

M for Mother

Women, once they have children of their own, return again and again to their childhoods as a point of reference. But not a whisper of her childhood came from my mother's lips. She had apparently had no childhood or a childhood so miserable and unhappy that she had erased it from her memory. I was always afraid of what she suppressed, without knowing why.

I never knew my mother. Don't misunderstand me. She was always around, busy at the sink, pegging out washing or kneading pastry at the kitchen table. She went to the market with her shopping bags; she ironed white school shirts, tea-towels and even socks. She cleaned upstairs on Tuesdays and downstairs on Thursdays. She left for the evening shift at the cake factory at 5.30 pm, leaving my father's tea keeping warm in the oven. But I cannot remember a time when she played with me or when we sat down together to enjoy a book. She never asked about my day but I probably never asked about hers.

The truth was quite mundane. My maternal grandmother had left her husband and two small children when my mother was a child of two. So *my* mother had never known a mother's love. It was only when I researched the maternal side of my family history that I discovered that my grandmother had never known her own mother either. My great grandmother, Charlotte Harding, had died ten days after giving birth to her first child, a daughter, my grandmother. It is now that I am much older that I wonder how my grandmother was able to do such a fearful thing. How could she leave two young children and never make contact with them again? Yet, through family history research, I discovered that my maternal grandmother died just a month before I was born and she was living on Henrietta Street, only two minutes' walk from where my parents were living on Turner Lane.

In later life my mother developed Alzheimer's disease. As her memory faded, she worried about her father and his sister, her aunt, who had raised her and had been the closest person to a mother. She demanded to walk along the street where she'd lived as a child even though the house had long-gone. Her sense of duty was undiminished. She wanted to get home. "*I've got to cook my dad's dinner*", she would say. So my mother couldn't tell the doctor the name of the current prime minister or what date she was born but she had been a clever girl, destined to be a teacher, until her father's unemployment put paid to her Grammar school matriculation and she went to work at the Robertson's Jam factory.

In the nursing home I looked at her, sleeping in the chair, the TV blaring, the tea-trolley rattling along the corridor. She was well cared for, her white hair freshly shampooed, her nails clipped and clean. I sat beside her, stroking her hand. She opened her eyes and gave me an angelic smile.

"All you need is love, Mum. Love is all you need"