

Freedom

Now, when I look at my week-old baby son, I thank God he will never experience what we went through when I was just eight years old. As long as I live I will never forget that Tuesday morning. It was thirty-one years ago and Mum was holding my hand as she walked me to school.

Cars sped by; drivers with or without passengers headed to work. Some were friends who hooted and waved to us as they passed and, in the distance, the constant thrummm of vehicles on the dual carriageway echoed across to the busy school road.

The closer we got to the school, the more impatient parents in cars became, slotting into spaces other drivers wanted. I heard more swear words close to the school gates each morning than I ever did than anywhere else. Usually my Mum would tell me not to listen but, on this morning it was she who didn't seem to hear.

The pavements teemed with children in blue and grey, mothers chatted to friends about what had been on the television the night before, or what they'd had for dinner. Mostly the children walked themselves to school, their Mum's ignoring them being too busy chatting as they walked two or three abreast, blocking the pathway with their pushchairs and prams.

I remember giving a little smile as the mothers forced to step into the road to get by the obstruction, gave filthy looks and muttered swear words as they stepped back on to the pavement. To be honest, there was always some aggravation around the school gates in the morning; it blended with the chat and laughter.

In a few minutes, groups of happy children would be running around in the playground together, and the equally happy mothers, free of their offspring for a few hours, would be on their way to work, a shopping trip, coffee with a friend, or for those very unlucky, back to the housework. Every school morning was the same, except this one. Well it seemed to be for everyone else, but not for us.

For some reason, although my mother always held my hand, on this day her grip was tighter than usual and she seemed tense, was very, very quiet, it was totally unlike her. We normally talked about what I was going to do at school that day, what I wanted for my tea, what Dusty, our Old English Sheepdog, had been up to. We would just talk...all the way to school, about anything, and she usually made me laugh. Not that there had been much to

laugh about over the previous few weeks. And certainly she was not laughing that morning. She seemed to be so deep in thought she didn't even notice her friend Ruth call out, and she missed seeing our neighbour, Sally, wave as she went by on her way to work. At least I think she missed them. She never mentioned having seen them, but then later on we had too many other things to think about, I suppose. But it seemed strange that she turned her head in the opposite direction as Ruth called. That was very unlike Mum. She really liked Ruth and I couldn't understand why she had ignored her. I remember being a little frightened by that. I wanted to say something but stayed quiet; she didn't seem to want to talk, not even to me, and we were almost at the gates. She suddenly stopped walking.

'Mum, what's the matter? Mum?' I remember looking up at her. She looked so...so serious. I was scared. I was about to go into school and wouldn't see her until later. I was going to Davie's house to wait for Dad to collect me, and all I was wanted to see her smile before she left.

Then, as she gently pulled me to one side to stand against the school wall to allow others enough space to pass, she gave me that smile that meant everything was alright and she crouched down so her face was level with mine.

'Move your foot forward and I can pretend I'm tying your shoe laces,' she said, turning to look either side. I put my right foot out and she started playing with the laces. I could see the red mark and bruising between her left eye and the side of her nose over her dark glasses.

'I know I've been a bit quiet but I had something on my mind.' She undid and re-tied my shoe lace, looked up at me and smiled. 'I want to talk to you before you go in and then I have to go to work, but this has to be just between us, you do understand, don't you?'

I nodded; I remember thinking that I knew what was coming. Her face was close to mine and I reached out my hand. She flinched. I drew my hand away for a second then reached out again. This time she didn't move and let me run my finger gently along the still livid, red scar that ran from her left eyebrow to halfway down the left side of her nose.

'Does it still hurt, Mum?' It looked as though it should, and she still had what was left of the bruising that had been all around both swollen eyes, but was now yellow-green saucer-shaped lines low down on her cheeks. I had seen the fading black-blue marks moving lower and lower down her face over the last two weeks. Looking back I now realise it was the blood going to the lowest point and pooling.

It had been seven weeks since that night, the stitches had been taken out and her nose straightened, but the evidence was still there. I will never forget how she looked in the ambulance on the way to hospital. Helen had shoved my big teddy into my arms to cuddle for comfort but she kept her arms around me as well while the paramedic was looking after Mum. The scar still looked sore.

She shook her head. 'Not any more, love.' She took my hand away from her face and held it, waited for a group of four women, two prams and a number of children to go by. 'Sweetheart, if I have to make a decision about...' I looked down at the chipped and cracked grey paving slabs of the pavement and the muddy green moss between them. Then Mum stood up and I thought she wasn't going to say any more, but I was wrong.

'Greg, you're a big boy now and you know what happened. I've been thinking that I need to make a big decision about the family. Will you trust me to make the right one?'

I remember a feeling of such happiness I couldn't speak. I was right. I did know what she was talking about and I threw my arms around her waist. 'You mean leave Dad? How soon can we go?' I was so pleased. We were going to get away.

Gently she released herself from my hug and took my hand again to lead me towards the open black wrought iron school gate. Most of my friends were already in the playground and there were only a few chatting parents left.

'How did you know?' Mum asked. 'How could you be so understanding...at your age?'

'I was hoping we'd leave. He frightens me. When are we going, Mum?' This was so exciting.

We stood back to allow the Macdonald twins through into the playground. Mrs Colston and Miss Mackie were the first two teachers who came through the main doors, whistles at the ready to see their classes line up.

'You're going to have to go in now. Your sister and I have been talking and we're trying to plan things properly. It might be a few days yet, but I'll let you know when I've been able to sort everything out. Remember, it has to be our secret. Can you do that? You must not even tell Davie.'

'...but will it be soon, Mum?'

'Yes, love. It'll be soon but Dad mustn't know or he won't let us go. You do understand that don't you?'

Oh yes! I knew that. He would never let us go and everything would get worse. No, I wasn't going to say anything to him at all and I promised her I wouldn't. 'But what about Helen? She's coming too, isn't she?'

'Oh, yes, of course. Helen will come too.'

I just knew that everything was going to be alright. Mum hugged me. 'You'd better go in now and I'll see you tonight.'

I had just gone through the gate and Mum was a few steps away down the pavement. I had a thought and ran back. 'Mum! What about Dusty and the cats. We're not leaving them behind, are we?'

She turned back to give me one last hug. 'No. No-one gets left behind,' she smiled. 'Now, off you go or you'll be late into class. Don't forget, you need to get on with your schoolwork today. Just remember, everything has to seem normal. This is our exciting secret. No-one must know...'

'...especially Dad.' I finished her sentence.

'Do you think you can be brave enough?'

'Yes. I don't want to live with Dad anymore. He scares me.'

'Come on, Greg!' Davie yelled. The classes were all heading into school.

'See you later, Mum,' I said as I ran back into the playground. Inside I felt as though I was glowing and hoped it didn't show. It was our secret and no-one would know.

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All through the morning, I tried not to think about what Mum had said, but I couldn't help it, and it was just really hard trying not to say anything, especially to Davie and my other pal, Alex. It was difficult to concentrate during classes that morning, but I managed to get through and by lunchtime, I had almost forgotten about it. Outside in the playground, running around with my mates had felt so normal. Then it was time to go back into class for our reading lesson and I got stuck into my book, got a gold star for reading out loud and for understanding, and then it was afternoon break.

I remember we had only just gone back into class and taken out our Geography books when the door opened and in walked Mrs McMurdo, the Headteacher. She looked in my

direction as she walked to the front of the class to talk to our teacher, Mrs Livingstone, who stood up. Teachers always stood up when the Headteacher entered their classroom.

By the blackboard, they turned their backs and spoke quietly. Angus, sitting at the desk nearest to them stretched forward as far as he could go, trying to hear what they were saying but sat back sharply as they turned around.

‘Gregory,’ said Mrs Livingstone. ‘Collect your things and go with Mrs McMurdo, please.’ I remember being so surprised at hearing my name that, for a moment, I didn’t move.

‘Come, boy,’ snapped Mrs McMurdo and the whole class turned to look at me. I stood up, shakily took my jacket off the back of my chair, threw my books and pencil case into my school bag while Mrs McMurdo, who now seemed very impatient, her arms folded and in what we always called her cast-iron cardy mood, watched from the doorway. You didn’t keep Mrs McMurdo waiting.

‘What’s up?’ whispered Davie, as I squeezed by his desk.

‘Don’t know,’ I muttered, hurrying to join Mrs McMurdo and aware of the silence of my classmates as they all watched me leave.

When I stood in front of her, Mrs McMurdo smiled at me. I don’t think I had ever seen her do that before and it was quite frightening, to be honest. She laid her hand gently on my shoulder and ushered me out of the door and into the corridor where I found my Mum waiting for me. I went to speak but Mum gave me an almost imperceptible shake of her head and took my hand.

‘I’m glad to see you looking so much better after that nasty car accident,’ Mrs McMurdo said to Mum. ‘I hope you’re feeling better too.’

‘Yes. Yes, I am. Thank you for asking.’ Mum smiled very sweetly. ‘I’m sorry I have to take Gregory out of school for a few days but as I mentioned, my aunt and I have always been close and there’s no-one else, you see.’

‘Oh, I quite understand, family must come first, but of course Gregory seems a little confused.’

Mum looked at me. ‘We have to go to London for a few days, Greg. Auntie Connie has been taken ill and...do you remember her son, Keith?’

I shook my head.

'No, well perhaps you wouldn't it's been a while since you saw them. Anyway he's in the army in Germany and can't get home until the end of the week, so we're going to look after Auntie Connie until he can get home.'

She turned to Mrs McMurdo. 'Thank you so much for letting me take Greg with me. Unfortunately, as I mentioned, with my husband working shifts...'

That's when I knew she was telling lies. Dad was just starting the second year of his college course. He didn't have a job, let alone working shifts. But I said nothing, although I was dying to ask.

'...he can't look after the children, so they're having to come with me. All being well Greg will be back on Monday.' She looked at her watch. 'Oh, is that the time? Sorry, Mrs McMurdo, we'll have to catch a train so we need to get home, get a few things packed and be on the 5.15 train to Euston.'

Mrs McMurdo just looked down at me. 'I don't think there's too much to worry about with young Gregory being away from school for three days. You're up to date with all your work aren't you?' I nodded. 'And you have your reading book.' I nodded again. 'Then we'll see you on Monday. Right, I'll let you get on your way. Have a good journey.' And with that she walked away, her footsteps echoing on the tiled floor.

'What's happening?' I asked.

But Mum just took my hand, winked, but said nothing as we headed towards the cloakroom. I can still remember our footsteps sounding as loud as Mrs McMurdo's had as we walked the length of the corridor towards the main door; any sound seemed to echo more loudly along that long passageway.

When we reached the cloakroom, Mum looked around. There was no-one in sight. Everyone else was in class. 'Quickly, get your coat and PE bag.'

I remember standing at the door and starting to ask...'But...'

'I'll explain when we get outside. Go on, quickly. Give me your school bag. I'll wait for you by the main doors.'

'But who's Auntie Connie?' I asked.

'Just hurry up...come on.'

I ran in, snatched my coat off the peg, grabbed my PE bag from the cage underneath the seat and ran out. Mum took hold of my hand, we darted out of the door and just beyond the

gate I saw a big, black taxi. Helen was inside and she seemed to be a bit squashed in. She waved and beckoned.

As we ran out of the gate, Mum said. 'I couldn't say any more this morning, but Helen and I have just packed up everything we need. We gave ourselves an hour to take just what was necessary. We've left home. You won't be coming back to this school. I had to lie to Mrs McMurdo to get you out.'

Inside the taxi, a very excited, tail-wagging, Dusty almost threw herself at us, but Helen held her back by her lead to let us get in, then the silly dog jumped all over me. I can still feel her licks making my face wet now.

Piled up against the other door were four cases, a couple of holdalls and some black bags and our two cats, Strider and Sophie, sat miserably in baskets on the floor. There wasn't much room for Mum and me, I can tell you.

'Right then,' said the driver, 'where noo?' He started the engine. It was such a relief when we moved off.

'Can you take us to the vets by the Johnny Walker Distillery, please. We have an appointment there and then there are two more stops. Is that going to be OK for you?'

'Aye,' he said, and I've never forgotten this. He turned to look at us. 'Ah think ah ken wha' yer doin' an' ah'll help. Yeh'll pay sumthin' but ah'll no charge yer the fu' fare, hen.'

Mum smiled. 'Thank you. That's good of you.' She moved over to the pull-down seat and spoke to the driver through the gap in the screen where people paid their fares. 'Can I ask you a favour please?'

Keeping his eye on the road he didn't look round. 'Aye. Yer can ask,' he smiled.

'I just wondered if...if anyone...'

'If anyone gets in touch with the comp'ny tae ask aboot yer, dinna fash yersel' hen. Ah ne'er saw yer. Thass nae problem, hen. Ah've tekken lassies like yersel away from bad lives afore.'

Mum sat back beside me, and it was then I asked what had happened to my goldfish. I had two in a big bowl with plants and a little castle-thing. Mum told me that she'd given them to the little girl next door. She wasn't leaving anything behind to suffer. I didn't mind that. I liked little Debbie.

Soon after we were at the vets. Mum took Strider inside to have a vaccination booster while we waited in the car. Then we drove to a kennels where they also had a cattery section.

The driver waited while we booked Dusty and the cats in, and got Dusty settled in the dog section where she had a large indoor kennel with an outside run, and the cats were housed together in the other part of the building.

I can't recall the exact conversation between Mum and the woman at the kennels, but I know Mum asked if they would keep it a secret that our pets were there, and I know the lady agreed. She said they would only deal with Mum, and I saw her write something on their notes.

It was horrible leaving Dusty there. The cats didn't seem to mind too much, but Dusty cried and whined and ran at the door of her run as we left her behind. I remember Helen crying. Mum hugged us both and I do remember what she said to us then, word for word. 'We'll get them back as soon as we can and we'll visit, but remember they're safe and that's what counts. We'll get them back when we have somewhere to live. Now we have to get to Fiona's.'

No-one spoke as we walked back to the taxi. We were all too upset at leaving our pets behind. But Mum was right. They would be safe there and we would get them back when we were settled somewhere.

Fiona was a work friend of Mum's and we were to stay at her home that night. Dad didn't know her so would have no idea where we were, or where to begin looking. As we unloaded all our bags, the taxi driver got out to help. He even took some of the bags inside for us. Then, when he was ready to leave, Mum went to pay him and he refused to take any more than five pounds. To this day I can still remember his face. There are some kind people in the world.

Neither Helen or I had met Fiona before but she was amazing; beautiful and really friendly. Mum said she was a little like a cross between a Hippie and a Goth. I thought she was fantastic and Helen loved her style. I can still remember her now. Long, black shoulder length hair, and sparkling green eyes. Mum said later that she used emerald-colour contact lenses but her eyes were naturally green.

Once we had settled, Mum then explained that we would be going to the Women's Aid the next morning and they would help us. She and Helen had been made plans for us to go

straight there the following day, while Dad was at college but, when he came home on Monday afternoon, his timetable had changed and they found out he would be at home on Wednesdays. That meant we had to leave earlier than they had planned and Fiona had offered to let us stay at hers overnight.

It was after six o'clock that evening that Mum phoned Dad's brother to let him know we had left, were safe but she wouldn't tell him where we were. I heard her say that if he didn't know where we were staying, he couldn't tell any lies.

That night, I slept in Fiona's little boy's room. I can't remember his name but he was a lovely three year old who was very excited at having someone sleeping in his room. Mum slept on the sofa in the living room and Helen slept in Fiona's bedroom. Not that any of us got much sleep that night.

Because I found it hard to get to sleep, I heard some of the conversation between Fiona, Mum and Helen. At one point I heard Mum say: 'Jim was pleased we had left and was going to go and see him. He said the best thing I'd done was to get Greg away from his father's influence.'

The next morning we went to the Women's Aid office and stayed for a few weeks at their refuge in the same town, then moved to another town sixty miles away where Mum had friends. It was there we changed our surnames and 'disappeared' through their system. We never saw my Dad again and I wasn't sorry.

Of course, I never went back to that school. For about six weeks I went to another primary school in the town. Mum paid for a taxi to take the other refuge children and me to school. She never admitted it, and I realised afterwards that it was because she didn't want me to be at risk, but going to school and back in the taxi and then straight into the refuge meant I was never out on the streets where Dad might see me. She was protecting me you see. Helen was older and wanted to keep attending her college. She travelled by bus, and was always careful to keep an eye out for him.

When we moved away, I went to another school close to the Women's Aid refuge. All the primary school age children went there and they were expert at keeping us safe.

We found out later from Uncle Jim that Dad never went back to college. Well, he did but just once – to pick up his grant cheque.

Sometime later Mum met another man, they married and he became the best father I could ever have asked for both Helen and me. He legally adopted me when I was twelve years old. Helen took his surname legally but she was over the age of adoption.

Over the years, what Uncle Jim said has come back to me. I liked Uncle Jim but did he really think that Dad's violent streak would come out in me? That what I saw would make me act like my father? If anything it had the opposite effect. I have no time for any man who hits a woman. Being drunk is no excuse. It's a power thing. I'm sure of that.

And my son will never know the fear and misery of living with a monster. We had freedom to live our lives in peace and that's how I want it to stay.