



Home for Friendless Girls

Lucy Jane Gonzalez

The ones I love aren't here anymore. I'd like to say they passed at the end of long, fulfilled lives, but that is not so. They were taken unjustly. As for me, I'm still hanging on, aged 91.

As I write these memoirs, I'm wearing my simple lilac blouse, taupe-coloured pleated skirt and my favourite emerald earrings. I'm not sure the lilac and green really go well together, but who have I to impress? Besides, we spend our lives trying to make things coherent day by day, trying to make our actions match our intentions, so why is there always this pressure to put together a perfectly-matching outfit? I like my lilac and green just fine.

I've been asked to write this by the Dean of City University, London. He's compiling a collection of working class autobiographies for student research. My neighbour, Julie—she comes round twice a week to water my plants and stick her nose in my business—has a daughter, Becky or Bex or Bekka or something, who studies History at the university. Julie obviously relayed my stories to her daughter who then went and told the Dean all about my upbringing. I had a letter from him on my doormat, sealed with a wax crest as if he were royalty. I resent Julie's sharing my tales without my permission but I don't mind doing this. It's something to pass the time.

My childhood was spent in a cycle between three locations: home, school and the market. My father owned the fruit and veg stall. Before I was old enough for school, I used to sit on my little wooden stool next to Father behind the stall, feeling so important. I would watch the people and be fascinated by the different kinds. Around the edges of the street, gentlemen in top hats and tail coats had their shoes polished by men in tatty mismatched clothing, moth-eaten flat caps and neckerchiefs. This sight was what made me first realise that we were poor, because Father wore the same clothes as the shoe polishers.

Above the other chatter and laughter, the voices of the lady stall owners dominated. I knew a few of their names because they would bring Father and me fresh bread and bottles of milk for our lunch. Of course, Father would always reciprocate with a few strawberries in brown paper. One of the ladies, Bessie, always winked at Father and smiled for longer than was necessary. I never understood why, but once I grew up and thought back, I was very glad that Father never indulged her shameless flirting. My favourite lady was Joy at the flower stall, who used to give me the flowers that hadn't sold by the end of the day. I was especially excited when they were daffodils, my favourite, but I was happy with anything. I would rush home with them tucked in my coat, arrange them in the tin watering can and place it on the ground outside the front gate. Once, a stray dog got hold of the can trying to drink from it and tipped it over. By the morning, the flowers were crushed into pieces by passing feet. I felt more upset than perhaps I should have.

Every day was almost identical. The same faces, the same routines, the same stiff upper lip. I didn't mind the routine one bit. I didn't want anything to happen that was out of the ordinary. Extraordinary sounded too frightening to me. Father said that without Mother the house felt empty, but I couldn't remember any different. She was dead by the time I was two.

My brother Samuel, three years older than me, was a fiercely caring and silly big brother to all three of us girls: me, Mary and Louisa. Our brothers Edward and William were

already at war. Two years later, Samuel got called up too. I cried the hardest I've ever cried the day he left, clinging on to his ankle.

'I'll be back soon, little one,' he insisted.

He never came back. He, Edward and William were all killed on the battlefield. A year later, Mary and Lou both contracted measles and were dead within a month. I spent three weeks curled up on the floor rug with Sausage, our dog. Not even Father could get me to move, resorting to bringing me plates of food and placing them by my head. I should have been there for him. He had lost everyone close to him too. The following April, Father died of influenza. He was 40. That time, I didn't cry. I didn't have any tears left.

The rich Spooner family rescued me after that. They paid for me to go to a Home for Girls. Father used to deliver fresh fruit and vegetables to the Spooners' home, even on Christmas Day. I had been so angry because that delivery meant Father had to stop our game of chess halfway through. Sausage had jumped up onto the board while Father was gone and messed up all the pieces, so we couldn't even carry on where we left off.

Staddon House was known as the Home for Friendless Girls. A dark brick building in the shape of a triangle. I never found out what was at its point, but the girls used to say it was where they hanged you if you were really naughty. Angela Green said she once heard the sound of some rope snap, but Angela always told lies. Miss Truman said it was because she had too much personality. Angela got in trouble all the time. A rap on the knuckles when she left hair in the comb, turpentine in her hair 'to keep trouble at bay' when she talked in class, her head stuck in a bucket of water when she refused to say her prayers because she didn't believe in Him. I didn't get into trouble. Maybe it was because I had no personality after losing my family. Every morning, I was force fed three spoonfuls of cod liver oil as I was thought to be frail.

When we walked to Charles Church on Sunday mornings, lined up in twos in our navy straw hats, banned from talking, we always ended up walking just behind the boys from the other home. We called them 'The Grey Coat Boys' and we weren't allowed to look, though we all did. The first time I saw them, I remember thinking they looked like fluffy baby penguins. A week later, Angela Green said the same thing and everyone fell about laughing and shared their secret sweets with her. I didn't mind sticking to my fruit. It reminded me of Father.

One of 'The Grey Coat Boys' looked so like my brother Samuel. He was always at the front, leading the rest of the boys like a soldier. Each time I saw him, I wanted to run over, push through the other boys and give him a tight hug.

My first birthday at Staddon House was my eighth. I got a small bag of biscuits and a comb from Matron. After tea I cried in my bedroom window, the first time in a year. As I wiped my eyes with my sleeve, I noticed a figure in the garden of the Home for Boys, beyond the picket fence. Blinking hard to remove the remaining tears, it became clear it was my Samuel boy. He was peacefully reading a book under an apple tree. I leaned in closer to the window, my hand flat against the glass. I felt safe that I could watch him from such a height and he wouldn't know, but his head snapped up and met my eyes instantly. He must have noticed my sad, tearful expression because he looked puzzled, closed his book, and stood up. Then he turned his back and I thought, 'he's not interested in a weeping wimp.' I was about to climb down from the window seat and go back down to the rec room when the boy turned back around and stepped aside, pointing at the grass next to his lace-up shoes. He had picked some apples from the tree and arranged them in a big smiley face. I burst out laughing and gave him a clap. And then I realised that was the first time I'd laughed in a year.

I didn't see the man coming up from behind the boy, I was too caught up in joy. The hands that grabbed him round his ribs were large, dirty and bony. The boy tried to fight,

kicking up his legs in defence, but it was no good, the man was too strong. He looked up at me with his thick beard and scary eyebrows. The boys were not allowed to communicate with us girls under ANY circumstances. He was dragged away, his book left lonely on the grass. One of the apples of the smiley face had been kicked in the scuffle and now looked like a tear on the face's cheek. After that, I really didn't cry again. I decided that it simply couldn't have been in God's plan for me to be happy. What is the point in happiness anyway? Looking back, Angela Green impresses me. To retain her personality in such a soul-sucking environment? That's impressive. The Home for Friendless Girls stole my childhood, my personality and my hope.

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'Home for Friendless Girls' was written in response to 'Untitled' by Ethel Mary Ellen Ley, a text dictated in 1980 about a childhood beginning in 1890—Burnett Archive volume number 1:872

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First published June 2015, as part of 'Stories from the Special Collections' on the Brunel Library Special Collections blog — <https://brunelspecialcollections.wordpress.com/>