

Street Kid

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Chapter One

I was two when Mum and Dad deserted us, leaving Mary, Dora, and me alone in the house for seven weeks without food, light or coal for the fire.

I was born in Cheshire in 1945 and although the war had ended that year, it had been a battleground in our house whenever my parents were together. When my dad wasn't working in a factory he was dressed up in a herringbone tweed suit preaching at local spiritualist church gatherings. It was only when my mother married him that she realised what a nasty piece of work he really was but she still managed to have three kids with Dad before she decided she'd be better off with her Irish boyfriend, Paddy.

When Mum ran off she took with her our identity cards and allowance books. She must have thought that my father would see to it that Mary, Dora and I were fed and clothed but all he did when he realised he was saddled with us was ask our next door neighbour, Mrs Herring, to look in on us every so often and check we were okay. He said he'd be back the next weekend but he didn't keep his promise.

So that was how the three of us came to be left in the house alone.

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Mary was seven, and the oldest. I reckon that as soon as I was born, I knew better than to cry for my mother: it was always Mary who'd looked after me and Dora. Mrs Herring looked in on us now and then, letting us have whatever scraps she could spare; but it was Mary that kept us going. She must have longed for a mother's care herself, especially when she had to go to school in such a terrible state. All the teachers were appalled that she was so dirty, and they'd often have her up in front of all the class to tell her off.

One day it got so bad for Mary that she dragged our tin bath into the living room, put it in front of the fireplace, and started filling it with cold water. She pulled me up from the hearth, where I was eating ashes, and said, 'Come on, we've got to get you dressed. We've got to go and look for Mummy.'

We went out and made our way to the market, which wasn't far from our house. It was cold; my feet were bare; and all the clothes hanging from the stalls were flapping in my face. I kept looking through them to see if I could see my mother.

And Mary kept saying, 'Look for Mummy.'

After seven weeks, Mrs Herring was at the end of her tether. She had only meant to look out for us for a few days. She must have thought, 'Where the heck is their father?' Maybe Dad sent her messages saying he'd be back in a week or something. But the weeks went by and we were in a terrible state. In those days, times were tough but people looked out for each other, and I'm sure Mrs Herring just thought she was doing her best. But at some point she must have realized she had to do something or we'd get really sick. A bitter winter was setting in and we had no money for coal or food. When I touched my hair,

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I could feel it was all matted and crusty, and my body was covered in weeping sores that hurt when I lay down.

Mrs Herring contacted the welfare people, who managed to track down my father and served him with a summons. Dad suggested to them that he find someone to look after us in exchange for free lodging at our house, and they agreed with the plan. A homeless couple of drifters called the Epplestones came forward, and the welfare board was satisfied. In the years after the war they could barely keep up with the rising tide of poverty and need, so once our case was closed they didn't bother their heads about us again.

After five months my mother returned home, pregnant and penniless. My dad allowed her back in the house on the understanding that she didn't see Paddy again and had her baby adopted. She agreed.

I don't remember being glad Mum was back or anything like that. You only feel glad or relieved if you have something to compare it with but life with her had always been pretty awful for us. Still, it was better than being in the care of Mrs Epplestone who'd hated having to look after us and shouted a lot. Most of the time, Mary, Dora and I had sat huddled like mice on the old brown couch in the living room, with its springs poking through the cover. But it was when it came to mealtimes that the horror really began. Bowls of porridge were banged down in front of us and when I couldn't eat the nasty, slimy, lumpy stuff, Mrs Epplestone would yank my head back by the hair and force the spoon down my throat until I couldn't breathe. When I choked and gagged she'd hit me across the face.

Mum had no intention of giving up her baby when it arrived and when my Dad discovered that she was keeping her he was furious and came straight over to the house. It

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was a frosty New Year's Day and Paddy was round, warming himself in front of the fire. He must have come in for a quick one with my mother and to see the new baby. They both got a big shock when the door opened and there was my father. When he walked in and saw them playing happy families, and Paddy's trousers over the chair again – in his house – all hell broke loose. The men tore into each other like dogs. My mother was screaming like a banshee, and the men were hammering into each other with their fists and breaking up the furniture.

Paddy was a big fellow, much larger than my father, and he'd been a boxer in the army, so he soon got the upper hand. Dad stood there, all bloody with his chest heaving, knowing he'd been beaten and yet burning up with fury and wanting to kill them both. Mum and Paddy looked back at him, confident now that my father had been beaten. My mum told him that they were keeping the baby and that there was nothing he could do about it.

Being told he couldn't do anything made my dad determined to show that he was still boss in his own house. He strode over, boiling with anger, and grabbed me. I hid my face against Mary's chest and clung to her. She and Dora held on tight, screaming at him, 'Leave her alone! Leave her alone!' But they only managed to hang on to me for a few seconds before he peeled their arms away.

I don't think I made much of a sound, but I can still hear Mary and Dora screaming my name as my father dragged me down the street. I can remember my legs not being able to touch the ground: they were just batting the air as Dad took great big strides to get away from the house. I didn't know where we were going or what was going to happen. I'd just seen him fighting Paddy and was terrified that it might be my turn next. I don't know how

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far I was dragged but it seemed like a long way. I didn't have a coat and felt colder than I'd ever been in my life.

I'd never been separated from my sisters before. The trauma of having been left on our own at such an early age had made us terrified of leaving each other's sides. At night we'd always slept in one bed and during the day we moved about the house like silent triplets or sat on the sofa wrapped in each other's arms. I think we were frightened one of us might disappear. And now I had.

When we arrived at my father's place there was a dark-aided woman sitting at the table. Her face was rigid and, although she didn't say anything, I sensed that she was shocked. I wasn't really aware of much that first evening as I was almost catatonic with fear, but in the days that followed, I realised that this sharp-faced woman hated me.

Her name was Freda and she'd left her husband and child for my father. He had promised her the moon and now he here he was, walking in with a two-year-old child in tow and telling her that she had to look after me. It wasn't surprising she was bitter. All her dreams of starting a new life in their own little love nest, just the two of them, were shattered in that moment.

Things were only to get worse for Freda. The spiritualist union were tipped off by her husband that she was living in sin with one of their preachers, a man who had deserted his wife and three kids and the scandal was soon splashed over the local papers. My dad and Freda were effectively run out of town and we wandered homeless for weeks. No one wanted anything to do with an adulteress who had left her baby.

Finally, we had a lucky break. A friend of Freda's knew an old couple who needed caretakers for their shop in

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Patricroft, an old mill town near Manchester. When we went into the shop I thought we'd gone in to buy something. It smelt of sugar and biscuits, and I saw meringues on a shelf by the door. There were newspapers, jars of sweets and cakes, and my stomach gave a rumble as we walked through to the back of the shop. When my father introduced us to the lady behind the counter, she led us through the door behind her and down some stone steps to a room at the back.

Gertie and George Roberts, the owners of the shop, interviewed my dad in the living room of the flat that was to become our home. It had a fireplace and a back door that led out into the yard, a table under the window, a sink in a sort of cubicle, and a tiny two-ring stove.

I'd been cleaned up a bit before the interview, but I expect I must still have looked a sight. My dad was on his best behaviour and laid it on pretty thick, acting the loving family man, trying hard but down on his luck.

'This is my wife, Freda, and that's Judy, our daughter.' I sat on my stool quietly, hearing his lies but not reacting, knowing I'd be severely punished later if I did.

'You see, I was made redundant from the factory and since then we've been struggling to get by.' His shoulders slumped dramatically.

'Oh dear me, you poor things. I know it's been bad for so many just now.' Gertie's face was creased with pity and concern.

'The thing is, I've been trying to do my best for them, but it's been really hard and we've got nowhere to go.'

George looked at his wife and cleared his throat. 'Well, we'd like to help you and you seem like good folk. I know Gertie would agree with me that we'd like the job to go to a family who really needs it.'

'We're hard workers,' said Dad, 'and we'll do well for you, I promise you that. We never dreamed we'd be lucky enough to find a job and a roof over our heads too.'

I really felt I had a home now, all because of Auntie Gertie and Uncle George. Uncle George looked like Father Christmas – fat, with a white beard and huge rosy cheeks. He used to sit in the chair while Auntie Gertie helped Freda, and I'd stand against his knees by the fire, happy to be feeling so comfy. I don't think he spoke much to me, but I liked it that way.

Auntie Gertie was a big-boned woman who looked rather dour; but she was the gentlest person – never aggressive in any way – and had arms that sort of snuggled you. She also helped Freda a lot in the first weeks. I used to watch her mixing the ice-cream by the door of the shop. She gave me a meringue while I sat there with her, which I ate in little bites. She also took us down the steps into the cellar, where she showed Freda how to use the plunger for the washing and the mangle to wring the water out of the wet clothes.

I still missed my sisters terribly and thought of them a lot, especially before I went to sleep at night. I lay on an old settee in the box room upstairs, wondering if they were thinking about me too, and whether Mary wanted to put her arms around me as much as I longed for her to hold me safe and warm.

After the first couple of weeks, once Freda had got the hang of things, Uncle George and Auntie Gertie hardly came round any more. When their dog, Jessie, died they were completely heartbroken and, without the excuse of a walk, didn't leave their house much. When George and Gertie were around, Freda minded her behaviour and acted the dutiful wife and mother. But now she had the place to herself, things really began to change.

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My dad soon got a job in a linen factory, where they made handkerchiefs and eiderdowns. He worked nights as a security guard and slept during the day. I don't think I ever saw him, unless it was a Sunday. Freda shut me out in the yard as soon as the papers were delivered to the shop in the morning, so I never saw my father come in. And because he was never around, Freda could be as vicious to me as she liked.

In the box room where I slept, there were stacks of boxes all round, making it difficult to get undressed. I didn't have pyjamas or a nightdress, so I wore my vest in bed and covered myself with a blanket to keep warm. In the morning, as soon as I heard Freda coming out of her room, I would get up and put on my dress and cardigan and go downstairs.

One morning, I came down to find Freda waiting for me. The paperboy had just arrived and she grabbed my arm impatiently and took me to the back door.

Pushing me roughly outside she said, 'Sit there. I don't want you moving.' She pointed to a spot on the paving in the middle of the yard, gave me a vicious little nudge so that I almost fell down the steps, then went back inside.

I walked over to the spot she'd pointed at and sat down. There was nothing to be seen but enclosing grey walls, and a bucket standing against the door of the outdoor toilet. I sat on the cold paving stones wondering when Freda was going to let me in. I remained there for an hour or so, scared to move in case I'd be punished. I remember putting my finger in a crack between the paving stones and moving it along the tiny strip of sand. Then I traced the outline of one of the stones, then another beside it. It wasn't a very interesting game, but I made it last for a long time.

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I'd been told to stay put, but, as I wasn't wearing any tights or socks, the cold began to get to me. I needed to move about to keep warm, so I stood up and went over to the steps, looking nervously at the back door. I was curious to see what was over the dividing wall, so I climbed up the steps to look into the next yard. I saw it was almost the same as ours, except for a few plants.

I then tried jumping down the steps, one at a time, then climbing up again. I did this at least twenty times, then got bored of it and sat down and looked at the sky. I watched it for ages. I saw the smoke coming out of the chimneys and the patterns it made, and the pigeons on the roofs, hopping about and sitting hunched up in pairs by the chimney pots.

It was several cold hours before Freda opened the back door.

'Get in,' she said.

She didn't even look at me. It was as if she was letting in the dog.

'Have your tea, then get out of my sight.' She pushed a cheese triangle across the table at me.

Afterwards, I went and sat under the table, which was where I always hid when Freda was around. It had a long cloth, so no one could see I was there. I stayed quiet as a mouse until it was time to go up to bed.

After that, Freda shut me outside in the yard every day. The first time it rained. I ran to the back door and tried to get in, but it was locked. I hadn't known until then that Freda actually locked the door. By the time I'd made it to the privy I was soaked through. I had to shelter in the toilet most of the afternoon, which smelt damp and mouldy, like the cupboard under the sink, and I felt I'd never get warm again.

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One day, when it was just starting to spit with rain, our neighbour, Mrs Craddock came out of her house and looked over the wall.

'All by yourself, chicken?' She tutted and cooed, coaxing me over. I approached her cautiously. Mrs Craddock had rollers in her hair and was wearing a flowery pink overall, stretched tight across her enormous bosom.

'Come inside and keep warm.' She scooped me up, lifted me over the dividing wall and put me down in her yard. I saw she was wearing brown tweed slippers with pom-poms on them.

'Let's get you warmed up then.'

She took me by the hand, led me indoors, and sat me down on the sofa by a big fireguard that had washing hanging over it. I was very frightened. I'd been told to stay in the yard.

Mrs Craddock stood at the window watching for Freda, hands on hips, and as soon as she saw her get off the bus she opened the front door. I tried to slip past her but she pushed me back, tucking me behind her, protectively.

I was panicking badly now. *I'm going to be in big trouble. Freda's going to go mad.*

But Mrs Craddock was puffed up with rage and nothing was going to stop her now. She didn't pause to think that I'd be the one getting hurt at the end of it.

Mrs Craddock angrily asked Freda what she'd thought she was doing, leaving me in the yard in the rain. Freda's face looked sharp and pointy as a knife and I thought she was going to go for Mrs Craddock.

They went at it hammer and tongs, watched by some of the women from neighbouring houses. Finally, Freda grabbed me and took me with her, slamming the door behind her. She dragged me through the shop and down

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the steps into the room at the back. I thought she'd beat me senseless, but instead she gave me a couple of slaps and sent me to bed. I think the row with Mrs Craddock had exhausted her. Mrs Craddock never took me in again. But from then on, other people began looking out for me, and occasionally gave me toys to play with.

One day, there was a thunderstorm and I was feeling frightened. A girl came running over to me. She wasn't wearing a coat and was getting drenched. She looked about eight or nine and had ringlets, which the rain had plastered against her head.

'My mum said to come and fetch you.'

She took me by the hand and we ran through the sheets of rain to her house. Her mum was waiting at the door.

'You poor little thing. You come in and get dry.' She led me into the kitchen and dried me with a towel, fussing over me as she did so.

'I'll make you a cup of cocoa. That'll warm you up. What's your name, poppet?' She was talking to me soothingly as she put some milk and water on the hob.

'Judy,' I whispered.

'And how old are you?'

'Three and a half.'

'Now poppet, I think you'll get warmer if you come into the living room and sit by the fire.' She led the way to the other room, where her two daughters and husband were sitting.

'Tony, this is Judy. She got all wet in the storm,' she said.

'Hello young lady. How would you like to come sit by the fire with me and help me win the pools?' With that, he scooped me onto his knee and let me help him pick out the winning teams with a pin on his football coupon.

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It was the first time I'd ever got a glimpse of what family life could be. I bathed in the warmth of it.