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Child C

Surviving a Foster Mother's Reign of Terror

Christopher Spry

Prologue

'Do not withhold discipline from your children,' shouted Mother. 'If you beat them with a rod, they will not die.'

Facing the wall I screwed up my eyes, knowing what was to come and hearing the evil swish of the bamboo. Then screaming as it tore fresh agony into my back. Again the swish, again the blinding pain across my back as I stood in the gloom of the sitting room, receiving my punishment. At the window a sheet was up. Across the floor was strewn rubbish: plastic Safeway carrier bags spilling clothes onto the carpet, dog-eared boxes full of disused toys, old rugs, discarded kitchen appliances fit only for the bin ...

'He who spares the rod hates his son,' she screamed. 'But he who loves him is careful to discipline him.'

The cane scalded my back. Once more I yelled in pain, screaming, 'No, please, no,' twisting away, feeling her pull me back, her hand steadying me at the wall. Then another stroke across the back, then another. My hands were against the wall, nails digging into the wallpaper. Swish. Swish.

'I'm sorry, Mother,' I screamed. 'I'm sorry.'

I was sorry because I'd left a dead hen in the yard. It was my job to move the dead hens, I knew that. If a hen died you had to move it quickly because the rats could get to it and we had enough rats without encouraging more of them. It was my fault. All my fault I was being whipped.

'Demon child,' she shouted, and still the blows came.

'I'm sorry!' I screamed in return.

Sometimes she would say nothing during beatings and would deliver them with a calm, almost serene air. Other times, like now, she would scream and shout, say that

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she had to drive the demons out of me ready for the apocalypse and quote passages from the Bible. Always quoting. The same quotes I would hear again and again.

'Do not withhold discipline from your children,' she reminded me. 'If you beat them with a rod, they will not die.'

I felt something warm and wet slide below the waistband of my jeans. Blood or sweat, I wasn't sure. And I sank to my knees, my shirt in tatters at my back, able to stand the pain no longer.

The whipping continued for some time, until at last she stopped, breathing heavily from the exertion, dropped the cane and left the room. In agony, tears of pain streaming down my face, I remained on my knees alone in the dark and filthy sitting room. I would remain on my knees for my entire childhood.

This is the story of how I got to my feet.

List of five advantages of being brought up by my evil foster mother Eunice Spry

1. I am well mannered and polite

2. I do not swear

3. I don't spit either

4. I know how to behave in restaurants

5. I can differentiate between brands of washing-up liquid just from their taste

List of five disadvantages of being brought up by my evil foster mother Eunice Spry

1. I can differentiate between brands of washing-up liquid just from their taste

2. I rarely sleep, and when I do I have nightmares

3. I am in constant pain from an injury in my knee, from where she disciplined me with a cricket bat

4. I do not make friends easily

5. I can never have children of my own

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Chapter One

Eunice was my mother, and I called her Mother right up to the trial. I've only just stopped. Sometimes I still catch myself thinking of her that way. It's rare these days, though.

I hated the trial. I mean, of course I hated the trial, anyone would. But I hated it so much that I went to the bridge over Golden Valley – a dual carriageway connecting Gloucester and Cheltenham – and stood at the edge a couple of times, thinking about taking the one step that would send me plummeting to the road below.

I thought about throwing myself in front of a car, too, but that particular method of suicide is too much of a gamble. You might survive – which is not much use if you're trying to kill yourself – because the car needs to be doing almost exactly 73mph. Any faster and you run the risk of being bounced straight off the bonnet. Any slower and you might simply be dragged along the road. No way do you want that kind of pain.

On the other hand, I don't know – at the time anything felt preferable to the alternative: the guilt of giving evidence against Eunice – the horror of facing her across the court.

In the event I sat behind a curtain for my appearance, so we were screened off from one another. Still, though, our eyes met just as she was being led out, one tiny second as we both turned heads at the same time and clocked each other across the courtroom. There was nothing there, in her eyes. There never really was.

She'd pleaded not guilty; she told the court that the worst punishment she ever gave us was a smack on the bottom. In the end, the court believed us: Children A, B and C, as we were for the duration of the trial, then for the media coverage afterwards.

Child C, that's me.

Child A is my foster sister Karen, who was fostered by Eunice a year or so before I was.

Child B is Lulu, my other foster sister, who is older than me by four years, and was fostered by Eunice at the same time I was. Of the three of us, she always knew something was up, Lulu did. She's that bit older than me and Karen, so I suppose she'd seen a life outside of Eunice that we never had. Lulu was the one who tried to tell the neighbours, who tried to run away. We used to get quite angry with her; used to say pull yourself together, come on, just get on with it.

Lulu knew, though. Over the years we kept a tally of the times we cried. Cries from pain didn't count; we're talking about emotional cries. Lulu was on thirty-one of them. Karen was on twenty-something. I was on three. I'm the lowest, the best.

We weren't the only children Eunice had fostered, us three. There was another girl, Charlotte, who was the eldest and who had been fostered from birth; plus my younger brother Bradley – my real younger brother. Like Charlotte he came into

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Eunice's care from birth, and like Charlotte he was never touched. Well, they were touched in the sense that they were cuddled and hugged and kissed and Eunice loved them. But they were never beaten with bamboo. They were never starved, or forced to drink washing-up liquid for stealing food. Instead, what Eunice did to them was hold them back and stop them from growing, keeping them in a permanent state of very early childhood. When Charlotte died, her bedroom at the farmhouse was in the process of being transformed into a pink grotto fit for a princess, a paradise for a little girl. But Charlotte wasn't a little girl when she died. She was seventeen.

And Eunice had done the same with Bradley, keeping him back, treating him like a baby. The attic floor of the farmhouse was Bradley's playroom and you couldn't move for the toys she'd bought him. Couldn't move. He lived in that room like a spoilt little child-king, ruling over an empire of countless Thomas the Tank Engine toys and radio-controlled cars. Throwing tantrums, getting us into trouble for upsetting him.

Directly below his playroom was the room where Karen and I were locked for a starvation punishment. We spent a month in there; the spoilt little child-king in his playroom upstairs, the princess painting her grotto pink.

But that makes me sound bitter, and I'm not. Not to Charlotte, because you shouldn't speak ill of the dead and, anyway, she was a child, same as all of us. And not to Bradley, because he's Bradley – Bradley my little brother – and I taught him all he knows about cars (and I know a lot, so he knows a lot), and, yes, sometimes he's a little bastard, but ... he's Bradley.

Eunice had two other daughters, natural daughters, who were the product of her second marriage. The daughters were older, grown-up. There was Judith, and again I don't like to speak ill of the dead, but she helped with the abuse – at times as the torturer's apprentice. And there was also Rebekah, who never helped, but who saw things that tripped warning buzzers in her head and considered telling social services, but never did, probably because Eunice was her mother. She gave evidence at the trial, though, Rebekah did. We all helped send our mother to jail.

Which is where she is now. She was sentenced to fourteen years for twenty-six charges including child cruelty, assault, unlawful wounding and perverting the course of justice. The judge said it was the worst case of child abuse he'd ever encountered. What made it worse, he said, was Eunice in court; her face was unmoving, set in stone for the entire trial. Like I say, there was nothing there. Nothing at all.

And then I'm on This Morning. If you saw it, I was the one sitting with my back to you. The moment I started talking my trouser leg began to vibrate as people tried calling me. Lucky I'd set the mobile to vibrate, come to think of it. And then I'm on Sky News. And I'm talking to newspaper reporters. And everybody wants to know what I think of her now. Do I hate her? No, I say, she was my mother. Did I ever try fighting back, they want to know. Of course not, she was my mother. Why did I stay? they ask. Why did I stay for over a decade of torture and abuse?

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Because Eunice was my mother.

Chapter Two

I was born in Cheltenham in 1988. December the 20th, to be precise, although I never celebrated my birthdays because Eunice was a Jehovah's Witness and her beliefs did not extend to birthdays and Christmases. I had a night out on my eighteenth, but that was less to do with being eighteen than being alive at that point. I celebrated my fourth, too, one of my very earliest memories – one of the few times I ever saw my natural parents when I was growing up.

I have a very vague memory of being with them, my natural parents. Well, not really a memory so much as an impression. I remember some stairs in their house, and climbing up them. I was about one and a half, I reckon, probably able to walk but still at that stage where it's quicker to climb stairs on all fours. And I can recall that they had no carpet on them, and that new carpet was due to be fitted.

My next memory is of being with Eunice at George Dowty Drive in Tewkesbury. Not an outstanding house, not from the outside anyway. Neither is the street itself much to look at; it's actually a cul-de-sac, part of the Northway estate, and it's named after Sir George Herbert Dowty, who lived in Cheltenham and who invented the first internally sprung aircraft wheel, as used on the Gloster Gladiator. Lovely aircraft.

Sir George Dowty died in 1975. It was around that time the Northway estate went up and George Dowty Drive was built. Eunice Spry lived at number 24 and was a council tenant there, eventually buying it from them. She had two daughters, both grown-up, and she fostered children in her three-bedroom, semi-detached, not-very-remarkable ex-council house. She fostered me.

It had a huge kitchen, the location of my second proper memory, which finds me sitting in a high chair in the kitchen in the evening. The door's open, so it's probably summer, and I can hear a dog barking outside, which would have been ours. Meg or Jet perhaps. We had a lot of dogs over the years. A lot of pets. Eunice was obsessed with them; she used to become fixated with one pet before losing interest then moving onto another one. Our menagerie grew as a result. We had a goose in the garden, plus a duck called Queenie, who had ducklings that I remember Eunice used to drive around in the car. And we had rabbits – lots of rabbits – plus cats, of course, as well as hamsters, gerbils and a snake called Sequin. And like I say, this was just a residential cul-de-sac. All those animals in the garden – the neighbours must have hated us.

On one side of us we had a Welsh couple; on the other side a family. The Welsh couple ... I don't know what they thought of us. I think we used to infuriate them. The way we spoke to them. One of the many things Eunice was obsessed with was manners, and we had to address everybody by their surnames. 'Hello, Mr and Mrs Smith,' along those kind of lines. For some reason I have this memory that the Welsh couple hated that. Perhaps they thought we were taking the mick.

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The Welsh couple lived on the other side of our semi, so we were joined to them. They never heard anything of the abuse, though, as far as I know. One of the weird things – well, the only weird thing – about the appearance of the house is that there was space left for a garage that was never filled. It meant that although the two houses were joined, there was only one room in each property that shared a wall. What I'm saying is, they never heard anything, and I believe that. The husband, Brett Young, later told Sky that there was no sign we were being abused; that we were always well dressed and clean and tidy, and he was right, we were always clean and tidy. Always polite and on our best behaviour. We were well-brought-up children.

On the other side of us was a family, and there was a bit of rivalry there but we didn't see much of them because there was an alleyway separating our two houses, with a fence that burned down one time. Somebody thought it would be funny to creosote it, then set light to it, and I guess it was sort of funny. Suddenly the dog was barking, we looked out of the window and the garden was on fire. Someone – I think it was Charlotte – dialled 999 and the fire brigade and police came. Eunice wouldn't bring them in. The house was filthy and Lulu had a large gash on her arm that Eunice didn't want them to see. The gash was from where Eunice had attacked her with a stick that had a nail in it. Of course, Lulu had moved, so the nail had opened her arm up. Obviously, Eunice didn't want anybody seeing that. So she dealt with the police in the car and sent them on their way.

Sorry, I'm getting ahead of myself. Because before all of that – before life at George Dowty Drive and the fence burning down and the beatings, was how Eunice took me and my younger brother away from our natural parents.

Chapter Three

Good fortune is not something that ever lingered long at my natural parents' house. It's almost as though Eunice knew that; as though she exploited that fact to take away children who didn't belong to her.

It all happened when I was very young, of course – too young to remember – so to find out how I came to be in Eunice's care I have to ask them, my natural Mum and Dad. That's not a problem; I see a lot of them these days. We're making up for almost fifteen years of lost time.

Their names are Pete and Elaina. He's from Gloucester, born and bred; her family is originally from Malta, and you wouldn't miss them if you saw them in the street, they're a striking couple. Years and years ago Dad went to Glastonbury. This was in those days when it was all hippy convoys and free entry. You look at my Mum and Dad and you think, it figures, you can imagine them at Glastonbury. They dress and act like two people who grew up with idealism and watched it slowly fade. Mum with her fortune-teller clothes, her nails that she keeps painted in frankly weird colours. Dad with his long hair – at the time of writing it's jet black. No, you wouldn't miss them if you saw them in the street. They stand out and they stand for something – something a bit different.

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The two of them have been through so much: illness for most of their lives, the pain of what happened to Bradley and me. But still, they carry themselves with a bearing, a pride. And they're funny, too. Dad, in particular, has never lost his sense of humour. He goes pretty serious when he talks about Eunice, though; Mum, too. When I ask her about what happened she looks down and frets with her painted fingernails, picking at her clothes. She rolls a cigarette and her hands shake. When she speaks it's with the dreamy West Country accent you get around the Cheltenham area. It's soft, comforting, the kind of voice you want to hear last thing at night, tucking you in. Dad reaches across and takes her hand.

And Mum talks.

She was abused as a child. Her own mother sold her to men from the age of nine. She spent her childhood in care and had sixteen foster mothers of her own. When I came along in 1988, the last thing she wanted for me was a lifetime of fostering and abuse. The last thing.

But fate has a way of confounding even the biggest wishes, and Mum became ill. She needed a gallstone removing, which meant she had to go into hospital, so therefore had childcare problems. My Dad, at that time, wasn't capable of helping, so the only other option for my Mum was to ask her own mother to help out. Rather than do that, she called Social Services, who found Eunice Spry.

Eunice and Gloucestershire Social Services were already old friends by then. Eunice first applied to become a childminder in 1979, but they turned her down because of 'unspecified concerns'. This was according to a paper later published, the Executive Summary, which you can probably still find on the Internet. Whatever those unspecified concerns were, they were subsequently lifted and Eunice got the green light to become a childminder. Next, she applied to become a foster carer and was at first declined 'as it was felt her lifestyle was not conducive to her being a foster parent'. Those objections were removed, though, and she became a fully fledged foster parent, able to help out mums in their hour of need.

Or, in our case, our three months of need, because that was how long Mum was originally in hospital.

Mum came out, lighter by one gallstone, and life as a family resumed. There were outings and visits to the cinema, and it was after one such trip that Mum was struck down with meningitis. And everything changed. Everything. For a start, Mum went back into hospital, and it was no short-term tenancy this time, she was in for the duration. For a long time she was in intensive care, her condition critical, and my father was told she wouldn't make it, not to hold out hope. He set up camp in the hospital so he could be at her side twenty-four hours a day. At nights he fell asleep by her hospital bed, holding her hand in his.

There was a complication. The doctors attempted a lumbar puncture, a procedure where a needle is inserted into the spine in order to collect a sample of cerebrospinal fluid – very common in cases of suspected meningitis. She describes herself as a 'bigger lady', my Mum, and as a result doctors had problems inserting the needle. In

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the end, they had to go in eight times, the last time so hard that the needle snapped. The resulting operation to remove the snapped part of the needle left her with severed nerves in the spine, which left her facing the rest of her life in a wheelchair, able only to walk very short distances. Mum would eventually spend eighteen months in hospital.

I was very young then, only just walking. Plus, I was – as my parents are nowadays fond of telling me – a 'boisterous' little boy. When I went to a foster family during mum's hospital stay, I was apparently so boisterous that I broke the leg of the family's pet dog, tried to ride on its back, giddy-up horsey, that kind of thing. Wherever that family is now, I'm so, so sorry. You have no idea.

And then my Mum's mother bumped into Eunice's daughter Judith in town. One of those chance meetings, just, 'Oh, hello.' It was in Tesco, or Sainsbury's – somewhere like that, somewhere mundane. My grandmother had remembered Eunice from before, when she had helped out during the gallstone operation. Mum had been wondering about her, too, what with things going so badly with our present carers, the dog incident, the fighting.

So that day in the supermarket my grandmother asked Judith whether Eunice still fostered.

Yes, said Judith, Mum still fosters. Why?

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