Worthless

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Extract

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PROLOGUE

I was thirteen years old when I decided to end my life. Though, at the time, it was probably more of a cry for attention than a deliberate suicide attempt. All my young life I felt I had been striving to win my mother's affection, yet in my heart I could only feel her bitter rejection.

The evening before I took the pills, I had been indecently assaulted by some boys outside my friend Grace's house after going out to talk to them. The assault had shocked me badly, and as soon as I got away from them I sobbed bitterly on Grace's shoulder. I should never have gone outside to even talk to the lads.

I ran home a little later, traumatised by the assault, feeling that somehow it must have been all my own fault. I was terrified my mother would find out about it; I felt she would kill me if she knew and I had not intended to tell her. Yet at the same time, I felt a need to confide in her, hoping she would be able to ease my pain and lessen my embarrassment over the incident.

It was not to be.

As I crept in the back door of our house, Mam was waiting for me. She had already been told by Grace's neighbours that something had happened to me – my

screams had alerted them – though what version of the incident she was given, I never did find out.

As soon as I walked into our kitchen, I was confronted by Mam. She slapped me hard across my tear-streaked cheeks.

'You dirty little tramp,' she yelled at me, as I tried to shield my face and head from her hard hands.

'Just what do you think you've been up to?' she demanded. As she continued to rain down her blows I tried to escape by running into the sitting room but she was soon after me, continuing her attack as she called me a 'dirty little bitch'.

'You are nothing but trouble to me,' she cried, as she punctuated every word with another slap.

The curtains were open in the sitting room and I wondered briefly if anyone would witness the scene of my mother hitting me as I cowered before her.

As I tried to evade Mam's blows, she kept up with her verbal abuse, yelling at me, 'You're bloody worthless you are, our Lyn, you've always been nothing but trouble to me and now you're a dirty little tramp into the bargain. I don't know what I've done to deserve a worthless girl like you.'

In between slaps and sobs, I tried to explain to Mam what had really happened, but she was having none of it. I had brought shame to her door, she told me.

Dad was at work on a night shift at the pit, so was not there to defend me this time.

'Get yourself off to bed and out of my sight, you tramp,' cried Mam, giving me a final whack to the head as I trembled in fear and shock in front of her. Her vivid, blue eyes bore coldly down into mine with neither love nor mercy in them.

I half-crawled up the stairs to bed as tears of injustice flowed freely down my stinging cheeks. I prayed she would not tell my dad about it.

Dad held me on a pedestal and I did not want to fall from his grace – it would break my dad's heart as well as

mine. I did not sleep that night as the whole incident played over in my head. It was Mam's reaction and her cruel words, still resounding in my ears, that had hurt me most of all.

It was during this sleepless night that I made the decision to end my worthless life.

ONE

I'm on a mission today.

I have been filling out the never-ending forms to apply for my state retirement pension. These forms have to be completed early and sent back to the office that deals with this kind of thing, along with my birth and marriage certificates. It's while I am searching for these documents that I come across my box of treasures, which holds keepsakes of my past 60 years.

Opening the lid, I take a look through my mementos. I have hoarded many things over the years. There is a little box that contains my babies' first milk teeth and, when I count them, I'm surprised to find there are 44 of them in total. I'm amazed they have kept so long and not rotted away.

As I look further, I come across the little wristbands two of my children wore when they were born – surely they were never that tiny! They are pinned together with old-fashioned nappy pins that I once used to pin the terry-towel nappies on my babies. There were no disposable nappies cheaply available in those faraway days of 1966. Thank goodness they had been invented by 1979, the year I gave birth to my third child, Wayne. Not like

1966 when I gave birth to two of my children during the same year, Helen in January and Paul in December.

Those terry-towel nappies! I used to rinse them then soak them in a bucket of Napisan with a lid on. Then I had to wash, rinse and boil them in a galvanised bucket over the gas stove, then rinse them out again several times before hanging them out to dry on a washing line. No tumble driers in those days.

I continue to rummage through my souvenirs and find a lock of my eldest granddaughter's fine, golden-blonde hair. I've had this for many years, as Gemma is now eighteen. Yet I remember so well the day on which she was born in 1988. She was Helen's first child and I was present at the birth.

I keep a few letters in my box, one of which is from my youngest son, Wayne. He was staying with Helen and her husband David when I was in hospital having heart-bypass surgery the same year Gemma was born.

In his letter Wayne tells me he is having a good time and hopes I am too. I have to smile to myself, though at the same time a couple of teardrops fall from the corners of my eyes. I have read his letter so many times over the years the paper is now quite fragile. Wayne had only been nine years old at the time; in later years, he would tell me he thought I had gone on some kind of holiday on my own.

There is another letter I cherish, sent to me by Tom Cookson, husband of the late Catherine Cookson. I have read many of her books and had corresponded with her over the years, complimenting her on her work, especially her autobiography *Our Kate*. She always wrote back to me in her own hand and told me in one of her letters how difficult it had been for her to write *Our Kate*, having rewritten it many times before it finally went to press. These letters from Catherine I have also kept and treasured.

The last time I had written to her was to ask her advice on writing my own story, and I received this letter from

Tom. It is a beautifully handwritten letter in which he tells me how ill Catherine is, that she is bedridden and almost totally blind. He goes on to say that even if it had been forty years earlier, Catherine would have said the same thing to me: 'It's *your* story and only *you* can finish it.' So I think to myself that maybe now will be a good time to start. If I don't do it now, perhaps I never will.

I realise it will be no easy task to write of the emotional turmoil I have endured. There have been times of poverty, heartache and hunger akin to any novel that may have been written by Catherine herself; unfortunately, my anguish and sorrows have been all too real. It has taken me many years to even be able to confide in my husband Richard about my past life. Even then, my whole sorry tale of past miseries and torment has unfolded slowly and painfully, in dribs and drabs, while his shoulder has been the sponge soaking up my endless tears. It has been Richard who has comforted me during endless nights as I suffered constant nightmares of my past.

I have also come across some photos, although most of my precious snaps are stored carefully in albums. There is one of Helen and Paul aged about two and three years old. They are hand in hand on my mother's front doorstep, dressed up in the new outfits I had bought them for my young sister Ann's wedding. Paul now has four children of his own and I notice how much his children look like him at the same age.

I have also kept two old key rings that contain photos. They are the kind where if you hold them up to the light, the photos are so real they almost bring the people in them to life. One is of my mother and father together at a Butlin's holiday camp in Skegness. It was the last holiday they spent together, one of very few holidays they ever had. When I look at this photo of Mam and Dad together they look happy, yet I still feel a yearning for my mother's love. I still remember the years of trying to win my mother's affection but never quite managing it, always

trying to please her and win her love, and I wonder if she ever loved or wanted me. But it's too late now and I feel I will never know.

In the other key-ring photo, Dad is on his own. He must have been around the age I am now when it was taken. He seems to be smiling especially at me and I can still feel the love that he gave me. He seems so alive in this photo I can nearly touch him. I loved my dad so much and I still feel the sadness of his death, though he has been gone from us now for 28 years. He died when he was only 62 years old and never did get to see my youngest son, Wayne. It's a pity – he would have loved Wayne and been so proud of him. Wayne is like him in a lot of ways.

Dad always wanted a son but the only son they ever had died during birth. My Aunt Kitty had told me the tale many times.

It was during an air raid in the Second World War that Mam had gone into labour. Problems had occurred and the midwife sent my dad to fetch a doctor, who was reluctant to come out during the air raid, as his wife was nervous of being left on her own.

He had attended but, according to Aunt Kitty, he had been in so much haste to get back to his wife that he had put Mam to sleep with chloroform then proceeded to deliver the baby by forceps. Apparently the doctor was in such a rush to get the delivery over with that he had badly damaged the baby's head and the baby was stillborn. The doctor had rushed home, leaving the midwife and Aunt Kitty to sort out mother and child.

Later, as Dad was handed the baby wrapped up in a little blanket, he had gone to stroke the dark hair of his perfect baby son's head. As he caressed his son's hair lovingly, the scalp peeled back – Aunt Kitty said this had been the doctor's fault as he had been in too much haste. Had it not been for this fact, she claimed Dad would have had his son, but had been left to arrange a burial instead.

Dad had never had much faith in doctors, and following that day it shrank further.

I remember so much of him, and the things he used to say are still in my head, just old proverbs like 'Don't put off till the morrow what you can do today', 'Don't let the grass grow under your feet', 'He who hesitates is lost' and so on. They are sayings that I often use to this day, so I'm sure Dad still lives on in a way inside me. I am sure he has looked over me during my lifetime, especially in my times of stress and trouble, when one of his little sayings would often pop into my mind.

I am sure the way Dad brought me up is why I have been able to survive the hard times – and hard times have been plentiful over the years. I was not always as happy and contented as I am today.

Finally, I find my marriage certificate, take it out of its envelope and scan it lovingly. My marriage to Richard David Hardy took place at Leicester's register office in 1986.

Richard is my rock, he is my knight in shining armour, and was the man who would save me from myself. He has been with me now for over 23 years. Without him I would not have become the person I am today. He has shown me such unconditional love and given me back my sense of self-worth, which I totally lacked before we met. Without him I would have been nothing. He has been by my side faithfully through good times and bad, for better or worse.

Indeed, the night I met Richard was to be the start of my 'happy life', my life of new beginnings. Richard always called our marriage certificate 'The Rule Book'. We've had little use for it throughout our years together; no rules have ever been broken. We remain as much, if not more, in love as the day we first met. We are closely bonded together – Richard is my life.

I replace the marriage certificate in its envelope: mission accomplished.

* * *

Today I have a wonderful husband and three children, now grown up with children of their own.

I have three stepdaughters: Mandy, Wendy and Joanne. Mandy is very close to me, and I love her like a daughter.

I am also a proud grandmother of eleven grandchildren, my daughter, Helen, gave birth to a lovely, baby boy Jamie earlier this year, when she was forty. Jamie came as a delightful surprise to us all, especially as Gemma is now eighteen and James is sixteen. They delight in their new baby brother and are able to spoil him. Helen has followed in my footsteps and has graduated as a nurse. She now works as a district nurse, following her maternity leave after having the baby. It reminds me of when I was doing my nurse training and had to take maternity leave to have her. It does not seem that long ago, yet my state badges were issued in March 1967.

I had tried to write my story years ago. It took me about two years to do it in long handwriting. Richard would often come in from his bingo nights at the club and find me writing at the dining room table. I would continue to write well into the early hours of next morning. When I finally finished it and re-read it all I felt as though I had exorcised old ghosts, but I thought no publisher would even look at my work, as rough as it was, so I tore it up and threw it out. Even Richard never got to read it and I think he worried at the time that I may later regret throwing it all away. I did not regret it, yet even now I still feel the urge to write, to try to get some of my 'self' onto paper before it is too late.

I know that in order to try to tell the story of my life there are many unhappy memories to be rehashed and sorted through if I am to be truthful about events. I do not want to upset my now happy life, yet I know there is no point in me trying to tell it unless I am truthful. To tell it all, I have to go back to the beginning, the year of my birth.