Cherry Stones and Jagged Cardboard

Karen P. Higgins
Worcester State University

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Cherry Stones and Jagged Cardboard

Karen P. Higgins, Master of Arts Candidate, Department of English, Worcester State University, khiggins1@worcester.edu

Abstract: Memoir writing is a deeply personal, but cathartic endeavor. It encapsulates a desire to present an authentic, significant story—one that will engage a reader and infiltrate his or her thoughts. A graduate independent study this past Fall (2022), enabled me to flesh out such an expression. I honed in on an important event in my life—one for which I still bear physical and emotional scars. “Cherry Stones & Jagged Cardboard” explores a life-changing car accident, at the age of seven, and a strange realization of the poverty, and thwarted opportunities, into which I had been born.

Keywords: Memoir; writing; nonfiction.

Cherry stones and jagged cardboard were the tools of my trade, and a plastic fork I found on her bedside table. “Ouch! No, Stop!” she whined.

“You need to stay still. I put you to sleep with the injection I gave you,” I hissed. I had poked her in the upper arm about three minutes before with a tine of the plastic fork. That had been my makeshift anesthesia application. She continued to squirm and moan, despite my efforts to hold her tightly and scrape the inside of her left elbow; I was performing what I thought would be a skin graft. I already had had several myself; her tonsillectomy certainly would not have provided the experience of scraped thighs, which would later morph into ghastly scars. The gossamer thin layers of skin slivered from my left thigh and placed over my right arm, left pitted lumps of flesh where now the blood had dried, welding wads of gauze to my leg.

Tiny red welts were bubbling up on her arm as I dragged the jagged, stiff cardboard back and forth. She finally pulled away with a squeal. Two other beds in the four-bed ward were unoccupied, so no one seemed to notice her discomfort or my demonized play at being a doctor. “You can’t do this,” she sniveled. Her face was pale.

“I just wanted to make it more real, that’s all!” I said, flouncing off then, leaving her to her carping. I flopped onto my own bed, wincing at the pain that shot through my right arm and left leg.

I only knew her name, Miriam, and that she’d had her tonsils removed. Her dark brown, curly hair shone, especially when the sunlight caught it and the curls bobbed and bounced when she left her bed to go to the bathroom. She had smooth peach-colored skin that sported two shiny, pink cheeks. Her mouth was perfectly shaped in a Cupid’s bow and her voice had a posh lilt to it—the kind you hear from British kids who had been sent away to boarding school at an early age. Her nightdress looked fresh despite her being in it for several days: it was bright white with beautifully embroidered flowers around the yoke and hem.

My pajamas were hand-me-downs: grey-looking. Any discernible pattern having been washed out years before with the elbows and knees threadbare. My bedside was barren day after night and night after...
day as I witnessed her being fussed over. Having lived for seven years in the detritus we called home and laughably family life, I was devastated to have my eyes widened to what Miriam enjoyed. I loathed her for it. The stream of visitors, showering her with gifts, sickened me. I did, however, in that moment upon my bed, feel a smirk and let out a low guttural giggle thinking of how, just moments before, I had tried to force her to swallow a cherry stone as her medicine. I knew it would be difficult for her, and I knew it would hurt considering she had just had her tonsils removed, but I tried anyway. Not only was I insanely jealous of the kind of “other” life she seemed to have, but the scenes that played out before me each day, drove the pain of my own paltry existence deeper into my psyche. Something that I barely understood then.

My eighth birthday was approaching, with no knowledge of when I might be released from the hospital. I had already been there for nearly three months. I began to look upon the ward as my home, and the mind pictures of my actual home had become indistinct. Not that home had ever been a place of nurturing and comfort, but until this spell in the hospital had illustrated the possibilities, I had known nothing different. The nursing staff had been sweet enough. They had comforted me when the crying jags came calling. My heart was heavy, heavy with the weight of what life had thrown at me thus far: the destitution of poverty, the fractious grappling of siblings who had never been taught how to care for each other, let alone love one another, the instability of a single parent who could never quite cope and who sought the company of strange men to overcome her despair. Seeing the obverse of the coin, of Miriam and her loving family, was more than I could bear. The green monster mushroomed and with it came a confusing sadness that underpinned what I believed to be the unfairness of my lot in life. I had not the tools, let alone the maturity, to comprehend the ugliness of my feelings. Not only was I now physically hurt with a torn-up arm and a scabbing blood-soaked thigh, but I felt adrift in an unforgiving sea, acutely aware of being tossed overboard at any moment. Possessing complex feelings but having no avenue to healthily work through them, or even realize there could be such an avenue, haunted me. So, my doctoring of Miriam ensued. I hated her.

~oOo~

“Okay! Off you go!” Sandra said gently. Several weeks prior to my torture of Miriam, my sister, Rita, and I had been playing with a friend in the neighborhood and having finished our play, Sandra was attempting to help us across the road to return home. It was this event that had landed me in the hospital where so much of my confusion of the world germinated and grew.

“Quick!” my sister shouted. She had already made it safely to the other side.

I don’t recall a screeching of brakes. No crunching of tires on asphalt, not even a sensation of being slammed into moving metal.

It was the first of May, 1964, at just before seven in the evening. The sun was slowly going down as the days were lengthening toward that glorious British time when it stayed light until around ten o’clock at night. We children loved those days and took great advantage of the long hours of daylight to continue our extensive play away from home. We rarely played at home. We
usually went with a band of siblings or other children in the neighborhood to the ‘wreck.’ Far from being a wreck of anything, it was just a five-minute skip from our house and with its wide-open fields, several trees along the edges to climb, swings and roundabout, we could entertain ourselves for hours: exactly what our mother expected of us. She wanted none of us “under her feet!”

On this particular day, Rita and I had decided to run across the street to play with Sandra, who lived on the adjacent corner. We were just one house in on Holbrook Way from the crossroads, next to the Osbournes—a family that housed an absolutely foul-mouthed mother and daughter: “Keep yer fucking kids away from my gate!” Mrs. Osbourne would hurl at my mother on a regular basis, spitting venom as she did so.

“Don’t worry, deary, I would be frightened what they might catch!” my mother would volley back. Then, usually, a slanging match would ensue where each woman would call each other a ‘saucy bitch’ or ‘dirty cow,’ and that inevitably led to Mrs. Osbourne honing in on my mother’s liaisons with men. Once or twice the daughter would come out of the house and chime in also, but Mum would become frustrated and just a little embarrassed, and would eventually slink back into the folds of the house, chalking up another spiteful encounter with the neighbors. Apart from the Osbournes, the foul-mouthed stuff happened infrequently, but we children were very aware of the shaking heads, and clucking tongues up and down the length of the street and its environs, whenever my mother walked by with one or another of us in tow.

We had been in this house, a three-bedroomed semi-detached abode sheltering one parent and six children, provided by Bromley Council, for about three years. It was what, in America, they call “the projects.” We had moved there when I was four. My father had very much been out of the picture from just after my birth. It was said that his work, as a merchant seaman, only allowed his return home on six occasions during a span of eight years. Hence, there was just an eight-year difference between my brother, Chris, the eldest of the Large siblings—yes, our last name was Large—and me, the youngest.

Sandra, and her family, The Hammets, inhabited the dwelling kitty-cornered from ours. Sandra also lived next door to The Watsons. Lynn Watson was Rita’s best friend and Dawn Watson was mine. Rita and I were often in their house for one reason or another, but they never came to ours, and Mr. and Mrs. Watson were always trying, frantically, to remove us from their abode. Looking back, I am sure she thought that we would deliver some nasty creature into her well-scrubbed home, or breathe several germs that no measure of disinfectant could eradicate. We were unkempt, ragged individuals with deep grime under our nails and lank, greasy hair upon our heads. As the price of heating hot water in our house was beyond what my mother could muster, each one of us were only allowed one hot bath a week. That bath, however, had to be shared in parties of two. My two brothers, Chris and Ray shared a bath, then the two eldest girls, Yvonne and Cheryl, and finally Rita and me. Although, Rita would never let me actually share the bath with her and so I always got her dirty, cold, water after she had finished with it.

Other families in the street became a part of the Large kids’ posse. It was a suburban neighborhood and
there always seemed to be a reasonable camaraderie between the kids, when we were not at each other’s throats that is. The parents, however, boiled another kettle of fish. There was more than a fair share of arguments between one family or the other, either between angry parents who were sick of other peoples’ kids at their house (usually the Larges tended to camp out at other houses as it was too exhausting and too austere at ours), or teenagers arguing about stealing each other’s dates, or little one’s having their usual playground spats. Somewhere in the mix of the spats, a Large kid was usually found. We also encountered our fair share of school hiccups, “If yer teacher wrote that bloody note, then you did something wrong, right?” Mum would spout to a neatly written summons from one of my teachers for Mum to visit the school to discuss my behavior.

“She’s just picking on me, again,” I would shout. “She doesn’t like me because I am one of the Large kids and it’s all the trouble that Chrissy and Raymond have brought to the school that comes crashing down on us,” I added. Later, in high school my sisters and I attended the local all-girls state school, while Chris and Ray attended the boys equivalent just down the road. With girls and boys in different schools, it was difficult for the administrations to link our behaviors.

“What were yer doing, trying to be the class clown again?” she hissed.

“Well, yes, actually.” I realized there would be little point to fabricating the situation. She always found out exactly what had transpired, and we always received the requisite beating for it.

“Miss Elam, the needlework teacher asked me to ‘run round’ the edge of the tablecloth I was making,” by this time I had begun to snigger because I still thought it was tremendously funny. “So, I put it on the floor and ran around it,” I said proudly. “The whole class laugh…” Thwack! I was frozen in mid-sniggering by my Mum’s man-sized hand meeting the side of my face, with full force. Tearing up, I tried to bolt, but she rooted me.

“How many times do yer ‘ave to be told? Yer don’t cheek the teachers. Were yer sent to the Head Master?”

“Yes,” I sniveled, feeling my right cheek grow warm and start to throb. “But, he had already crept into the room while I was playing the fool and whacked me on the backside, which brought me up short!” I declared.

“Well, yer deserved it. I don’t have the time to go traipsing up to that school. They’ve already dealt with it, and now I’ve dealt with it, and I ’ope you’ve learned yer lesson!” That was the end of it. I would go into school the next day, and explain that my Mum would not be coming, and that everybody had dealt with it. They would know, then, and many times besides, that she would have given me a slapping in some way. I was lucky, this time, as I had only met with her angry hand, and had escaped her weapon of choice—the bamboo cane.

The Large family was doubly looked down upon. Not only were we a single parent household with a non-working mother—who was a bit of a floozie by all accounts—but we were crippingly poor, dirty, shabby. I remember my sisters and I being intensely embarrassed by our upbringing, mainly because we often hung out at friends’ houses, and saw what little extras an income could provide. My mother tried her best but she was

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limited in her resources, and perhaps, even a little limited in her ingenuity to make things work: deciding on one particular path of an unsavory nature.

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Of course, as the years moved on and I grew, I came to understand that Mum had been a spent woman by the time she had married my father. When WWII put the world in a spin in 1939, she had been eager to ‘do her bit for King and country.’ Lying about her age to enlist in the newly formed Auxiliary Territorial Service (which was later subsumed by the Women’s Royal Army Corps after the war) she became a spotlight operator. She would operate huge blinding spotlights along the south-eastern coastal areas and near military installations in England. She was helping to track down enemy air raids of bomber aircraft, V-1 buzz-bombs or doodlebugs, and later V-2 rockets. At 17, and through her formative years, she sacrificed the majority of her teenage life to the carnage, fear, and mayhem of war. Later, when she met and married my father, she hadn’t chosen her mate wisely and suffered through years of mental and physical abuse, endless reams of dirty nappies and a mind-numbing perpetual poverty. What capacity of mind could hold much hope for love, dreams or even just plain kindness? The business of survival was all one could muster on the daily treadmill of life.

~oOo~

How I came to understand an exchange of money for the company of men in my mother’s life, culminated in my spying on her through the kitchen window. I must have been around five when I became aware of no permanent male figure in the household, apart from my brothers. To all intents and purposes, there was no father; I just didn’t have one. I never asked questions, just gullibly accepted that one did not exist. I did become aware, however, of Ernie, a blonde chap, and Bill. Where these gentlemen came from, I cannot say, but Ernie and Bill in particular, were regular visitors to our house, and on such visits, each one of us girls had to say hello and be ‘hugged’ by Ernie, or conversely, make ourselves scarce when Bill came calling.

It’s very difficult, for many people that I talk to, to understand that I dearly loved my mother, but I had trouble, in those early years, liking her. To continue to bear children from a man—my father—who was abusive and a feckless waste of space by all accounts, always puzzled me. Perhaps she was too afraid to tell the man, no, or maybe she simply did not have the energy. Eventually, though, they divorced and these other men trotted by. Sparse conversations with one sister revealed that Ernie not only required favors from my mother in exchange for financial assistance here and there, but he was also allowed to inappropriately touch my sister Cheryl and me. Maybe mother would not receive her rewards if she objected to Ernie’s ‘hugs,’ but his hands would dip and dive to inappropriate places upon our bodies, without restraint.

None of us girls, except Rita, came out of this era of our lives unscathed. Sexual abuse visited itself upon myself and Cheryl by Ernie, on Yvonne by one of our uncles, and in my case, not only Ernie but by one of my brothers. I cannot say whether my mother just shot a blind eye to such shenanigans, or whether
she was just too fragile to have discovered any of the terrors that were befalling three of her four daughters. I tucked it away. It seemed to me, at the time, that giving my mother one more thing to think about was out of the question. She could hardly cope with what she did have. As I learned then, and continued to learn, I just tucked it away and hoped it would eventually all go away. What I can say is, when that brother took his own life at the age of 63, in an incredibly violent manner, I did not shed a single tear.

When Bill came calling, everyone had to make themselves disappear while my mother and he connected. On one occasion I pretended that I had gone to a friend’s house, but instead, I hid down the side of the house in order to peer into the kitchen window. I was very young and the image of my mother being slobbered upon by this man—whom I never really knew—with his hand up her skirt made me sick to my stomach. It’s an image that remains etched on my brain to this day, as does Ernie’s stupid flaccid face and comb-over. If I had known how mother had come by some of the money we did have I probably would have gagged on the meals that the funds provided. Luckily, I was not old enough to make those connections back then.

Mother attempted to explore more traditional avenues to drum up finances, but they were not as fruitful. Begging was one of them. At least, that’s what it felt like.

“Mrs. Large, I’m terribly sorry, but you are getting your full benefits for yourself and your children. They are receiving free school meals, and free milk. There really is no other money available,” the condescending, perfectly coiffured clerk droned, as she tapped newly varnished pink nails on the blotting pad atop her desk.

“But, that’s not enough to keep a cat alive. ‘ow am I supposed to keep six kids fed and clothed on what the council gives me? They’re growing; they need things,” Mum pleaded, more thinking out loud than talking to the clerk at the welfare office.

“Mrs. Large, I do understand, really I do, but the extra check we gave you last month, for shoes for the two eldest girls, was it, was an extra payment that really should not have happened. What do you think would happen if all our clients came in wanting extra payments each month?” she sarcastically injected. “There is only so much assistance we can provide. Have you considered a part-time job to supplement your welfare payments?” she breathed with eyebrows upraised.

“Oh, not this again! ‘ow can I get a job, part-time or otherwise with six kids in tow? Every penny I would earn would be spent on paying someone to look after them,” Mum hissed at what now appeared to be a distant, long-suffering stare from the clerk. She was not allowed to make mention of why someone would want to bring six children into the world without having enough resources to feed them, let alone put clothes on their backs, even though we all knew this was exactly what she was thinking. Mum upped and left, dragging us behind her.

~oOo~

Sandra’s mum, Mrs. Hammet, took pity upon Rita and me. We were the only ones who were allowed into Sandra’s house, and Mrs. H would smile with an offer of a biscuit or two. Not even the Watson kids—next-door neighbors—were afforded such hospitality. True
enough, however, Rita and I appeared to be the only ones on the street who went out of our way to play with Sandra. In our youthful observations we knew that Sandra, despite her seeming lack of want for anything, was still at odds with the world. She was much older than us. Rita was eighteen months older than my seven years, and I would hazard a guess that in 1964, Sandra would have been around thirteen. She was a friendly girl, a little overweight from lack of mobility, long brown hair, brightly colored brown eyes that always appeared distant and dreamlike. Her clothing was what many of us would have called old-fashioned: long pleated skirts, knit twinsets and heavy brown lace-up boots. She dressed more like a thirty-year-old than someone in her teens.

The brown lace-up boots had been medically provided to fit the metal. Sandra had a physical challenge: a stigma that carried an inordinate amount of heaviness in the 50s and 60s. She wore leg-irons as we called them then: braces or calipers on her legs. Nobody ever really got to the bottom of why. Speculation was that as a child Sandra had been the unfortunate recipient of the poliomyelitis virus. Although Salk’s vaccine had been introduced in the UK in 1956, there already had been a massive outbreak of the virus through the early 1950s, with the paralytic strain being the most virulent. To add to this devastation for the Hammets, I also heard (although, some years after the accident), that tunnel vision could be added to the misfortunes that Sandra had to endure. She was not able to see anything clearly to the right or left unless she completely turned ninety degrees in either direction. On this night, in 1964, while assisting us across the road, she hadn’t fully turned.

“OK, we’re off now Sandra. Burke’s Law is on tonight, and we don’t want to miss it!” Rita reported to Sandra who was just coming out of the house to join us again after a visit to the bathroom. We’d had our fill of play and it was time to return home. Getting on for seven in the evening meant that Burke’s Law, a lavish American detective series, from the 1960s, would be playing on our small screen, which served as our black and white television. Despite the poverty, Mum always made sure we had a ‘gogglebox’! We may not have had soles on our shoes, or clean sheets on our beds regularly, but we always had a television. I know that on Friday nights, at seven o’clock, I lost myself in that slick world of Hollywood detectives and their abilities to always solve the case in the nick of time. On this night, however, the smooth boys and their cops’ and robbers’ tales eluded me.

“I’ll cross you across the road,” Sandra said.

“NO!” came an ear-splitting shriek through the kitchen window. We all stood, rooted to the spot for maybe five seconds and when no more noise, or action, ensued, Sandra set about encouraging my sister to cross. Rita stood on the opposite side waiting. Within an instant, although reality appeared to don a cloak of ethereal proportions as, after a gentle shove, I went from curb to car to asphalt, tumbling through a series of slow, deliberated moves. I felt no pain. There was no pain, as the scene played out like someone paging through a flipbook of static cartoons; I found myself lying on my back in the middle of the road—a gaggle of sad-looking faces forming above me.

As it was described to me later I had slammed into the front passenger door of a moving car. Like most cars of the time, entry was by a regular door
handle: a tapering grasp of metal that operated up or down to open or close the door. My right arm, at the inside elbow, had become wedged between the door handle and the door. Realizing a small human hanging from the side of his vehicle, the driver pulled up as sharply as he could. The handle, in the impact and as the car rocketed to a halt, had drilled itself into my arm and with gravity pulling me down, the handle stripped back the flesh like peeling a fresh banana. Bones were broken, flesh gouged out, muscles torn, tendons ripped to shreds, blood spattered everywhere, and only a one-inch-wide piece of flesh, on the underside of the elbow, was all that kept my arm from being severed in two. The center of the damage, in and around the elbow, was quickly covered by neighbors who came to assist. Towels, handkerchiefs, and scarves swiftly became tourniquets and bandages. These had been set in place immediately before my mother came on the scene. She had no real understanding of the extent of the damage.

Who can comprehend the reality of the world in those weird moments of trauma? But the scene has played out in my mind from eye-witness accounts over the years.

“Get some towels!”
“Cover that bit up, will ya mate!”
“Oh God, her arm!”
“Get her mother. Where’s her mother?”
“Rita has run home to get her,”

Among the voices I faintly heard my own. Like the scene around me, it felt disembodied. Consciousness seized me and just as quickly avoided me in waves. I saw myself floating above and gawked as my favorite blue velvet dress—one that had been bought at a charity shop just for me, not a hand-me-down (in my eyes)—darkened into a blood-soaked brown.

I remember mouthing, “It’s only a dream, isn’t it?” I cheerfully offered into my mother’s face. “I will wake up in a minute, won’t I?” I continued, all the while feeling dreamlike, without pain, sensing a liminal chaos that I had no control over. “I’ll wake up in a minute, won’t I?” I declared, as shock began sealing a tight bond around me.

Rita had witnessed the entire scene I later discovered, and as far as I can recall received absolutely no assistance for her own trauma—neither of us have ever had any psychiatric counselling around the incident. She had rushed home to rouse the rest of the family. At first, no one believed her, thinking that she was playing an ill-chosen game. My brother Chris came, leaving his half-eaten dinner on the table, but promptly losing that eaten half in the road as soon as he set eyes upon the mess. Mum squatted by my side and held my limp right hand while dripping salty tears onto my face.

The road could not have been more than about twenty-five or thirty feet wide; just enough to have one car, in either direction, squeeze by safely. Parked on our side, half on the curb and half on the road was a small grey minivan. I think this belonged to the Watsons. I was quite small for my age and was unable to see above the parked car, or around it. It really was one of the tiniest vehicles ever to have been made, even to my childish brain, so it would not have been a great sacrifice to walk past it to see the road behind. None of us did that! Sandra scooted Rita across and I remember the last image I had, before hitting the metal and the asphalt: Rita waiting patiently for me to join her on the other side,
probably seeing all in a flurry of surrealism. The car popped out of nowhere, at the very same moment that Sandra offered a gentle push.

Long hours of surgery followed the accident. When I eventually came out of my stupor, I gingerly peered around to see a blood drip in my foot, felt a heavy plaster cast on my right arm and wadded bandages on my left thigh. I knew I had been in an accident, but that was all that had come to mind in that instant—no sounds, no smells, no recollection of pain. My whole body felt like a heavy sack of potatoes and as I lay there, I felt salty streams of tears run down from the corners of my eyes. I was terrified and the floodgates had opened. As I sobbed, the pain eventually came knocking. I wanted nothing more than for someone, anyone, to envelop me in his or her arms and to gently rock me back and forth, telling me all the while, that everything was going to be Okay.

Coming to terms with the knowledge of my mangled arm and ripped apart leg, I had been informed that I had a deep cut on the inside of my left knee, and hefty bandages on areas of my thigh. Skin had been stripped from my thigh to patch up the missing bits on my arm during hasty reconstructive surgery. I was also to learn, after soreness and poking around under my bandages, that more stitches existed in addition to the ones from the cut at the accident. I had a laceration on the top of my left knee—something that, the hospital regrettably informed me, had happened accidentally during surgery. Living in a non-litigious society and coming from a poor family, no mention was ever made of compensation for the ‘slip-up’!

I gradually settled into daily life in the children’s ward at Farnborough Hospital. The hospital, run by the National Health Service was an all-service affair. All walks of life were treated there, from the very rich, to the very poor—seldom did people have private health insurance in those days. During my lengthy stay, I was fortunate enough to find one or two sweet nurses who showed a large measure of concern for my well-being, and who continued to show concern once I had been discharged.

There was the Norland Nanny whom I knew as Nurse Imogen. Norland Nannies are specially trained childcare practitioners who not only understand a child’s needs, but who are also exceptionally medically trained caregivers. Many are required to do a stint in local hospitals as a practicum. The unique nature of their training has seen these specialist individuals rise to the point of elitism today, where the likes of royalty will secure their services. Imogen was a funny looking girl with an enormous heart. She wore glasses, had messy hair that would never be tamed, was short in stature, and although extremely proud to wear her NNs uniform, never seemed comfortable in the ill-fitting garb. She would play with me, but also made a point when she was on shift to help me with my schoolwork. She knew that the visiting tutor—provided by the school department—was generally strapped for time and never quite seemed to have her head in the game. Imogen provided the patience and guidance to help me master writing with my left hand—I am a righthy!

I remember Imogen taking me, and another patient—a boy named Stephen who had burned a foot falling onto a live railway line—up on the roof of the hospital one spring day. We enjoyed the beautiful fresh air—a lovely change from the clinical aromas of the ward—and were fascinated with the sights from on
high. Somebody else must have been with us because I have a couple of black and white Polaroids of that adventure. I still smile broadly when I look at them: Stephen standing with one leg aloft, Imogen with her wild hair and me with my right arm, complete with cast, tucked inside my dress making me look like a very portly little girl.

Another two Norland Nannies who were sweet creatures, Jean and Sylvia, kindly took me to the seaside one day: to Bognor Regis, Sussex. The grandmother of Sylvia lived in Bognor and we all went to tea with the grandmother. I just adored being fussed over that day: beach, cotton candy (Candy Floss we Brits call it!), a donkey ride, and a sumptuous afternoon tea resplendent with finger sandwiches, cream cakes, and lashings of orange squash. I was queen for the day! None of this had ever been even a fleeting element in my life thus far.

Then there was Staff Nurse Reader. A professional woman who had worked hard to move through the ranks of the nursing profession—she was just one small hop from being Matron, the highest rank upon a ward of nursing professionals—who possessed a melting heart for small children. She brought me to her house for dinner with her family. She, her husband, her two sons and I had a huge family spread, or it seemed huge to me. I cannot remember what we ate, but recall being agog at the abundance of food. I think that this might have been a time when my eyes truly popped from inside their sockets! It was the first ever real people and conversation-centered meal I had ever experienced. There were no petty arguments, no gibes or accusations and no mother rising in anger, voice accelerating up octaves to the point where one of us would start sniveling. This was such a unique experience for me that I drank it in voraciously.

Staff Nurse Reader treated me like the daughter she had never had and I lapped it up. Here were two adults, and even her two young sons, who were showing genuine interest for the human I was. They wanted me to talk, to offer my opinions, my thoughts, my ideas, despite the fact that I was only eight years old. They showed me, by their actions and their welcome that I had value. The attentions of Imogen, my trip to Bognor, and the many visits and outings with Staff Nurse Reader came several months after I had reigned my twisted vengeance upon Miriam.

While in the hospital, the overwhelming loneliness that had stuck to me like a second skin, was crippling. Visitors were virtually non-existent, a situation that became a trend over the three months of my stay. My Auntie Audrey did stop by one afternoon, but she became angry with me because I would not sit still and chat with her. She had brought me a couple of comics, and some sweets, but she seemed to want me to be immensely grateful of her presence. Seeing as she offered no hugs, no kisses, and no words of reassurance from which I might reap comfort, I was unsure how to deal with this distant woman. She had married twice, never produced her own children, and had always been insanely angry at her sister—my mother—for producing a brood for whom, she knew, my mother had a diminishing capacity for care. This Aunt may well, thinking retrospectively, have understood the trying limitations of what her sister could offer her family, but I never witnessed any effort of assistance and neither do the family talk of such. Of course, Audrey was not
required, obligated, or passionately involved to do so and therein lie deep questions on what family really means to each and every one of us, along with the expectations each of us have of our relatives.

Mum did try to visit, at least once, I seem to remember. I can see now that it must have been very difficult for her to split herself in several different directions: flustered in trying to get the younger siblings looked after by the older siblings—no one was a fan of the chore. It had been a stressful situation, she told me, to make sure that my brothers and sisters were not antagonizing each other—which was something of the norm in our household—and then she had struggled to take two buses to get to the hospital. My Auntie Audrey had a car, but she had never attempted to offer to drive Mum to visit me. It was, however, extremely comforting to see her face, and to have that rarest of rare moments: having her all to myself for an hour. Until I became an adult, this would be the only time in which I had Mum all to myself. I forgot about all the rubbish in our lives, and I concentrated on telling Mum all the stories of the ward, its patients and staff and what life was like in there. I didn’t talk about the accident, and I believed Mum was relieved for that. She left smiling, despite having made sure to scold me for not talking to Audrey much. I brushed that aside as I was so thankful to have been the center of my mother’s attention, even for that all too brief hour.

Gradually, the days went by, and I became a fixture and Miriam arrived. In the few days since Miriam had been admitted for a tonsillectomy, it hadn’t taken long for my hatred of her to consume me. Of course, many years later and throughout my life, I have cringed at the overpowering malice that I delivered upon poor Miriam. Just as I had had no choice in where I landed on earth, she hadn’t either, and she should not have had to be terrorized by the likes of me.

I did—I think several months after I left the hospital, although she had long gone—go to Miriam’s house. My mother had found out about what I had done and insisted that I apologize. Despite all her shortcomings, her drained physical and mental capacity, Mum truly wanted others—especially those that any one of us kids might have wronged—to know that we had principles. Her heart was in the right place despite her daily battles with the detritus of life. They may have been gossamer-thin principles, but she desperately tried to have us understand right from wrong, and understand that making amends by apologizing was part of that deal.

The pain of the accoutrements of a life I believed I would never have, was still smarting; now I had to endure it further—in Miriam’s bloody house. The insanity of it all gripped me tight in the gut. I was the one who had suffered! Yes, I had exacted some cruel moves upon her when she was already feeling poorly. But now, Miriam, in the comfort of her home, was going to reap her revenge and watch me suffer as she and her parents would be able to dish out the “she knows no better, she’s from a poor family” routine.

We went to tea one Saturday or Sunday afternoon. Even though I was already remorseful of my actions, I still couldn’t help being miffed at Miriam’s luck and my misfortunes, knowing where I sat in the economic pecking order. Her house was on the south side of Blackbrook Lane, a smart-looking street of semi-detached, privately-owned well-appointed c.1930s large houses. Each sported beautiful semi-circular leaded-
light bay windows in the front, half pebble-dashed walls, pseudo-Tudor paneling and attached garages. The insides were spacious, comfortable, with Miriam’s—or so it seemed to my young mind—being expensively decorated. I especially loved her couch and armchairs in which one would almost disappear and luxuriate in the softness. Miriam’s wrap-around gentleness was a far cry from our stiff settee where there was never a space to sit because it was always piled high with old newspapers and magazines, along with several suspect stains. Miriam’s house also had wall-to-wall carpeting and that fascinated me. I wanted to roll around every inch of it to feel its bounce and smoothness. I could never had rolled around in my house as we only had wall-to-wall linoleum and the occasional grimy, moth-eaten rug and the filth appalled me.

Her house was only a half mile or so from mine, and I felt that the residents of Blackbrook Lane and other homeowners in the area must have been incredibly upset when, in the 1950s, low-income housing of row after row of joined dwellings all looking exactly the same – same front door, same windows and handkerchief-sized gardens – sprang up as a neighboring community.

That afternoon tea stood still in time, like a stage tableau. The surrealness illustrated my mother and me in what would have been considered our Sunday best attire. We sat in Miriam’s sumptuous living room, mother holding a bone china cup and saucer, which was bedecked in flowers and rimmed in gold plate. Her hands tried to hold onto this dainty crockery without crushing it. I had, over my short eight years, understood the full force of her large, hard-working, hands and now they were accentuated by the delicate china. Those hands had seen many hours of toil, had desperately tried to hang on when all else around her was crashing down, and had, in the early days, held each one of us, cradled. I remembered wishing that the hands were more akin to the cup.

Mrs. Miriam—honestly, I have never known their last name—sat perched on the edge of a deeply-cushioned chair wearing sharply pressed slacks of brown, a cream-colored, short-sleeved sweater, a row of pearls resting on her sternum. Her hair was neatly arranged in a bun in the back. She wore no makeup except for bright pink lipstick which left a ring on the cup as she sipped her tea. She held her cup in one hand and the saucer in the other—naturally, the pinky finger on the cup hand was held high, prodding the air.

Miriam sat in her floucy, pink-flowered dress and we glared at each other—I, in my grey school uniform pleated skirt and a navy-blue sweater that had probably belonged to one of my brothers in the past for the shoulders drooped down to my elbows and there was a stain on one sleeve. Miriam had bright white ankle socks with little frills around the tops of them. My once-white socks sagged at my ankles as the elastic had given up any attempt to grab my calves long ago.

“Mrs. Large, I hope that life is treating you well, and now that Karen is out of the hospital, there are not too many difficulties arising from her accident,” Mrs. Miriam drawled in her ‘oh-so-frightfully’ intonations.

“Wehl,” my mother chimed trying desperately to imitate the Mrs. Miriam’s of this world, but succeeding only in making herself sound ridiculous, and embarrassing me to where I wanted to throw something at her. My mother’s printed dress was shabby and faded. Looking closely, I could see a stain
or two from where she might have wiped her hands during cooking. Her hair, beginning to grey around the temples but scraped back from her face was left to its own devices. She wore no makeup, never had. What always fascinated me about Mum, though, was her rosy cheeks. She had dozens of little red spider veins in two huge circles around her cheekbones. These gave her face a healthy hue despite the multitude of wrinkles that framed the rest of her visage. I was relieved to discover that she had put her teeth in for this encounter. There was never anything more mortifying than watching my mother try to make small talk, or even engage in an argument, when her gums were gleaming and her lips were left to flap around without the support of teeth.

“We ’ave had to go to physiotherapy,” mother continued, “course, ya know,” she was definitely feeling a little more relaxed as she was unable to keep up the pretense of talking with a plum in her mouth. “Ya know, they plastered her up for two whole months with ‘er ‘and sticking up at right angles to ‘er wrist. I dunno what they were thinking! It’s only natural that something would’ve got stuck, right?”

“Naturally, Mrs. Large. How bad is the damage? Did the doctors explain why they did such a thing? Oh! Do have a slice of cake. I made this Victoria Sponge this morning. I used some of the preserves we made from the fruit of our garden. Do you garden, Mrs. Large?” Mrs. Miriam mused.

My mother shot a quick glance at me to let me know that she had moved from uncomfortable, to semi-comfortable and straight back to downright awkward within minutes. She wasn’t sure which question to answer, or in what order. So, she just plowed in, “Yes, would love a slice of sponge. It’s very good of yer
to go to the trouble, dear.” I was angry then. If she had refused the cake, we could have high-tailed it as soon as our cups and glasses were drained. Now, we were definitely trapped for another half hour or more. Mum went on, “I do garden,” she announced proudly, “I mainly do veg, with six mouths…,” she paused, seemingly not wanting to perseverate on the difficulty of raising her brood. “The doctors thought they were doing the right thing … they were worried she would lose the use of that ‘and and wanted to give it support. ‘Course they forgot, somehow, that without movement the tendon is gonna freeze.” She finished and stuffed a huge chunk of sponge into her face. She wasn’t going to pass up this bit of luxury, no matter how much of an act of charity it seemed.

“Miriam, dear,” Mrs. Miriam crooned, “Why don’t you take Karen to play on your swing, outside?” Miriam came across the room and held out her hand. I froze. I wanted no part of it. This girl whom I had hated so vehemently for everything she stood for, even though I knew nothing of her character. I sank further into the back of the couch, and shook my head with vengeance. I just kept shaking my head.

“She’s not feeling a ‘undred percent right now. I’m sorry Miriam,” Mum said almost between clenched teeth. I was obviously embarrassing her again. “But,” mum continued, “she does ‘ave something to say to you, don’t yer Karen?” I glared at my mother, abhorrent that she was going to go through with this. I wanted to shout from the rooftops that I was not to blame, but how could I have even grasped that then? All I did know was that this was embarrassing and intensely unfair.

The apology was a bit of a blur but I do remember sniveling and fleeing from Miriam’s house. I have
absolutely no knowledge of how my mother dealt with my escape and her extrication from Miriam’s household. I do remember the walk home. Mum gripped my hand so tightly that it went numb. She marched, as though she were back in her army uniform. While marching, I wriggled to break free from her iron grip; she let fly a ‘talking to’ that would have made a vicar’s ears curl. I was an ungrateful insolent child who could use a good spanking to make me understand. As I listened, and marched, I imagined Miriam going up to her princess bedroom and playing with more dolls than I could shake a stick at. I thought about how surprised I was that I was going to be returning to school the following week and how eager I was to re-enter Mrs. de Beer’s classroom, back into my old seat and desk. I thought about how one day my arm would be normal again, how life would return to its normal routine, and how I would be able to stop tucking away bad things, and be able to power forward with my little life. I knew that Mum had tried her best in the face of Mrs. Miriam, and I knew, equally, that I had not truly apologized, but rather had shown myself and my mother to be just those people who, ‘knew no better; who were from a poor background!’

Many years later, it was important for me to realize that where I had come from was not something that could, or should, have defined me. Awakening, I considered, most probably began with Nurse Imogen who had taken a shine to me. It continued with the two other Norland Nannies and with Staff Nurse Reader. Each of them appreciated a value within me: a worth, a viability and an intelligence that mattered. So, in the strangest of ways, the accident and my subsequent persecution of poor Miriam, were blessings in warped disguise. How else was I going to be able to wade through the quagmire? ~oOo~

I moved out of my childhood home in my early teens. I was working and had finally decided that I needed the space and independence of my own place. Rita and I initially moved in together but that was short-lived when we realized, just as siblings at home, we lacked the compatibility to make living in the same space possible. Chris, Yvonne, Cheryl, and Raymond had all been long gone: either married or living with girlfriends/boyfriends. We all worked; none of us had taken up further education. I began to understand the difficulties and belt-tightening moves that one had to pull in order to keep one’s head above water. It wasn’t easy running one’s own home and I now understood some of the ‘robbing Peter to pay Paul’ tactics that my mother had experienced trying to raise us and to keep the home running. Although I certainly didn’t have children at this point in my life, making the salary stretch while meeting the rent payments, the utility bills, and finding a few coppers to spend on food, seemed an ever-increasing nightmare. I also tried, as often as I could, to visit Mum on a Sunday afternoon and bring her a few stocks of tea, sugar, milk, bread, and eggs. I don’t know what compelled me to do so, but I knew that I had to do it.

We commonly stayed in touch and many years later when I moved to the United States, I telephoned regularly along with writing letters. These were my favorite. I loved to tell the stories of my life in the US and let Mum know about my husband and his life in the US Air Force. I also sent lots of photographs of our son and daughter and talked endlessly about how
different things were on my side of the Atlantic. Her responses usually spoke of the weather, how she was 'sick and tired' of one or another of my siblings, but always sent oodles of love and kisses for the children. She still maintained, as she had done from the very beginning of my relationship with Kevin, that because he was a G.I., he would ‘love me and leave me.’ This was a giant throwback to WWII when many G.I.’s had been stationed in the UK, had dated local women, unfortunately got them pregnant and then returned to the states, leaving the girl and unborn children behind. Not every G.I., or every local girl, found themselves in such a quandary, but several did and obviously—although she had never discussed the issue with me—Mum may have had one or two army comrades who found themselves abandoned in this way. It was this kind of perseveration on tinges of life back in the war, back in the army, that would persistently seep into Mum’s thoughts and expression. This fueled my understanding that that segment of her life had been incredibly important to her and that back then was where she had possessed the deepest passion, the greatest animation she had ever really known.

Making sense of all this, obviously, took time—time, perhaps, that continues. I’m not happy that I can say that I loved Mum, but didn’t like her. It’s disingenuous for me to say so. I try to work on this daily, but I do believe she understood the extent of my love before she departed this earth.

When I received a call from her in her hospital bed grumbling that no one would bring her a clean nightie, I was hurt and shocked but was immediately spurred into action. That one phone call sent me into nurturing mode. I hopped a plane, even though I was in the middle of a graduate program and was student teaching at the time – changing my career much later in life – I had very little money to spare. I arrived at the hospital to find a little, grey-looking, bored lady sitting in a chair beside a bed. The life in her eyes had almost completely snuffed out. At that time, I had had two brothers and three sisters living in the United Kingdom, but not one of them were available to bring Mum a fresh nightie. My relationship with my siblings was not a strong one. I traveled across the Atlantic to do just that, change her bloody nightie.

I spent two weeks with Mum, liaising with her doctors and caregivers to discover that she would not be able to return home after this spell in the hospital. I pleaded with the medical staff to let me take her back to the United States, but I had definitely missed my window of opportunity there, as she was now too weak to make the journey. With limited funds and time, I set about finding a care home for her. I refused to let her go to a government run care home, as having visited a couple, I couldn’t bare to think that she would be propped up in a chair and left to snooze all day long. She was having difficulty getting around by now – her knees had always denied her nimble mobility – and she was suffering from chronic COPD, congestive heart failure and ulcerated legs. Seeing the nurses change her dressings, I couldn’t believe how much liquid could ooze from just one leg! My mind was cast back to the wadded layers of blood-soaked gauze on my left thigh and right arm. I thought about how disgusting I felt then, and now understood how miserable my mother’s existence had probably become.

I moved rapidly. I scouted advertisements, called local authorities, visited homes in several areas
near the seaside in Kent (the county in England where we had all come from) and finally found a superb small home – it only took ten elderly folks – that was family run and perfect. In between these frantic administrative and physical tasks, I spent as many hours with Mum in hospital as I could. We worked on several crosswords (her favorite) and discussed the appalling political situation in the United Kingdom and around the world. We spat our dissatisfaction at rising prices and the diminishing quality of life for the average person. She told me how terrible the hospital food was and said that she would give her right arm for a lovely plate of fish and chips. I smuggled them in one evening despite the fact that they were almost cold by the time I got to the hospital, and we spread them out across her bedside tray table. We gorged with alacrity.

When I left her to return to my family, my graduate program, and my home in the US with the promise that I would be back as soon as I could, she was smiling broadly, was sitting upright in her chair, had recovered some of that gorgeous pinkness she usually wore in her cheeks, and was sparkling in her clean nightie. She was shining in a way that I had never seen her shine before.

On the very first day of my very first, ever, teaching position, I received ‘the’ call. Just two and half months had lapsed – containing many heated conversations with my brother, Chris, the eldest child in the family, and the rightful ‘head of the household’ in which he seemed unable to ‘step up to the plate’ – since I had spent my last hours with Mum. Within twenty-four hours of ‘the’ call, I was at the hospital but declined the doctors’ offer to see my mother in the morgue. So much heartache from across the years ensued, and because I had wanted more for her at the end, which had not materialized, I was devastated. I contacted each of my siblings, letting them know that I had arrived late on the Friday. The following Monday was a holiday and so I could not obtain the death certificate until the following Tuesday. Each one, in their own particular way, responded with a variation of, “OK, tell us where and when to show up and we will!”

Note on Author: Karen is pursuing her second master’s degree under the guidance of Dr. Elizabeth Bidinger of the English Department at Worcester State University. Karen refers to herself as the eternal student as she has earned a bachelor’s in liberal studies from Assumption University, a master’s in education from Clark University, an education specialist’s degree in curriculum and instruction from UMass, Lowell, and hopes to complete this master’s degree, in English, in fall 2023.