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MEMORIES

My story starts before I was even born. My parents, who married at a very young age in the Republic of Ireland in the early Seventies, had problems from the outset. My grandfather on my dad's side committed suicide when Dad was a young boy. Apparently he stuck his head in an oven and just turned on the gas. Dad's mother then abandoned him and his young brothers. I think there were four of them. I'm not sure. It's not something I've ever discussed in depth with my father. All I know for sure is that somehow Dad ended up moving from his birthplace in Scotland to Ireland whilst the others were spread out across the world. He never saw two of his brothers again. There's a story right there just waiting to be told. But, sadly, it will be lost by the passage of time because there is nobody around to tell it.

The marriage between my parents appeared to be doomed from the start. Neither has offered a satisfactory explanation. Both remember things from their own perspective; both hold on to their own version of the truth. The reality, I imagine, is somewhere in between. But, for whatever reasons, it was my mother who ran off when I was two years old leaving my three-year-old sister and me with her mother. There's a sort of perverse cosmic parallel there, I suppose.





Is There Anybody Out There?

Alone

I'm at the doctor and he sticks a needle into my arm. I cry and look for mummy. But she isn't there. I am alone.

'Where's my mummy?'

It's Christmas morning. Where's Mummy? I got some sweets for Christmas and I want to show her. I can't find her.

Apart from that I don't really have any conscious memory of my mother. There was never any sense of physical loss. One day I woke up and she wasn't there. She was never there again.

I've got a bright red tractor with some sweets in the back. It's a present for my birthday, I think. Mummy's not here but Daddy is. I peddle into my dad's bedroom and he's lying propped up on his pillow, grinning at me. I give him a sweet and peddle away. I still don't know where Mummy is.

I'm sitting on Grandma's settee with my sister. Granddad is hitting my dad. I haven't seen Dad for a long time. Grandma gives me juice and a boiled egg. Dad goes away again. He's always going away. But at least he always comes back. Mummy hasn't come back. He said that Mummy is never coming back.

I'm told that my sister and I spent a great deal of our early years with my grandparents on my mother's side. If I'm honest I can't remember that either. I want to remember them both with fondness and happiness, but I can't. Sometimes I close my eyes and try to remember what they look like, but I can't. Sometimes I think that it would be nice to have Waltonesque memories, or at least to invent some of my own. I just remember that they were there somewhere in the background. The one thing I do remember about them is that I felt happy and secure when they were around.

I don't even know their names.

We're driving in the car with my dad. It's late at night and we stop on the motorway. A woman gets in. I've never seen her before. We keep



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on driving and it starts to rain. Who is she? Is she my mum? Maybe. Daddy is kissing her.

Dad's gone. I don't know where. This woman is looking after us. She's not very nice. When she gets angry she hits us. She gets angry a lot.

Dad's back. The hitting has stopped. But then he goes away and the hitting starts again.

We've come to visit a big house. Dad says we have to stay here for a while. He doesn't say why. There are lots of other children here. I think their dads have left them for a while too. I cry a lot. But nobody hits my sister or me. I sleep in a big room with lots of other boys. The house is so big and has a back garden with a sandpit and a huge tree that we climb when nobody is looking. Dad comes back but then he goes away again.

It's my birthday. I'm seven and I have a party at the big house. I've never had a party before. I have cake and everyone sings to me. Where's my dad? I feel alone.

I love it in the big house. I have loads of friends and we're allowed out to go to church once a week. We get to see the nuns singing. If we're good on the way there we're allowed to have ice cream on the way back.

One day two ladies come to see me. They are very nice and they start to take me out every week. Sometimes we go to their house and they give me treats. Sometimes they take me shopping. Once they took me to the cinema. I wish they could be my mum. But I always have to go back to the big house every week.

My dad has come back and we have to leave the big house. I have to leave my friends. I have to leave the two ladies. I feel alone again.

We move into a new house. One day men come with the police and throw us on to the street. We have nowhere to live and we have nothing to eat. Sometimes I wonder about my mum. Does she have a house? Does she have things to eat? Does she ever think about me, about my sister? Does she ever feel alone?





Is There Anybody Out There?

Across the water

We're on a boat now. We have to get past soldiers with big guns. They look in our suitcase. They look very angry.

We're on our way to England. It's very stormy outside and my plate of egg and chips is sliding about all over the table. Maybe my mum is in England.

England is an awful place. We haven't found my mum yet. We move from one cramped, squalid bedsit to another. Finally, we arrive in Yorkshire and move into a house. My dad is away a lot. The hitting starts again.

Our house is cold and damp. There's no carpet on the floors or paper on the walls. I have a bed and a blanket and a million bed bugs. They're small and red, and they live in my mattress and in the folds of the curtains. They come out at night. I know they're coming because they smell funny. They crawl on my face, my eyes and my hair. I get used to them.

I'm hungry. Dad lost his wages on the horses again. Dad is always in the betting shop. Sometimes SHE sends me down there to get him. Dad looks embarrassed when I go in and he always makes me wait outside for him. I daren't go back without him because if I do, SHE hits me.

I'm hungry. There's not enough food this week. There's enough for cigarettes and beer but not for food. Dad disappears again and I'm locked in my room without food. It's worse in the holidays because I have to stay there for days on end. I feel alone.

Sometimes I'm sent to the shop for bread and milk and I open the bread up, steal a slice from it, and replace the top. I have to hurry back though, because if I take more than five minutes SHE beats me. If I do it in less SHE beats me. I have to time it just right.

I'm so hungry.

Sometimes I lie in bed at night and wonder what it would be like not to be hit. In my head I transport myself into the future where I'm big and strong. There is no hitting in my dreams. I can't even remember when the hitting started. I can't remember what it's like not to be hit.



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Sometimes, if I'm lucky, I just get slapped on the head. Often I'm punched on the back of the head and the kidneys. The punch to the kidneys hurts the most. I try and avoid that if I can. It usually means leaving my head wide open, but anything is better than the kidneys. I try to avoid curling up on the floor because SHE kicks me in the testicles. I don't cry out any more for it doesn't do any good. Sometimes I wonder where my mother is. This is all her fault.

It was a sweeping brush handle today. I didn't dry the dishes fast enough. The floor was dirty. The bin was overflowing. I can't remember why I'm being hit anymore. My back hurts.

Her friends are around again. They are all drunk in the front room. SHE screams for me. I get out of bed and go to her. SHE flicks lit cigarette butts at my head when SHE's drunk. SHE spits on me. Her friends laugh at me.

I'm allowed to go to London for the day with my classmates. I've got egg sandwiches and a whole pound to spend. I buy her a box of Roses for 99p. I don't know why. Sometimes I think that if I'm nice to her then maybe SHE'll be nice to me back. I come home and SHE is in the front room drinking with her friends. SHE's drunk. I give her the chocolates and SHE punches me in the face. All her friends laugh at me. I go to my room and cry. I really am alone. I rock myself to sleep and dream that my mother is going to come and rescue me. She's going to knock on the door one day and take me back to Ireland where nobody gets hit.

SHE's drunk again. I can hear her snoring in the bedroom next to mine. Dad is out. I get some paper, screw it up and shove it under the bed. Using her matches I set it on fire. I hope SHE burns. Dad comes back and sees the smoke. He wakes her up. The paper didn't catch properly. Shame. I don't think he realises it was me.

It's late at night. They're coming to take me away. I'm going to a children's home. My sister and I are separated. That's never happened before. I wonder if I'll ever see her again. When I get into the building they're having their supper of toast and milk. Everybody's looking at me. Stuff 'em! Toast and milk! You don't get that every day.





Is There Anybody Out There?

If I'd known this would happen I would have tried to set her on fire sooner.

I've to move to a new school, but I don't have any clothes and I've only got Wellington boots. They take me down to the cellar and show me a room full of clothes and shoes. It's like a big shop. They let me choose what I like. They let me choose! I've got a clean shirt and shiny shoes without holes! My clothes are ironed and everything! How cool is that! I feel on top of the world. I wonder what they would have given me for killing her.

I like my new school and I'm a shepherd in the school nativity play. My friends from the home come and see me. Everyone is clapping and cheering for me. Nobody has ever done that before.

It's snowing. One of the older girls helps me build an igloo in the back garden. I'm happy again. There's no hitting or shouting.

My dad is back and I've to go with him. I don't want to go. I don't want to go back to the bugs in my bed, back to the hitting. I want to be with my friends. I want to stay at my school. I'm given a packed lunch every day. It has crisps in it. Nobody ever gave me crisps before. I want to have shiny shoes and an ironed shirt. But I have to go. He has a new house with his girlfriend.

Another new school, another set of friends to make. I feel alone again.

I didn't see it until it was too late. I just felt my legs go from under me as SHE caught me full in the stomach.

I've been in this room for about five days now. SHE lets me go to school but after that I'm not allowed to leave it. Sometimes SHE gives me food and sometimes SHE doesn't. Sometimes I sit on the windowsill and watch the other children playing outside. Sometimes I watch them going out with their mums. I wish I had a mum. I wish my mum would hold my hand.

I like to read. It passes the time. I don't know when I learned to read; I just always remember being able to do it. I read about the 'Famous Five'. They get biscuits and orange juice. I wish I could have biscuits and orange juice. I like to travel to other worlds in my mind. When



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I read, life becomes beautiful and peaceful. The world is full of children who drink juice and eat biscuits and go on wild adventures. There is no hitting in that world.

'You're useless. Nobody likes you, you and your spastic sister. Your mother hated you. That's why she left you. Your dad hates you. I hate you.'

'Get your head out of that book. What are you reading? Famous Five? I'll give you a famous five punches in the head. You're useless. Just like your father.'

Sometimes I just wish SHE would die.

I don't know where my dad is. I'm hungry.

Some people come and take us away. I'm staying with a family I don't know. I don't know where my sister is. They won't tell me. Just another family - just another set of faces I'll soon have to forget.

Dad's back again. This is my life. What's the point of it? Maybe God hates me too. Maybe he thinks I'm useless.

I can't breathe. SHE's strangling me. Dad's lost his wages on the horses again. He hasn't come home. It's my fault. I'm useless. I wonder why my mother left me.

At night I look at the stars and dream that I'm in a far-off place. I wonder what other boys are doing in other countries at this precise moment in time. I wonder how many other people are looking out of their windows and wishing for a better life.

My sister is being beaten again. I can hear her screaming in the other room. I think it's because she's a 'spastic'. They call her that a lot. She's useless too. Nobody likes her either. I wonder why nobody likes us.

I write to my mother today. I tell her how much I love England and how happy I am. SHE makes me write lies. As a reward I don't get beaten today. I can't remember the last time that happened.

My sister is being beaten again. I don't know why. I don't care. It isn't me. It isn't me. I want to be brave and stand up for her. I just stand and watch, glad that it isn't me.



Is There Anybody Out There?

My uncle comes to visit. I've never seen him before. He gives me money. SHE takes it from me when he goes. Next time he comes he brings me a football. SHE takes it from me and gives it to her own son. Next time my uncle comes they have an argument. He hits her so hard SHE flies over a table. He's my hero. I go to bed and dream of hitting her so hard SHE flies over a table too.

My secret

Sometimes I wonder if everybody in my class is beaten but they just don't talk about it. It's a secret we all keep from each other and from our teacher.

Sometimes a social worker visits me and asks me questions. Am I happy? What does that mean? I'm happy at school. I'm happy reading and writing and learning. I don't want school to finish. Sometimes I wish I could live at school. But every day I have to go home, back to the room, back to the shouting and screaming and hitting.

I decide to run away from home. I read about it in a book. I could have an amazing adventure and meet all sorts of people. They would be nice to me and I could start a new life. I get to the end of our road and hide in a bush. I read my book and fall asleep. I'm cold and hungry so I go home. I'm beaten. But at least now I'm only hungry.

I run away again. This time I get into the town centre but the police pick me up. I pretend not to know my name, but they find it out anyway. I beg them not to take me back. They do. I think SHE's paid them to bring me back. I'm beaten.

'You're useless. You're thick. You're stupid. Nobody likes you. I hate you. Your mother hates you. Your dad hates you. You'll never amount to anything in your whole life.'

Today I took my 11+ exam. I had to spell the word 'vegetable'. I hope I spelt it right. I can't remember. Maybe I am useless.

We've just had our 11+ exam results. They're in envelopes and the teacher tells us to take them straight home. On the way home I ask God to let me pass. I promise that I'll never ask him for another thing



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again as long as I pass this exam. I haven't talked to God for a long time. I used to pray that he would make the hitting stop, but he never did. He must really hate me too. I hope that he'll listen to me just this once.

I give her the envelope. SHE's drunk again. SHE reads the note and then looks at me. I've passed! I was stupid and useless and everybody hated me but I didn't care. I'd passed! That night SHE beat me and beat me and beat me. SHE dragged me around the room by my hair. SHE kicked me. SHE spat on me. SHE head-butted me. I staggered to my room. It was the sweetest beating of my life.

I passed! I passed!! I sat in my room and laughed and laughed and laughed. I jumped on my bed. I punched the air. SHE never called me stupid again.

There's an open day at the Grammar school I'll be going to. I have to wear a uniform with a tie and a blazer. The people from the social pay for it. It's an all-boys' school. It's Heath Grammar School. I feel proud.

I don't have any gym kit. All the other boys have shorts and shirts and nice new trainers. I have to play sports in my new grey trousers. I get grass on the knees playing rugby. At home time all the other boys are picked up by their parents. I walk into town and take the bus home by myself. When I get home I'm beaten for getting my trousers dirty. I daren't tell her that I need some kit.

I don't fit in at this stupid school. All the other boys have nice clothes and watches with calculators on! Their parents drive nice cars. They have clean clothes, pressed trousers and smart white shirts. I wish I had a crease in my trousers. Nobody irons my clothes. Nobody washes my shirt. I only have one pair of trousers and one shirt. Sometimes they aren't washed for ages. Sometimes I do them myself in the bathroom sink.

My shoes wear out and I stuff card covered in plastic bread bags on to the inside of the soles. I shuffle my feet in the playground so nobody sees.



Is There Anybody Out There?

'Non-uniform day tomorrow, lads. Don't forget.'

The dreaded words. I don't have any nice clothes to wear. I only have my school trousers and my shirt. Some of the other boys line up at the gate and laugh at me for being a 'gypsy'. I feel so alone.

I've a pain in my stomach. It hurts so much. They send me home from school. When I get home SHE is there with her friends. They call for a doctor but SHE just laughs at me. I try to sit in a chair but SHE throws me on the floor.

'There's nothing wrong with you that a good beating wouldn't cure!'

SHE kicks me in the stomach. I pass out. The doctor comes. He calls an ambulance. They put the lights and the siren on. I feel very excited. I'm having my own adventure just like the Famous Five.

I've to have an operation because I have appendicitis. The doctor goes away and SHE hits me in the head and tells me to stop crying. Some people come and take me away on a trolley. I am scared. I am alone.

I wake up and my dad's there holding my hand.

Lots of people from my school come to visit me in hospital. It makes me feel good. My dad visits me and sometimes SHE comes as well. After a week I'm allowed to go home. Because I still can't walk very far my dad fetches me and we leave in a taxi. I'm allowed to lie on the couch and watch television. I feel like a king.

The next day when my dad goes to work SHE makes me go to the shop. I have to buy seven pints of milk and ten pounds of potatoes. The pain in my side makes me cry. A lady stops and helps me to carry the stuff to my door. When I get in I'm beaten for not carrying it myself. My scar starts to bleed.

SHE throws an ornament at me today, a little brass one. It hits me on the head. I'm bleeding. Dad walks in and looks at me bleeding on the floor and then at her standing over me with a broom handle. He goes berserk and throws her out into the street. He tells her it's over. There's screaming and swearing. I've given up hoping that I'll never see her again for it's a scene I've seen them play hundreds of times before. Every time SHE's back the next day.



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SHE hasn't come back yet. It's been two days. My dad has been playing games with my sister and me. We played 'Operation' and 'Tip the waiter'.

I live in fear of her turning up at any moment to beat us for daring to have fun and for staying up until 6 o'clock to watch the television. I daren't go out to play in case SHE does come back and I'm not there.

*But SHE's never coming back.
I will never be beaten again.
I am thirteen years old.*

