

ACT ONE

As my brother John and I headed over the grass verge towards the big green door for the last time, I stopped, looked back at the house. Norman's mum, Celia, came out of the kitchen, ran down the two flights of stone stairs in a panic. 'Have you seen Norman?' She was crying, almost hysterical.

'No, why?' I asked, knowing fine well what was going on.

'Everybody's looking for him but there's just no sign.' She whimpered, the blue mascara she slapped onto her lashes framing her bloodshot eyes, was running down her cheeks, merging with the red lipstick she'd smeared all over her face. Made her look like a clown.

'He'll be in David's bedroom,' I said. 'I'm sure I heard David talking to someone earlier.'

She ran off frantically in that direction.

Mrs Mason – Celia's best friend, our foster mum – had made our lives an absolute misery, I was never sure how long we went away for but it always felt like an eternity. It might have been a month, maybe more, maybe less. We'd been sent there while our mum was having twins. Another two kids to add to the original eight. It was always John and me that were fostered out, as we were the eldest boys. At the time John was eight, I was nine. We'd been to some terrible places before. At the last place the last woman forced, and held my face into a plate of mince and onions because I refused to eat it, but this place beat that by a long shot.

Ever since we'd walked through the door of this big depressing house we'd been treated like scum. No sooner had we dropped our bags into the bedroom than we were summoned through to the living room. Mrs Mason sat there with a chair, two towels, a bucket of hot water, some kind of disinfectant and a steel comb.

'Right, you two, over here,' she said.

I sat down on the chair first, knowing what she was going to do;

I'd been through the drill, had the horribly painful metal comb through my hair so often. Her three kids sat on the couch eating sweets, watching us, as if it was some kind of freak show. She poured the stinging chemical onto my head; it burned like hell, she then scraped the damn comb across my scalp, felt like she was creating furrows on my scalp. I stood up to run but she grabbed me, forced me back down.

'If you don't sit still while I get those nits I'll get Lloyd to come in and strap you to that chair.'

I had no idea who or what Lloyd was, but the thought of being strapped into a chair freaked me into submission. I was terrified, a nine-year-old kid being subjected to that kind of humiliation on the first day of a long fostering.

'I don't have nits'. I protested, but she wasn't interested in anything I had to say, a quick skelp across my lug let me know who was in charge.

Every time we were fostered out we were told, 'It'll be different this time. These foster parents really love kids.' It was always the same, they did love kids. Their own! They only happened to hate the ones they were being paid to look after.

John and I were only looking for a bit of happiness until we could return home, we never, ever, had any idea when we'd be going home. Mrs Mason's three were very spoilt. Seemed to have everything they wanted. Donna was ten; Abigail nine, and David was seven. We were warned not to play with or speak to them, if she caught us using any of their toys there'd be Hell to pay. We'd been taken down to register at St. John's school earlier, that was another upheaval, learning to make new friends quickly.

The kids turned out to be OK; they wanted to play with us and did so behind their mum's back.

A week or two later Abigail and I went to her bed to sleep together. Pure innocence on our part, we were snuggling up, happy warm, safe, until ... The light went on, Mrs Mason went ballistic.

'What the fuck are you doing in bed with my wee girl?' She bellowed.

What's the problem here? I thought to myself. It was the first time I'd seen anyone overreact and didn't understand what was happening.

‘Abigail is only nine years old, what the fuck do you think you’re doing to her, you monster?’

‘We were only sleeping together, Mum,’ she said. ‘We weren’t doing anything.’

‘Yeah, we were only cuddling,’ I said.

‘You shut that trap of yours right now or you’ll get my belt across your arse.’

I could see a redness in her eyes, the fury was palpable, I did not want to go there.

She put her hands on top of her head, began to wail like a banshee. As she was going through this disturbing scene she glanced over to the corner of the girls’ bedroom, noticed that her other daughter’s bed was bulkier than usual. She ran over and pulled back the covers. The first scream was trivial compared to her next one. John was lying in bed with her oldest daughter and her youngest son! She grabbed John by the hair, hauled him from the bed, dragged him into the hallway, kicked him up the arse he was sent flying back against the door and into our bedroom. A few seconds later she came back for me, dished out the same treatment. She banged the door shut, shouted through it.

‘You two little bastards are out of here tomorrow. I knew it was a mistake agreeing to look after folk from Pilton.’

We walked back to our room in silence, where an uncomfortable, sleepless night was had. We got up for breakfast the next morning, dawdled through to the kitchen. She was at the table nattering with a posh looking woman wearing a flowery dress that seemed too big for her, who was smoking and sipping at her cuppa. As we appeared at the door they stopped talking. Her son, Norman, was hanging about, sucking an ice pole. He looked up, went to the fridge, took two ice poles out, walked towards us, handed them to John. They were snatched from his hand by Mrs Mason. She threw them back into the freezer and pointed at us.

‘That’s them, Celia,’ she said to her friend. ‘Little tramps.’

‘Yes, they do look a bit scruffy,’ the woman said as she sipped her drink, blowing smoke from the side of her mouth. ‘I’m not sure I want you to look after my Norman if they are still here, Madge.’

‘Don’t worry,’ she said, ‘they won’t be here that long. Trust me, as soon as Social Services can get them to somewhere more suitable they’ll be out of here like shit off a shovel.’ They both laughed.

‘Make sure they are,’ Celia said. ‘I’ve heard things about these kinds of people.’ She put a hand to the side of her face, covering her mouth, hoping we wouldn’t hear her, whispered, ‘Why do people have all of these children if they can’t bring them up properly?’

I walked out of the room feeling utterly worthless.

We spent the whole day locked in our room, isolated from everyone. At eating times the snib on the door would be unlocked and we’d be handed a plate of food, then the door would close immediately. Later that night I heard the door being unlocked. We were ushered to a smaller room along the hallway by a man who I’d never seen before. I wondered if it was Lloyd, who strapped kids to chairs. He smelled of vinegar and wore a maroon cardigan with leather patches on the elbows. He never said a word, closed the door behind us, then I heard the key turn a few times. In the semi-darkness of the new room I could see there was a cot with a baby in it. It must have arrived while we were in quarantine. I looked in and saw a tot in a blue romper suit. As it lay there sleeping, I noted with interest that it was holding a rich tea biscuit in each hand. *They’ll be mine later*, I thought, *as long as it stays asleep*.

Hours passed, my stomach was growling at me as I lay tossing and turning in the darkness. I got up as quietly as I could, made my way stealthily over to the cot. The biscuits were in bits, but the biggest chunks were still in the baby’s hands, a bit soggy with its sweat but still edible. I reached over to pick up the bits that lay around its head, stuck some into my gob and chewed contentedly. I put some on the unit beside his bed for John to eat when he awoke. I went back for the big prize. As I leaned further into the cot I tried to loosen the baby’s grip. As soon as I touched the biscuit, the baby let out an almighty roar. I shit myself, jumped into my bed and under the covers in a single bound.

The hall light went on, a very angry Mrs Mason came in; the man was with her. She had her nightgown on,

but he was still dressed the same. She put the light on, John sat bolt upright in his bed. I could see from beneath my covers that he was bewildered, he sat there rubbing his eyes, blinking, looking around. She went over to the baby, picked it up, soothing it. She looked at the biscuits on the unit by the side of his bed, put the baby down and stormed over to John. She grabbed him by the hair, wrenched him from the bed.

'Can you little bastards not take a telling?' She said, hitting John repeatedly over the head with the baby's rattle. He was trying to protect himself, sobbing. I'd had enough. I jumped onto her back, grabbed the stupid rattle from her, threw it at the man and pulled her hair. The shock sent her haywire. She easily threw the two of us off, grabbed the baby and left the room, locking the door behind her. The man was still standing there, looking at us, fidgeting with something in his cardigan pocket. The door quickly opened and he was yanked outside.

'You two are history,' she said, locking the door again. By this time there was a commotion in the hall. It seemed everyone was up and about.

Again, we headed to bed with a flea in our ear.

Next morning, the sun was streaming in through the shutters on the window. I looked over to John's bed, I was glad that he was still sound asleep. We'd both had a rough time, but he was taking it a bit harder than me. All I wanted was for him to be happy. I sat up, looked towards the door; there was a black plastic bin liner lying inside it. I got up, had a rummage. Our clothes were crammed into it. I woke John up, we got dressed, tried the door handle and was relieved that it had been unlocked. We walked through to the kitchen where both women were sitting in their usual positions.

'What do you think you're doing here?' Mrs Mason said.

'Getting something for breakfast?' I said.

'No way!' She said. 'There's somebody coming to pick you little bastards up soon. Get back to your room until you hear a knock at the door. I'll be glad to see the back of you, I hope I never set eyes on either of you again.'

'Well said, Madge,' said Celia.

We walked back to the room, hurt and hungry. There were biscuit crumbs all over the place, but too small to make any difference to the hunger we felt. We sat in silence for ages, John drawing a picture in the condensation on the window. After a little longer an idea popped into my head.

'Come on, John,' I said, 'let's get out of here, have a bit of fun.'

We sneaked out of the room through the window, headed to the play area. A few of the kids were on the swings and around the corner, under the fir tree, Norman, Celia's son, was playing alone in the sandpit.

'Hi, Norman,' I said. 'Fancy playing a game?'

He nodded his wee ginger head about twenty times.

An hour or so later our taxi pulled up outside; I could clearly hear it from behind the great stone wall.

'Right, Johnny boy,' I said, 'let's get out of this hole.' We climbed back into the room, I grabbed the black bin liner with our stuff in, then we scrambled back out of the window and strolled into the house through the front door. In a show of defiance we walked down the hallway, into the kitchen where everyone, including Lloyd, was in a panic.

'Where is he? Where is he?' They said. Norman's mum was breathless with panic and hysteria, I nudged John and we laughed as we headed out of the front door.

We were taking our last steps, heading for the door in the wall, and freedom. I took a detour to the sandpit, lifted the upside down yellow bucket that sat there and winked at Norman, his head was the only part of him sticking above the sand.

'Shhhh,' I whispered. 'You are definitely the best boy I've ever seen at hide and seek.'

He gave me a toothless smile, whispered, 'Mummy no gonnae find me.'

'No way, Norman,' I said. I placed the plastic bucket back over his head and tapped it gently.

I went back to where John stood, we looked back at the building we'd grown to hate. There were frantic

silhouettes running all over the house. We both laughed, headed for the door. As we got there the handle turned and the door was opened by a big burly guy with a smile.

'Taxi for Divine?' The driver said, taking the bag from John.

I smiled in utter satisfaction as I slowly pulled the green door shut.