

*Secrets Behind The Collar*



*Reverend Lynn Boyle*

2020

## **We Survive**

**Some of us have just learned how to survive  
It's in our genes, cemented by events of our childhood and teens  
Our life has been shaped by the wills of others  
A stranger, so called friends, our fathers, our mothers  
We can't ever say the details out loud  
Make it real, make us feel  
The emotions again,  
the hurt and the shame, the feeling of blame  
That we know isn't ours and doesn't make sense  
We can't say the words, they would cause offence  
To our ears and to any others who hear  
Of the life we have spent, living in fear.**

**Some of us have learned just how to survive  
We've had years of practice of saying 'I'm fine'  
When deep down inside we are treading a line between  
Self-loathing for what we know we have done  
and anger at those who made us what we've become  
Filled with self doubt and feeling unworthy  
of friendships, relationships  
Because still, we feel dirty  
From the hands that mauled and did unspeakable things  
Robbed innocence, robbed peace and robbed the good dreams  
Turned them all into nightmares, terrors and panics  
Fragments of things we don't want to recall  
Things we'd rather not remember at all.**

**We survive and we learn how to smile outwardly,  
Suppressing our thoughts so we're not depressing  
others, because who really wants to hear, to know  
what makes us tick, what makes us sick  
to our core?  
The memories of the reality  
of what was done,  
forced upon us  
when we were too weak to fight.  
The man that took us without our will  
Too young to understand, to frightened to tell.**

**And so we hid it all in a box,  
Like Pandora, we locked it firmly away  
Hoping there would never be a day  
when it forced its way out  
The experiences oozing, making us inwardly shout  
Inwardly scream, at a man we know we can't ever name  
Who's actions have scarred us, made us never the same**

**When fear overwhelms us and panic sets in  
We run, we hide  
We push ourselves to our limits and so we survive.**

I am not writing anything here for shock value, or to provoke any particular reaction. I am writing because my secrets have remained hidden for far too long. I am writing in the hope that others who have kept similar secrets might take something from my experience and feel strong enough to speak out and in doing so begin to heal. I am not writing with any intention of identifying any individual, or exacting revenge. I have deliberately not included a single name in the account of what happened to me. Please be aware that although I write about the abuse I've suffered at different times in my life, I do not include details. Firstly, I cannot bring myself to write them, and secondly, the details do not serve a purpose here. This, sadly, is my truth.

2020

For the majority of the population of the UK, 2020 proved to be a year difficult beyond their wildest dreams. Nobody could have predicted the global pandemic, which changed life for us all. As REM belted out regularly on my Spotify playlist, it was "The end of the world as we know it". 2020 was the year life would change for us all, but for me it was to become a living nightmare for a completely different reason.

Maybe I should have 'read the omens' back in January, when I received an email from my Archdeacon. I was the vicar of a small parish church and he was informing me that there had been a complaint made against me. The complainants were from the parish and their issue was with regard to my involvement with the local Music Festivals. Basically didn't believe that, as vicar of the parish, I should be associating myself with the festivals. The village was divided in its view of the festivals and as far as this group was concerned, I was associating myself with those who drank alcohol, took drugs and were just generally undesirable in their behaviour. It was true, in the fact that for the past five years I had spent time at each of the festivals at the local farm, volunteering to serve behind the bar, leading Sunday Worship and most importantly, making myself available for anybody who needed to talk to me, or have me pray with them. It was, by enlarge, a large a quiet ministry, offered to anyone attending the Country, Rock, or Hacienda style festivals, which have taken place on the farm at the far end of the country park, situated in our village.

Over the years I have walked alongside the bereaved, the hurting, the abused, those who have turned to drugs and drink, those suffering from PTSD and those who have previously attempted to take their own life.

For me, the work at the festivals, has been simply answering a call and doing what I believe Jesus would have done. Meeting people where they are and drawing alongside them has always been. It is truly where I believed He would be and to be honest, I recognised far more of the suffering than those I ministered to could ever have imagined...

Whilst the complaint was deeply upsetting, it actually had nothing to do with the real reason 2020 was turning into a nightmare. There was a growing pressure within me and it was only a matter of time before it came to a head and erupted. In retrospect, I can see that now. The manner in which that eruption happened though, surprised everyone, even me.

It was an afternoon in mid February and I was in a meeting with the Archdeacon and a group of local clergy. He had called us together to talk about what was happening in our individual churches, and what our area of the Deanery (a cluster of local churches within a Diocese) might look like moving forward. It was not a stressful or

unusual meeting, but when posed directly with a question by the Archdeacon, I suddenly couldn't engage. I was completely disengaged, not just day dreaming, but completely unable to connect. The questions flew into my head: What was I doing? Why was I here? It was almost as if I was standing outside myself and the meeting of clergy.

I just couldn't do this. My personal life was in utter turmoil and I didn't have the headspace to deal with a discussion about the future possibilities of our local church communities. Something had snapped within me.

"I'm sorry, I can't do this, I can't deal with this at the moment", I found myself saying, as tears filled my eyes. I was acutely embarrassed, and the clergy around me looked bemused and concerned.

The Archdeacon addressed me directly.

"Would you like to talk to me in private, Lynn?"

The tears that had been brimming my eyelids coursed down my cheeks as I nodded. Needless to say, the meeting drew to a swift close.

1963

My memories of my childhood are patchy to say the least. But now, when I look back, the most significant thing about them is that I can't really remember any happy ones. I really wish I could. I have boxes of old photographs my mum collected of when I was a child but they just don't trigger any memories of the happy events they depict. My earliest memories in contrast to these smiling images are anything but happy; they are traumatic.

The first distinct childhood memory is of suffering from Measles and being really very poorly with it. I can clearly recall lying on the settee in the living room and then sneezing and triggering a nose bleed so bad there was blood spattered all up the wall. I remember my grandma putting a bag of frozen mandarin oranges on my forehead to try to get it to stop. Why mandarin orange segments, I have no idea. My other significant early memory is that of getting my head stuck in the railings just a little way down from our house. I'm sure so many people share the same horrible childhood memory. Don't ask me why I was there and what was in my head to put it through those railings. I don't know. What I do know is how I panicked at not being able to get myself free. I know that somebody had to go and tell my parents, and dad had to be come and he forced the bars apart enough for me to get out. Not before I had a substantial audience though and was mortified and embarrassed at being laughed at. I was only five years old.

These two early traumas took place in, and near to the first of seven houses I would live in before I reached ten years old. At that time, I was also enrolled at the first of five primary schools I would attend before I was nine. Why we moved home so many times would only become clear many years later.

I was born in 1958 into a pretty ordinary family; my mum was a machinist and my dad was a motor mechanic. I was the first and eldest child of four my mum would give birth to by the time she was thirty years old. I have two brothers and a sister below me.

I believe that my memories of childhood are patchy because many were blotted out by trauma and most in particular, a terrible trauma I experienced when I was seven years old. I think it became easier not to remember the past, so I didn't. I still don't. Only recently have I begun to understand the reasons for this.

Trauma has a significant affect upon our memories and how our brain stores them. Those that cause us pain are often locked away for our own protection. It's a mechanism of self-preservation. We can't control it; our brain takes control. Some elements of trauma are buried so deeply that they may never re-surface, or if they do, it's in the form of flashbacks and fragmented images that we can find difficult to understand. But then there are the times, where there is a bursting out of memory, triggered by an incident or a build up of events. We don't and we cannot control this and it can creep up on us with little or no notice; even in a meeting of clergy...

### **It's all in the past**

**It's all in the past'  
 'Get over it' they say and...  
 'Move on', or, 'remember, today's a new day'  
 But what, when today holds over 55 years  
 Of suppressed memories and untold fears?  
 There are some things you can't just 'get over'  
 They are the things that will stay in your being forever,  
 Because they are a part of who you are  
 They've made you, they've moulded you.**

**And though you've come far  
 You can't deny, forget what occurred  
 What you've hidden a lifetime, without a word.  
 And now you've disclosed the events from your past  
 And shared them, it ought to be easy, at last.  
 But you sense all the thoughts and the words left unsaid  
 The judgemental views playing through the heads  
 of those you've told of what took place.  
 It's what isn't said. It's the look on a face.  
 Do they want the details? Would they then appreciate  
 what you'd actually been through  
 and the lifelong affect it's had on you?  
 To indicate that you should just 'move on'  
 Is to silently state that it should be all gone  
 From your mind  
 But there are things that can't ever be erased  
 The things that you know you should never have faced  
 As you grew up.**

**So please don't dismiss it as 'all in the past'  
 My past is my present and I live with that.  
 My past has made me who I am:  
 I'm a fighter, despite all that was done  
 And even fighters sometimes have a wobble  
 And after 55 years,**

**This time, here and now, is my struggle.  
 But I will come back again,  
 Strong like before  
 I will paint on a smile and I will shut the door  
 on the vile things that should never've occurred.  
 And I will answer when you ask  
 and I'll say, 'I'm fine',  
 But for now, please just give me the time  
 To face the demons I've locked away  
 Let me deal with them without judgement  
 Without the need to say  
 'Just move on,'  
 I will do that when the time has come  
 When the nightmares, flashbacks and panics halt  
 And I can finally acknowledge, it wasn't my fault.  
 I will move on, I will put it all back  
 In the box it's lived in for such a long time  
 I will move on when the decision is mine.**

2020

The Archdeacon looked uncomfortable. It was understandable. What I blurted out to him following that meeting wasn't easy for him to hear and would certainly have been totally unexpected. He'd known me for the past nine years and worked quite closely with me at times. I have become the master at hiding the secrets of my past. Why should he have had any incline of what I was to divulge?

He listened as I explained, as much as I was able at that time, what was going on in my life and more significantly, the past traumas that had awakened within my brain. It was painful to do, and I'm sure painful to listen to. As clergy, we are often called to hear people's inner most fears and in the confines of Confession, their inner most secrets. I've done this and listened to the most traumatic of memories being poured out, but it doesn't ever become any easier. I was putting him in a position that I had been in so many times over the years and I absolutely knew how uncomfortable it would be for him, as it was for me.

"Are you really able to minister to others and deal with this at the same time, Lynn?" he asked when I'd finished.

"I'm not sure," was my honest reply. After all I had just broken down in front of a room full of fellow clergy.

He eventually advised me to make an appointment to speak to my GP. He didn't think there was anybody in the Diocese who was qualified to help me. This was specialised. I needed specialised help.

I drove home that afternoon with tears streaming down my face. I felt totally broken and totally alone. I made an urgent appointment with my GP for the following morning.

1964

For me, being the eldest child meant being placed in a position of responsibility, even from an early age. I was the big sister and I was supposed to set an example to the others. I was also expected to help mum with the younger ones. Over the years I learned how to cook, bake, wash, iron, clean, sew, knit, mend and embroider. Skills that would serve me well in adulthood.

We had moved to our second house by the time my sister, six years my junior was born. I had a brother two years younger by this time. One memory I do have is of the day my sister was born. It was an unusual day because my grandma picked my brother and myself up from school. We were told there was a surprise waiting for us at home. And there she was, like a real life baby doll, a sister.

The fact that I don't remember my youngest sibling, my second brother being born two years later is not at all surprising and is significant to my story.

In 1965 we moved house again – house number three. This time to Audenshaw, not far from Ashton Under Lyne and close to the area where the Moors Murders were taking place. My dad had sold our previous house and bought into a Blue Star service station with an adjoining house and garden alongside.



*Standing in the front garden of our house in Audenshaw – Aged 7*

When I look back now, I can see that I was often left to my own devices when we lived in Audenshaw. I could regularly be found riding my little bike up and down the coal slag heaps of Ashton Moss and I was a frequent visitor to the Transport Cafe next door, becoming friends with an older girl who lived there. I was seven years old and I think I must have very often been quite a grubby child at that stage. Slag heaps are a dirty playground.

Mum was pregnant again, although, as I said, I don't really remember that or my brother being born. I just recall how busy and pre-occupied both she mum and dad were at that time. Imagine the excitement then, when dad brought a puppy home. We called her Kim. My brother and I had great fun with her, my one year old sister spent all her time trying to avoid our boisterous games. But then as suddenly as she arrived, dad announced that she had to go. Mum couldn't cope with her and so she was taken away from us. The joy of her arrival soon became the sadness of her departure.

Whilst living in Audenshaw, I attended Lumb Lane Primary School. This was now the third of my five primary schools. I was in the first year of the juniors. My classroom was in a different building to the infants, which my brother attended. I recall one particular day, when dad dropped me off by the junior school before continuing down the road with my brother. I got out of the car and stepped into the road, only to be hit by a passing vehicle. I wasn't seriously injured but my leg was very bruised and I had to go home to recover. Another traumatic memory.

I've often wondered why I only seem to have these types of memory and I don't have the answers even now. But I do know that the most traumatic was still to come...

2020

I attended the appointment with my GP. Explaining myself to him and then to the Practice Nurse wasn't easy. The GP I saw was not one I'd seen regularly or felt I knew very well. He was also a young man, which made it more difficult. In the end I just had to take a breath and go for it. Here was a sixty two year old woman telling of her present and past trauma to a thirty something doctor and hoping he would understand. It had to be done. To be fair, he was really very good and very understanding. He suggested that I take time out to deal with the issues and he decided to put the reason on my sick note down to 'family difficulties' to save my embarrassment with the Diocese. It was vague. He was trying to protect me by not being explicit. He also wrote down a phone number for me and suggested I might benefit from speaking to somebody about having some counselling. He asked if I wanted to involve the Police. I declined. The Practice Nurse just got hold of me and hugged me tight. She knew what I needed at that moment.

I was alone for that first week of being signed off work. My husband, daughter and closest friends were all out of the country, skiing and my son lived at the opposite end of the country. I had to begin a process of dealing with what was happening to me, but where to begin?

I felt very uneasy with telling my Church Wardens and Assistant Priest. It wasn't that I didn't think they would be understanding, but how would they cope with what I revealed? How would anyone? What would they think of me? I was so ashamed of myself and I'd also never had any time off and I actually had no idea how long this would take. My first medical note was for three weeks. I had a big funeral coming up and was hosting the Ash Wednesday Worship for our group of churches. All I could think of was the very difficult situation I was putting my church into.

I spoke to my Wardens and Assistant Priest as openly and honestly as I was able to at that time. I was worried how they might take it but decided it was the only way. My worries were unfounded. Of course, they were all really shocked at what I told them,

like the Archdeacon, they could never have seen it coming, but then they were so wonderfully understanding and supportive, and have been throughout.

First hurdles over, but then it became trickier than I'd ever imagined. What do you do in this situation? Where do you go? Who do you speak to? How do you help yourself, when it seems there is nobody out there to help you? There are no guidelines, no helpful handbook. Again, I was flying solo.

I suppose one of the first things I chose to do might seem a little bizarre. I picked up the phone booked an appointment – at a tattoo salon. I will admit, it was a pretty spur of the moment decision to have a tattoo, a symbolic tattoo, inked on the inner side of my forearm. It wasn't my first tattoo, I'd had one done twelve months previously, during Lent symbolizing the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Christ.

The first salon I tried to make an appointment offered me one for the beginning of May. It was February. Even when I tried to explain, they didn't understand the importance and urgency of what I was doing and why I needed it doing now. Fortunately, the second place I contacted did understand. Absolutely. I emailed them a photograph of the image I wanted tattooing and, like with the first salon, a brief explanation of the reason why I wanted it doing as soon as possible. The girl who read my message knew how and why it was important. She looked the image up on the Internet at what it signified and booked me in for the following day. No going back.

I was choosing to mark my body with the most significant symbol I could find, that of a Sexual Abuse Survivor. My abusers had marked me emotionally and mentally for years. Now I was marking myself, in defiance, as a physical testimony to all I had suffered at their hands. I have never regretted my impulsive decision.



*The tattoo I chose to mark my arm with in February 2020, was designed by a sexual abuse survivor who stood alongside Lady Gaga at the 2016 Oscars. Lady Gaga had the same image the 'Fire Rose' tattooed on her shoulder. The design uses the infinity sign, along with DNA structure to come together as a rose on fire. It is a symbol of unity with all who have suffered similar abuse.*

1965

I don't recall the month or the exact time of year. I guess it can't have been too cold because I know I was wearing dress. I usually did. I was a very girly, girl, unlike my younger sister, who was always an out and out tomboy. Even today I never see her in a dress!

The memory of what happened that day is typical of extreme trauma. It is fragmented. There are some distinct memories, and then flashes of feelings, of emotions, of colours and broken images. I can't even describe to anybody, fully the sequence of events from beginning to end, because there comes a point when everything goes blank. I have an absolute memory blot.

I do remember that I was hanging around the Transport Cafe, nothing unusual in that, I often did. But on this particular day, I was invited to go for a walk. This wasn't usual, but the person who invited me seemed a nice man, friendly, and I suppose all those warnings about going off with strangers just didn't enter my seven year old head. Now when I look back I realise that there must have been so many warnings at that time, especially in the light of the number of children being abducted and murdered locally, but they just didn't register. Where we lived in Audenshaw was really very close to the locations where children had been abducted by Ian Brady and Myra Hindley. As part of the therapy I've undergone in recent months I have had to research to assure myself that the man who assaulted me that day could not have been Ian Brady. I concluded that he couldn't have been because the man I remember was big and very strong. I was only a slight thing and mustn't have weighed very much. I have fragmented images of the colour blue, possibly he was wearing the boilersuit often worn by truck drivers.

I can recall that we set off walking and all seemed fine, things changed when he swept me up from the floor and sat me on his shoulder, his right shoulder to be precise. That memory is so very clear. As was the fact that I now wasn't at all happy. It felt such a long way up and I didn't like it. I can still see the path. It was the grey black shale of the coal slags and it seemed to be moving beneath me. Panic was welling up inside of me. This wasn't right. I was stuck. I couldn't get down. If I jumped down onto that mass of stone, I would hurt myself. I was up there on his shoulder and I was frightened. And then he was laughing and suddenly, I was filled with terror. I was terrified of everything about this situation. I was terrified of falling, I was terrified of jumping to get away and I was suddenly terrified of this man.

That terror, that fear of even being a very small height off the ground has never left me. It has remained with me all my life. I know that it is a totally illogical fear, but I cannot control it. In my mind, even to jump off something only a metre or so off the ground takes me back to that day, and it terrifies me. So many times I have found myself standing on the side of a swimming pool, knowing there is only just over a metre or so of water beneath me, but not being able to make that move. I want to jump, but I'm too frightened. I'm back on that shoulder. Recently I was asked to stand and balance on one leg on a small gym step. I was back on that shoulder. I couldn't do it. I just don't feel safe.

I was further paralysed with fear when his hand began to move up the skirt of my dress and he began to do things that I cannot bear to speak of, let alone write down, not here, not anywhere. They will always remain too vivid and too shameful for me ever to share.

It has been so very hard for me to accept the fact that I was a small child of seven years old and he was an adult who was perverted and who had complete disregard for my innocence. For all my life since, I have simply blamed myself; I was the one who went off with a stranger. I was the one who had put myself in such a dangerous situation and I was the one who would carry the shame of what happened that day for years and years to come.

The human brain is an amazing organ in the way in which it reacts to situations of deep trauma. It triggers our response to fight, to flee or to freeze. I was too small and too weak to fight. He had me trapped and I was powerless. And so it seems I did what my brain felt was the only option. I froze. And my brain froze. It froze the memory so that I can only recall so far what he actually did, before I meet that blank wall, and then everything is a shroud of white, of nothingness.

Through the therapy I've received this year, some fragments of that lost memory have returned – a sensation of running, a sensation of hiding and of feeling absolutely terrified; my insides knotted with fear. But I never told. Not a soul, not ever.

It was my shame to carry alone for over 55 years. I was just seven years old.

### **Run...**

**When you're seven the world should be filled with fun  
Enjoying each day with no need to run, to escape  
from a man who did unspeakable things  
To a child who trusted, who just went along  
Not knowing he wanted to do her such wrong**

**When you're seven you think all intentions are good  
But if you could turn back the years then surely you would  
Make a different decision from the one that you made  
Which led to such danger, such actions disgusting  
By a man filled with evil and intentions sickening**

**When you're seven and assaulted, your world is upturned  
Nothing feels right, and hard lessons you learned:  
Never trust being with a man on your own,  
That no place is safe, you want to be home  
And now it's too late - the damage is done.**

**Damage that marked an innocent child  
Left her reeling and left her feeling defiled  
And taking the blame she kept her dark secret  
Until the truth burst out for all to read  
Of a stranger's abuse and perverted deed**

**Turned sixty, the world should be filled with fun  
But inside you're still seven and just want to run...**

*Lynn Boyle 2020*

2020

So I had a medical note, I'd informed my Diocese' Human Resources Officer, my Archdeacon, my Wardens and my Assistant Priest. But the hardest was still yet to come and I hadn't yet even managed to find the help I needed. It soon became apparent that such help was not going to come quickly. I tried the phone number provided by my GP; I was directed by an answerphone message to a website, where I was instructed to complete a self-referral form. I filled it in and I waited for a response.

As I waited, things were becoming increasingly difficult on many levels and I really didn't know where to turn. I was still alone at this stage and I really was getting desperate. My anxiety levels were rising daily, so much so, that one evening I went on the Internet and typed in a search for 'Adults who had experienced sexual abuse in childhood'. Even as I did this, I felt deeply ashamed. I immediately deleted my search and I deleted my search history. I sat staring at the screen. I typed it in again and this time pressed Return. Up popped the name of an organisation called NAPAC (National Association for People Abused in Childhood). There was a number for an emergency helpline. I stared at it for a long time. Was it an emergency? Did I feel so badly in need of help? Could I actually come out and describe what was wrong to some stranger on the other end of the phone? What would they think of me? I spent a very long time questioning, answering and questioning again. Eventually, I decided that I did feel that bad; I was beside myself with anxiety and had nobody to turn to. I had to do something. My fingers punched in the number.

NAPAC limit the length of your call. I can absolutely understand that, but my story was long and it was complicated. If I'd just been dealing with the trauma of my seven-year-old self, then maybe it would have been straight forward, but there was so very much more to it.

The man on the other end of the phone listened attentively as I unburdened myself. Somehow, it was easier than I'd thought to pour everything out to this nameless, faceless stranger. And then, when I paused to draw breath, he didn't judge. In fact he offered me some very sound, if not very costly and difficult advice, that I might choose to follow.

At the end of my allotted 30 minutes I felt as if I was just a little bit better placed in knowing what I might do next and I thanked my anonymous confidante and adviser for his help and put down the phone.

I sat in my bed and thought very long and hard about what he'd suggested I do. It was something I had been dreading and I'd found every reason to put off doing; speaking to my brothers and sister, sharing the secret I'd kept for so many years. This was going to be more difficult than sharing my story with my husband or even my children because I was about to blow open their childhood memories and perceptions, not only involving myself, but also their mum and their dad. I had shielded them from this for over fifty years and now in order to bring about the healing I needed, I was going to have to hurt the people I had always strived to protect from the terrible secret of decades ago.

1974

I was plunged into a state of complete panic. My Sixth Form Tutor came to find me to tell me shed had a message for me and that I needed to go home urgently. My mum had phoned school and asked that I go.

I had no idea what was going on. I was informed that it was just me who needed to go, I didn't need to collect my younger brother, I just had to make my way home as soon as I could.

It was only a short walk from my secondary school to home, but that day it seemed to take an eternity. What could be so urgent? What could possibly have happened? As soon as I walked into the house, I knew something was dreadfully wrong. Mum and dad were in the lounge at the back of the house; absolutely unheard of during the daytime. The back room was for evenings, Sundays and Christmas only. There was a stony silence as I entered the room and I could see that mum's eyes were ringed red from crying. My immediate thought was that something had happened to my grandma (mum's mum, and my only surviving grandparent). What happened next both assured me that grandma was not the issue and shocked me more than I could ever have imagined.

Flinging a packet of condoms in my direction, my mum shouted at my dad, "Go on, you tell her!"

Dad stood in silence, head bowed, as if he couldn't, or didn't want to find the words to say to me. It didn't take my mum long to find them for him.

"I found these in his pocket! He's having an affair! Again!" she shouted.

I was speechless. I was just sixteen and here I was, having to deal with something I could never have imagined. I immediately felt way out of my depth. My mind was swirling. Dad was seeing another woman, cheating on my mum. But it wasn't just that, my mum had said "Again".

There was a lot more shouting, mostly on the part of my mum before she delivered her ultimatum: he had a decision to make, he could give her up and stay, or pack his things and leave, and she finished by telling him that he'd better make his mind up before the other children arrived home from school.

Dad attempted to defend his actions to me, saying that it wasn't just a passing affair, he was in love with this woman and she was in love with him and they wanted to be together. He told me that he was going to move out to go and arrange to live with her, but he still wanted to be part of my life and those of my brothers and sister. My world shattered, but, as was going to be the pattern for my life, there was even more, and worse, to come.

As dad went to pack his bags I asked the question burning through my brain.

"Mum, why did you say, 'Again'?"

It was then that mum told me about what happened when I was seven years old and whilst she was pregnant and expecting the birth of my youngest brother.

It turned out that in 1965 and 1966, whilst we lived in Audenshaw, my dad was having an affair with my mum's best friend. Much of their duplicity took place right in front of her, even to the extent of dad suggesting that she borrowed some of my mum's most lovely clothes, as mum couldn't fit into them whilst she was pregnant. Mum didn't find out about the affair until months after my brother was born and her best friend had become his Godmother. In 1965 I was seven.

No wonder both my parents were pre-occupied. No wonder I didn't feel I could possibly have told them what a man did to me one day on Ashton Moss.



I dreaded sharing this information with my lovely children, even though they were now both adults and mature enough to deal with it. I felt ashamed. I felt dirty. I felt I was to blame for letting myself get into such a position. Every logical part of my being tells me that it wasn't my fault, but that is so difficult for anybody who has been abused to hear. We do blame ourselves. Even as I prepared myself to speak to my children I was shrivelling up inside with the shame of it all.

Of course they were devastated. This was not what any child would want to hear about their mum. I was too much of a coward to share the worst with them at that time. I'd skirted around it with my husband. I couldn't even admit it to myself. I knew that somehow I needed to get more help. I couldn't do this on my own. I couldn't phone NAPAC again. I had acted as much as I could on their advice. I needed something more.

I was at my wits end when I telephoned the Safeguarding Officer for my Diocese. I phoned her in the hope that she just might know of somebody and be able to put me in contact with anybody who could help me.

It was a phone call that was to change things significantly for me. Once again I poured out my story. She was very sympathetic and agreed with me that I really did need specialised further help and promised to come back to me. Within a short space of time she telephoned me back. The Acting Diocesan Bishop had offered to fund counseling. It felt like real help was on the horizon at last.

Over the next few days I was kept informed as the search for a suitable counsellor was undertaken. Eventually, I was provided with a name, a phone number and a computer link to make initial contact. One dark night at the end of February I met the person who would walk the most painful journey of my life with me.

1972

As a young teenager I became increasingly involved in activities at my Parish Church. I am what is often referred to as a 'Cradle Anglican'. I've been going to church since birth. It's true that there was a significant amount of time when my mum didn't take me, particularly when we lived in Audenshaw and then in Kirkby-in-Ashfield (the fourth of the seven houses I would live in before the age of 10)

On our return to the Stockport area, I returned to the local Parish Church and progressed from the Sunday School and to become a member of the church choir. I loved to sing. I still do. It was a good and well-established choir with a decent teenage contingency. There were limited places teenagers could go in the 1970s, or activities to be involved with, so Thursday night Choir Practice became a great social event for us. As a group we decided to join the church Amateur Dramatic Society.

Initially we were all signed up for the Chorus in the Pantomimes, but as my voice grew in strength, I decided to audition for a small part. I was thrilled when I was successful. It was at this stage that my dad decided that he too wanted to be in pantomime and auditioned and secured the role as the Pantomime Dame. Mum was not happy at all. She supported us both, but she wasn't happy, I could see that.

It would be a couple of years later before I discovered the reason behind her unhappiness, although, in retrospect, I should have spotted the signs. I should have noticed how dad turned on the charm offensive with all the women in the cast.

Instead, I just recall the deep hurt he caused me one night whilst chatting up one woman of the cast in particular. They were standing in the corridor adjacent to the stage and he was showering her with compliments for her acting and singing. He obviously didn't realise that I was within hearing distance and therefore heard him quite clearly tell her:

“Our Lynn thinks she can sing, but she can’t sing for toffee.”

I was so humiliated. So embarrassed. Part of me curled up and died inside. My self-confidence dropped through the floor. How could my dad say this about his own daughter? Did he really think so little of my ability? How could I ever look this woman in the eye again?

I never challenged him about it. I was too hurt. I couldn’t.

What I did do was to spend years trying to make him proud enough of me to say something positive that would take back that hurt.

I would eventually take singing lessons with a tutor from the Royal Northern College of Music, and under her careful teaching, enter and win several prestigious competitions within Singing Festivals around the North West. All the time, though, all I wanted was my dad’s approval and for him to say that he was proud of me. I went on to take leading roles in concert and on stage. Sadly these came to an abrupt end in the late 1980s when the conductor of the opera chorus I was singing with made advances and sexually assaulted me. He asked to meet with me one evening to talk about the singing roles for the next season and which might be the best for me. I didn’t suspect anything amiss until he made it very clear by his words and his actions that he would only give me principal singing roles if I slept with him. I was shocked. I told him that I was not going to do that, which resulted in my not being offered any more major singing parts...

Did I have something tattooed on my head say “Cheap”, “Worthless”, “Damaged”, “Help yourself”?

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2020

The advice to share my past trauma with my youngest brother and my sister was coming at me from all directions, including from my counsellor on that first visit. Why my youngest brother? The brother two years younger than me has suffered from MS for many years and he just wouldn't be able to cope with the hurt I would have to inflict. It was clear that I needed to enlist the help of the other two though, if I was to deal with the demons overtaking my every waking moment. But how could I do it? I'd protected them from the truth all these years. They were now both in their fifties and I just hoped and prayed that they could both cope with what I was about to divulge.

I decided to meet with them individually. I can't exactly say why, it just seemed easier for me to do it that way. I needed to go so very carefully with this and I had no idea if they had any incline of the secrets I was about to divulge. Was I going to totally destroy their memories of their parents?

Both meetings were heart wrenching and many tears were shed. I met with my brother first.

Although they were very young, they could both remember something of the affair dad had in 1974, because they remembered him leaving us. My brother recalled running out of the house when he found out. But what they had no idea of at all, were mum's subsequent attempts to take her life, they had no idea about dad's earlier affair, or the fact that the woman was my brother's Godmother. And they most certainly didn't know about anything that had happened to me. I still couldn't share all the details of that. It was hard enough using the words 'assault' and 'abuse'.

It broke my heart to see how upset and shocked they both were about how their dad had behaved. They were heartbroken to hear about how he had treated their mum

and also about what I'd been through in the process. But most of all, they were both instantly and wonderfully supportive and have been throughout the process. I couldn't have asked for more from these two lovely people and their partners. The most significant decision made between the three of us was that I should stop visiting dad whilst I dealt with all the hurt and the trauma. This was a massive step for us all, as I had been the one visiting three times a day and it would put extra pressure, not only upon them, but also on my husband. We also agreed that we needed to seek some sort of care package for dad. His admission to hospital shortly after this was to make the application for Attendance Allowance and the transition to carers a little easier.

1974

I recall a time when I idolised my dad, this was before I knew the truth of what he'd done. He was my 'go to' parent, but this was when I had no idea of the affair he'd had when I was seven, let alone any others I'm pretty sure he had, but we just don't know about. My outstanding memory though, is that he was always really busy. Too busy.

Discovering that my dad was not the man I had believed him to be was beyond devastating. I couldn't absorb the fact that he would do this to us all and that he could leave us for a woman other than my mum. Where would he be going? Where would he be living? How and when would we see him? It was the most awful time for us all, but for me it was going to get so much worse.

Dad moved out and moved in to a flat above my cousin's print shop. Of course this was well before the days of mobile phones so there were great gaps of time when I had absolutely no idea what was going on with him.

But then his visits home began and with them an emotional nightmare I'd never imagined. Dad began to bring me letters and gifts from the woman he was seeing. He told me her name, where she lived, who she was married to, in fact everything I didn't want to hear about her. He told me that he wanted me to accept her, if not as a second mum, at least a friend. He continually pestered me to meet her. I wouldn't. I couldn't!

My brothers and sister were not involved in this emotional rollercoaster. Just me and I was a mess. It was more than I could cope with, but I had no idea then that I would have to cope with so much more than dad's unfair and unreasonable demands upon me.

It is probably no surprise to read that we had the most awful Christmas that year. I tried to make it as 'normal' as possible for the two younger ones, who were then eight and ten years old. But our family was broken. My mum was broken. She was on medication from her GP; she was taking Valium, which meant she spent most of her time in a zombified state. Grandma helped me as much as she could during the day. But night times were to become far, far more difficult.

In the early hours of one morning just after Christmas, I was awakened by a loud knock on the front door. I was immediately awake. I had become a light sleeper by necessity, always checking that mum was OK. I slipped out of bed and closed the bedroom door so as not to wake my sister. I popped my head round mum's bedroom door. Her bed was empty, the bedclothes pulled back. I assumed she had already gone downstairs to answer the front door. It did seem strange though, there were no lights on in the house.

I made my way down. The front door was closed tight and there was no sign of mum. The knock came again, seeming more urgent than the first.

I cautiously opened the door. I was frightened. I'd never known anybody knock on the door in the middle of the night. Who on earth could be knocking at this time? Why would anybody be knocking at this time?

I soon had my answer: outside our front door were at least two policemen and with them, my mum, wearing just her nightdress; her wet nightdress.

"This lady says she lives here," said one of the policemen.

"Yes," I answered, suddenly shaking with fear and anxiety. "She's my mum."

"We found her trying to drown herself in the canal," he explained.

I can't even describe the horror I felt at that moment. My dad had left us and now my mum wanted to kill herself and leave us too.

"Mum..." was all I managed through my tears. She just looked blankly at me.

"Well, now she's safe, we'll be getting along, love," said the policeman. "We'll leave her with you."

That was it! I was sixteen and my mum had just tried to drown herself. My younger brothers and sister were up stairs in bed. This couldn't really be happening. Could it? Amazingly, the younger children were all still fast asleep, spared from this horrific awakening in the middle of the night.

I had to treat mum like a child, drying her off, warming her up and tucking her safely into her bed. There was to be no more sleep for me that night, or for many nights to come.

That wasn't mum's only attempt on her life. She tried overdosing on several occasions and each time I prevented her doing it by physically wrestling the tablets out of her hands.

One night, things got even worse. Dad came home and there was an almighty row. Before I knew it they both had handfuls of pills goading each other to take them first.

I had to beg dad not to do it, whilst fighting with mum for the tablets in her fist.

I ended up hiding all mum's pills and just giving her the prescribed doses at the allotted times. She found where I'd hidden them more than once. I ended up putting them at the back of the top shelf of the airing cupboard on the landing.

I didn't sleep at night for a very long time (I still don't sleep wonderfully). I was sixteen years old, I was studying for my A Levels and my life was a living hell.

### **The knock in the night**

**This was the day, when the world fell apart  
Called home from school, a new nightmare to start  
At 16 years old, here we were again  
In that place which would cause such ongoing pain  
Caused by a man, with selfish intention  
A fling, an affair, to massage his ego  
The consequences of which he'd never know  
He'd never acknowledged the distress that he caused  
It was all about him and his 'happiness'  
Not a thought at all for the unbelievable mess  
he made of our lives –  
and this was the day when  
A teenage life was destroyed  
Having to grow up before it was time  
If it happened today, it would be a crime  
To leave a young girl in such a situation**

**Not of her doing, not her creation**

**The knocking that came in the middle of the night  
 The knocking that caused pure panic and fright  
 To be made even worse, when answering the door  
 To the vision of police – two, maybe more  
 Holding there, shivering on the doorstep, a mum of four,  
 just in a nightie,  
 Her daughter, shocked and more than slightly  
 Bewildered – where had she been?  
 What had gone on?  
 Why that strange look?  
 What had mum done?**

**Brought home from the canal in the early hours of the morning  
 The intention, her mission, now suddenly dawning  
 upon this terrified teenage girl.  
 A suicidal mother, three siblings in bed  
 ‘She’s all yours, now’, the officers said  
 As they handed her over into the care of her daughter  
 Who was left thinking that her life ought to  
 Be so different from this nightmare she lived  
 Caused by her father  
 Could she ever forgive  
 His actions that led them into this place  
 And all the horrors she was too young to face.**

2020

My first appointment with my counsellor was, as to be expected, a little awkward. I wasn't sure what would happen. I was very nervous. I'd never in my life envisaged myself in this situation, sitting here in front of a stranger for some kind of therapy. She was gentle and did all she could to put me at ease. It hadn't been an easy day. Dad was in hospital and he was being very difficult, arguing and threatening other patients.

As I sat there, I felt guilty on so many levels. I was also ashamed and embarrassed at the prospect of telling anyone what I'd done, what I'd allowed to happen to me. Because that is how I saw it.

She listened as I began the sketchy outline of what had happened to bring me to the position of sitting in front of her on this dark February night.

By the end of that first session, I felt that she had some idea of my story and also of the more recent circumstances, which had brought me to the point where I felt compelled to disclose my darkest secrets.

I can see now that those circumstances had been building since before Christmas 2019. Dad had always been a very self-centred man, I think it was just in his nature, possibly because he was the youngest, and by far the youngest of five. Recently, he was being increasingly demanding. He had got to the stage where he was unwilling to do very much for himself at all. He had refused to join in the Christmas festivities, which in itself was not unusual. For some reason, dad had always hated Christmas and made sure we all knew about it, even as children. He always said he found no joy in any of it. He'd never joined in the excitement when we were younger. He'd never played our games with us, or helped to put things together. That had always

fallen to mum to do, for as long as any of us can remember. Dad has always done things with us that he chose to do, things he enjoyed. We were always welcome to dig worms and go fishing with him!

But there was more to his being miserable over the Christmas of 2019. He'd fallen out with his latest 'lady friend', or rather, I believe, she had had enough of him following an incident in the autumn. She lived in Scotland and it was a long distance relationship unless she came down to stay with him. He wouldn't go to her. She had to come to him. This is the way dad has always operated. Everyone has had to go to him. The last time she had done this and travelled from Edinburgh, she'd caught the train to Manchester Piccadilly where dad had arranged to collect her as he had in the past. For some reason, only known to him, he got fed up of waiting for her and so drove home without her. He said he couldn't find her and so thought she hadn't bothered to come down. In the meantime she was trying to call him on his mobile, but he wasn't picking up. She ended up getting a taxi to dad's home and was very distressed when she eventually arrived. Not in the least at the fact that dad then said it was all her fault, not his.

Needless to say, she soon made arrangements to travel home again and it was very clear to us that she was not going to come down again. It was pretty much the end of the relationship, although he wouldn't accept it. He was convinced she would change her mind and come for Christmas. Dad has always expected people to do what he has wanted.

This was the last of a long line of 'lady friends' as he called them, that dad had had since mum died, following a major stroke, in 2008.

Not too long after mum died, Dad joined an Internet dating site and we would always know when there was a new lady on the scene. He would be straight on the phone and round to our houses immediately in order that we meet the new lady.

This meeting almost always included dad announcing that they were very serious about each other and were making long term plans. This fact was usually declared in front of whichever lady was current and much to their embarrassment. It was always clear that they were not of the same mind!

Dad was possessive, intense and insistent, and one by one the ladies he tried to strike up a relationship with made a hasty retreat.

His last partner, though, the one from Scotland, did give it more of a chance to work. She came down to stay with him on several occasions before the incident in autumn 2019. One day I visited when she was staying with dad and he couldn't wait to point to a ring on her finger. He told me they were making plans to marry. A little later, when he was out of the room, she told me that as far as she just considered it a friendship ring. Their expectations were obviously so very different.

So here we were, December 2019 and dad was miserable and making sure we all knew it. Each year, since mum died, I have made Christmas dinner for the family and always invited dad to join us. For the past two years, however, he has told me that he was coming and then changed his mind. In 2018 that change of mind came just as I was about to put dinner on the table. I'd phoned him earlier and he still hadn't arrived. When I made another call, he told me he'd decided to 'Give it a miss'.

So, in 2019 I asked my sister if she would mind inviting dad, as we had actually been invited out as a family for Christmas Dinner for the first time in many, many years. Dad as usual, was not a happy soldier on Christmas day. He spent even less time with my sister than he had done in the past with us, before wanting to go back to his home.

In January 2020 we began to worry that there was something more amiss with dad though. His behaviour was becoming rather bizarre. He also seemed to be

increasingly forgetful. He stopped taking care of himself. He stopped shaving and showering unless I made him do it. He told us that when he went out, he sometimes forgot where he had parked his car. There was also evidence that he wasn't eating properly. He began telling us that we didn't care about him and that we never went to see him, so much so, that we began to write on a calendar each time we visited and we put a WhatsApp group together as a family, just to update on dad. This was when my visits began to increase to three times each day, with my younger brother and sister visiting whenever they could.

I cleaned, I washed, I prepared all his meals, often taking him a portion of a meal I had made for my family at home. He reached a stage where he wouldn't eat the meals though, unless I sat with him.

As the visits progressed there was another turn. He repeatedly began to tell me how wonderful my mum had been and how he could not have had a better wife. He even told me that there had never been a cross word between them. I worried. Was this dementia speaking? I'm really not sure that it was, as he wasn't too bad at this time or at least it was in its early stages. I felt as if he were trying to convince me into believing something that both he and I knew to be untrue. So many times it was on the tip of my tongue to challenge him. If she was the light of his life, if she was so wonderful, then why the other women? Why the affairs? Why push her to the point of attempted suicide? But the words always remained unsaid. Dad had a weak heart and I didn't want to upset him or make him ill. On the one occasion I did ask him about the woman he had an affair with when I was seven, he denied all knowledge of her, said he'd never heard of her.

The words I wanted to say, the questions I wanted to ask remained unsaid, but the anxiety they were causing me grew steadily, day by day, week by week, month by month as he took more and more control over my everyday life. Eventually I reached the point where I would get into my car and sob all the way home, so stressful were the visits.

And then came the day when he didn't say, as he usually did

"You are so like your mum."

Instead he said, "You've taken your mum's place now. It's a pity you can't just stay here with me."

"No!" the voice in my head screamed, "No!"

As I started up my car engine that day, my whole body was shaking. I knew I couldn't continue like this. So much came flooding into my mind.

He was the dad who couldn't recognize there was something terribly wrong with this seven year old daughter. He was the dad who was too wrapped up in an affair with my mum's best friend to see what was happening in front of him. He was the dad who failed to see the trauma his sixteen year old daughter was suffering, because he was too busy causing her additional stress trying to persuade her to accept and befriend his mistress.

He was the dad who had always put himself and his needs first.

The fact I was facing was that he was always there in the midst of the abuse I had suffered, but he was never able to see it, because all his concerns were for his own happiness.

I recently spoke to a close friend who has a daughter the same age as our own and I asked him honestly, if she were going through something awful in her life, would he be able to tell?

"Always," was his reply.

Could he imagine not being able to recognize if there was something terribly wrong?  
"Never."

Here I was dealing with a situation that was tearing me apart and once again, my dad was a key player in my stress and unhappiness. He had broken my mum and now I knew he was breaking me. Every horror, every nightmare and demon from my past was coming back to haunt me. I wasn't sleeping, I was that seven year old girl being sexually assaulted by a stranger. I was the sixteen year old girl coping with his affair, his mistress and a mother driven to distraction. I was the sixteen year old girl trapped in an destructive and horribly abusive relationship...



*I was just sixteen when my world fell in from all sides.  
I was trying to attain A Levels but my home and personal life was a living hell.*

1974

I was flattered when he first asked me out. He was three years older than me and quite a popular guy. Basically, I think I believed he was a bit of a catch. He could certainly turn on the charm, and sadly, I fell for it. When I look back now, I can see that I was just a child. I had no idea of what I was getting into. I was going through hell at home and he initially provided a sanctuary.

We fell into a routine of going out and spending time together. He had a scooter when we first met but quickly progressed to a motorbike. All seemed well to begin and I suppose we must have enjoyed some good times together but I honestly can't remember any, probably because what happened subsequently has overshadowed them.

He took his driving test and began driving his dad's car, before eventually selling the motorbike and buying his own car, a Triumph Spitfire. I didn't know at that time that the motorbike had afforded me some element of safety. I could never have envisaged or predicted how things would change once he had a car.

2020

I'm back with my counsellor. In the past two weeks' sessions I have tried to share with her the extent of what happened to me as a child and as a young person. The problem is, that there is so much, I cannot put it simply into words. I can't say some of it out loud at all. To do so would make the events I've tried so long to deny, real again. I'm already reliving them in my sleep but I can't speak them in my waking hours, even to this most gentle and understanding of people.

She is sympathetic to my problem and suggests we try a therapy called EMDR, Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing. It is a form of psychotherapy.

I've never heard of it. It is relatively new, having been developed by Francine Shapiro in 1988.

She explained that in embarking upon this therapy I would be asked to focus upon the things that distress me from my past, but without having to speak about them and describe them in detail. It is explained and demonstrated. EMDR involves bilateral stimulation. During the therapy sessions, I would follow her hand movement from side to side as I recall the images that disturb me most.

She provides me with printed literature and points me to the Internet where I am able to read up further information before we proceed. I need to know what I'm getting into. This therapy could help my mind to recover from the psychological trauma I am suffering, but it is not an easy opt out. It is particularly effective for sufferers of PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder), which had become my diagnosis on my second visit to the GP.

After researching and reading about the therapy, I agree to give it a go. Everything is set to begin my EMDR on Wednesday 25<sup>th</sup> March, but then we hadn't accounted for Monday 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2020.

23<sup>rd</sup> March 2020 was my 62<sup>nd</sup> Birthday, but the day and date was not memorable for that reason. It was the day Boris Johnson, our Prime Minister, locked us down. I can still remember the complete sense of panic overwhelming me. What was happening? What did this mean for us all? It seemed that all our freedom was being taken away. On top of this I was now facing a further dilemma: what was going to happen to my planned EMDR? Where did this leave me in the terms of dealing with these damaging traumas from my past? How was I ever going to move forward now?

I received a text from my counsellor. It was bad news. We couldn't begin the EMDR. It needed to be done face to face. She would phone me and we could talk through the options. I was devastated. I thought I was beginning a journey of recovery. Now I was plunged into confusion. I couldn't get through this by talking about it because I couldn't say out loud what had happened to me, even over the phone, or especially over the phone. What was I going to do?

For several weeks we had 'check in' phone calls. I worked on a lifetime chronology to try to help my counsellor put into sequence what had happened in the context of other events in my life. It was only when it was in front of us both in black and white that I began to appreciate just how chaotic my childhood had been.

My years of experience as a teacher, and particularly, as a headteacher, has taught me that alarm bells should have been ringing where it appeared a child was being moved repeatedly from Primary School to Primary School. Questions should have been asked. Somebody should have been watching. But this was the 1960s and 70s and nobody seemed to pick up on what was happening in this particular young child's life, just as nobody bothered to pick up on the fact that there was a 16 year old looking after three younger siblings whilst supervising a suicidal mother.

Looking back on these years and events, the fact that I managed to scrape through two A Levels, pass Piano Examinations to Grade 8 and subsequently go on to acquire two Degrees at the University of Leeds, is nothing short of amazing, even to me.

My counsellor once said to me that I must have a strong resilience gene! I think I must have something!

And now here I was, in March 2020 and somehow, I was going to need be resilient again, because the counselling therapy I really needed could not go ahead.

I was soon distracted when our daughter fell ill, with what the doctor diagnosed as most probably being Covid-19. She was so very, very poorly for weeks. I didn't feel too wonderfully well either, but there was no testing facility in those early weeks of lockdown. All we could do was self-isolate.

May 2020

Two months into lockdown. We are all fit and well again. We've turned the dining room into a makeshift gym. Dad now has a care package in place, which includes three visits per day, following a few weeks in hospital.

My counsellor contacts me to inform me that she is now able to carry out EMDR therapy via Zoom if I'm comfortable to try this. With no signs of the lockdown ending I agree to go ahead. We reset the parameters for the treatment and I begin the therapy the following Wednesday evening.

It is such a strange thing to do, and even more so via Zoom. On our first session, we experiment with different ways for the bilateral stimulation and eventually settle with tapping. She taps and I follow her hands, mirroring the movement with my own hands. I tap on my knees. The movements are quite rapid, large and decisive. It feels odd to begin with.

Before the tapping begins I am asked to focus on what happened to me and how the events make me feel – a negative cognition. I am then asked how I would prefer to feel about it. This is not easy. I feel deeply guilty and ashamed of what I did. It takes quite some time to identify the feeling of powerlessness as the negative cognition. Because that is what he made me feel, totally powerless. I am picturing that large man rendering me powerless as he hoisted me up onto that shoulder, I had no

power whatsoever. It was no good shouting or screaming – there was nobody around. He had complete control.

The aim of the EMDR is to focus upon this feeling of powerlessness and the emotions it then evokes until such time as the trauma loses its power. There also has to be a positive cognition and we decide this should be that I am strong. This is going to take several weeks of hard, concentrated work and is going to be harder and more costly than I could ever imagine as we embark upon the therapy.

With EMDR, the brain continues to process memories and associated emotions far beyond a therapy session. It triggers memories that have been locked away for years. Over the weeks that follow I find myself having flashbacks – fragments of sound, of images fly into my mind unbidden. And with the images develop the most horrendous panic attacks and night terrors. I wake up in a hot sweat and so frightened but without knowing exactly what it is I am frightened of.

I hadn't realised just how many of the traumatic memories from my past, which were locked away somewhere in my brain, impacted upon my present, until I began the EMDR processing. So many things began to make sense, such as an incident that had taken place a few months earlier in the gym.

I was training as part of a group class. There was a man in the class with whom I just didn't feel comfortable. I automatically stayed away from him in these classes. It felt better that way. He was a big man, not too dissimilar in size and stature to how I remember my attacker of so many years ago.

But this day, whilst we were working in the same group, he was closer than usual and began grunting as he strained against the weights. Something totally unexpected mushroomed within my head. All I could hear was the noises he was making; they were blotting out every other sound in the gym, even the music until they sent me into a complete panic.

It was only subsequently, as part of the EMDR processing that I realised why the sounds upset me so much. They were awakening a fifty five year old memory. I had heard them before and they filled me with fear...

During one of my sessions at the beginning of June, my counsellor asked if I ever did any writing, as she believed that if I write, I could let some of my emotions out into words and it might help. Could I? I didn't think I could possibly write about anything that had happened to me at that time. But I decided to try and one day I just sat down and let whatever come into my head transfer itself onto my iPad. The result was the poem 'We Survive' printed at the beginning of this account.

It was the first of a number of pieces. I began putting the images that flashed into my head into words. And it did help. There was one area of that early trauma I couldn't write about though, because all I could recall was an emotion, and that emotion was terror.

As the processing continues I clearly recall that large man, the light brown hair and the colour blue. I know he came out from the transport cafe next to our house, and that he seemed friendly when I agreed to go for a walk with him. I recall the laughing. Even across the years as we continue with the EMDR I can hear the laughing – but then nothing, a total block of memory. The EMDR prompts flashbacks of emotions and images but never anything that is a concrete memory of what happened next, how I got away, how I got back home. As I tap and focus, there is just that vague awareness of running and hiding. The block in memory becomes increasingly distressing over the weeks. What did he do? Did he let me go? Did I wriggle myself

free? Did I escape from him? Did he threaten me if I told? Is that the reason I didn't? Is that why it's been my secret for 55 years? So many distressing, unanswered questions.

By now my counsellor had recommended a book called 'The Body Keeps the Score' by Bessel van der Kolk, a psychiatrist, author and researcher, particularly in the area of PTSD.

I had ramped up my running, regularly doing 5km round the country park in my village. It was my greatest escape, my obsessive escape. As I ran, I listened to Bessel van der Kolk's theories on my AirPods. As the book unfolded, so many of my questions about why I couldn't remember became clearer. The brain, basically won't allow it. When a trauma is too severe for an individual to cope with, the brain locks that memory away and with it the ability to articulate what happened also disappears. It happens because when any deeply traumatic memory is awakened, we relive it, the feelings, the emotions become real again. This is a part of PTSD. This happens particularly with childhood trauma.

I had a choice. I could continue to push, to drive myself to distraction, trying to unlock the memory, which could cause me even more distress, or I could accept that maybe, just maybe, I was better now knowing the 'what happened next' part of it all, and just maybe, perhaps I was being protected from it all.

Pondering upon this led me to write another piece of poetry.

*Trying to pull back a blocked memory of an assault upon my seven year old self, and suffering flashbacks is incredibly painful and feels every bit as traumatic as it did all those years ago. It is a reliving of the fear of the event, without knowing exactly what happened, and realising a fear of the unknown.*

*The following is written, inspired by 'Footprints' as a positive exercise, in response to that deep rooted fear and perhaps the fact that my Heavenly Father, unlike my earthly father, has looked out for me and protected me from all the details of what happened that day.*

**'I lifted you...'**

**I reached down and gently I lifted you up  
I just knew you couldn't take anymore,  
Your young mind needed to shut the door  
On the what and the why  
Of the awful events that happened, the day  
A stranger stole your innocence away.  
And so I lifted you.**

**I lifted you up  
And took your young brain, to a place  
where you would no longer recall  
The detail, the horrors  
of the worst that occurred  
Of an assault, which changed your view of the world.  
With a screen and a cloud, I hid it away  
When I lifted you up in my arms that day**

**I lifted you up  
 and I chose to blur the memories  
 that flooded your innocent heart.  
 I kept you safe, held you apart from  
 All the details for so many years.  
 And now when the images flash  
 When they cause terrors and fears,  
 Still, I am here, lifting you up  
 And gently turning your face away  
 From all the hurt and the shame of that day.  
 Because to me,  
 you will always be  
 My precious child  
 With no need to recall how you were defiled  
 By a man who caused such awful pain ~  
 I lifted you then and I lift you again to  
 Prevent you from putting the fragments together  
 Just to cause more hurt, that you'd carry forever.  
 And as I lift you and hold you safe in my arms,  
 Let me be the judge of the one who did harm.**

**I lifted you then and I lift you still,  
 Just lean on me and trust in my will  
 For all that is good and gentle and true  
 Lean on the one who's protected you through.  
 I love you, I've shared your hurt and your pain  
 I lifted you then and I will lift you again,  
 and again...and again...**

July 2020

We decide, after careful discussion to bring the EMDR processing of my childhood trauma to a close. It is causing excessive present trauma. I am not sleeping, I am suffering too many night terrors and panic attacks. I have to move on.

The man who took me for that walk and did awful things to this little girl is probably long dead. I have to let him and that powerless child go. I am no longer her. I am a grown woman. I was a successful headteacher of a wonderful school for many years. I am a Parish Priest and most importantly, I am a wife and a mum. I am surrounded by a loving husband, family and friends who are watching over me and supporting me as I battle the demons that have been hiding and waiting to do their worst for so many years.

There was one more thing to do and I didn't actually attempt this until several months after stopping the EMDR. A letter to my attacker:

*To a man I wish I never met,*

*I don't know your name, I never did. I don't know if you are still alive. I don't know if I was the only child you molested and defiled, I hope so, but I suspect not.*

*What I do know is the life damage you have caused me. I'm 62 years old now and I've had a very successful life in so many ways. I have two beautiful grown up children and held very successful professional positions. But there has always been that wounded, mistreated child within. I've lived for years, under the shadow of what you did to me that day. The fact that some of it is blanked out in my memory is testimony to how awful it was for me. My brain cannot bear to let me remember.*

*You planted in me a fear of being alone with men, so much so that I still go into a state of panic when it happens. I also can't bear the grunts and groans that men make, even when just working out in the gym. The sound makes me want to cover my ears and run.*

*I have an illogical fear of heights; when you lifted my small body off the ground and placed me on your shoulder, I was so frightened. It felt so high and I didn't feel safe. I wasn't safe. You destroyed my innocence and led me to keep the darkest of secrets for too many years.*

*How many secrets have you kept? How many other innocent children have you left with the same legacy?*

*I have no idea at all who you are, or were, but I do hope that somewhere along the journey of your life, you have come to realise that what you did to me was wrong.*

*I hope that just once maybe, you have felt the need to say 'sorry' to the little girl your violated one day on Ashton Moss.*

1975

I can't say exactly when things changed, when the charm turned to control. He was my first real boyfriend and I had absolutely no idea of what was 'normal' behaviour, and what was not. (The only experience I'd had was the horrible encounter when I was seven and I'd told nobody about that). It soon became apparent that I was 'abnormal'; he told me so, time and again. I was abnormal. I had nothing at all to compare with, I had nobody to talk to. My home life was in total turmoil. I was desperately trying to focus upon the A Levels I was trying to attain, and now this man was convincing me that I wasn't normal. Maybe he was right, maybe what happened to me at seven had made me abnormal, but looking back after all these years, I don't truly believe that. The things he wanted me to do were bizarre and awful. If I didn't comply, he would goad and menace until I was reduced to tears. One night he told me I was frigid. I had absolutely no idea what that meant. All I knew was that I didn't want to do the things he was making me do. To me, they weren't normal, it wasn't at

all what I imagined 'love making' to be. This was coerced. He kept on at me until I gave in, even if I was crying. He even threatened to leave me in the middle of nowhere. Each night we went out, I used to dread getting into the car at the end of the evening, my stomach immediately knotted with apprehension. I knew what was coming I knew what was expected of me. He told me it was 'payment' for taking me out. Payment, he told me, he had the right to expect.

### Pandora's Chest

**He assaulted, you consistently abused,  
 He was a stranger,  
 But with you there should have been no danger  
 He stole innocence,  
 But you stole dignity  
 He violated once and then was gone  
 But you exerted power that went on and on  
 Over a vulnerable young girl  
 Causing a nightmare of body and soul  
 Yet again someone else had control  
 Of her life, of her being  
 And once again, no one was seeing  
 What was happening, day by day  
 As her self worth and respect we're eroded away.  
 In the beginning you were just always so pleasant,  
 With your face set in a smile  
 Whilst underneath your intentions were vile  
 Intentions that unfurled towards the end of the night  
 When you'd drive to a place, tucked out of sight  
 And there you'd demand all manner of deed  
 And of her pleading  
 You'd take no heed  
 Always it ended with her in tears  
 As once again her very worst fears  
 were realised along with an accompanying threat  
 And again she wondered, how bad could it get?**

**It was simple:  
 You needed to dominate  
 Demanding your payment following each date  
 Have her carry out acts, perverted and wrong  
 But she was vulnerable and just went along  
 As her life took a new shape:  
 Once again in an unhappy home  
 And abused every time she was alone  
 With someone who's need was to have control.  
 You took a life that had strived to be whole  
 And dashed it to pieces bit by bit  
 She knew she should escape from it,  
 But human need of another's attention  
 Kept her trapped in this diabolical position  
 Until the day she was suddenly free  
 She'd brought it about, so unwittingly,  
 Because the day you knew you'd lost control  
 That you could no longer own her, body and soul  
 You dropped her, suddenly in a manner so cruel  
 And she gained her life back from under your rule  
 But now she was left damaged and broken  
 All dignity and self worth, you had taken  
 And so she did what she had learned to do best  
 Locked it away in Pandora's chest.**

August 2020

I begin the part of my counselling I've been dreading the most. It's time to face once again my teenage abuser. This is more difficult than I can ever explain. He's been there in my head for over forty five years. I've tried so many times to quash the feelings of dread he invoked in me, but I've never, ever, been able to rid myself of his horrible legacy.

Between what happened when I was seven, and much more particularly, what he did to me as a teenager, I've been left with a deep and uncomfortable mistrust of men. However, I have become the master of putting on a smile and hiding my true feelings, whilst being in a state of total and absolute panic inside. This has manifested itself twice, most startlingly, in the past twelve months.

The first time was in a personal training session. I had been with my personal trainer for some time and we had always carried out the training sessions in the local gym. However, circumstances led him to have to move my training to his home. He'd set up in his garage. I happily agreed to give this a go, but I could never have predicted the unbidden reaction I experienced at the beginning of my first session.

He had everything ready and set up in his garage as expected when I arrived, and he'd done a great job, as he always did, in preparing for the workout. I was impressed and looking forward to getting started. But then he closed the garage door. I don't know why it took me off guard, but it had never occurred to me that we would be behind the closed door of his garage. I was suddenly overcome by complete and utter panic. I was trapped again. He was bigger and stronger than me. How could I get out if I needed to?

Did he know any of this, anything of how I was feeling? Of course not; I did what I've become so adept at doing, I smiled outwardly and screamed and panicked inwardly. Only time was able to move me beyond that level of fear and allow me to enjoy my training sessions.

The second instance was in September 2019. I had injured my shoulder whilst on holiday in Greece. I was struggling with severe pain in my neck, back and travelling down the nerves of my right arm, which I could hardly use by the time we arrived home. I was desperately in need of treatment and opted for a visit to a recommended physiotherapist. I arranged to see him as soon as possible after my return from holiday.

On arrival at the clinic, he invited me to sit in a reception area. One side of the reception area was all windows and we were clearly visible to anybody visiting the leisure centre where the treatment rooms were situated.

I certainly felt safe enough as he took a history of my injury and enquired about other aspects of my fitness and health in general. I answered his questions and was desperate to get some relief from the pain but all the time with growing anxiety that I was trapped because he had now moved us and I was in a small room with a man I didn't know, and he was standing between me and the closed door. Beyond that door I knew was an empty reception area before the main leisure centre. I could feel the panic rising inside of me. I was trying so hard to focus upon his questions, but all I could feel was such severe apprehension. Once again this man was totally unaware of the turmoil I was experiencing. As he began to work on my shoulder he mentioned the tension in my neck and surrounding muscles. He had no idea that fear of the situation was adding to that tension. Again, why would he? As always, I hid it well. He could never have guessed the extent of unease within this new patient. It would actually be months later before I would share this with him.

All too often mental health issues are considered and treated with something approaching disdain; they are minimalized. But in my case, that feeling of loss of control, of being trapped is as real today as it was so many years ago. I cannot help the panic that rises inside of me. I don't know if I ever will, even with the counselling and EMDR therapy. I have lived with this for so long, it has become part of my psyche. In the manifestation of the panic, my body really has 'kept the score' of the loss of control elements of the sexual attacks and the abuse I endured as a small child and as a teenager.

1975

I was caught up in a situation over which I felt I had no control, no choice. I was being continually accused of abnormality and convinced that I was aberrant and worthless because I didn't want to engage in the acts that I now realise were far from the norm. Life was getting pretty desperate all around; but then, in the midst of all this came a man who was going to prove to be my saviour.

I had been having regular piano lessons since the final year of primary school. I had gone as far as I could with my dad's friend teaching me and now needed to change teacher. I spoke to the Head of Music at school and he offered to teach me. Up until this time, the Piano Examinations I'd taken were London College of Music. He told me that in order to progress further I needed to move across to Associated Board exams. I worked hard and entered and passed my Grade 5 practical and theory. Having taken me through my Grade 5, that same Head of Music walked into the Music Room in school one day and put a prospectus on the desk in front of me. "Look at it, think about it seriously," he said.

The prospectus was for Bretton Hall College of Higher Education. It was affiliated to Leeds University. He was suggesting that I train as a teacher.

I can clearly remember my immediate response. I looked at him in complete disbelief.

“Teach people like me? No chance!” I said.

“No, not people like you, teach primary aged children. There is a distinct shortage of musically trained teachers in primary schools. Just think about it.”

I didn’t realise it at the time that he was handing me the way of escape from so many things; and methods of escape I would employ for the rest of my life.

You see, at that moment in time, I didn’t have the qualifications to secure a place on the course, not only did I need two A Levels, I needed to have attained Grade 8 Piano. I was only Grade 5.

I took the prospectus home to read. I remember it looked so exciting but daunting, way beyond my self-perceived capabilities. I’d settled to the fact that I might go into some kind of secretarial work. To get myself on a teaching course at Bretton seemed way beyond me. It certainly wasn’t going to be easy, not in any way. There were several hurdles to overcome.

Firstly, I had to speak to mum and dad; hurdle number one. Mum didn’t want me to move away from home and she didn’t think they could afford it any way. I was already taking extra years at school by staying on into the Sixth Form and they needed me earning.

Dad thought it was beyond me and that if I did train as a teacher, I would consider myself above them and the rest of the family.

It took much negotiation on the part of my teachers, and particularly my music teacher to convince my parents that they should allow me to at least apply and that they could put in for a grant so that it wouldn’t cost them. I promised to work every Saturday, weekend and holidays to make up the difference so that I wouldn’t put an extra burden upon them.

Eventually, I was allowed to put in an application. But I was still short of that necessary Grade 8 Piano qualification. My music teacher immediately put me in for Grade 6. I had to put 100% effort and more into my practice and also into the theory of music exams. I passed. He immediately entered me for Grade 7. In the space of twelve months my music teacher took me through Grades 6, 7 and 8. Playing the piano became obsessive. Practice became a means of escape. I had to concentrate and I had to play continually. I found myself pushing to my limits. This would be a way I would manage stressful situations for a lifetime.

2020

The ability to throw myself into things until I reach breaking point in order to escape situations I am struggling with, has stayed with me. It is my stress buster.

Unfortunately, more recently, it has also become a bit of a body buster.

When I turned 60, my daughter suggested I rejoin the local gym. I’d been a member of gyms before, but all I ever did was run on a treadmill. It was my safe zone and running was in itself a means of escape. I joined the local gym. I ran on a treadmill.

Run faster, push harder. One day my daughter suggested that I tried a Spin class with her. If you’ve never tried Spin, it involves riding a stationary bike, without brakes.

The class is usually carried out to loud and generally quite fast music with an instructor leading you through routines of seated, standing and forward leaning cycling whilst varying resistance levels to simulate climbing hills or sprinting on flatter roads. The idea of it terrified me! A bike with no brakes? No control? No way! My daughter was persuasive though and eventually I agreed to give it a go.

‘It’s only a 30 minute class, mum,’ she said. ‘You’ll be fine.’

That first class was so very hard going. I nearly fell off the bike when it finished and I couldn't sit comfortably for days. But I went back for another class and then for more and more, and more. I was hooked because for 30 or 45 minutes, depending on the session, I could forget everything that was worrying me. I could escape.

Before I knew it, I was Spinning most days of the week, sometimes more than once in the day. I then moved on to try weight and strength training, circuit training and boxing. Inevitably, before long there were injuries, which left me frustrated until I could get back to punishing my body again. It had become my ultimate way to escape stress and anxiety. The Leisure Group asked whether they could do an article on me for the local newspaper – the Weight Lifting Vicar! It hit the Internet and spread across the country. How had I gone from practically no exercise to this? Absolutely no idea!

Of course it all came crashing down in March 2020 when the gyms were closed under the National Lockdown. What to do? I needed to do something whilst I was undergoing the counseling. I found 'Joe Wicks HIIT' and 'PE with Joe', his 'Seven Days of Sweat' and then the Fitness Instructor from the Gym began putting classes online. I was also running and set myself a 10km goal. I pushed my pace every time I went out. Of course further injury was the result. I was still recovering from my shoulder injury and now added tendonitis in my hip and then bursitis in my right knee. I kept a physiotherapist busily, virtually employed throughout lockdown!

I'd also found another outlet for my stress. I'd discovered POUND. In August 2019 a friend invited me to attend one of her classes. I loved this strange, energetic workout. POUND is a rockout workout. It is a HIIT Cardio Session inspired by drumming. In autumn 2019, I was so hooked on this new form of exercise that I trained to teach it. In fact, both my daughter and I trained to become POUND PROs – POUND Instructors. I had only just got it all started when we went into lockdown. What to do? Inspired by the friend who first got me into it, I learned how to use Zoom. Before long I was doing two free classes a week for anyone who wanted to join in. It gave me focus, it gave me the means of escape I needed as I journeyed through the traumas of my past with my counsellor.

And so I fell into a routine of running, Strength training, HIIT, POUND and cycling on an exercise bike. Every day pushing it as far as I could. I was often doing two or even three workouts in a day. I pushed and pushed. My counselling took place on Wednesday evenings and I couldn't wait to get out on Thursday morning, until a knee injury put an end to running for a while. I was just overcoming this when I developed a kidney infection followed by Shingles. The latter brought me to a grinding halt. My means of escape had resulted in an imprisonment of pain. Mental illness often leads to the sufferer engaging in obsessive behaviours. For me the focus has changed over the years and in latter years it has settled on the need to workout. If I don't, I don't feel good. It's as simple as that.

### **Intensity**

**Emotions fuel your energy  
And the intensity builds  
In your thoughts and in everything you do  
Driving you to succeed,  
To Push and push, push yourself through,  
Throw yourself into every task  
Nobody ever has to ask for more,  
You give it your all, that's for sure.**

**Emotions fuel your sense of drive  
Pushing yourself is the way you survive  
It helps to blot out  
The things you don't want to feel  
The things in your head,  
you would rather weren't real**

**You push and you give everything you've got  
You give it, regardless of it hurting or not,  
Push and push until you're done,  
Spent,  
Nothing left  
All energy gone  
And has the push taken away the pain?  
No, Not a chance  
So tomorrow you'll repeat  
The push again.**

1975

Of course, there was one other person to speak to about my possible training at Bretton Hall, and he wasn't happy at all. This was going to 'change' me. He became nastier as I made my way through the process of application. His control and demands became greater. Coercion was his number one tactic and I came to dread the end of the evenings I spent with him. Sadly, I didn't have the emotional capacity or mental strength to break it off. I can see now that I should have done.

In the summer of 1976, I passed just two A Levels – Music and English Literature. I also passed the magical Grade 8 Piano exam required and so I had scraped through enough to get myself to Bretton.

Dad was back home; the woman he was having the affair with never intended leaving her husband and very nice home for this man who could offer her nothing whatsoever. He discovered he had no option but to ask mum to take him back. And she did.

At the end of September 1976, it was mum and dad who drove me to Bretton Hall in West Yorkshire, my home for the next three years before graduating with a Bachelor of Education Degree from Leeds University.



*Bretton Hall was affiliated to the University of Leeds and specialised in courses in design, music and the visual and performing arts. I feel hugely privileged to have trained there from 1976 – 1979*

*Today the Hall is closed and the grounds are home to the Yorkshire Sculpture Park.*

1976

I found the initial experience of Bretton life quite daunting. I'd never known anything like it. I'd never been away from home and I wasn't at all prepared to be amongst all the seemingly, very self-assured arts students. I had such little self-confidence; after all I'd had somebody continually undermining me and putting me down for some time. But I'd worked so hard to get to this point and I was determined that I was going to succeed and to qualify as a teacher.

I was placed in a large room in the mansion house pictured above, with three other girls. It soon became a popular meeting place for all manner of students. I began to make new friends with whom I would either keep in touch with, or eventually become re-united with through the wonders of social media.

So where was my abuser in all of this? He came along for a visit that first October and it was soon apparent that he was neither comfortable, nor happy; he was in such a foul mood for the whole weekend.

In November 1976, he was due to come to stay for another weekend. This was before the days of mobile phones, so all communication was reliant upon my phoning his home number. On this particular Friday I phoned from a public phone box in Barnsley to check upon his arrival time.

"What time are you getting here?" I asked when I made the call.

"I'm not," came the reply.

"Oh," I said, "are you ill? Is something wrong?"

"No. I'm just not coming."

"Why?"

"Because I'm not. I'm not coming today and I'm not coming again, ever."

That was it. We were over. I never saw or spoke to him again.

I felt as if I'd been thrown aside like the worthless article he'd always convinced me I was. The truth was that I really was useless now because he'd lost control.

Looking back, I should have just felt relief; this was the ultimate escape from a totally dark relationship with the potential to lead who knows where. But all I felt at that time was rejection. He had discarded me like a piece of rubbish for the bin.

That sense of rejection, and the fear of being rejected, would remain with me for decades; it was just another result of his horrible legacy. It would affect me in so many ways in the years to come, continually present, diminishing my self-confidence, from larger issues of being passed aside for a job or position of responsibility, to the very minor, having a text ignored or unanswered by a friend. It has never mattered the size of the rejection, it is just that fact that I have been rejected, discarded as he discarded me that day in November 1976, because I was no longer of use to him.

2020

From the moment of disclosure in February I'd used the terms 'sexual assault', 'sexual abuse' and 'emotional abuse' and 'control'. But there was one word I had yet to bring myself to use. I couldn't say it, because I didn't want to admit it for what it was. I knew, of course I knew, but to give it its name would not only make it real, it would make it worse, for everybody. It would also perhaps prompt others to try to persuade me to take matters further and I knew I could never put myself, or my family through that ordeal.

It is July and with the support of my counsellor, I've decided to return to the EMDR processing. The decision has not been taken lightly following my previous experience in May and June. But, as I cannot verbalise in much detail what happened to me to anyone, even to my counsellor, it is my best option. The focus upon feelings and emotions won't require me to go into graphic details. They will be in my head.

I have to say at this point, that my counsellor was amazing throughout. She just gently encouraged and I found myself telling her more than I've ever managed to say in my life. And when I've not been able to say it out loud, she encouraged me to write to her between sessions. She was also wonderful at reading between the lines. She had already worked out much of which I was struggling to say, before I reached a stage where I was able to be more open. I realise now that the relationship between a counsellor and client is a long process of growing trust. And if that trust is not there, then I don't think the process can be as successful as it might be.

There is a time of preparation before we begin this second round of EMDR and it is during this time that the 'R' word is used for the first time. I don't say it. I describe, as much as I am able to, what happened and my counsellor puts the picture together and uses the word in response to that description. I know she is right, but somehow to actually say 'he raped me' is too difficult. It is still so difficult and I've only been able to say it out loud to those in my closest circle.

Over the next few weeks, using EMDR, I process what happened, what he did and what the recognition of it really means to me.

The first session sees me break down in uncontrollable tears. I can't help it. I am completely knotted up inside and then the flood-gates open and I have no power to stop them. The feelings I experience as the tears fall are of the deepest shame and hurt. Forty five plus years of pain and shame rain down my face. My counsellor encourages me to let it out. I've never cried about it like this, not ever. I've learned,

like I have with everything else, to keep it pressed down, to squash the anxiety and upset it has causes me. Until now.

As we continue through the weekly processing I feel increasingly that I want to tell him how he had made me feel in doing what he did to me; how he has left me feeling for so many years. And so I write a letter. Of course, it is a letter I will most likely never send, but writing it, putting down what he did and how I'd had to live with it all these years helps me to move on through the process. It allows my emotions to move from deep shame and uncontrollable sorrow, to anger, anger towards what he did. This is progress.

\* Please note that I have edited this copy of the letter from my original, as I cannot bear for anybody else to read the full extent of it, even now.

### Letter to a Rapist

*Xxxx,*

*I cannot begin this letter with the salutation 'Dear', because I don't feel it's appropriate. It's not appropriate because there is nothing but pain and regret when I think of you.*

*For well over forty years I have lived with a legacy of mental and emotional pain and shame that has cut deeply into my everyday existence. I have tried to keep what you did to me and what you put me through locked away in a box. Until now. I wouldn't imagine you've ever given a thought to the damage you inflicted upon me, but I have had to live with it for decades.*

*Only now, with the amazing love of family and friends and the support of a caring and skilled counsellor, have I been able to properly face full on what you did to me time and again and give it its rightful name - rape. You may not think or even believe that to be correct, but I know that is what it was and I also know that if I chose to pursue what you coerced and often forced me into night after night, you would have a case to answer in a court of law.*

*Do you know, I still cannot pass where you took me night after night, without my stomach tightening in panic and dread? It was the place where I was expected to 'pay' you back for taking me out for a drink, a meal, to a party. You absolutely expected it of me and when I didn't want to do as you asked, you told me I was 'frigid'. A 'frigid bitch' I believe was the term you used. You broke me down until I cried and gave in. I didn't even know what the word frigid meant until you used it. But I wasn't frigid. I just didn't want or deserve to be forced to do the things you wanted me to do. It's true, I did knot up and freeze. I knotted and froze with anxiety, panic and dread at the*

*thought of where we were going when we got into the car at the end of an evening. I froze with dread at what I might be expected to do. I can't even bring myself to write descriptively about it here, but I remember all too well the things you made me do and some of those things, I know now, were not normal. I used to brace myself against it, numb myself until it was over and I was free to go home. That was never how love should be expressed.*

*As far as I am concerned you just added to what had been stolen from me when I was seven years old, when I was sexually assaulted by a stranger. Surprised? No, I didn't tell you. I've never told anyone about what he did or indeed what you did, until now. This has been my dark secret. It was my shame to bear abuse at the hands of a grown man as a child. He stole my innocence. You stole my dignity and my self-worth, you exerted your control time and again and when I didn't want to comply, you treated me in such a way that left me feeling totally worthless.*

*You reduced me to tears, you had me apologising for what you made me believe were my own shortcomings. You left me feeling dirty and used. It happened to me when I was seven and you did it all over again and again and again. Let's face it, I wasn't even worth the time for you to break off with me properly. I actually had to phone you to find out where you were that Friday, only to be told you were calling it all off*

*My biggest regret is not being strong enough back then to say 'no' and walk away from you. You actually did me a favour when you ended it that day and I have since considered it to be my luckiest escape. I only hope that whoever you have gone on to share your life with has not had to endure the things I did.*

*You didn't ruin my life in as much as I have been highly successful in everything I've set my mind to. I attained two Degrees at University and I have reached the top of my profession. I have an amazing family - a loving, kind and caring husband and beautiful and equally highly successful children along with the most loyal and fabulous friends.*

*But despite all that success and the deep love that surrounds me, I've lived too long with my darkest secret. I've lived with years of freezing in panic and dread at the end of a lovely evening when my husband has turned to me and I've frozen at the expectation of having to 'pay', as I did with you. Add to this the fact that whenever I've found myself alone with a man, whatever the situation, I've frozen inside with panic and dread as to what might happen, what might be expected of me - there is your legacy.*

*I've blamed myself for years for what happened, and only now have I been able to acknowledge that actually, none of it was my fault. Not one bit. It was yours.*

*You raped me. Expectation, coercion, pressure to do what I didn't want to do - that was rape - no other name for it, rape that I endured for far too long. You even took me to watch X rated sex films, films I wouldn't ever have dreamt of watching, films that made me uncomfortable and that I was ashamed to watch. You took me along to try to show me and persuade me how to live out your sexual fantasies. And then you made me do things way beyond normal. I didn't know any different. Only that I didn't want to do it. Now I know, you raped me.*

*I'm not pursuing anything here because I'm not a vengeful person, I never was. I know I could and I have every right to take things further, but I don't want to escalate the trauma you put me through and what I've had to live with for so many years.*

*What I want is for you to know how I feel and to take ownership of what you did - the lifelong damage you caused another human being in this world.*

2001

It was in 2001 that I first felt God calling me to do something more. I had no idea at the time what the 'more' might be, but with the fantastic support and discernment of my Vicar, I came to the conclusion that it might be a call to some kind of ministry. People often ask, "Why did you choose to be a Vicar?" You don't. God does the choosing.

The process that possibly leads to Ordination is deliberately long, beginning with one to one interviews, progressing to panel interviews within your own Diocese and then, if you are recommended, an interview at national level by members of the Bishop's Advisory Council. This final interview lasts for several days. All in all, it is a rigorous process.

I really had no idea why God might be calling me. I was truly damaged goods; more damaged than anyone on any of those interview panels ever discovered. Only God knew and I decided that if I was rejected, then I would know how damaged he thought I was and it would remain between us. Strangers didn't need to know and I wasn't ready to speak out. It was my shame, my secret.

The questioning and the tasks set during the process are penetrating and demanding. As a candidate, you are called to bare your soul over and over again before actually being found suitable, or not, as the case may be, to attend what is affectionately known as 'Vicar School'.

At the end of a process that lasted well over two years, I was recommended for Ordination and was offered a place at 'Vicar School'.

This actually meant embarking upon a three year degree programme in Theology and Pastoral Care on the Northern Ordination Course, affiliated to the University of

Leeds. It was a part time course, which I would complete whilst continuing with my post as a primary school headteacher.

There were several times during those three years of training when I had to face scenarios of sexual and emotional abuse, often in role-play situations or round table discussions. This was often being mirrored in my adjacent role as a headteacher and frequently involved liaison with Social Services and the Police as I dealt with frequent child protections and safeguarding issues. Strength of faith and God's calling somehow carried me through the most challenging times.

I was Ordained in Chester Cathedral in 2007 and made Priest in 2008. After a training curacy of three years, I was installed as Vicar of my present church in March 2011.



*Being called to ministry is a huge privilege. It is a call to serve God and others in a very unique and special way. I love the role I've been called to as Vicar of a Parish Church.*

In March 2020 I had been Vicar of a village church for nine years. I was well established and I'd never had any time off for illness, so to be in the position I found myself in personally and emotionally was hard to bear. To feel unable to minister to those in my parish who needed me made it even harder. Of course many of them had no idea why I was missing. How could they? Maybe they thought the Vicar had finally lost the plot! I don't know. But I made the decision to be as open and honest as I could about why I was not working, to those who asked why I wasn't working or how I was.

One of the most difficult things I encountered was the battle not only with the memories, but with my own faith. As the months of counselling progressed and a time when the memories and recollections were at their darkest, I really struggled to find God. This was totally unfamiliar to me. He has always been there for me. I've always been assured of that. But now I felt so alone and that He had turned His back

on me. I can't explain fully why. I had the most wonderful support from those within my church throughout. My Wardens and Assistant Priest were always there for me. But personally, I was struggling. Where was God in this? Had He decided that I shouldn't have been Ordained after all, I wondered? I was hurt and confused and I'm sorry to say that the result was that as I couldn't feel He was there for me, I turned my back on Him. For a period of time, as I worked through the worst of the trauma, I was spiritually lost. I couldn't pray. I felt there was nobody listening. It can happen, even to a Vicar.

I wasn't to feel the weight of God's loving presence upon me until the end of the summer. Whilst holidaying in Devon with my husband, we visited Exeter Cathedral. It was there that I discovered that 'thin place'. A 'thin place' is a place where the veil between this world and eternity literally feels thin. It is a place where you can palpably feel God's presence. Standing on the shore of the Sea of Galilee has always been a thin place for me, particularly the northern shore. But on this day, as I stood in Exeter Cathedral, a place I'd never before visited, the tears gently rolled down my cheeks. I could feel Him.

"Ah, there You are," I whispered.

That experience, that visit to Exeter Cathedral was to prompt me to make contact with the Bishop of Exeter, a Bishop I have known for many years. It led to some of the most compassionate, caring and loving ministry that would lead me back fully into God's presence.

2020

Sexual assault is not only a violation of the body, it is a violation of the mind. Sexual abuse is almost inevitably accompanied by emotional abuse.

Nobody can simply shrug off the trauma of sexual assault and abuse. Oh, we can hide it, and many do, for years. We can bury it, we can even try to deny that it ever happened, but as van der Kolk stated 'The Body Keeps the Score'. One day it will catch up with us, affecting our health, mentally and possibly physically.

As I embarked upon the EMDR therapy again in August 2020, I was to discover just how powerfully our body reacts physically to previous trauma.

As a 16 year old, whilst going through all the turmoil of dad's indiscretions, his constant endeavours to persuade me to accept his new 'lady', my mum's suicide attempts and the sexual abuse I was enduring, I fell ill with Shingles. I was studying for crucial exams, I was totally stressed and I developed Shingles.

Shingles is a horrible condition cause by the same virus and Chicken Pox. It manifests itself in an extremely painful blistering rash. The virus travels along your nervous system to your skin, making it very sore to touch and also causing severe nerve striking pain. It is frequently caused by a weakened immune system and you are particularly susceptible to it, if you are under stress. The symptoms can last for weeks and the nerve pain continue for months after.

In August 2020, as I began to process the trauma suffered by my 16 year old self, my body re-triggered that past illness; I developed Shingles. As I battled with mental anguish and emotional trauma, my body physically recreated this painful illness of my teens. It seemed that my body truly had kept the score.

Like many people during the national lockdown, as a family, we began to binge watch various series on the television. One of these was 'SAS Who Dares Wins', the reality TV series featuring a number of ex Special Services soldiers. The challenge involved putting men and women through a two-week long gruelling training programme, pushing them to their limits, pushing them to breaking point. It wasn't

this fact that resonated with me, although I knew all too well about pushing myself to my limits, to breaking point; it was the stories behind the men and women who took part. So many of them had been through incredibly difficult times and had put themselves forward to test their resilience. Ant Middleton, the Chief Instructor, focussed the contestants energy on the tasks as he tried to help them believe that they could achieve the most difficult of challenges. I became fascinated by the idea he constantly put forward of employing positivity in negative situations and I began to read his books. I listened to one of them as I ran. I took note of what he was saying about turning a life around.

Watching the series, reading and listening to the books made me realise, that if I was to move on and come through this horrendous time, then I needed to develop ways to help myself as much as I could.

It was shortly after that my counsellor recommended the Bessel van der Kolk book and I began to read and learn more about PTSD and in that learning I began to realise how I could begin to help myself. I somehow had to turn all the negativity that had been in my life into positivity. I began by trying to write how it felt.

### *Sand*

*In a battle with the memories from the past, I am trying to turn negativity into positivity. It isn't easy. It's like standing on sand at the edge of the sea. The sand is firm until a wave hits and then it shifts under your feet and you are unstable again. It can cause you to lose your balance as the sand moves under your feet. This poem is written to try to express the shift and movement in that battle to turn negativity into positivity as I walk this difficult journey.*

### **Sand**

**Sand beneath your feet,  
Warm, soft, firm, secure  
Until the next wave hits,  
and then the grainy floor  
shifts and moves  
and staying upright proves  
more difficult than it did before.**

**Now your footing isn't so sure ~  
struggling to maintain a stance  
to stay upright, to maintain balance.  
Once more, steady, feet take hold  
Awaiting the wave, feeling bold.  
Watching it grow, approaching the shore  
You can do it, take this on, and more.**

**Again the sand begins to move  
And standing solid begins to prove  
More difficult, feet just won't stay  
As the shifting grains slip away.  
Don't give up now,  
stand firm, stand proud,  
Stumbling is fine, it is allowed.  
Stumble, but from that slipping, learn**

**Each time the tide begins to turn  
And the waves of negativity build  
That positivity, is a state, self willed.**

2020 Moving forward

There is a common perception that PTSD is something associated with War Veterans. It is often depicted in movies or television broadcasts as the result of trauma in battle. The reality is, that any kind of severe trauma can trigger the disorder, including abuse in childhood.

I can only write here from my own experiences, which have led to the diagnosis. For me, there has been the classic case of the 'wounded child' within. I felt, I still feel, if to a lesser degree, that wounded child and I think it is because I have never before addressed what happened to me. The memory of such a trauma lies dormant, like an undiscovered volcano, asleep until something wakes it. And then it just cannot help but erupt.

In the human brain, that eruption causes the devastation that can manifest itself as PTSD, leading to unharnessed anxiety, panic attacks, feelings of terror, flashbacks, fragmented images, the triggering of unbidden disturbing memories, heightened feelings and emotions which are difficult to live with or understand.

I have come to realise that a diagnosis of PTSD should never be underestimated. It is a condition that is incredibly difficult and debilitating for the sufferer and also traumatic for those who have to watch them suffer.

When memories are aroused, certain aspects of the trauma, often the feelings and emotions, can be experienced again as if they were real.

Our brains are great at prompting the instincts of survival, but sometimes, when that volcano erupts, we just have to deal with the consequences. It is sometimes extremely difficult to cope with the whole gamut of emotions. On other occasions there can be a detachment from what is happening around the sufferer, numbness sets in, freezing out the present reality.

In September 2020, I was emailed a prayer by the Bishop of Exeter, for survivors of sexual abuse. It spoke of forgiveness and also of letting go of hatred for the abuser. When I read it, I realised that despite everything I've been through, I've never felt hatred. Perhaps it is because it's an emotion I don't generally relate to; I don't know. I have felt shame, sorrow and anger and deep, deep hurt, but never hatred. And then there's forgiveness. How do you forgive those who have caused you such harm? Have I the capacity to forgive? Have I already forgiven them? I am aware that I should know the answer to these questions, after all I am in the business of forgiveness. I am a Priest and I have preached and acknowledged how damaging it can be to hold onto resentment. But the questions still prove difficult for me to answer. What I do know is that I have never felt vengeful. I don't feel the need to make anybody pay for what happened. It happened, I wish it hadn't but I can't change the fact that these things have taken place in my life. I don't have to see those who sexually abused and assaulted me. One may well be dead. In any case, they do not, by enlarge, play a physical part in my life. I don't have to deal with that. What I have to deal with are the issues within my own head.

My dad, and the emotional trauma I suffered through his behaviour, is more difficult to deal with. I have been so lucky to have the most amazing support from my family in helping me to take the time to heal from the hurt he has caused me. Throughout it all, I have continued to take care of his affairs and to speak on his behalf with medics and care givers. I have continued to ensure that he has been well looked after, but I

know deep down that following this process I cannot invest again in the relationship with him, emotionally as I have in the past. It would be too damaging both to me and to my family. We have been through enough.

Abuse is an exertion of power over a weaker individual. Each person who has mistreated me has abused the power they held over me. They each asserted control over somebody who was at their most vulnerable: a small child a troubled teenager, and then as an adult trying to do the best they can. It was time to take control over my own life. Now it was time to move on.

There is no quick fix. It would be totally wrong of me to ever suggest there is. It takes hard work to try to get better. I worked hard over those initial months of therapy. I had to and I also had to find my own ways to move forward, in order to get back to my work in ministry and also for the sake of my family. I am fully aware that there is still a very long way to go. It is easy for the memories to suddenly run rampant when you are least expecting them to. Once the box has been opened, once the demons have escaped, they always have the power to return. Pushing past traumas, which have been awakened, back into that box is not an option. They cannot ever go back to that place in the brain and be forgotten. Like Pandora's box, once opened there is no way to put it all back. But I hold onto the fact that the last thing left in Pandora's box was Hope.

## 2020 Hope

As I move forward, my faith is restored. God placed His hands on my shoulders in Exeter Cathedral and the Bishop of Exeter picked it up from there. Hope is one of the greatest promises of Christianity. It is the foundation of our faith. Hope is God's assurance to us that all will be alright, because He has promised that it will. Hope is what keeps us going. For me, faith and hope are intrinsically linked. It is in faith and hope I look to the future. I don't forget the past, but I am not letting it define who I am and who I have still yet to be.

In the definition of hope as it is generally used: it is my hope that the counselling and therapy I have undertaken and will continue to undertake, will keep me moving forward. I am realistic though and I know there will be difficult days, difficult weeks, even difficult extended periods of time. I know there will be times when the panic will set in again. I know that therapy does not bring about instant healing. It is a pathway, a journey, in which the trauma sufferer, hopefully, eventually learns how to live with and deal with past trauma in a more measured way, keeping it in perspective and not letting take over.

I also hope that anybody who reads this, who has suffered similarly in their lifetime and perhaps kept it locked away as I have done for far too long, might feel able to speak to somebody about them. So many people never come forward, and I totally understand that. There have been many times during the past months when I've asked myself why I didn't just keep my secrets. But in the end, I didn't have an option; my brain took over. One day without warning, they just erupted from the volcano of my mind.

Of course, it is important to find the right person to talk to, someone who can be trusted and then ultimately, someone who can lead the way to finding the best source of help. In the first instance, I wouldn't hesitate to recommend NAPAC. They listened and set me off on the journey when I had no idea where to go to for help. If you have suffered in any way as I did then please also speak to your GP. Even if you don't think there is an issue, there will be. Seek the right counselling. Be discerning in choice. Choose a counsellor who can also offer a wide range of therapy and perhaps is used to treating those who have suffered abuse. There are plenty on the internet and those who are open have written about themselves and their experiences. Speak to those close to you. They are going to be your first emergency service when things flare up. You need their support. I couldn't have done any of it without my family and close circle of friends. Don't listen to those who try to make little of it. Mental illness is real, don't let anybody try to tell you otherwise. Dealing with past trauma is mental illness, it is dealing with matters within the brain which are out of our control. PTSD is mental illness and it can lead to other issues if it is left untreated.

Of course, in many ways I wish I had dealt with this a long time ago. There have been occasions over the years when I've wished I was brave enough to speak out and deal with all I was hiding away, all that way eating away inside. But perhaps the time wasn't right. Perhaps it is something that needed to wait until such a time that my family - my brother and sister, my husband and children were more able to cope with it and support me through it.

One thing is for sure, it is never too late to tell, it is never too late to unburden the hurt and it is never too late to begin the process of healing.

## Hope

**Hope: is it the  
finest thread we hold on to,  
delicate and easily damaged?  
Is it brittle, like glass,  
So easily dashed to the ground  
Shattered into a thousand pieces  
By a thoughtless word,  
an unkind act?**

**No!**

**All the demons of the world swirl around hope,  
their aim, to strangle her and suppress her power**

**Because they know,**

**Hope is strong!**

**Stronger than spider silk.**

**Hope holds on relentlessly**

**When all else seems lost,**

**even the slimmest chance.**

**Hope resists all evil.**

**Hope is the light that shines through the darkness  
of the past, of our secrets, of our weakness.**

**Hope is there in our absolute brokenness**

**Ready to re-shape the future**

**Faith, Hope and Love,**

**our Bible tells us, these three:**

**Faith, Hope and Love.  
Yes, the greatest is Love, but it is  
Hope that sits like an arrowhead in the centre,  
Binding the two together  
When our faith is weak, when love is a struggle  
Hope will fire her way through  
To light the path before us,  
Hope can make everything possible,  
and nothing impossible.**