

Marychurch

by

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I was eighteen months, a toddler, when my six years old sister Jeanette, and I arrived at the large wooden doors of Marychurch, a Catholic Orphanage in Torquay, England. A seaside resort surrounded by rocky cliffs and sandy shores known as the crown jewel of the English Riviera with a comparatively mild climate, and rich landscape that give rise to Devon as a prime destination for recreation and leisure for many visitors that come there for their holidays.

Jeanette and I were both scared and clinging on to each other for moral support as we stood there on the front doorstep of Marychurch. I started to cry and rubbed my eyes on my sister's wool skirt. Jeanette bent down and said, " Don't cry Maily, we have to be brave." Maily was my knick name that she and Mum used, as I liked playing with the dustpan and brush.

I looked up at my mother as she wiped tears from her eyes, not knowing what was about to happen, that would change all our lives from this day forth.

I had entered a world engulfed in war, sirens blared defiantly over the loud roar of low-flying German aircraft flying too frequently dropping bombs over our small village. My parent's attention was focused on defeating the enemy abroad and caring to the wounded at home.

My father with his aunts had emigrated from Northern Mexico at seven years old. He was assigned to the 103rd bomber squadron flying out of Nottingham, England to drop bombs over German territory in the wee hours of the morning.

My mother was a nurse, working for the Red Cross when she was not caring for my sister, brother, Chris and me in a small flat in Plymouth. Most of the families in Devon lived in fear, never knowing when or how the war would impact them directly.

For my family, that moment came when news reached my mother in September of 1944 that my father's plane had failed to return to base in Nottingham and that he was missing in action. News of his death came shortly after with a knock on the door and the R.A.F. confirmed my father and his crew lost their lives in the early morning hours over a large field in Hemet, Belgium. I learned later my father's plane was shot down by the Luftwaffe Ace, Reinhold Knack, who was killed two years later by a Royal Air Force pilot.

At twenty-six years-old, my father's life came to a sudden and violent end, just as mine was beginning. This single event would set into motion a series of events that would shape the outcome of my entire life. Everything I am, and everything I ultimately became, was because of the sacrifice of my father, the cruelty of a mother who could not cope without him, and the compassion of the Dominican nuns who showed me love in ways that I never knew was possible.

My Aunt Ruby and my Mum brought my older sister, Jeanette and me to the Priory Convent of Marychurch by taxi where we now found ourselves standing with our meager possessions boxed and carelessly unloaded from the big black car. A loud rap at the door from my mother was answered by a nun with a large chain of wooden beads flapping across her habit.

"Sister Catherine Angela," my mother said. "These are my daughters, the girls who I spoke to you of during our meeting last week."

"Hello Girls," Sister Catherine Angela said, peering over the metal rims of her glasses. From where I stood she appeared as a large woman, more round than tall. Her stiff white habit, neatly starched with several uniform creases, gave her the appearance of a huge penguin. She leaned down to look us over and nodded in approval.

She then looked at Aunt Ruby and mummy and said, "You can leave the girls here with me! We'll take very good care of them for you."

"Girls, say goodbye to Mummy." This was the first time we had spoken. "Goodbye, Mummy," Jeanette said trying to hold back her tears. She gave my mother a quick hug.

Mum looked at me and said, "Goodbye Mummy."

I screamed out loud, "Mummy, Mummy!" as she hugged me and Jeanette and I watched her walk out the big wooden door wiping her tears from her eyes with Aunt Ruby's arm wrapped around her waist. It would be a long time before we would see her again.

Jeanette grabbed my hand and we both followed Sister Catherine Angela into the convent. We entered into a dimly lit building with a long hall, extending the entire length of the building. There was a strong smell of carbolic soap used as a disinfection to wash the floors. Jeanette and I were scared of our new surroundings, too much was happening and we could not understand what was going on around us. I squeezed my sister's hand tighter and held my breath for all the uncertainties to come.

Sister Catherine Angela turned around and looked at us both warmly and said, "Welcome to Marychurch girls. This will be your new home until your Mummy returns to take you home."

It would be a long time before we would see her again! I was eleven years old when my mother came to take me home.

Jeanette spoke in a low voice, "Sister, when will Mummy come and take us home?" Jeanette was fourteen when she went home with Mum.

Sister looked down on us with a smile on her face and said, "Girls, God has sent you to us to take care of you until Mummy comes back for you."

Puzzled, Jeanette said, "Who is God?"

"You girls will learn about God and many wonderful people," said Sister.

Jeanette took my hand and we continued to follow Sister down the hallway.

Our mother had not explained why we now found ourselves in a Catholic orphanage along with refugees from the war who had fled major cities to escape the dangers of wartime bombing.

We continued down the dimly lit hallway until it gave way to a brightly lit room with long oak tables whose bright brown veneer had been worn down by generations of use. Seated at the tables quietly eating were all manner of girls: brunettes, blondes, gingers, freckles, glasses, and everything in between. The smell of the food was delicious!

All eyes shifted our way while Jeanette and I stood there shaking with fear. We could hear a chorus of whispering voices fill the air. We both jumped as a thundering noise erupted above our head. Sister Catherine Angela had clapped her hands several times to dispel the noise.

"Silence, Girls, Silence! We have two new girls joining us today. This is June and Jeanette Houghton. They come from Plymouth. Please welcome them to Marychurch."

We heard the sound of benches scraping against the dull linoleum floors and the once-seated girls were now on their feet, moving toward us, in a slow silent rush.

"Welcome to Marychurch," One girl with orange hair said, offering her hand to my sister.

"Welcome," said another girl, whose glasses were too big for her face. "Hello," said a girl with raven-black hair. My name is Joan and I'm from London."

So many girls crowded around us, and Sister Catherine Angela knew that Jeanette and I were overwhelmed. She commanded them all to go back to their seats.

This was our new world, our new home and Jeanette and I were both scared for our future.

Shortly after our arrival at Marychurch, Jeanette and I were Baptized Catholics with our mother's permission. This was done in the church during the Sunday mass.

Two Novice nuns stood up as our Godmothers during the service. Holy water was poured over my head by the priest, as he said, "I baptize you. In the name of the Father the Son and the Holy Ghost."

My Godmother was Sister Teresa and Jeanette's was Sister Oliver.

As a novice, Sister Teresa, was training to become a nun and she took care of the orphans in my age group. I saw her daily and she became my Guardian Angel, carefully steering me out of trouble.

When I was old enough, as part of my school day we attended church regularly. When I was five years old Sister Teresa taught me to pray the rosary by holding on to a small crucifix with beads arranged in a long loop.

"The rosary is a special way of praying, June," Sister Teresa said. "When you recite the prayers of the rosary, think about our precious Virgin mother and her son, Jesus. Think about the bible stories you listen to in Mass on Sundays."

I found it difficult to recite the long prayers that all of us were expected to know by heart.

During that time I did not know the full consequences of war, but I can remember at an early age the care of me was done by the Catholic nuns in the orphanage. They fed me, dressed me, and comforted me when I cried. As I look back and try to get a clear memory of the nuns, I think of their endearing faces and caring hands during my illness with colds measles, and chicken pox. Through their love and teaching I learnt compassion, trust and humility at a very young age.

This is where my story began.

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