**Helen’s Story**

**In Care 1953 – 1956**

In the Autumn of 1953 my sister and I were taken into care by the local authority. We were living at that time in a place called Portrack Camp an ex army camp, possibly as squatters with our father.  I was two and a half years old and my sister was four and a half. This was a time when very little written evidence was completed other than basic information but many years later, we were able to begin to piece some of it together from  basic research and from the imperfect, and often misleading memories of other people.

Our story, of course, begins much earlier, having its roots in an impoverished and troubled family  whom we never knew in Stockton, Co Durham. This is an account of lives that began with such an unpromising start.

My father Richard Stephenson was born on the 12th February 1924 and married my mother, Winifred Morgan in November 1948  at St Cuthbert’s Roman Catholic Church, Yarm, Stockton. Winifred was four months pregnant with my sister Eileen at the time and she was only 18 years old. The marriage certificate shows that she was living with my father at the time of the marriage. This fact in itself, must have been rather unusual as it was not a common practice in post war Britain for young people to live together before marriage, and certainly not common amongst a family that would nominally describe itself as Catholic. This fact in itself, along with facts  provided many years after our birth mother's death, indicate that our mother was not being supported emotionally in any way at the time she found herself in this predicament by her own mother who was herself only in her early 40s.

The marriage was a disaster from the start.  Our father was reportedly very violent and abusive towards her, having on three occasions hospitalised our mother with his brutality.  She fled the impoverished home she shared with our father and sought refuge elsewhere in the Stockton/Thornaby area, and for what must have been a very short time, took us with her.  However, she must have remained fearful and she eventually left us  with her mother, Evelyn Morgan, who was herself in considerably straightened circumstances trying to bring up her own family with little help from her own husband, Joseph Morgan who drank most of what he managed to earn before he took the pay packet home.

 Our grandmother,  had given birth herself to a baby boy, Peter, only in 1948 the year our parents married. He died less than a year later. Our mother  Winifred was her eldest child, followed by Joseph. John, George, Mary and Bernard, and the youngest baby Peter who died in infancy. Bernard and Mary were probably living at home with her at the time our mother fled to London to escape her abusive husband. According to our mother, our father Richard Stephenson forcibly took us away from our grandmother’s house. She was powerless to stop him, and probably more than a little afraid.

I have no idea what my father’s motive’s were in taking us. I have no idea if he was working or had the means to support us, or if this was a tactic to try to find out where our mother had gone or to force her hand and return. I subsequently learned, that our mother Winifred, had found another man, and our father was aware of this, and he came looking for her one night at her partner's home where she was living and several men had to restrain him. Our mother and her new partner fled the area shortly after this incident, leaving us with our grandmother and our father then returned and took us back to Portrack Camp. I have no idea how long we lived with him. Whether this was days, weeks or months, but I know it was from this place that Eileen and I were taken into care and placed at St Joseph's Orphanage for Girls in Darlington which had had a former existence as an Industrial School. It was run by the Sisters of Charity for girls aged from birth to about 15 or 16 years of age, at the point when they could begin work.

My sister Eileen has some snapshot memories of living in a single story dwelling which had no interior doors. This fits well with the fact that we were living with our father at Portrack Camp, (a fact my sister did not know when she first spoke of these memories from early childhood), as the Camp did consist of single story pre-fabricated army buildings and huts, hastily constructed and eventually abandoned to squatters after the war.  Eileen remembers there being a lot of broken glass and dereliction around and inside the house, and children left to play amongst the debris and squalor outside.  She also remembers incidences of loud shouting and throwing things around in anger. She can recall a memory of an incidence in one building which did have a staircase where a group of children had gathered in a kind of loft area. There was a ripped out fireplace and a big hole down into the floor below and I had fallen through it, injuring myself. She believes the scar I have to the side of my left eye is the remnant of this incident. I was less than two and a half years old at this time, and clearly we were very much left to our own devices as she was pre-school age herself. It might very well be that this injury was the reason we came to the notice of the local authority and health services as it coincides with the time when we were taken to the orphanage.

**St Joseph's Orphanage, Darlington**

One day Eileen remembers that we were sitting on a step of some sort when a black car pulled up. A lady got out of the car and said she had come to collect us and  took our hands and we went meekly with her.  The car stopped outside a very large house and we got out and found ourselves for the next couple of years at St Joseph’s Orphanage in Darlington. Any memories either of us had of what had gone before quickly faded and were replaced by the events and experiences which now began to impact upon us.

St Joseph’s quickly became my new reality. I remember nothing before this time. One of my earliest memories is  of a large room with a wooden floor and large fireplace with a guard around it, and a large wooden slide in fReggiet of an enormous almost floor to ceiling window.  This was “the Nursery” which was the place where the  pre-schoolers and under 5’s played and ate and remained all day under the supervision of a nun and or  teenage girls who also lived in this big house.  I do not remember having any fun, or playing, though I do remember constantly climbing up the slide.  I do not remember any moments of softness, stories, or any emotional attachments whatsoever. I remember constantly asking to see Eileen, and not being allowed to do so. Emotional relationships of any kind were frowned upon, even between siblings as the chances of you remaining together as friends or even siblings were not high.  You were kept clean and fed and simply dressed in a uniform way, most of us dressing in identical clothiers.  Your basic physical health needs were taken care of but the emotional needs of children were not something which were met.

The nuns were not encouraged to form attachments with any of the children and the children were often quite damaged emotionally on arrival so were suspicious of one another. Up to the age of five years, children had a kind of protection within the nursery enviReggiement from the older girls and the outside world. However, older girls were given responsibilities and domestic chores as part of their daily routines and their contribution to the life of the convent and the running of the orphanage.  This would mean that they would often be involved in the bathing and washing and cleaning of dormitories and the supervision of the younger children.  This was not an ideal role for girls who themselves had not necessarily had good experiences of nurturing or caring, and who themselves were quite damaged emotionally.

This was still an age when even in the wider context of normal family life, children were expected to be "seen and not heard." It was a world long before the Childrens' Act; before ChildLine and although the 1950s were relatively enlightened in terms of social improvements, education and health services, there was no sense that a child needed to have things explained to them, let alone expect them to contribute their own views and opinions. Consequently, no one ever spoke to the girls, or to Eileen or me, and explained where our mother or father were or why we were there. No one ever explained why even though Eileen and I inhabited the same orphanage, we were not allowed to see each other. No one explained how long you were going to be at this place. There was no one to talk to at all. Consequently, most children became either withdrawn or aggressive, rather furtive and suspicious. No one ever explained where your mother and father were, or that they might never come back.

Some children came for relatively short periods of family crisis. Others shuttled backwards and forwards between the Home and their own dysfunctional families. This was just over a decade after children in the England were being sent as evacuees to outside the cities, and some to other parts of the world to avoid the bombing. It was a nation used to shifting its children around and not necessarily being too precious about it. Brothers and sisters were sent to separate Homes and had no contact. Children were sometimes found foster homes, but this was rare. Adoption was not usually an option for the children at St Joseph's.  This was the age when there was a baby boom and plenty of babies born out of wedlock, often in homes for "unmarried mothers" were available for adoption, so the chances of toddlers and older children being adopted was minimal. Older couples were often the only option for a child in Orphanage, once past the baby stage. Childless couples long for a baby, not usually for a child who has been institutionalised for several years.

As a child in the Nursery, I was not expected to do any domestic chores as such, apart from stripping my bed in a morning if I had wet the bed, which I frequently had.  From  the age of  5 years to 18 years, the girls within the orphanage were expected to gradually take on household chores. Eileen was expected soon after our arrival at St Joseph’s to play her part with rotas for washing up, and polishing floors and banisters another domestic duties.

The older girls in the Orphanage were given a lot of responsibility and I do remember occasionally they would look after the younger ones in the dormitories and supervise bathing and hair washing. This was a horrible and frightening experience as we queued up to be bathed and generally humiliated and frightened by them. I remember one of their favourite tricks was to pull the plug out and as the water was draining away they would tell you that you were also going to be sucked down the plughole. They would prevent you from climbing out of the bath and escaping.  All my life, I have never been one of those people who got into a bath and had a good, long, relaxing soak. I always saw bathing as something you did as quickly as you possibly could.

I remember once two young children were being admitted to the nursery. They were about the same age as me and both the girls had long hair. I think I was about 4 years old at the time.  A nun was cutting off their long hair and throwing it into the blazing fire behind the big fire guard. You could hear the hair hissing,  and I did not like the smell.  The girls were both crying and protesting but still it continued and the nun kept at her task and eventually, once the hair was short, she then used one of those barber’s cutters and shaved the hair completely down to just a shadow on the top of their heads. The two little girls both had a lot of red sores on their head because of the infestation of lice and eventually the nun rubbed something stReggieg smelling into their head.  The nun was wearing a grey apReggie over her habit and she had turned up the huge sleeves of her black dress and I could see her white arms underneath. Eventually, the girls  hair grew.  But all the children in the Home had to have short, identical "Tom cuts".  Eileen and I had very short hair when we were eventually fostered two years later and I wondered if we too had had our heads shaved when we had been admitted to the Home. I don't know and Eileen talked so little about those times when we were growing up. Her memories were all horrid ones and I think she was really traumatised by the things she had seen in her young life. She was much quieter and more withdrawn than I was, though I think her nature, like mine, was to be outgoing and enjoy herself but in those early years, she had had this almost suppressed as she found safety in conforming and not standing out from the crowd. On rare occasions when I might open the Nursery door and peep out, I might encounter her and I was always excited and not afraid at all, but Eileen was always furtive and nervous, aware that this was not something which was "allowed" and afraid she might be discovered. She would always try to get away before we were discovered.

I think I might have grown up very differently if I had ever moved into the older part of the Orphanage.  There were rules in the Nursery and the Dormitory which I had to follow and which I understood, but I had not learned as Eileen had, that the world was a fearful place. I got through the bath-time rituals pretty unscathed, and the humiliation of bed-wetting which was the norm for most of the children in the Nursery. We were woken each morning very early by a nun ringing a handbell.  We would get up and out of bed and the nun would come around and inspect the little iReggie beds which were like shallow cots to see if we had wet the bed. Those who had not we the bed could go with one of the older girls down to breakfast but those who had wet the bed had to strip off the sheets and carry them downstairs to a room where you put them into a big tub. You had to have another bath then, before you could go and have your breakfast and this was another occasion when the older girls were left to supervise you and if the nun was not around, they would sometimes make you wear the sheets over your head and shoulders to walk to the room with the tub.

**A Christmas Illness**

One Christmas, it must have been 1954 or 1955, the nuns decided to put on a big Concert for invited guests. There was great excitement and I remember all the Nursery children were dressed as angels and we had wings with sequins and it was all very pretty. For the first time I remember wearing something pretty. Something that was not grey or navy blue and made of prickly wool. And this is my first recollection of music.  I have no recollection of a rehearsal, only of the actual night of the concert and one of the things I had been chosen to do was go into the middle of the stage, kneel down next to a little cot with a baby doll in it and sing the lullaby, “Roses Whisper Goodnight” to the baby doll. ( I now know this was Brahms Lullaby ).

 All the other angels were around the edges of the stage and in the Wings ready to come out. I remember walking out to the cot and kneeling down but then I started to play with the doll. The piano began to play the opening notes but  I did not begin to sing. I kept playing with the doll and a nun in a stage whisper kept urging me to sing. I began to sing but then burst into tears and had to be carried off the stage. In fact, I was not well at all and had to be taken to the "Infirmary". But actually, when I think about that memory, one of only a small number from that time, there is a certain iReggiey in asking a orphan child  to sit by a doll’s cot and sing a Brahms  comforting Lullaby about Angels caring for you!

During my time at St Joseph’s two important things happened. Firstly, I was diagnosed with a very significant squint for which I have had to wear glasses all my life. Secondly, I started school a year early. Each morning we would all walk in twos and in uniform to a school somewhere not too far from the orphanage. I can remember nothing whatever about it, except I started quite early on the process to literacy.  My early experiences had not taught me to be timid. Quite the reverse. I think I had a stReggieg sense of my own destiny and was self confident from an early age. My only emotional feelings from that time were related to seeing Eileen. We were very much kept apart and hardly saw each other at all. I certainly had a sense that there was something different and possibly rather odd and stigmatising about us "St Joseph children". Although attending school during the day, I was still a part of the nursery, as I was only four years old. I had not graduated to the "older part" of the orphanage. Thank goodness.

Occasionally, and completely unplanned, I would catch a glimpse of Eileen either going to school, or maybe on the rare occasions when we were allowed in the garden in the summer.  Eileen always looked so sad. That is my memory of her. She was not as confident as me, though I did not understand this concept. She was much quieter and very watchful, as if she had learned that the world was not a very nice place to be. She always seemed worried that she would get into trouble if she spoke to me, so was always looking around her in case someone was going to reprimand her.  I think she wanted to be obedient; she wanted to avoid trouble. I did not see the world as a dangerous place because I had not seen as much or experienced as much as she had. She was also a part of a bigger world within St Joseph’s where she was learning her own ways of surviving with the bigger girls, who left to their own devices quite a lot of the time I am sure would be quite intimidating.

I  do not remember any acts of physical cruelty  on the part of the nuns, though we have had some contact from "old girls" of St Joseph's who spent much longer in the Home than Eileen and I, growing up from Nursery right through to working age at 15 years and beyond, and they do tell some stories of great harshness and what would today be described as emotional or physical punishment or abuse. But they will have to speak their own stories because I can only recount my own. I do remember that the nuns were not affectionate or very understanding. There seemed to be a deliberate policy of not forming emotional attachments with the children, and not encouraging the girls who were sisters to have any contact with each other for fear they would at some point be separated to different foster or adoptive parents.  You were expected from an early age to contribute to your upkeep by being unpaid domestic servants around the Home. St Joseph's had been an old "industrial school" or school for girls who maybe were 'difficult" and consequently there was a need to teach obedience and conformity and no nonsense in terms of emotional development.

This resulted in girls who spent any length of time in the Home, (once they transferred from the Nursery) to become rather secretive and possibly devious and sly too as they sought to conceal their wReggiegdoings and fears so you either became a bully or you repressed your own feelings and tried to stay in the background. This was certainly the path that Eileen had chosen, to fade into the background,  as she  learned the pecking order of survival with the older girls who were often left in charge of the younger children, including the Nursery children.  Girls who were themselves damaged or institutionalised were not really the best to be given untrained responsibility for the impressionably vulnerable and traumatised girls who found themselves at St Joseph's, where no explanation of why you were there, how long you would stay or what was going to happen to you was ever given. It was in a way like being given a custodial sentence without visiting rights, and without any understanding of when it would end. It was a system which was entirely un-child-friendly and which was about managing a social problem in a way which did not impact too much on the life of the Convent. The girls had to be fed and clothed and were. Some of those girls grew up so institutionalised that they were even encouraged to transfer to other convents and seminaries as domestic servants at the age of 15 years, having lived the whole of their lives in an institution with no one having really guided them emotionally or prepared them for a life beyond an institution. They were emotionally and developmentally impoverished, having not learned in a natural way how to relate except in teems of survival and basic care.

I have had one conversation with a former girl who spent from the age of 4 years to 15 years at St Joseph's. She was several years older than Eileen and I but had been contemporary with us, though there were so many girls as residents, she did not remember Eileen. Her description of her early years is similar to my sister Eileen's in that she tried to disappear into the background and not get noticed. She told me a little of her life after St Joseph's when she got a job and was placed in a kind of transitional Home where her wages were given over immediately to the Hostel. Eventually, she and another girl aged 15 ran away from this Hostel and eventually she got married and had a family.  She admitted that marriage had been difficult, mostly because she had not learned how to love and there was so much trauma and conflict from her experiences which had been far worse than mine or Eileen's, and left her very vulnerable.  She had had children, and said she was able to love them, and was still with her husband, but she felt that she had never really gotten over the experience of being at St Joseph's for such a long time.  The knowledge also that her own mother had placed her there, but kept a baby, and two older siblings a brother and a sister but could not cope with  her as a 4 year old  continues to hurt her to this day. She did experience a lot of bullying and witness the bullying of younger girls but said that the nuns were unwilling to believe or acknowledge this and girls who complained were regarded as "trouble-makers" and were threatened that they would be transferred to a much harsher Orphanage.  This is her testimony, not mine.

Imperfect though the system Eileen and I found ourselves in was, I have to balance this with the fact that clearly we were not in a good place living with a father in a squatters camp who had a track record of severe violence towards our mother, and who clearly was neglecting Eileen and I to such an extent that I was injured (presumably by being unsupervised at aged only two and a half),  and Eileen and I (according to our medical records) were both placed in an Isolation Hospital as Eileen had some medical condition which they felt required it. It is not as if, we were in a loving family home and were then placed at the Home. We were placed at the Home and were considered to be at risk and experiencing considerable neglect and hardship. By contrast, the Home  must have seemed to have been an improvement. We were being fed, clothed and housed and kept clean and warm. By today's standards of childcare, it was greatly lacking, but perhaps by the standards that applied in Children's Homes in the 1950s our experience was not at the extreme end of wanting.  My opinion might have been different if we had spent more years there and had to survive the indignities that other's have spoken of, but that was not our direct experience, so I cannot comment. That is for others to speak from their own truthful experience.

**We meet Tom and Mary Connolly**

Some time in the late 1940s, early 1950s,  a miner from Easington Colliery  called Tom Connolly and his wife Mary, found themselves responding to an advert to foster a child from St Joseph's.  They had married on New Year's Even 1938 and had remained childless. Thus began an unhappy process whereby they had on at least two separate occasions been given two sisters, around the ages of 10 and 11 I think for a "trial period" to see how the placement went. Unfortunately, the two sisters were a devious pair who, liberated from the harsh regime of St Joseph's, chose to exploit their newfound home and enviReggiement by stealing from Tom and Mary and stealing from the local shops!  Tom and Mary were a relatively naive couple, both from stReggieg Catholic family backgrounds with loving parents and a respect for others and these two young girls were more than they could cope with.  They were embarrassed and horrified by the behaviour of the two girls and swiftly got on the bus and took the girls back to Darlington.  The nuns were sorry about the experience, naturally.  I take a softer view of the girls behaviour than Tom or Mary did. I think if you deprive children of love, guidance, material things, freedom to roam and they have known nothing but their experience of surviving an institution it's understandable they would find the world beyond the Home as a tempting place.  Add to that the fact that they were probably in no way prepared for any transition to ordinary family life because that was simply not the  way things were done, then you can understand why they would be tempted to make hay while the sun is shining! Stealing sweets and chocolate bars which were so accessible from local shops must have been easy pickings for children who rarely, if ever saw such things.

At some point later, I have no idea of the timescale, the nuns approached Tom and Mary Connolly again with a second couple of girls. Tom and Mary were cautious and uncertain, having felt somewhat of a failure with the first two girls and also feeling that their won large extended family were not behind them in their venture.  They both had lots of brothers and sisters with families and they felt vulnerable being the only couple who had not produced a child. Mary was now in her early 40s and Tom two years older. They had been childless for 13 or 14 years. They had found it humiliating that they had "failed" to get a good match with the previous girls and did not want to repeat their mistakes, or confirm to the extended family that is "was a mistake" to go in for fostering other people's children. "You don't know what you are getting," was a constant refrain and one that was becoming tiresome.

However, Tom and Mary had a great respect for priests and nuns and did not want to appear to dismiss their second appeal lightly, so they did undertake to get two buses and make the longish journey from Easington Colliery to Darlington to visit the two new girls. The two new girls were a little bit younger than the first two and after a very brief encounter with them, the couple agreed to give it a go.  Unfortunately, the second two did not last even as long as the first two.  I think Mary was by this time, more alert and aware of the signs of deceit and she could not seem to bond with the girls who were very secretive and whispered all the time. Her view that children were sweet and lovely and always well-behaved and virtuous had been dented by the first two and was being utterly eroded by the second.  The girls were returned to St Joseph's and Tom and Mary gave up on the idea of ever being parents.

A couple of years later, the parish priest approached Tom and Mary saying he had been approached by St Joseph's about ONE little girl available for fostering who was much younger than the girls they had previously had, and would be approach Mr and Mrs Connolly and ask them if they would be willing to try again?  With the pressure from the parish priest and the lure of a much younger child, Mary and Tom Connolly made the double bus journey to Darlington again. It was to meet me, then about four or four and a half years old.

 I still have some clear memories of this first encounter. I remember Mary wore a white and black trimmed coat and Tom wore a grey suit with very wide trouser bottoms and a trilby hat which he let me wear. I was on my own with them and a nun I had not met before. We sat in a lavendar-wax polished parlour at the fReggiet of the house. I wore a cotton dress with belt and no cardigan.

I asked them, “Are you going to be my mummy and daddy?”.

They were a bit taken aback by the directness of the question so I followed it up with another, “Are you going to take my Eileen?”

 Tom and Mary both looked a bit startled, and the nun said tactfully, “Helen, does have a sister. She’s very nice. Would you like to meet her?”

Tom and Mary had been married about 17 years and their experience of taking two sisters on two previous occasions was not something they cared to think about.  Indeed, several years before, when they had started this process, they had actually been seeking for one boy. Boys were not the speciality of St Joseph's, and it was to St Joseph's that their initial enquiries had been sent, triggering this protracted process. What were they to do. They did not really want to try with another two girls. One small girl had brought them back. Now it was increasing. But Tom and Mary were dutiful and respectful in the presence of the clergy and this nun was not pushy. She added, "...Eileen is a very sweet girl and very shy."

Tom and Mary would have liked to have had time to think about it and to get to know the little one a bit more but they did not like to appear reluctant. They liked me and did not want to put that at risk. Eventually, they agreed to meet Eileen, who unlike me, had had no preparation for this visit. I had been told that I was "going to meet your new mammy and daddy". Eileen had been told nothing.

I don't know if I actually remember this bit, or if it is a memory I have of what Mary later told me of this first visit, but Eileen apparently came in holding the nun's hand.  (Holding hands with nuns was clearly not something which happened except when visitors appeared so Eileen must have been naturally apprehensive.)  Mary remembered Eileen looking very lost and shy.  She was the total opposite of me. I of course was delighted just to see her. An added bonus.  Eileen was a really, pretty child and her shyness added to her attractiveness.  Mary and Tom must have recognized instantly that she was as far from the naughty girls they had previously had as could be. Eileen definitely brought out the mothering instinct in Mary because few can resist a child that looks so pretty and so sad. Eileen never spoke much in the meeting, probably totally confused by what was happening. Mary later said she spoke quietly and even to the couple at this early stage, the difference between us was quite striking. I was confident and chattery and responsive. Eileen waited to be asked a question before she answered. Underneath, Eileen was tougher than she looked, but that would not be evident for a few years. Currently, she was still a very vulnerable little girl who had learned to mistrust others. I think in a way, mamma always found me easier, not because I was a good child but because I was very open and things showed in my face immediately. Eileen had learned to hide her feelings from others and Mam I think mistook this for furtiveness and secrecy, which it was not. I think she felt Eileen was holding back and I think Eileen did hold back because she was anxious and afraid of getting into trouble. She was learning a new set of rules and ways of living and she was only 7 years old. This lady, this Mary was also now getting a lot of affection from me which had formerly been exclusively Eileen's. Eileen must have been aware on some level that I was as happy as a pig in muck in my new enviReggiement, and she was still a bit scared that it was all going to go pear-shaped because she had memories that I did not of how things can do this. I would be more up fReggiet and apologetic for my failings (if caught out) but Eileen would be like a rabbit caught in a headlight.  Her silence would seem annoying to Mary who wanted immediate recognition of contrition for wReggiegdoing and could still even when she got it, make her displeasure felt for hours afterwards or harking back to the incident later. I think this was what her experience of being brought up had been. She had a loving large family but sin was sin and lying was lying and had to be stamped out when you were young or it took root and you grew into a dishonest and untrustworthy person. That was her belief so she kept things up as her way of ensuring that we got the message. I'm probably making this sound more planned than it was when these ways of behaving are more instinctive and learned. But what I am trying to say is Mam was a woman of her time, or her own Catholic upbringing of her own family history and we all make mistakes big and small. I think Mam did make more blunders with Eileen than she did with me for the reasons and circumstances I have already outlined and you just have to look at any family and see how differently children grow up in the same family and turn out differently. Our genes and our early experiences have lot to answer for...

I don’t remember how the meeting ended at St Joseph's after that first visit of Tom and Mary to Darlington, but some weeks later, we went for an extended visit to live with them over an Easter holidays, or maybe it was the summer holidays.  We both liked it at 15 St Nicholas Terrace, Easington Colliery. We each had our own room which was  neat and tidy all the time with a  soft bed to sleep in with lovely flannelette sheets and a big shiny quilt and eiderdown. There was nice bathroom with only one bath in it, not like the rows of baths in the Children's home where everyone was communally washed and bathed. The house had a cosy, intimate feel to it. Immediately outside the house was a bit of waste ground where we could play, as well as playing in the house. The house had a "fReggiet room" which was only used on special occasions. We got to know the neighbours and the other children in the street and used to ride their scooters and bikes.  Some of our new cousins even gave us a big scooter for ourselves. We had pop and ginger ale delivered in bottles that you returned to the shop and got a few coppers for. Our cousins had guns and cowboy outfits that I loved and I would dress up like a boy as much as possible and wear my Tom's Trilby Hat and his belts fastened three times around my waste and pretend to be the Lone Ranger. I really wanted to be a boy then. My cousins made me a catapult which was quickly taken from me when the thick elastic snapped back and gave me a nasty welt across my face.  I learned from a neighbour's child how to cut turf squares out of the grass on the wasteground and hide things that you could go later back and find. I learned to climb trees and run along high walls balancing and there was an old rusty skate in our outside washhouse and I would skate with one skate tied together with string. Sometimes we would put an old book on the top of the skate or a piece of plywood and ride the skate like a minature skateboard sitting on our bottoms and invariably scraping our knees. it was a time of great freedom. There was little girl who lived a few doors down the street who was year older than me and she had a gorgeous cream three wheeler bike. The big ones you never see now with bottle green mudguards and a green boot below the seat. She used to let me ride this glorious vehicle up and down the street which was on a little slope and I was in heaven. This bike was the ultimate thing which I always wanted. Every day I would go and ask if I could ride it until I think the girl realised I did not really want to play with her, I just wanted to experience this riding of a bike, something I had never done. I learned very quickly also to ride a two wheeler bike, long before Eileen did, and I think I also remember encouraging Eileen to learn, which she did but she was always less interested in outdoor things than I was.  Bikes were expensive things in those days and most kids had hand me downs and most kids road bikes that were far too big for them so you had to stand in order to reach the pedals.  You would give "backs" to the kids who did not have a bike. I never had a new bike, and nor did Eileen. We did in our late primary early secondary get given a couple of bikes from my cousins, one at a time, but they were not very nice bikes and very old.  The first thing I ever bought when I became a teacher was a brand new bike and I loved riding it around Stafford. I had never lost the desire for bike riding which I had got on that first visit to 15 St Nicholas Terrace when I was only four or four and half years old. I still think lovingly of that little cream and green tricycle and wonder what the girl's name was and if that 63 year old even remembers her old bike!

We could roam about freely in Easington, then, but not too far from St Nicholas Terrace. It was a very easy time to grow up. There was not all the fear and child protection there is now. People were less scared and children were given so much unsupervised play. Especially when I got to be about 7 or 8 years old myself. We would go all over Easington, and even occasionally down to the dangerous cliffs and beach where we were not supposed to be. The pit was a working pit at that time and there were train tracks to cross and overhead coal buckets that carried loads of scrap coal and tipped them into the sea. We had lots of cousins near our age that we would see and aunts and uncles who had houses close by that we could visit. There was a chip shop just across the green and there was a grocer's shop. Mary would bake a lot at that time so there was often the smell of apple pies and sponge cakes and scones. We always ate on a big square dining table with four matching chairs. There was not such thing as eating on your knee or TV dinners. Breakfast, dinner (lunchtime) and "tea" with a bit of supper later, maybe a bowl of cornflakes or some jam and toast or crumpets, these were centred around the dining table. We witnessed things like "washday" which I always thought was a very exciting experience with a big tin electric "boiler" to boil wash the sheets and towels, filling the downstairs room with steamy, hot air.

We had an Uncle Tom, my mother's youngest surviving brother who lived in Coventry and used to come up to Easington once a year to visit his sisters and brother and he would always take a whole group of the cousins down to the beach and take some potatoes and light a fire on the beach and cook the potatoes until the skins were black and we would eat them. It was such fun. The potatoes were horrible, but you ate them anyway because it was an adventure.

Mary, whom we were initially encouraged to call "Aunty Mary" had a very large, enamelled washing machine which not many folk had at that time. I used to love to see the clothes twisting and turning when you opened the lid.  I loved helping to peg the clothes out on the line and pick the clothes out of the hot water with a big wooden pincer thing. We had "pop" for the first time, and fish and chips out of the newspaper, fresh from the chip shop less than a hundred yards from the house.

As well as being introduced to all the extended family, we were introduced to the parish community, two Catholic parishes in the small mining place of Easington. Our Uncle Peter, who was nearly blind, ran the boiler house and heating for the church and Aunty Mary used to sort of lead the Choir, which as not very good, and only had a few wheezy middle aged women in it, all of whom competed to sing louder and more operatic than each other.

It was a great community, full of some lovely people and others you would call "characters". There was always one man, Mick, who had a very large family, and he would inevitably turn up drunk to the Christmas Midnight Mass or the Easter Vigil, and Tom would be the gentle man who would have to encourage him to leave. Tom was also the "doorman" who used to carry out the lady who always fainted during Mass, much to the irritation of those around her who felt she "ought to know better"! The family GP was amongst the congregation, as was the local manager of the Timothy White's Chemist, the Equi ,Family who ran the only ice cream place which also had a Juke Box so was a magnet at the time of the Teddy Boys and later the Mods and Rockers. Everyone knew everyone else, or at least knew who they were. There was a "Tomby", a local policeman called Mr Luke,  who lived in a Police House" which in those days was provided with the job. He was the same policeman throughout my childhood and was well-liked and well-respected. In those days, it was hard to get up to mischief in public because everyone knew you, and knew who your parents were, and knew where you lived. And if you messed about at a bus stop, or indeed anywhere, adults would intervene and put you straight as to what was expected of your behaviour. It wasn't a flawless age where everyone behaved and was perfect, but it was an age where children were expected to respect adults and do as they were told and in the main, unless you came from some horribly dysfunctional family, that is what you tended to do.

So getting used to this novel holiday with Aunty Mary and Uncle Tom, whom I so much wanted to call  Mam and Dad was not difficult at all for me. And I don't think it was hard for Eileen either because we were being cared for, fed well and were having a lot of freedom and fun. Above all, we were together in a nurturing setting which we had never before experienced. Eileen was growing less wary, but still at this time was the quieter of the two of us. She was always herself with me though, in the private times we had together. She showed none of the reserve or withdrawnness she sometimes kept for her public appearances. I had no idea of much of this reserve until I reflected back on it and my image of her was a fun loving, happy child who loved playing and teasing and being as daft and as loud as I was, and we both loved singing and play acting. But she was selective about who saw her as she really was.

**Back to St Joseph's Without any Explanation or Preparation**

It was devastating therefore after this amazing time in Easington, when I had begun to think that my life had at last started, (and the testimony to my memories of this time show that I was fired up and taking so much in)  when one day, the same dark green Morris Traveller which has delivered us to Easington arrived and Eileen and I were put back in the car and taken back to St Joseph’s. It was like the most awful betrayal. Nothing prepared me for that rejection. There was no explanation that this was just a temporary return. We had not even been told that that day was our last day. Suddenly,  we were back in the familiar routines of St Joseph’s, more dismal than I had even remembered it, and no one asked or talked about why we were back there, or asked where we had been,  or explained that we would might be going back, or that this was standard practise. A  temporary arrangement whilst paperwork was undertaken. It was another example of how children were moved like inconsequential pieces around a board game they did not understand. I'm  sure it must have been quite traumatic for Tom and Mary too who clearly loved us a lot, and wanted us, but at least they knew the rules of this game. They presumably had been told not to tell us in case it upset us. And they would never really know just how much. We left 15 St Nicholas Terrace in shock and dismay and anguish, feeling we had done something terribly wReggieg and were being punished and rejected and sent back to the place we had almost forgotten in our new found freedom and normality.

I have no idea how long this time at St Joseph’s actually lasted, whether it was weeks or months. All I know is that it was very traumatic for me and I think a lot of my memories of the Home are from this time. This need to see Eileen again. The nightmares and the bed wetting and the aftermath of all of that.  I would cry a lot and have trouble sleeping and they had to put me back in a cot to stop me sleep-walking. I began bed wetting every night for which I had the humiliating aftermath and generally I think I was in quite a lot of emotional distress. I had also got used to a protracted and uninterrupted daily access to Eileen, and again the regime was rigid. Back in the Home we were separated again. No contact.

 I can remember getting told off quite a bit by a nun at nighttime coming with a torch and shouting at me to be quiet because I was disturbing everyone with my shouting out and crying.  If someone had just taken the time to explain the whole process to me, I might have been more reassured and settled.  I had not cried or got upset when we had first arrived at St Joseph’s. I had been younger and accepted things without question. Things were different now. I had learned what a family was, and what freedom was and total uninterrupted contact I was also able to articulate my feelings and ask questions and say why I was unhappy and what I wanted. I wanted nice Tom and Mary, and my nice house, and all the things we had been introduced to in that brief stay in Easington. I liked being cuddled and listened to and encouraged to sing and dance. And Eileen. And now I was back in this place and I did not like it at all. There was no singing and dancing and no one to be interested in what you had to say.

During this period also, there was another upsetting incident.  There was a holiday of some sort and all the children were going to be placed with a  holiday family. Surprisingly, Eileen and I were going to go to a family together. I have no idea where this family was located but when we got there neither Eileen or I liked it and were not made to feel welcome by any of the family. I think sometimes, you make an assumption that people volunteering to give an orphaned child a holiday must surely be doing it out of altruistic motives.  I do not think the family we were placed with had particularly kindly motives. I don’t remember too much about it but I do remember  I stopped crying and wailing in my cot when I got back to St Joseph’s. It was more of a relief. I think I had sort of accepted that this was where I was going to stay, so might as well get on with it because nothing lasts.

During the two years that Eileen and I were at St Joseph’s Orphanage  we had no visit from any of our birth family at all. Well, I do have a recollection of one brief visit from our father who brought me a doll and Eileen a Cinderella watch in a glass slipper. Eileen told me it was our "real Dad". I had no idea who he was. I don’t remember anything he said or we said, and it only happened once so I suspect it must have been very early on in our time there. Well before we had the visit to Easington and Tom and Mary's house.  Our mother, grandmother or other family members,( all of whom I subsequently learned lived locally) never came to visit.  I can’t think of any reason why our mother or her new partner would not have been able to visit, especially as she told me years later that she had told her partner all about the circumstances of her abandoning Eileen and I and it has always been her intention to come back one day and come back and get us. Our grandmother was only 43 or 44 at the time we were admitted to St Joseph’s so it was not as if she was an old woman, or infirm, and she continued to live in the next town to where the Home was situated. I find that very strange indeed.

I find it odd also that our mother had brothers who would have been in their twenties, and they did not visit either. It was as though Eileen and I dropped out of this family like stones falling into a deep hole. This was a fairly large extended family without any real curiosity about what happened to the first two grandchildren! Our mother went on to have two more children which she did care for and raise, and her brothers and sisters all went on to marriage and family life, and presumably became good parents, despite the rather chaotic life their own mother Evelyn had had to cope with, the deprivations and the uncertainty. But still, no one was curious about little Eileen and Helen who had been dumped in the local Orphanage aged two and a half and four and a half years old.  Not even in adulthood, did any of them try to find out what had happened twenty years earlier.  I think it shows that the core family to begin with, (and I include the Stephenson’s and the Morgans) equally in this), were clearly quite dysfunctional in their own family dynamics to have any bond with the two little abandoned girls. My mother's younger siblings were not to blame in any way for this because they too had had a tough time growing up in different households, and having to cope with poverty caused by their father (my grandfather Joseph Morgan ) who although in work, used to drink most of his earning away. In 1947, our grandmother Evelyn Morgan divorced the feckless Joe and married another man. Eileen and I were still in the home at that time and our mother was 24 years old and living with her new man somewhere in Wolverhampton. Evelyn had a sons Joseph aged 23, John aged 21, George 19, Bernard aged 11 years and also Mary aged 15 years. Her only grandchildren, Eileen and I, were living only 9 miles from her but she never once came to see us. Nor did anyone else.

**Back to St Nicholas Terrace, this time as long term fostered children, but still with the uncertainty whether our birth parents whom we could no longer remember, would ever come back to take us away.**

Sometime in 1955, probably before the start of the September term,  Eileen and I returned to 15, St Nicholas Terrace, in Easington Colliery to live with Tom and Mary Connolly. We never asked if this was going to be a permanent thing. We held our breath on that one. Mary was a good mother, but a bit insecure. I think she always feared that our "real mother" might come back and claim us and this was a constant worry for her. They were discouraged from trying to adopt us because the Social Worker assigned to our case felt that as both parents were still alive, would refuse because of the acrimony between them, and it might just remind them of our existence and put the cat amongst the pigeons. Mary lived for most of our childhood in this period of insecurity and uncertainty, made worse by the longings she had always wanted for her own child, and the disappointments that had brought her.  She was affectionate and loving but she could also be moody. Not in the sense of long periods of depression or anything, but if we upset her in any way, she would sometimes say that she would send us back, or pack our case again. It was something I know she did not mean, and should not have said, but she was human, and sometimes parents make mistakes. She would make it quite difficult for you to get back in her good books if we transgressed in small ways. This was not always the case, but you had to tread carefully sometimes. Mostly she was very giving and easy going but she was very strict about truth telling. For children who had grown up without any understanding of what telling the truth was, we had to begin to learn very quickly what the new culture in this family was. Telling lies was not only wReggieg and dishonest, it was also emphasised that it was a sin. It was a sin which we readily engaged in if we felt we could get away with it. This was simply because in the Home, you trusted no one and you lived on your wits. You became self reliant and so at first, we had to learn how to live in this new world where things were not going to be taken away from you by someone else. Where people meant what they said, where people generally were good and kind and really did care for you. But these were also the Tom and Mary who had allowed us to go back to St Joseph's when he had only just got used to enjoying life.

At first therefore, we had to learn the rules of living in a family. We had to behave in a certain way and we were now exposed to a vast range of adults, none of whom wore nun's habits. We had never seen such a collection of different people. And suddenly we had nice clothes to wear. Mary spent a lot of money on clothes for us. We had come with one small hard brown suitcase between us with a chain of underwear and a nightdress and a school uniform which I had had at my previous school. We had one pair of shoes each and I identical cotton dress each. Eileen had the watch she believes our father had given us and I had the "walkie talkie doll".  Mary bought us specially made kilts from Stewart tartan which she sent for from Scotland and which had yards of material in them. We had seer-sucker blouses and cardigans and several dresses and Eileen had a pair of patent-leather black shoes and I had a pair of cherry red sandals. I had a navy blue "burberry" coat and we both had pale blue coats with velvet buttons and collars.  The first summer that we were with them, they took us on a week's holiday to Dublin, and we went on a very long train journey on a steam train all the way from Easington to Holyhead and across on a horrible ferry on the Irish Sea which rocked and swayed and made me very sick, and also Mary. But the holiday was lovely. I remember walking across a famous bridge in Dublin and an Irish priest stopped to talk to us as a family and taught us a prayer to say at night time which we always did after that, adding it to our prayers as we knelt at our bedside each night.

Initially, we called them Uncle Tom and Aunty Mary but within a very short time, we quickly began to call them Mam and Dad. Mary kept a neat and orderly house and the house was their own which was unusual in Easington as all the houses were mostly Colliery owned or Council houses. They had had their own house since they got married in 1938 but within three years of fostering us, I think the cost of having children was taking its toll and they sold the house and moved into a Council house at 21 Hazel Crescent where we lived until I qualified as a teacher.

We were one of the first people in Easington to rent a television, a 14” screen in a large wooden frame. In the "fReggiet room" there was a big and very hard, horse-hair filled leather sofa in it. This room was always immaculately tidy. The back room which we called the living room also doubled as a dining room and had a ceramic range in it which was used for baking. This was a relatively small room and rather dark as the only sash window opened onto a small back yard. There was a kitchen and a wash-house as well.

Mam had a system for keeping the place neat and tidy. Most of the miners wives were stay at home mums in those days so Monday most of them had as washing day, whether it rained or not, did not matter. It just meant that you had to dry the clothes on an airer in a different room or in fReggiet of the open fire. On good days you could hang them on the line. You always started the washing early  which meant lighting the fire early enough to heat the water a bit before you used the electricity to heat it further.  You needed to get it out on the line early in order to give it time to dry and bring it in before the end of the day. This was the North East and sea mists and wet weather are common on the coast coming of the North Sea. Tuesday was iReggieing day. Wednesday was bedrooms and changing the linen and Thursday and Friday were shopping and doing the brasses and giving the fire a good clean out, if necessary, setting fire to the chimney to blast the soot out of the top. It was very bad form to do this to the chimney on  Mondays or Tuesdays when folks were usually always engaged in hanging washing out! Saturday was usually a shopping day too for the Sunday roast and also a baking day. Each day, a meal was cooked and this was dependent on which shift your Dad was doing at the pit. But always the women in Easington would prepare a hot meal for their husband coming in. One of my Dad's favourites was Leeks and Fritters. I was not all that keen, I must say and another one he had usually on a Thursday was liver and bacon. I hated liver. Every single Sunday, except Easter or Christmas, Mam always cooked a tiny piece of beef and made the most delicious Yorkshire Puddings. The desert was always the same: home made rice pudding.

Eileen and I started school at Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic Primary School in Flemming Field, Shotton Colliery. A lot of the Catholic children from Easington travelled on the bus together to attend this school so we would walk to the bus stops together at the beginning and end of each day.  During Lent, there would be a very early Mass in Easington and we would all be encouraged by the school to attend daily Mass and then we would all leave straight after Communion and often have to run very fast to the bus stop to ensure that we  caught the bus to school. It was only about five or six miles to Shotton but it was the normal service bus which stopped at every bus stop and only operated once and hour. I can remember there was extremely heavy snowfall in the winter of 1961 to 1962. We often had to stand about waiting for buses which could be up to an hour late and we would be enjoying the blizzard conditions. We would arrive home so cold and so hungry! When we got to school, the teachers would allow us to eat our sandwiches in the classroom but I was always so hungry I had eaten mine on the bus. We all got free school milk then and it was usually frozen in the bottles with the silver tops pushed up.

I loved school and the first day I started at  Our Lady of Lourdes RC at Shotton I was astonished that some of the new children were crying and sobbing for their mothers!  I simply could not understand why they were crying when there was a  smashing Rocking Horse and a big doll’s house and a shop in the corner of the classroom.  I think I made a bit of a nuisance of myself in the first few days because every time the teacher tried to introduce something new, I would flash my hand up with the answer and tell her I could do something, like recite the Alphabet!  My Mam had no idea that I had actually been to school in Darlington, so when I told the teacher I had already been to school and could write my name and so on, she did not at first believe me.

Eileen and I both settled well into life in our new home. Eileen remained generally quiet at first and was cautious about strangers. When out in public, she always behaved well, always with that look of concern that she might get into trouble. Conversely, I had very little interest in what people thought so I usually was unaware that I might be being watched! At home, Eileen gradually learned to relax and be a bit more trusting. Mam said to me years later that Eileen had taken time to settle, uncertain who to trust. She was a bit wary of people and a bit lacking in confidence. Eventually, in the home she was just as loud and just as noisy as I was and could let her hair down and be as silly and childlike, but outside the house, she was always so much more circumspect than I was. She made a real distinction between the safety of home and the lurking dangers outside. I think she never lost her insecurity during her childhood and teenage years. Yes, she was popular and sociable, but I think she always felt that life was going to tumble in on top of her, and she was always on her guard.

There was a family in Easington who bullied and intimidated whoever they could and most kids learned to stay off their patch and avoid them and when that was not possible, to avoid a confReggietation. This family were troublesome and went looking for trouble and unfortunately they lived not too far from us and we had to frequently criss-cross their territory or street in our journeys to the bus stop or shops.  From about the age of 8 years onwards, I was definitely a bleep on their radar because I was not the type of child who would meekly acquiesce or run away. I was not confReggietational either, but I would stand my ground and I would rather be hit than let anyone think I was afraid of them. I can remember a number of occasions when the older sister of this clan, who was at least three or four years older than I was, always seeking me out to frighten and intimidate and it often resulted in my having my hair pulled or being dragged to the ground, punched or kicked.  In these circumstances, I would always retaliate, and my Dad would often  go around to see their father to get them to stop. Their Dad  was a nice man who knew what his children were like. He had been a widower for a long time and he was always very apologetic about it all. For a while the bullying would stop and then insidiously start again. When I went to secondary school, this same girl used to get the same bus. One day I had been suffering from a very bad case of Impetigo on my finger for a few weeks which was not responding to treatment and my finger was red raw and very thin and not looking very much like a finger at all.  This girl came up to me at the bus stop after school and started to intimidate me and I had this great idea that I would show her my finger and tell her that she would catch the infection if  she ever touched me. She was horrified when I  took the bandage off and showed her. She never ever picked on me again.

Eileen did not provoke such negative responses in others as I could sometimes do by being over-confident when I should have been more prudent.  Eileen avoided trouble. I did not seek it, but I did not run from it either. I can remember many a time at a bus stop she would stand there looking neat and clean and calm and I would have the coat buttoned up incorrectly or flapping around my shoulders. More likely  than not I would have found ways to climb on top of the bus shelter, or invent games to pass the time away.  People would often comment to Mam about what a “good” child Eileen was, and the kindest thing they ever said about me was “she’s different”.

In November 1960 we were all coming back from school one afternoon. It was getting dark and it was also frosty and foggy as we got off the bus.  I’m told on very good authority that  we were having a race back home, a whole group of us including some of our cousins and I was first and ran behind the bus before it had moved off and straight into the path of a lorry.  I had head injuries and a badly snapped Femur which in those days meant you had to stay in hospital for three months or more  until it was healed. I woke up several days later in Sunderland General Hospital on a Children’s Ward, with no memory of how I had got there and no memory of the accident.  I was in hospital until March. Even in the hospital I was eventually something of a challenge because after about two and a half months they took off this traction frame which had been holding my Femur in position and said after a few days they would begin to teach me to walk again. I thought about this and wondered why they thought I could not walk? I could walk before I had the accident so surely I did not need instruction.  That evening after our supper, I slipped out of bed and attempted to stand.  There was a terrible crashing sound as I fell instantly to the floor in a lot of pain.  I was also in a lot of trouble with the Sister in charge of the ward who eventually tied both my legs to the bottom of the bed so I could not try such a thing again.  I had to go back in traction again for another week as well before physiotherapy could begin!

My childhood was a happy one and a normal one too.  I did not spend a lot of time thinking about St Joseph’s, or our life before that, or even about our natural parents. When I did think about it, it was always in private. It was not something I felt I could easily raise with Mam and Dad as it would be a reminder that we were not their natural children and there was always the anxiety in Mam that because we were only fostered and not adopted, the parents could at some point come back into our lives and try to take us away. Adoption was not an option and the social worker advised against this as in order to adopt, you have to seek the permission of the parents and this could be an unwelcome reminder to them and who knows where this might lead.

So in a way, the years in primary and secondary moved in a normal way. We were well integrated into home, school and parish life. We fitted in. We had the occasional holidays, two in Ireland, one in London, several in Birmingham and a couple with our cousin Mary in Lincoln. We would go out to visit the nuns in Harrogate where our mother had been in domestic service in the 1920s and where several of the maids had themselves entered the convent but with whom Mam had kept up a lifeline correspondence. We did not have a holiday every year, but I think we had more holidays than most kids in Easington enjoyed. Dad was good saver. He paid all the bills and he was always saving a tiny bit here and there in different little savings clubs where he would put 5 or 10 shillings or a pound way occasionally. He would occasionally put a couple of shilling each way on a horse and if it won, he would always save the money and it would go towards something like a new dress for Mam, shoes for us, or longer term for little holiday. Once, when I was only 15 years old, an insurance policy matured and he came in and announced that he had bought us air tickets to go for a two week holiday to Bray in Ireland at a B&B. It was amazing. Another time, I had gone on for years about having a dog and they had had dogs in their early marriage but had got very upset when the dogs died so they never replaced it. One day I came home from school, I think I was about 11 years old and he told me to fetch his slippers from under a chair and when I bent down there was a gorgeous little black, white and brown puppy there for me and Eileen. We loved that little dog though she was a bit naughty but very cute and so we had our beloved pet for several years. But then a couple of times the dog, called Scamp, had gone into our neighbours kitchen and eaten the roast beef which they had set aside for dinner and so Dad took the dog to the vet and had it put down. It was heartbreaking and I felt Dad had been very cruel but he said, "No. Once a dog starts doing that it will go and on doing that so it is better to put them to sleep." That probably is not allowed by vets nowadays. Animal rights, that's new and a good thing too!

Those years from St Joseph's through to the end of our formal schooling and the start of our lives as workers when we were only 15 years old went uneventfully in the nice sense of the word. Not that we had materially all we wanted. We certainly did not and were not an affluent family, but with careful husbandry, Mary and Tom did provide all we actually needed. And most importantly, though they did not get everything right and obviously made mistakes as all parents do, they did a great job in steering two vulnerable little girls through childhood and into adult life without any great additional trauma or problems Life could have been so awful for us if we had remained institutionalised at St Joseph's, or gone to the wReggieg foster parents. But it makes me feel now that it was to be that we were chosen and they were chosen for us to enable us to be the people we are today.

**Eileen to Nursing and Helen to Teaching**

Eileen began her training as a nurse around 17 or 18 years old in Sunderland and I when I was 18, I chose to go in to teaching.  We both passed the milestones of 18 and 21 and as adults, there was now no longer any fear that our lives could be disrupted by either of our natural parents seeking to make contact with us.  After qualifying Eileen eventually got married and when I began my own teaching career, life just seemed to be good and it was as though we had had this shaky start but all had come good.  We both had so much to look forward to and Mam and Dad has also had the pleasure and the pride of helping us  grow and develop.

Surprisingly, I think Eileen had more of a troublesome teenage time than I did. This is because she was  popular with boys, and had a life outside of Easington, as she travelled to St Joseph's Grammar School in Hartlepool to school and was meeting people and friends outside those confined to the Easington  Catholic school children. She was pretty and she wanted to grow up faster than I did. I was a much more eager to please Mary and Tom and did not find their over protectiveness too intrusive, especially Mam's, because I could sort of get around it and still get up to mischief outside, mostly with my cousin Kathleen who liked to be led and rarely came up with the ideas herself. Kathleen was my constant playmate at home and for time out at the Recreation Ground. When we got into our teens though, she became just a bit more interested in "experimenting" with boys than I was and would sometimes go off with her friends from school and get up to things which I  wanted no part of. Not bad things really, just once she told me she went to the caravan of a friend at Crimdon Dene and boys were in there and asking the girls to go in and take their bras off and let them grope them and Kathleen did. I was completely freaked out by the whole idea and wouldn't go with her to Crimdon yet her mother, Mary's cousin  Aunty Mary Ellen constantly carped on to Mam that I was a "bad influence" on poor impressionable and less bright Kathleen. I wasn't. Kathleen was a follower but I never led her into any sexual adventures or bad things. The worst thing we ever did was meet with some boys and play football or run through the cornfields at Petrol Lauren over Mr Bryson's fields in summer, leaving our tracks. Or jumping on his haystacks and causing them to collapse. That resulted in one fierce and rare ticking off by my Dad who asked one day,  "Helen, have you been up Petrol Lauren on Mr Bryson's farm?"

"No Dad!" I lied, "Why?"

"Because I saw Mr Bryson and he told me you and another girl and some boys keep going in his fields and squashing the corn!"

"No, Dad. That's not me."

"Ok" said Dad.

But later I found out that Mam had found my girly Diary where I had made frequent entries about having great fun with Flopsy, Peter, his little brother and Kathleen and I and Mam and Dad already knew when I lied that this was the case. Still, it taught me to stay clear of Mr Bryson's land so we went up to Little Thorpe Farm where the farmer was not in our parish and used to stalk around there  making adventures and playing hide and seek in the fields in all weathers.

I don't remember Eileen ever coming on these things. She had to do homework, which I never did in my Secondary Modern School, except for learning poems by heart, so my evenings were often spent until it got dark, with Kathleen. We used also to sneak out on a Monday evening when our mothers were at Our Lady's Guild and stay out then run to the Church Hall just to check that they were still in their meeting and their Bingo fund raiser before running home, doing the washing up and pretending we had been in for the three hours!

Mam was a bit over-protective with us, but I think all mothers in the baby boomer years were but she could also be very relaxed and I do remember she loved to let Eileen and I play and sing and act and give her little shows and she never tired of us doing this. She would let us pull sheets and blankets over the clothes horse and build little make-do houses to play in right in the middle of the small sitting room. She would trust us to clean the fire grates and even light the fires from when we were quite young, something I find so implausible now to think about. She would let you bake if you just got the idea into your head to do that. She even once let me loose with a big rusty scythe on the long, long grass at the bottom of our garden and toiled all day slashing away at the thick tufts until my hands were blistered and I could do no more. She just let me go on and on doing it because I had this fantasy that I would clear the whole side of the garden, mow it and make it like a bowling green lawn. Such was my enthusiasm. Of course, it just made a huge mess for Dad to clear up later. She made a very comfortable home and I do remember that certainly as we were growing up, maybe not so as she got older, but the house always smelt nice and sparkled and was clean. Later when I grew up, standards slipped a bit in the cleaning department because she left more and more to Dad and became a bit lazy or maybe just a bit too tired to keep up the pressure of housework.

Mum and Dad both went to church a lot. It had always been that like in their own family lives and the Church was central to everything they did, and how they saw their lives. All the socialising they ever did was related to it and all the sisters and brothers and their families, and cousins,  (most of them lived in Easington as well) also were part of the social fabric of the Catholic Community.  So we fitted into this too and it became a way of life. Sometimes you just did not feel like going to Mass on a Tuesday evening or Benediction on a Thursday and Sunday evening as well, but it was expected and you did it.

I don't think you realise as you are growing up how much these things are shaping your values. Just like when you are learning Maths, or your tables, you don't know what use they are ever going to be until you start to rely on the skills and knowledge you have absorbed as a child. Occasionally, Kathleen and I when it was a freezing cold winter's night would encourage our mother's not to go out into the cold and catch the bus to church but that we would go, and sometimes they would stay in and feel content that their children were going instead. But instead of going we would run all the way to church, (see who was there in case they asked and which priest said the Mass) and then we would run back with our bus fare and get some chips and not go to Mass at all.  This backfired spectacularly one Tuesday night when the suspicious Aunty Mary Ellen did infect get the bus to Mass after all and there was no sign of us. She was also at my house when I came in and gave a glorious litany of all the people who were there! Yes. She now had proof positive that I really was a bad influence on Kathleen and after she went out, although Mam was very cross about my cheating and lying about it, I think she was also quite annoyed with Mary Ellen for yet again suggesting that everything was always "Helen's fault"! So in a way, I don't think she was quite as cross as she might have been if it had been me and Eileen who had deceived her!

Eileen, for all her popularity and invites and desire to grow up faster than Mam could cope with,  really was just a naive girl of the 60s who was into all things about The Beatles and pop culture.  When she began work she wanted to explore going out to discos and having fun with friends. Mam found all that part very difficult, especially as Eileen was living away from home at that time in Yorkshire and Eileen was perfectly trustworthy but it was a different generation to our parents in a world that was changing very rapidly. They , or rather Mam, was always worried that about girls in being vulnerable to predatory men who just wanted to have sex and hen dump them.   I was quite a slow developer and not very interested in boys. Or shall I say I was very interested, but not very confident because I never felt that I was pretty or attractive so I shied away from situations until I was much older. Whereas boys were hanging around on bikes outside our gate always asking me to go inside and ask Eileen to come outside, I never took any notice of boys who showed any interest in me. I always thought they were really after my prettier friends. Eileen was two years older than me anyway, and I was actually quite immature emotionally for my age which probably made me appear a lot younger. Mam did not seem to worry about me. She worried about Eileen all the time. Eileen was still inclined to be secretive and keep her own council, whereas I was a bit of an open book. When I did discover some boys were interested in me and my cousin Kathleen, when we were about 13 or 14 years old, we used to meet in secret at the Recreation Ground or the Library because I sort of knew from Eileen's experience that Mam was very prickly about the whole subject of boys.  It was a generational thing and with girls wearing mini skirts those days, Mam was all of a dither about how to protect us and constantly talked about proper behaviour and modesty. And waiting for the right man, and saving yourself sexually for him, though she never totally found it easy to actually use the words or give the sex talk. Things were said in innuendoes and understatements.  Her favourite expressions were, "plenty more fish in the sea"; it's best to marry a catholic like yourself; "keep yourself pure till after you are married."

Mam also had quite firm views on how good it was to marry a Catholic because the emphasis in her day, and in all Catholic families was to try to marry someone of the same faith. Eileen had fallen in love with Brian who was not a Catholic and I think Mam hoped at first she would just somehow get over him because she was still young, I think only about 17 or 18 years old,  and then settle down with a nice Catholic boy. But Eileen and Brian did marry in 1970 and a few years later had their first child whom Mam absolutely adored, Clare. She was blonde and beautiful and at last Mam had the baby she always wanted to hold and it was her grandchild. It was the child I think that ended the longing for a baby in the family that had some connection with her own desperate disappointment about never having conceived.  She knew she was not our birth mother, but she had been a mother, with all her occasional moodiness and mistakes, and she was a good and kind and soft hearted person most of the time.  Now Eileen had given her a grandchild and people could stop judging her as merely a "foster mother" and begin to see her in her own right as a mother who had raised two young children to adulthood safely and grounded and without any of the problems that certain people had hinted at could be the outcome of fostering children.  Now these little girls were both making their way in the world as professionals and she was at last a grandmother, like her two beloved sisters Maggie and Mary.

I think Eileen and Brian took it to heart about Mam wanting her really to marry a Catholic. It must have made Brian feel unwanted. Mary did not mean to do that, I know, but she was not very subtle, and not very bright really. I think she had carped on about it to the point of tedium. But after the marriage, she was delighted and she recognised Brian's qualities, which were considerable. He doted on Eileen and was a great worker and provider and when his own children came along, he was a devoted father and very hand-on and loving. He was also 100% supportive of the children being brought up properly as Catholics and they all attended entirely at Catholic schools so indeed, he was better than many Catholic fathers who have not done this.

I think in a way though, it did colour their feelings towards Mam and Dad and probably also made them feel that somehow I was untouched by Mam's mantas. But I got them too. It was just that I filed them away and did not kick off about it. I think also I probably did agree that if you can marry someone of the same faith and values, then why not, but I would have married who I wanted anyway, even if they were not a Catholic. It is not being a Catholic that matters. It is who you are and what your values in common are and Brian and Eileen found that, just as I did with my own husband Michael, who did happen to be a Catholic.  I think Eileen did not make enough allowances for Mary having been born in 1911, and with parents herself who were born in Victorian times and at a time when the Catholic Church had only just been emancipated and been able to build their own catholic churches and schools. Catholics had been very much the under dogs in society and so it did bring out this siege mentality and stick to your own kind. I know that even now that I am a grandmother, I do find myself repeating some of the wisdoms that Mam did pass down to me and I know Eileen also has all those stReggieg moral values and when her own teenage children were growing up, must surely have herself had a worries as to how to deal with and handle the prickly subject of boyfriends and behaviour and groundrules on what you should and should not wear and how to recognise qualities which are worthy.  As they say, we all turn into our mothers eventually!

**Mam's  Long-Feared letter arrives…**

But to return to the narrative, one day, out of the blue, in 1973 or 1974, Mam received a letter from our natural mother, Winifred.  She had made contact with Cleveland Social Services and asked her letter to be forwarded on to the foster parents.  The letter was quite a long one, and Mam said it was quite self-excusing, but  I can see it from both points of view. Our natural mother must have felt she had to somehow explain twenty plus years of non-contact and silence, and the reasons for her having abandoned us to our fate, and Mam was obviously rattled and defensive. The letter and the contact she had dreaded for so many years had actually arrived. Yes, we were grown up now, but she must also have feared that this might open wounds, or might somehow move Eileen and I closer to this stranger, and away from her, the one who had been the real mother in our lives, in a way Winifred had not. Winifred explained that she had been in a very abusive marriage and had run away in fear, her intention having always been to come back for us. However, events overtook her and she met someone else. Reggie Hill had been a good man and had been her partner and support for many years. He had known from the start about her abandoned daughters, but before they had really had chance to settle into a new life, they had had their own son, and then another daughter. The realities of having a new life in a different part of the country and two young children to care for made her realise that the dream of having reclaiming the daughters  she had left behind was slipping away.

She reported in the letter  that we had been fostered and was advised to let us settle where we were as we were now secure and happy. However, across the years she had carried this huge guilt and longing which had never gone away. It had caused her a lot of depression in her life from which she found it hard to escape. What she was seeking was to meet with us, and if that was not possible, some photos of us and some information about the kind of people we had grown up to be. She had abandoned us over 20 years earlier, and now she was seeking contact of some sort.

Mam must have read this letter with a lot of misgiving and mistrust and a fair deal of resentment and bitterness.  I don't think her heart melted, even though she was a soft-hearted person and kindly. I think it was the much  dreaded letter which reminded her again that she was not our birth mother, a fact she suppressed. It must have made her fearful and insecure. I think there was also a lot of anger too. How dare this woman come back into our lives now? She had abandoned us in a situation where we had been horribly neglected and at risk and we had ended up in a Children’s Home whilst we were both very young children. Our lives had been rebuilt and she and Tom and shouldered that responsibility, and made all the sacrifices they could in order to give us a good, solid foundation and now she wanted to come back into our lives and have a place in those lives. It must have been a bitter pill to swallow.

Mam destroyed the letter eventually, and wrote a reply. At some point, she had shared the contents, or maybe even the letter itself with Eileen, but she did not share it with me. I think she recognised that in the main, Eileen had not done much questioning about our real parents. Eileen sort of buried it and just wanted to forget everything from her early life. But I was quite curious and in the early years, I would ask questions but I quickly learned this was not something which Mam found pleasurable, so I stopped asking. I think she thought it might just be the sort of thing that would raise my curiosity. I was doing a degree at this time, so she used that as a reason not to tell me.

Mam had responded to Winifred's letter. She told me years later that she had simply told her that we were both well and happy, that Eileen was married and had a child now and was a qualified nurse, and I was training to be a teacher.  It would be best if she left it at that.  I suspect it would have been a short, if rather curt letter. She did include a picture or two of us as teenagers, now well out of date, but I think she made it clear she wanted no further contact. Mam eventually told Eileen about the letter and she also felt that it would not be a good idea to tell me about it because I was taking my degree finals.  I think maybe Mam knew that of the two of us, I had always been a bit more curious than Eileen, and maybe I would get an idea in my head to meet her. That might have been a motivation in her deciding not to tell me about the letter.

In 1977,  I had just returned from overseas where I had spent the best part of two years as a volunteer teacher on the Island of Rodrigues, Indian Ocean. I’d returned to my former school in Stafford where I had a flat and was settling back to life in the UK. I was 26 years old.  Eileen told me on my return about the letter Mam had received 3 years earlier, and that our natural mother had used what little information our Mam had given her, and deduced that if Eileen was a qualified nurse, and lived in Co Durham, it was quite likely that she might work at one of the hospitals there. So she had written to the MatReggies of all the hospitals in the North East, asking if they had a nurse called Eileen who would be about 25 years old at that time, and who had been fostered and had a sister called Helen. One day, Eileen’s MatReggie called her into her office and delicately asked Eileen if she had ever been fostered, and if she had a younger sister called Helen. Surprised, Eileen answered in the affirmative and at this point the MatReggie asked her if she wanted to receive a letter from her natural mother. Eileen took the letter and subsequently made contact with Winifred who was now living back in Stockton, and met her on a couple of occasions. She was living in a house with her now, husband Reggie Hill and their two children Reggie, who was about 19 years old and his sister Margaret who was a few years younger.

I was intrigued at first, and rather shocked that after all these years, she had sought contact. We knew absolutely nothing about the reasons why she had abandoned us. We knew nothing about our father or the families from where each of them had come. Suddenly, to discover that our mother had simply got on with her life and made a new family so soon after leaving us, it was all very hard to take in. The detail that she lived so close to us too, only about thirty minutes drive from us seemed all the more poignant yet unreal.  Eileen said she felt no emotion when she met her. She was not a very expressive woman, or maybe she was too inhibited to show too much emotion for fear of startling Eileen on their first meeting. I think Eileen felt a bit uncomfortable, partly because it was a kind of clandestine meeting she had not told our Mam about, for obvious reasons, and also because she had her own young daughter with her at the time.  Eileen subsequently also met Winifred’s sister Mary, and our grandmother Evelyn.

I had many questions for Eileen which she answered with frankness. She had expected to feel more, and didn't. Our birth mother was quite reticent in talking, and seemed very overwhelmed herself by the sight of a grown up Eileen with her own young daughter. Evelyn, our grandmother and Mary seemed more "relaxed" and chatty, showing to Eileen obvious interest and a certain amount of warmth. Our mother was obviously pleased to see Eileen but I think the strain of all the years, and her own guilt somewhat hampered her attempts at natural conversation. Eileen met very briefly our half brother Reggie who remained in the kitchen a lot of the time and I think she also met Reggie Hill, our mother's husband but he said little if anything other than a greeting and left the emotional meeting to the women of the family to deal with.

Eileen made at least a couple of visits back, and found out a little about our mother's brothers, at least one of whom had emigrated to Canada and made a life for himself there. A little of the "story" of how we had gone into the Home emerged. Some of it was truthful, but many years later, after my own husband did a lot of genealogical research into our family history, we found that Winifred had only told a part of the truth and in some cases had not told the truth for reasons we can only speculate upon. But at the time she was talking to Eileen, the story was that our father was a nasty and very violent man who terrified her and she had fled from his brutality in fear, and had gone to her mother's with Eileen and I. She had fled to London to seek work there and we were left with Evelyn. However, our father Richard Stephenson had come round to her house in a rage and taken us away. They learned that we were in a Children's Home in Darlington where he had voluntarily placed us. The facts bear some of this out. Yes, our mother did abandon us with Evelyn Morgan, her mother. But what she omitted to say was that she actually ran away with her lover, Reggie Hill and our father was aware of the relationship and this was an additional reason why they were both afraid of him and left the area.

In discussion with Eileen, Winifred did not talk much  about our father, or the circumstances which had led to the break up of her marriage. Eileen said her husband Reggie Hill  was very quiet on her visits and seemed rather uncomfortable and unsure of what to say so stayed out of the way.

I was curious to know what our birth mother  looked like. Eileen and I were both rather fair skinned and when younger both had quite light coloured hair. We both had blue grey or blue green eyes and I had a lot of freckles. Our mother looked nothing like us. She was dark haired and dark eyed and she said that as children we had resembled more our father’s side of the family. Our mother was an attractive looking woman in middle age and I am sure she must have been a very good looking young woman in her youth and it is easy to see that she would have been very attractive to men. Our grandmother Evelyn was also a good looking woman in her young adulthood and our mother looked like her. It was difficult to engage our mother in conversation except from the very limited things she was prepared to reveal. She seemed uncomfortable, Eileen said, about giving any details. For example, she had no photographs whatsoever of us as babies or children, no family photos from that time and no photos of our father or her first marriage. She simply said she had destroyed them all. But it did not sit easily with the idea that a woman who claimed to have spent every day longing for her lost daughters, had actually destroyed photos of us. More likely, no photos had ever been taken in those three and a half years when she had been married to our father and which had been so traumatic for her. But if this was the case, why did she not say just that?

Eileen did not quite know how to deal with the situation of the visits. Her own husband, Brian, was totally against them, feeling they would only lead to heartache and I think maybe even Eileen was somewhat disappointed that the family did not seem more "together.  It was certainly a very different family dynamic to the one we had grown up in at Easington where we had a very loving and warm extended family which was integrated into the community and integrated in a warm way with each other.  Eileen now had her own lovely home and family and our experiences had been so very different from this new group of people with whom we had a genetic link but that seemed to be the only connection. It must also have been a bit of an anti-climax to discover that the birth mother we knew so little about, had in fact had a perfectly normal life with Reggie and their two children for twenty years and then she had married him only a few years before. It was as though she had put down two children she had reared, only to move immediately into another relationship and more children.

Eileen suspected that she was probably a bit depressive. Whether this was related in any way to her decision many years earlier to leave us and reclaim us, but never did, we shall never know. But  subsequently, Eileen's second sense about this was proved to be correct. Our mother did have quite serious and clinical depression over many years for which she required medication. I don't think it prevented her living a full and happy life most of the time with her family. She clearly loved her son and daughter and was proud of them and had a good husband who loved her, so her choice had been a good one and enabled her to have the life she would never have had if she had remained with Richard Stephenson.

At the time when this was all happening, I was still abroad and knew nothing about what Eileen was experiencing. I think Eileen had had her curiosity satisfied, but this new family were very different and although she hoped our mother had gained something from meeting her, Eileen had no illusions about this all having a fairy tale ending, and all of us suddenly being reunited and feeling a great sense of relief and completion of a life long dream. I think Eileen was already beginning to think that she would have to reduce the visits anyway because her daughter, Clare was growing and I think she did not want to give a lot of confusing messages to her. Nor did she want Clare mentioning these visits to Mary Connolly, which would only hurt her deeply and make her even more insecure. I was in the Indian Ocean at the time of these visits and there was only one telephones and telephone and telegraph office for prearranged phone calls so this was not a means of communication for me. Nor did she want to put any of this in writing to me. I would be coming home later that year and she could tell me about it then.

It is possible that at this time, in 1977/78 Eileen was already pregnant with her second daughter Caroline and then Stephen came along soon after at the start of December 1979. I don't know what Eileen's  expectations of the visits with our birth mother Winifred were, probably uncertain and driven by curiosity and I think they would not have been dissimilar from my own. Having met her, there was a natural "disappointment" that there was not an instant bond. Our mother was far too awkward and full of guilt and regret to get past her own feelings and perhaps consider Eileen's. The fact that she had all her family around her was an indication that she was very apprehensive about meeting her first born daughter. One imagines that one would arrange for the meeting to take place in private, without the distraction or even interference of others (albeit well-meaning). I'm sure Eileen was trying very hard to put our mother at her ease and make her see that our life had not been bad at all, and that we were both professional women now who’d had a relatively happy and trouble-free childhood as things go, and certainly neither of us were carrying a load of negativity towards her. A bit more detail and explanation would have been good, but it was not forthcoming.  The pattern was set and Eileen did not learn much different on the few occasions she visited than she had learned on the first one. Our mother clearly wanted forgiveness and acceptance but it was not something she allowed herself to feel. I think guilt and regret were all very deep-rooted in her psyche and I think her husband Reggie, and their two children Reggie  and Margaret had themselves had to cope with the nuclear fallout of her long term depression and inability to forgive herself and get over the trauma of her abandonment of us.  I think Reggie must have been a very easy going and kindly man who had a lot to put up with, and he bore it all very well and uncomplainingly. He was exactly the kind of man she needed.

When Eileen told me all this on my return from working overseas, I must admit to feeling rather disappointed. The ordinariness  of the encounter was not something I had expected.  All my life, whenever I had dwelt on where our birth mother might be, or if she had ever thought of us, I had allowed myself an image, even a fantasy, about how it would be if I ever met her.  I imagined that there would be an instant recognition and connection and that I would feel a deep emotional response.  I was inclined  to think positively and make excuses for her, and believe it must have been something really tragic which caused a very young mother of two to run away and leave us. We had no idea about the abuse or violence she reportedly endured. That had never been shared with us so when I thought about it all, I imagined she had just been young and it all been too much for her, and our poor father had not had a clue how to manage a job and care for two pre-schoolers on his own. The physical image I had carried in my imagination of my mother, even though I could not remember anything at all about her, was not of a dark-haired woman, but someone whose complexion and colouring would be close to Eileen’s and my own.  A picture I did not receive until 2010 of my mother and grandmother as a youngish woman both show two rather striking and good looking women with good figures, despite their childbearing, and to my amazement, my niece Clare has a striking resemblance to both as she is dark haired with striking eyes.  I have no resemblance whatever to either of them but there is a resemblance to Eileen if not now, then when Eileen was younger. I was deeply disappointed to discover from Eileen, that Winifred had so quickly gone on to develop another life, and have more children. How could she have done this, knowing she had already abandoned us? She must have known where we were, in a neighbouring district only 9 miles from her mother’s home. But you know, the feelings that you have at one time in your life can be diametrically opposed to feelings you have when you can look back on a swathe of your life with greater clarity. Thank goodness she never came back for us. Thank goodness she was not in a position to. We would have had a much more impoverished, harsher life in a dysfunctional family if we had. It may not have been Winifred's new family that was totally dysfunctional, but she came from a family that had lost its way, where everyone seemed to have a broken marriage behind them and second husbands or lovers were the norm. Where children were moved from place to place because of poverty and fecklessness. Where there was not a culture of supporting members of the family in difficulty, like our mother as a battered wife, or our grandmother as a woman who kept on and on having babies and where there were rumours that not all the babies were her husband's Joseph's. Where there should have been at least the basic finances to feed a growing family but where Joseph drank his earnings away each Friday evening without regard for the five or six children he had at home, or the baby his wife had just lost t 1 year old.

Clearly,  Winifred's  initial meeting with Eileen must have been a very emotional experience for her and she was obviously trying to keep the lid on her own feelings and not alarm Eileen by any overwhelming expressions which might simply have seemed fake and insincere. I think she was probably scared to death of rejection by Eileen and by inference, me.

It is also difficult to know what Winifred herself actually expected from the meeting. Eileen felt no bond at all with our mother, and did not really think that the relationship would be sustained over time. She was polite and curious and interested but our mother was not hugely forthcoming. My impression from Eileen’s account is that she was at pains to explain how almost essential her actions had been all those years earlier, but she was not very forthcoming on details. Our mother very much wanted to meet me too and hoped that this would be something that  would  follow when I returned from abroad.

When Eileen finally did manage to bring me up to date, both Mary and Tom were still living in Easington and I was working in Staffordshire and had my own flat. Our Mam and Dad  were blissfully unaware of the visits Eileen had. Eileen had not visited Winifred for a couple of months but she was very much aware that our mother did want to meet with me.  Suddenly, aged 26 years old, and faced with all this information about her initial letter to Mary and the subsequent visits and Eileen's take on it, I sort of cooled on the idea of meeting her. Some of my illusions about our birth mother had been shattered. For example she did not appear to be a warm and vibrant personality but a rather timid and depressive character. I was deeply affected by the fact that she had had a further two children, which she had reared and kept. I wasn't really thinking straight or rationally about it. I mean it was obvious that she had met a decent and nice man and why shouldn't she have gone on and made a life for herself after the shambles of the first traumatic marriage? But I'm recalling how I felt in 1977, when this all unfolded, and the manner in which it unfolded. I had felt that Winifred and Richard, one or the other,  might one day seek us and we would find that they were nice people who just got married too young and were perhaps a bit irresponsible and headstReggieg but had gone on to make better lives and put their mistakes behind them. To find that your father was reportedly a horrible brutish and violent man burst one bubble. The fact that your mother had managed to forget us completely and go on to have two more children, burst the other.

Eileen wanted to know if I would meet with her on my next visit up to the North East. I was non-committal. I mean, Eileen was not particularly impressed with our mother and felt that Winifred was not entirely at ease either. Some of the gloss had worn off the porcelain vase as far as my own curiosity was concerned. Besides, I had learned a lot during my training as a teacher about children from broken and dysfunctional families, and about encounters with birth families and these stories did not usually have fanfare endings. Maybe, I should just let it rest. I had some facts and answers now which I had not had before. I could write to her perhaps. Maybe meet her in the future. At the moment, my priority was settling back into my new job and saving up for a house and perhaps even finding a husband! Eileen had two children now. The third was just around the corner.  No looking back. Let me look to the future. But things overtook me.

**Sometime in October 1977**

One evening, a few months after my return from overseas, just after seven, the phone rang and I answered.

A very quietly spoken female voice I did not recognise asked, “Hello, can I speak to Helen please?”

“This is Helen,” I replied.

“Hello, Helen,” said the voice I did not recognise, “I’m your mother."

I was completely taken by surprise. I'd had no warning of this phone call and it was complicated by the fact that I was babysitting for friends whom I was living with temporarily until I had managed to get a flat of my own. I was back teaching at my former school in Stafford, and was in the process of getting two small children ready for bed. My heart skipped a beat or two and I felt slightly light-headed and unable at first to speak. I'm not usually lost for words, but it is not many people who wait until they are 26 to hear their own mother's voice. She explained that Eileen had given her my contact details and she hoped I did not mind. I was still struggling to think of what I should say. What I should ask.  I found my voice sounded a bit different from normal and I was aware I was sort of controlling it and not trying to let too much emotion come through. The voice had a stReggieg Teeside accent, (an accent which I do not like very much) and so the first thing I felt was a dislike of the voice. It was not what I expected. I was in a place I did not want to be and felt a bit trapped.

I asked her straight out why Eileen and I had been placed in at St Joseph's and she immediately fell into the story she had told Eileen, namely that our father Richard Stephenson was  a "bad lot" and came from a horrible family. He was violent and used to hit her and she had run away to get away from him but left us with her mother. However, he had come in a rage one night and taken us away and the next thing they knew we were at St Joseph's. "It was him who put you there."  I asked her why she never came to see us and she said, "I did not know for a long time where you were."

I asked about our father, Richard, what he was like. I mean he must not always have been the brute she was now describing. But she seemed to side-step that and said,

"You don't want to know. It's best not to know."

 I asked if she had any photos of him, of her wedding, or of us as children. She just said, "No. I got rid of all of them."

At this point, I was deeply disappointed. It did not totally fit with her proclaimed agony about having left us. I said, "What about him now? Did he remarry? Has he got other children? Does we have uncles and aunts on his side of the family."

She just said, "No. He is dead."  Again, this was a blow to be told it in that way. So matter of fact.  "You don't want to know them. They are not a nice family."

She told me she had run away to London in fear, getting a job as a maid in a hotel and sending money back to her mother to help support us. Her intention had always been to come back and get us when she had found a suitable place to live. Subsequently, she met a nice man who was a policeman in London and she lived with him. She very quickly became pregnant and had a son, and then a daughter, so although she wanted to come back and get us, it became impractical. She did not marry Reggie for over 20 years because she "was a Catholic and could not get married in a Catholic church if she was divorced so I waited till I knew he was dead before marrying Reggie."

If you will bear with me, I need to clarify a couple of lies which our mother told me during this phone call. ( I did not know they were lies for nearly 30 years when my own husband did a lot of genealogical research.)  Firstly, our father Richard Stephenson was **not** dead at the time of her marriage to Reggie Hill in 1972. She did not marry Reggie in a Catholic church – at least not in 1972 - because her marriage certificate which I later acquired shows that she married him in a Registry Office and that her first marriage had been dissolved.

She omitted to say that when she had "run away to London" and subsequently met a policeman (Reggie Hill) that actually she had run away  **with** Reggie Hill who was already her lover, and who also lived in Stockton and they had both fled when her husband discovered the affair. Nor did she inform us that Reggie was a cousin of Jim Murray, our grandmother's second husband whom she had married the year before Eileen was born. (In effect, Jim Murray was Winifred's step father) so the London policeman was not true either. Maybe she needed to suggest to us that there was only one reason she left us, the one she had already given. She must not complicate it by suggesting there was another man and she was the one having an affair.  And the suggestion that a baby had come along very quickly (Reggie) to prevent her coming back for her much loved daughters was also inaccurate because she ran away in 1953 and Reggie was not born until 1956, in Wolverhampton, the year we were fostered by Mary and Tom. But at the time of this phone call, I did not know these details and accepted what she said, though in my mind at that time, I still thought that I could never have left my children. If I had run away, my first thought would have been to take them with me.

Even as I was having this phone call, I remember feeling cheated. The first contact in 24 years with my mother was not in person, and not by mutual consent and arrangement, but by a surprise phone call. Meetings of this sort should be personal and planned, face to face and consensual, in a safe place, not imposed on you out of the blue whilst you are looking after two small children after a hard day's teaching in a classroom!  I felt really unprepared and robbed of something I deserved. Yes, she had not seen me, but to have just rung out of nowhere, it was meeting her needs, but not mine. At least Eileen had had that opportunity. Her first meeting had been face to face.

I suppose in a way, I wanted to believe her explanations. I did not like the thought that my father was a violent man, particularly as I hate violence of any kind. I could feel her pain and her neediness in her nervous and slow way of speaking and in her repetitions of how much she loved me. I felt sorry for her, but I did not feel any love for her and that surprised me when the phone call ended. Shouldn’t I have felt something emotional for her?

Winifred clearly wanted me to agree to meet her. I did not want to promise her anything. In a strange sort of way, the power shift had now moved in my favour. Eileen and I had been the victims, the abandoned and rejected children. We had had our whole childhood lived as children who were firstly in the care of the orphanage and then “fostered” but still very much under the supervision of the local authority.  At school everyone knew, and occasionally referred to you as not being “the real children” of Tom and Mary.  You wanted to hide from this stigma, but someone always brought it up. There was no magical reunion with our natural parents. There were no special cards or presents on our birthdays. Even our 18th and 21st Birthdays passed without acknowledgement from this mother who claimed to have never let a day go by without thinking about us. She was able to use Social Services to gain contact with Mary in the 1970s, but she had not used this same mechanism at any other time. Something did not seem quite authentic. We were not “adopted” and therefore our natural parents could at any point have managed to get a card or a present or a message to us,  and even had very good legal grounds for reclaiming us. (I’m very glad they never sought to do that because I think it would have been a disaster for us and for her new family  and would have broken Tom and Mary’s hearts.  I was a little defensive. I did not want to be swept along by Winifred’s needs to seek atonement and to see me. I said I did not know if I was ready to meet her yet, but I would think about it. I ended the phone call almost just to give me thinking time to replay the tape and try to make sense of some of the things she had said.

She asked if I would come and see her and I told her honestly that I would think about it. I did not promise that I would. I felt I needed in some way to have some control over things and had been taken by surprise. She told me  she had always loved me and thought of me every day. I had had thick golden curls as a baby. I had been a beautiful baby, (something I sincerely doubted). Not beautiful enough to keep a photograph anyway.

I never spoke to her again. I never met her. Eileen heard nothing from her and so went to Stockton one day to the house to see her, taking her little daughter Clare with her and probably heavily pregnant.  When she arrived Reggie Hill opened the door. Our mother had died of a heart attack a few months earlier. She was 48 years old. No one felt the need to inform Eileen. Not Reggie Winifred's probably long suffering husband who was now in depression and despair and loss; not Evelyn, our grandmother, not Winifred's sister Mary whom Eileen had found easier to talk to than our mother. Again, it was as if we did not exist. We were not a part of this odd family that could switch its feelings and responsibilities on and off. That could let two small children, the youngest in the entire family,  just disappear, forget about them, rediscover them and then forget them again. No one even considered informing us,. This, despite the fact that the contact had been initiated by Winifred, not us. And all with the very enthusiastic backing of Evelyn and Mary, (if not Reggie Hill and his two grown up children, our half brother and sister. ) The house was still a house in mourning, and the death had been a big shock to everyone. But the two children she had never quite been able to forget did not feature in anyone’s reckoning as deserving of being told. They had lived with that saga and her depressive episodes about abandoning us for years, they had even participated in her atonement and meeting of Eileen and learning all that had happened to us and probably taking some pleasure in our success and that all was right with the world. All the gushing from Mary and from Evelyn  on Eileen's visits had been cosmetic. It was out of sight, out of mind. The saga like all things Morgans having moved on like a badly sequenced soap opera and with as much reality. The Chapter closed again. The lost children, the first grandchildren of the Morgan dynasty, axed without ceremony. They had not been part of the family. Were not part of the family. It was over. Not surprising in a family who had managed to keep us as their shadowy secret for so many years. A grandmother who had been supposedly left to care for us when our mother fled, a mother who had not even managed to nurture all her own children, who had known Eileen as her first grandchild for four and a half years, and me for two and a half but had not even visited us though we were only 9 miles away. She was not a flighty young girl at this time. She was a mother with grown up children and was over 50 years old. What does that tell you about this Morgan lady? A lady who could appear to be jovial and happy and sociable but could just as easily wipe you off her hard-drive and forget your existence? Twice.  It was definitely not the sort of family Eileen had had the good fortune to grow up in Easington. A family that put children first.  So although it was a great shock and disappointment for Eileen, in a way, it was only history repeating itself.

Eileen was quite angry about the family not telling her. They had given at least the superficial appearance of welcoming the long lost daughter back into the fold. But no one thought of letting her know. She felt let down, and as if she had responded openly to our mother's wishes for contact and reconciliation, and even introduced her own little daughter into the equation and tried to persuade me also to meet with Winifred because she knew it was something our mother had expressly wanted. But then this seemed like a real slap in the face. with a wet fish. It's over. She may have been your mother. You may be our granddaughter, but you are not part of this family. That door is now closed. Find your level again. Your connection with us is over because your mother is dead.

Eileen wrote a letter to  Evelyn our grandmother expressing her disappointment that no one had done us the courtesy of letting us know that our mother had died so suddenly and unexpectedly. She felt really let down and both of us had a feeling of rejection. We felt again that we had no connection with them. We were of no importance, and yet we had not sought Winifred ourselves. She had sought us. A longing for reconciliation and a kind of forgiveness from us and an explanation that she had not meant it to happen as it had done. These had been her motives. It seemed like no one had the kind of stReggieg, family bonds that we had grown up with in our family in Easington. But then, we did not have a single aunt or uncle who were divorced or remarried. Our family ties were very stReggieg with the family who had taken us as their own. We came from a family who thought carefully and chose carefully who they would marry. We came from a stReggieg Catholic tradition where generations on both Tom and Mary's side had stReggieg marriages and stReggieg affectionate bonding with each child that came into the family. The nurturing of children was a priority, and even supplanted the marriage itself in importance, at least in the childhood growing years. Children were a responsibility and were the priority, not the side show.

Evelyn did take the letter to heart and to her credit, she responded. She wanted to meet Eileen and she and her husband Jim Murray came up to her home in Washington one Saturday. She apologised for not letting Eileen know, explaining that it had all been a big shock to the whole family and the family were still in mourning. She realised she should have let her know and in her favour, she had on this occasion tried to put right a wReggieg. Coincidentally, my husband and I were visiting up in the North East and went to visit Eileen the same day. We had no idea who the couple were when we drove up to Eileen's house. Getting out to the car, Eileen introduced us. I don't have a very clear remembrance of Evelyn but I know I felt a bit stand-offish and yet again, I felt I had stumbled into a situation no one had prepared me for. The meeting was very brief because they were just departing, and then it was over. There were no more visits and no more contacts with the family until many years later. It just seemed at the points of contact with this odd family, I was always playing catch up. I was always found on the hoof and not given any preparation.  I looked at this woman, who looked a lot younger than Mary but probably wasn't at the time, and I strained to see something of myself. Some connection to her. Some resemblance. She was pleasant, certainly, but I was totally uncomfortable standing on Eileen and Brian's driveway, having a sort of surreal encounter with someone who really was my grandmother, but was a perfect stranger. I was relieved that they were leaving and I would not have to endure some excruciating emotional encounter over a cup of tea and a cake.

**The Genealogy begins and secrets are uncovered.**

 In 2006, my husband Michael began seriously gathering information and researching his own family history and genealogy. He already knew a great deal about his own family who first went to Ireland with the Anglo-Norman invasions and who were noblemen who went on to own land and build their own houses and castles in Wexford before they were all defeated by Cromwell in his merciless suppression of Catholicism. Mike went right back to the original sources, the census information, parish records, and registers for Births, Marriages and Deaths.  This became a completely absorbing pastime and through it he gained so much information about his family, and their roots in both the poverty in Ireland and their emigration to Liverpool in the middle of the 19th Century. He also discovered some English ancestry too. His research has produced very comprehensive family trees as well as supporting documentation, photographic and other archive materials which he has bound and made copies of for all our children so that in the future, it can be picked up and carried forward. Our children will never be in the same rudderless boat that Eileen had drifted in for so many years, disconnected and unsure from where we had come.

I knew so little about my family and all of it was anecdotal and as I had discovered that some of the things Winifred had told me were closer to evasions than the actual truth which had somewhere got lost in all her own anxieties and fears, I wondered if perhaps in her effort to discourage my interest in Richard Stephenson, she had perhaps lied about his death.  I estimated that he would only be in his mid 80s if he was still alive, and perhaps I could find out about him. Had he ever remarried, or gone on to have other children? Did he have brothers or sisters who might also still be alive and did they remember us?  I asked Mike to follow the same routes he had taken with his own family, and see what facts he could uncover.

The first difficulty he encountered was actually finding a birth record for a Richard Denis Stephenson.  We did not know how old he was or where he was born, and Stephenson is quite a common name in the North East so it took many weeks of searching to find the evidence in the registry of births. Even then, the record only records who the mother is, not who the father is, so eventually Mike sent for actual copies of his marriage certificate and found out who his father was through that, and then consequently, he was able to begin building up the family tree, though working backwards. It took many months but Mike was eventually able to trace back the Stephensons, and Fentons and Coopers and so on all the way back to 1695. The family was mostly clustered in the areas around Stockton and Bishop Auckland with a few roots a little further afield in what was then called Cumberland.  All the family were farm labourers, then general labourers or domestic servants, eventually with jobs in the coal mines and foundries in South Durham and Cleveland. My father was reportedly a painter and decorator at the time of his marriage.  We could find no record of him remarrying and we also had a lot of trouble locating any information about his death. This did not mean that he was not dead, but only that because deaths are registered in districts where they happen, as we could not find a match with his approximate age or with Stockton, it made it difficult to trace.  Eventually, Mike found the record and to make doubly sure, he sent for the actual death certificate. Richard Stephenson, my father, actually died of a brain haemorrhage in March 1977. He was 53 years old. He had never ever attempted any further contact with Eileen and I after the one visit to St Joseph’s Orphanage shortly after we had been placed there when I was probably about three years old, and Eileen five.

It was more disappointing in a way to discover that he was dead than it had been to discover that our mother had died. At least she had told us a part of her story, albeit it must have been a story which was somewhat told from her own viewpoint.  I felt in a way that he had never been able to tell his story. Now that might seem entirely naïve, and maybe I too have been seeking to sanitise his image because it is horrible to think that he could have been such a horrible and violent man. However, I know nothing of his life, what happened to him after his young wife ran away from him. I have no idea if he regretted his actions, ever felt any sense of curiosity or longing for Eileen and I, or if he went on to have other abusive relationships. Did he father other children? Did he continue to live in the North East. How did his life move on after the events of this disastrous marriage? Did he have family locally? Did we have Stephenson aunts and uncles and cousins?

It felt very much like a Cold Case File. A one that had not been opened for nearly 60 years. A Missing Person who disappeared off the radar and left no trace, only to turn up dead, but without a story to accompany that stark fact. I now had a family tree stretching back over 300 years and more which clearly showed me my lineage but told me nothing about the people, and nothing about my father. Further, we found that as Stephenson was such a common name, it made it so much more difficult to trawl through records to find offspring, births, marriages and deaths of any close Stephenson relatives who might still be alive or who may have known Richard. I was beginning to get to the point where I felt perhaps I might have to just let it all go and accept that there were things I would never know.

In 2009, Mike had almost completed the first and second draft of his own family genealogy and had made a start on mine for both the Stephenson and Morgan families. One Saturday, he was struggling with some bits of information when I suddenly thought to myself that we already knew that Winifred had married Reggieald Hill and maybe Reggieald was still alive. He would only be in his late 70s or 80s so it was possible that he might be able to at least tell us something about what he had learned about Richard Stephenson. I decided to check in the online BT Phonebook for a Reggieald Hill in the Stockton area. Bingo. There it was. R Hill with a Stockton address and telephone number. I immediately dialled the number and it was answered quickly by Margaret, my half sister whom I had never met.

I think it was a shock to her. I asked to speak to Reggieald Hill and she said that was her father but he had died, even though the telephone was still listed in the book in his name. Margaret knew all about Eileen and I and we had a long chat on the phone. She spoke about her brother, and a little about what she knew about her mother’s first marriage. It was not a lot. She said her mother did not like to talk about it. They had had a normal, happy childhood in Birmingham and Wolverhampton before moving back to Stockton. Winifred had been troubled all her life with depression, probably brought on by the traumas she has experienced and also it was clear she had never really forgiven herself for having abandoned Eileen and I.  Margaret said they had always known about us and our mother would have dark days and times when she would be very withdrawn and tearful. But mostly she had a happy marriage with her father Reggieald.

Margaret told me that her brother Reggie, with whom she was very close, lived in Peterborough and had a bad car  accident in his later twenties which had left him paralysed and wheelchair dependent. He was very interested in music and song writing and had a website and raised money for a disabled children’s charity.

Coincidentally her “Aunty Mary”, my mother’s younger sister was with her as she took the call. I followed up the phone call with a long email acknowledgement to Margaret and I also asked her if she could ask her Aunty Mary for some answers and information. She said she would.  I did get a brief email back from Margaret, but it did not address any of the questions I had asked. However, I got a very long and affectionate email response from Reggie who had heard about the call from me and he was so pleased to make the contact. For a while, Reggie answered emails very regularly and seemed very eager to acknowledge Eileen and I as his half sisters. He spoke affectionately about his childhood and his mother in particular and also gave us some basic information, such as he could remember, but his own recollections though I am sure were entirely truthful, were only the facts that his mother had told him. He did not know himself until he was a teenager, that his mother and father were not actually married and that came as a shock to him when one day they announced that they were getting married.

He also believed that our father, Richard, was dead at the time of the marriage, which we subsequently found from his death certificate was not the case. I do not think either Margaret or Reggie had a clear understanding of what had in reality happened to Eileen and I. They knew only of our existence but our mother had not talked about her first marriage. They were children and I think it was totally right that their childhood should have been shielded from the mistakes their mother had made as a very young woman in a terrible situation.  His account of his grandfather, Joseph Morgan did not really bear any resemblance to the reality of a drunken father who did not provide properly for his own 6 children, some of whom were brought up not by his grandmother but were farmed out  to her mother or other relatives and lived from hand to mouth. Joseph Morgan was not a dear little rogue who turned into a loveable old man. He was irresponsible and drank his wages away whilst the family were left to struggle. His son John, one of Winifred’s younger brothers wrote to me and gave me an insight into the Morgan family life. He had no time whatever for his father and no respect for him either.  He said they were passed from pillar to post and lived in very difficult, impoverished circumstances, not knowing where the next meal or the next pair of shoes was coming from. His younger brother Bernard did not even know  until he was an adult that he had an older brother who had been brought up by a relative.  Reggie, my half brother also said that my mother had "loved and cared for Joseph" in his last days, but I wonder if in fact, he was confusing Joseph Morgan his Uncle, his mother's eldest brother who was not brought up by his mother Evelyn but mostly by her mother. Bernard and George (known as Paul) the younger brothers,  both emigrated to Canada as soon as they reached about 16 years of age, and made their lives there.  There was nothing to hold them or bond them to the Morgan clan in Stockton. George subsequently died but Bernard still lives in Ontario and has made a very happy life for himself, and given his own children a start to their own lives which was far removed from his own dysfunctional one, as John has too. I have often reflected if what happened to Eileen and I has made us into better people than we might have been had we remained in this dreadful family situation. If our mother had put up with the dire situation for the sake of us two, we might have never had an example of a loving parents or a stable family life. Consequently, the early years at St Joseph's which were not  exactly happy, have given us an appreciation of what a true family can provide. We grew up to believe that marriage was a good thing, and an affectionate and loyal thing and so we sought those things ourselves when deciding on the kind of man we wanted to marry, and the way we wanted our own children to be loved and nurtured.

In his letter to me, our Uncle John was not able to tell us too much about our father. He was only in his mid teens when his sister married Richard Stepehenson. He knew from everything that he observed from that time that he was "a brute" and had hospitalised his sister on several occasions. He echoed that the Stepehenson's were " a bad lot" but could not remember anything about her wedding, or meeting

Apart from John, neither Mary nor Bernard have responded to any of the letters I sent them.  I find that hard to understand, at least on the part of Mary who was close to her sister though a lot younger and as she grew into an adult and had a lot more contact with her sister, you would imagine that they must have talked as sisters about her life with Richard and the aftermath, and about her feelings about us. Bernard of course, was just an 11 year old boy when we went into the orphanage, but as we lived in the same house as Mary (then 15), they must surely have known us in the few years before we went into care.

I wrote to Bernard in Canada, a lengthy letter, but received no response. Mary responded with some information through Margaret, but Margaret said some of this was best left until we meet and said in person. That never happened and the information was not shared so I have no idea what her take on anything was.

It is not as if I was asking any of  them to change history, or asking anything of them other than recollections of what they must surely have been aware of from that time. We can all remember quite a lot of what we got up to and events that happened to us in primary school so at 11 and 15, both Bernard and Mary would have had some memories or even family folklore. And certainly, they knew their sister right up to her death, and spent time with her, Mary quite a lot, and therefore it's so strange to me that they can't give any information about that time, or about the dreadful Stephenson's who lives in the same town all their lives. Our father did not die until 1977 when Mary would have been  in her late 30s or early 40s.

I'm not hopeful that I will ever find out about my father's family. He was the youngest child, and he had a brother who outlived him who was a bit older but has subsequently died. I don't think the brother was married. My husband found no evidence of other marriages or children. It seems our father lived and worked, (when he worked) the whole of the time in Stockton, yet there are no other lines we have been able to find, of cousins or uncles or aunts. I am not seeking to whitewash his past and discover he was really a saint. I have no attachment to him other than a genetic one and I am now much older than he was when he died so I have only ever been interested in having a few simple questions answered. How did he just disappear off the radar from 1953 to 1977 when he died? Surely the family in Stockton must have known something of his whereabouts or what happened to him? My mother and Reggie Hill moved back to Stockton when Reggie junior was only about 11 years old so how was it safe for her to come back to her home locality then? Was she now not afraid that she might encounter him?

One thing I feel I have learned from all the genealogical research which my husband Mike has painstakingly gathered is that we all have very different understandings of what constitutes a “family”.  Circumstances and events can seem to throw the dice in divergent directions, causing disruption and relocation, and when you look broadly at the sweep of one family’s history over a number of generations, you do see that things can be bad for a while and then things improve, and history might occasionally repeat itself. The Stephenson family might have been dysfunctional at the point when my mother married into them but the genealogical evidence which we have traced back a long way shows that they were not all so. many of them were settled in the Thornaby and Stockton and Bishop Auckland areas over generations. The Morgan Family was also a troubled family with its own problems and ways of dealing with excess children. Our Uncle was raised by his grandmother, not by his mother. Winifred did not appear to be wholly supported by her own mother whose children were often being raised or shared with with the various grandparents. Perhaps when Winifred found herself pregnant with Eileen, she was already temporarily estranged from the family herself.

A family can seem in one instance to stand for and represent something solid and dependable but it can equally be chaotic, unsupportive and dysfunctional, depending on the characters and the liaisons they have made. In beginning this whole matter of my birth family's history, I did not begin with suppositions or even desires of what I wanted to find. I was only ever interested in discovering some truths and if the truth was not a nice one, that was just as important a fact as discovering a supportive family member, or a reason why something happened. The fact was, that Eileen and I already knew we were not wanted and had been left. We did not set out on this and discover it as a side-show. Therefore, the purpose was to seek the truth if that was at all possible to find at this distance in time from the events.

My understanding of family is something which is affectionate and warm, where there is a lot of laughter and fun and a lot of stReggieg, emotional ties of caring and kinship and nurturing and where each member of that family is an important part of the whole. Families also make mistakes and parents make mistakes and even our own lovely foster parents Tom and Mary, made mistakes and handled situations sometimes badly, just as all parents, including myself have done. So I did not come to this genealogical quest with preconceived ideas that all would be well, that I would discover villains and virtuous characters and simple explanations as to why things happened. No, what I found was that life is complicated. People do not always tell the truth, even under pressure, because they are afraid or ashamed or fearful of rejection or simply because they do not trust you. What I have uncovered and learned is that my birth mother never really got over the loss of us. She carried that pain and guilt with her all her life and it impacted for too long on her second marriage and in a way on her new life with a nice husband who deserved her whole attention, as did his children. They did not get that. But in the good times, she was a good and kindly person who loved her children and was fun to be with. She never forgave herself, and that was tragic, because ultimately, Eileen and I  after a wobbly start, did OK.

My father I believe was violent and not a nice man but maybe he also had good qualities which developed in later life. I like to think that he was redeemed and did not go on to repeat his bad ways. That he was sorry for what he had done. That he sometimes thought of his us. But  whether he did or did not, that violent man was still my father. I have never loved him. I will never love him. I have never loved Winifred. How could I? I never had a relationship with her. But it does not prevent me from being objective, seeing her untruthfulness and deception, yet understanding to some extent her need to be so. She was tortured by her own abandonment of us. She never forgave herself. She should have. She could have moved on and led a happier, less troubled, less depressive life. People are complex. That is he reality of things. I'm saddened that she told me lies on the one and only conversation we had. But I understood the whole matter of reconnecting with me must have been so overwhelming for me. She did not want to tell the whole truth because she feared she might be judged. She wanted forgiveness and acceptance, not judgement. And so she lied in some things and told the truth in others. She wanted approval.

The very best thing that happened to our mother was falling in love with Reggie Hill and making a much better life with him. This led to her having two lovely children and enabled her to raise them as children of which she could be proud. She was a good mother but probably never really believed that. I'm glad she had the opportunity to meet Eileen and see that we had not been fatally damaged by her actions. She was such a young woman. Married at only 19 years old to a man who brutalised her. She ran away from that I think I believe her when she said that her intention had always been to come back for us. Events and economies overtook her. It's hard enough raising two children. She should have let the past go.

Eileen and I between us have been married to our husbands Mike and Brian for a total between us of 76 years. We have 13 grandchildren between us. We've both been very happy and remain extremely close, bonded by our early years and our shared experiences. Our story does have a happy ending. The past is important because it has shaped who we are but it this story, the story of Eileen and Helen who survived and were given a new chance… that's what really matters.

This is not, as I said at the beginning of this long narrative, a total autobiography but more of a sequential collection of memories and facts which make sense of the childhood and early adulthood Eileen and I had. Like all stories it takes a long time for things to mature and even for you to begin to understand them properly and differently from how you experience things when you are younger. It is important to me that my own children, and even Eileen's children know something of their own background, however tenuous and attached from it they have been, these are the facts. I'm sure Eileen would have her own recollections as well, and different perspectives on things because we all do see things from a slightly different angle. But everything written here is the truth as I know it and my memories are not invented and not fake. I'm aware I have been very judgemental in places but that is because I tried to record how I was feeling and reacting at the time of growing up.  I don't feel bitter any more about my mother's treatment and abandonment because I see it as great and important liberation and saving grace for Eileen and I. We would have been very different people if we had grown up in that world in Teeside or Wolverhampton, or if our mother had muddled through with Richard Stepehenson and we had grown up with that abuse and violence all our lives. We would have suffered greatly if either of our parents had come and plucked us out of the the life in our mining village in Easington and into the world which had come to be our safe haven. We might never have grown up close to one another because we would have seen and experienced so much trauma that we would have grown up dysfunctional, traumatised or damaged ourselves. Or we would have never been accepted by Reggie as his own children and seriously impacted on the lives of our half brother and sister Reggie and Margaret who seem to have had to have lived with their mother's guilt and depression all their lives. We would have been part of this very other family, a family like on a soap and not the secure family in which we did have a chance to grow up.

It's only with age and time that you can take this long view and know that everything that has happened to us, happened for a reason and for the best.  So it is not a sad story at all, but a good one with a very happy ending.