

A sister's story

Dominic and I were twins. We had always been very close. Although not identical twins in as far as we were boy and girl. We knew what the other was thinking. We spoke for the other one and would communicate with each other in our own language. As children we played together with one toy. Quarrels were almost unheard of. We were evacuated together, two crying three year olds clinging to each other. Six months later we were to return to London and the blitz. Our father was one of many men who did not return from the war. At aged eight we were sent to single sex private schools, this we both found very hard; but it was the right thing, we had to develop our own identities. Adolescence brought a wildness to Dominic's behaviour, he was always up to some money making scam or other. He was a lad running wild without a father to guide him. The first real separation happened when Dominic went into the Army, (my mother thought it might calm him down,) and I went to college. We wrote constantly, he would bring me gifts from all parts of the world.

When he returned from his three year stint in the Army he married. At about the same time as I also married. We lived only a couple of streets apart. We started our families within months of each other. Our children were close and we saw each other most days. I got on well with my sister-in-law we were like one large happy family. Dominic was running his own business but was sailing very "close to the wind" in money matters. I could see no wrong in him though my sister-in-law was getting anxious; he enjoyed the excitement of the chase.

Our mother died when we were 22 years old, we clung to each other for comfort.

Matters came to a head when the police arrested him for the misappropriation of £20,000 of funds that he could not account for. He went on the run trying to leave the country. We suspected a watch might have been put on the airports and ferries. His wife had a breakdown and for several months was unable to care for their five children. I had nine children under the age of 8 years, three in nappies in the day and five at night. Looking back I can remember the terrible tiredness, my youngest was only three months old and still being breast fed. I was frantic for news of him, I knew he would contact if it was safe to do so. Finally he was picked up in Harwich trying to get a passage on a commercial vessel, but it was the time of the seaman's strike 1965. There was no chance of him getting bail again. He was "banged up" in Brixton prison, on remand until his trial came up.

I thought my mind would explode with grief. I was glad that our mother was not alive to see his disgrace. My eldest sister, always jealous of the relationship between Dominic and myself said she wanted nothing more to do with him because of the shame he had brought on the family. She kept to her word, it was 40 years before she had any contact with him.

Maybe the first prison visit is always one of the worst. I hadn't wanted to go, I was frightened of who I might meet there, after all Dominic and I did not come from the "criminal classes", we were an upper middle class family. My God! What a terrible snob I was in those days, there is no such things as the "criminal classes". Wrong doers come from all walks of life as do their visitors, I was very humbled to see well dressed, well spoken visitors waiting their turn with the rest of us. I had no idea what to expect. H.M.P. Brixton is an inhospitable, grim place. My first impression was that it was like a vast public lavatory. Searches in those days were very cursory. I had taken by youngest child as she was only a baby and was still breast-fed. I was taken through to a cubical. Dominic was brought in by a prison warder, we put our arms out to embrace each other; our hands met on the glass screen that separated us. I remember how very cold that glass was. I had travelled a long way for that visit. All too soon, our 20 minutes were up, a warder came to take Dominic away, Without a thought I crammed a breast into the sleeping baby's mouth and said, "Turn your back my good man I am feeding my baby." He fled, red faced with embarrassment and did not return for nearly three quarters of an hour. Those were the days when women did not feed their babies in public. (Many times afterwards we were able to laugh at this incident.)

Those were the days when "slopping out" still took place every morning in Her Majesty's prisons. Dominic had always been very fastidious about his personal cleanliness, I knew how much he would hate the degradation of this aspect of prison life. We would talk openly of these things he explained that as far as possible the bucket was only used for urine and not solid waste, but this was not always possible if one of them got a "tummy bug." One bucket between three! Part of me lived in that prison cell with him; his prison sentence became my prison sentence.

When I wasn't busy with the children I was preoccupied with Dominic and how he was coping. I would walk along the beach and remember the times that he and I had walked together, jumped the waves, laughed with childish glee when a wave caught us. When would he ever be able to do that again? When would he walk bare foot across the fields in the early morning dew? This and many more memories tore into my very soul. I was the older twin, I had always looked after him, now I was helpless to protect him. At times I feared I was going mad.

The trial came; I attended guarded by police officers against hostile witnesses. My sister-in-law was not there she had started divorce proceedings the disgrace of Dominic's crime had been too much for her. He was sentenced to 21 months, the police were furious as they considered that he should have been given a much harsher sentence. Foolishly he had not had all other charges taken into consideration, a fact that was to catch up with him later. He had been very badly advised. He wrote to me weekly. In those days there was only one visit a month permitted. Money was short and the week I was able to visit we went without a Sunday roast to pay for the train fare.

I was tearing myself apart with grief, Dominic was an obsession with me. I remember walking down a tree lined country lane, it was Spring Time,

the scent of Spring flowers pervaded the air. Tears streamed down my cheeks, sobs rent my throat, I hurt, Oh how I hurt! I had to do something I was teetering on the brink of a precipice. I decided that I had to harden myself, that as an act of personal discipline I must stop wallowing, it helped no one; Dominic was no better off and I was tearing myself apart. This new strategy seemed to work until I realised that I had become hard all-round not just over dwelling on Dominic's plight. I did not like the person I had become; I had to try and get a more balanced view on life. We would get through this, we are survivors.

Dominic was moved to an open prison near to where I lived. Visiting was much pleasanter and I had a full two hours with him, unlike the twenty minutes I got when he was in the Scrubs. Dominic was due out in time for Christmas, then he told me that he feared a prison gate arrest for the crimes he had not had taken into account at his trial. I now had something to get my teeth into I got in contact with A News-reporter on a well know Sunday Newspaper. I contacted the Home Office. It was agreed that if the newspaper would hold back on their article on prison gate arrest they would bring forward the charges. Three months before he was due for release he was notified of these charges; this was less catastrophic than being released in order to be immediately re-arrested. Dominic was given a further four year sentence.

Dominic was now technically a second offender so was sent to H.M.P. Wandsworth. To visit involved a train journey, two buses and a walk. I am terribly travel sick so I found the journey difficult. Wandsworth like most of the older prisons is a grim place very different to the visiting I had become used to in the open prison. After the initial searches and waiting in a specified area we were taken across a courtyard, guarded by dogs and filmed by close circuit television, this in the days when the use of cameras and dogs were not usual. I felt like a criminal not a visitor. We were taken to a building and locked in. I think that maybe I have always been claustrophobic, I immediately needed to use the toilet; the only toilet I had seen was back at the initial reception centre. I would have to ask to be unlocked and re-cross that courtyard with the dogs prowling and terrifying. I managed to control my basic needs. The visit was short, once over we were led back across the courtyard, dogs still in attendance. I went out through the small door within the larger doors which are opened for prison transport. The door clanged shut behind me, the key turned in the lock. I turned, ran back and beat upon the door screaming to be let in. I was spread-eagled on the door. A hand touched me on the shoulder,

“Yer first visit ain't it luv?”

I went with this stranger. We sat in a café and had cup tea. This total stranger, stayed with me till I calmed down. Down the decades her words have stayed with me, “They promise they'll never do it again but the buggers do, cos you luv 'em you will always be there for 'em. It do get easier wi time.” Strange that I should find comfort in such words but I did, I never knew her name but somehow I no longer felt so desperately alone. In the decades that have passed since that time I have felt that I owe a debt to that unknown woman, a debt I have tried to pay many times not to her but to others.

Dominic, who had been a “red band”, a trusted prisoner at the open prison was not put to work painting two red blobs on the cheeks of plastic dolls at Wandsworth prison. He applied for a transfer back to the open prison, but the prison psychiatrist said that he was better employed where he was rather than being returned to the open prison. I applied for a second psychiatric report. I arranged for the psychiatrist to attend the prison. Before he was able to make his visit Dominic was moved back to the open prison. I had found a way of coping with the long years while Dominic was inside, I could fight his battles and those of others from the outside, which is what I did. I started to pay my debt to that unknown cockney woman at Wandsworth. Over the years there were many:

Patel, an Indian too ashamed to let his wife visit. I kept in contact with her and made certain the children were clothed and fed and had toys for Christmas.

Jack who had been in the German concentration camps and had no one to write to him or stand bail.

Andreas, a Lithuanian who was fearful for his girl friend because he thought the English police were like the K.G.B.

And many more.

I fought Dominic’s battles and those of the men he asked me to help, I no longer felt so helpless.

Parole was just being brought into the prison regime; it was essential that a man had an address to be released to. Dominic’s wife had divorced him during his years inside so her address could not be used. I read Hansard during the early days of Parole, I studied the words of Jim Callahan, then Home Secretary. I went to the Home Office to see Sir John Hunt, chairman of the Parole Board, won my case and Dominic was released to my address as one of the first men let out on parole. I had also arranged work for him where his prison record would not go against him.

For ten years he lived a hard working, honest existence, married again had a son. Then out of the blue he was arrested again for similar, though far more intricate fraud charges than his first set of offences. It was no easier second time around, I hated what he had done but I loved him unreservedly. It took four months, a Crown Court and a Judge in Chambers to achieve his release to me on bail while awaiting trial. We staked everything on him not running, our home was put up as security. Eleven months I watched his every move. He was facing a minimum seven year sentence; I don’t know if I, in his position, would have had the strength not to run.

Once again we were facing years of prison visiting we had got through it once and would do so again and sadly yet again.

We are survivors.

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