids. My aunt said she would break the news to my father, telling him I wasn't coming back. I sat on the end of Mum's stairs staring anxiously at the phone's long wire trailing along the hallway floor.

While Auntie Bridget spoke to my father I sat, frozen, imagining his contorted face, frightened he might storm over to come retrieve me. I could hear my aunt saying, "Joe, she wants to be with her mum." I was relieved I couldn't hear his end of the conversation, although I figured he would call me a traitor as he did Angela and anyone else that left him.

The little Steele Street house was crowded with five of us kids and Mum. But for me it meant freedom. Angela was so happy that I'd made it out, she threw her arms around me upon my arrival. We would become much closer. For the first time I was able to lead a normal life just like other girls my age. Not that I was in any way 'normal'. I was so damaged that a lot of the time I felt numb, my feelings had been cut off from any healthy emotional growth. My mind floated all over the place to avoid remembering all the awful things that my father had done to me.

At night I had terrible nightmares, and I would wake up crying and shouting. Angela would attempt to hush me. It was awful but we never talked about the cause of my night terrors; if we had the maturity to confide in each other, perhaps things would have been different. I did feel bad that Seamus was left behind in that old gloomy house alone with our father. Seamus used to come and visit us after that and hang out with friends of Angela's. I imagined my father would turn to Seamus and say to him, "Oh well, son. Just you and me left now, my First Lieutenant."

Mum's life was quite different and much happier. She was single and loving her freedom. Sometimes Mum would play a record and dance around the room to the sounds of her favourite group, The Stylistics. She continued to date and occasionally had a boyfriend stay over with her, and who could blame her? She was a pretty, sexy woman and after all her years of living with that awful man, she was finally enjoying her right to make her own choices.

Mum had never been much of a homemaker and it showed. There were no flowers inside, or outside, and the house was furnished with anything she could scavenge. Her cosmetics cabinet was an old fridge that had long since stopped working. It was filled with rollers and hair pieces, wigs, nail polish, hairspray, and makeup; it was her own little beauty space. None of the children minded the chaos much; it was what we'd always been used to.

Jackie's baby was born not long after I'd left. The baby was a little girl they named Colleen Mary. Dad chose Mum's name as his new daughter's middle name, which was bizarre, and Jackie agreed, goodness knows why. I did fear for that little girl, and for her big sister, Jackie's daughter Kira, but there was nothing I could do for them. I just prayed that Dad wouldn't hurt them and that Jackie would know to look out for them.

I managed to find a new job doing the books at a furniture store. I had a little office upstairs. Customers could buy all types of furniture from the shop and pay in weekly installments. I took the payments through a little window in the office. I didn't really know how to keep the books, I just bumbled my way through. I enjoyed it.

A couple of weeks after I moved to Mum's, Pete went on a summer holiday with his mates. After he came back, we seemed to speak less and less. It was over between us. I wondered if my crazy family was too much for him. Maybe I was too much for him. Why would he want a damaged, unlovable girl like me? All my insecurities resurfaced. He never said it, but I was sure he wanted a nice, average girl from a nice, decent family. Why wouldn't he? He was a lovely, kind-hearted man and I wanted the best for him.



About The Author

Debut author Yvonne Ash has a passion for helping abused and neglected children and was formerly the Director of Public Relations at Free Arts, an LA-based non-profit organization. An ardent advocate for the voiceless, she was involved in charity work for an orphanage in Tijuana, Mexico through an outreach ministry at St. Monica's Catholic Church. She has had the good fortune of meeting well-known celebrities through her volunteer work for the Elton John AIDS Foundation at the Oscars. Now retired, Yvonne enjoys community gardening and fostering dogs. She is married to Garry Ash, the love of her life, and lives in Santa Monica, California. The author can be reached at YvonneAshAuthor@gmail.com and via her direct number +1 (323) 705-7425.