


Sophia's
story

that anxiety-
HIDDEN waiting
game of my
childhood



I had a kind of deal with God – that I would only have one tummy bug a year and there would be only one of these screaming, bashing incidents a year. I used to tell myself that if I could get through it, there wouldn't be another for a year – and that's probably the way it did go. So once it was over, there was a sense of relaxation because I would tell myself I had a year till the next one. But actually, the tension was still there because you had no idea when it would happen again.

It was the not knowing when it would happen that caused the constant sense of anticipation for me. I had that yearly cycle of anticipation, but there was also a weekly cycle. Thursday, Friday and Saturday were dangerous days. The pubs still closed at six o'clock then, but my father belonged to a club and he would drink there and come home drunk. Once I'd got through to Sunday the tension would go down a bit, but then the cycle would begin again.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX
 IT WAS THE NOT
 KNOWING WHEN
 IT WOULD HAPPEN
 THAT CAUSED THE
 CONSTANT SENSE OF
 ANTICIPATION FOR ME.
 THURSDAY, FRIDAY
 AND SATURDAY WERE
 DANGEROUS DAYS.
 XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

One effect of that anxiety-ridden waiting game of my childhood is that I can't stand anything where I have to wait in anticipation. If I go to a movie and I know that something's going to happen, I can't sit there and wait for it. I spent the whole of *The English Patient* in the foyer because I knew the couple would get caught. I couldn't cope with anticipating the outcome. I didn't want to get caught up in their emotion.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX
 I FELT IT WAS MY
 RESPONSIBILITY
 TO CALM DAD
 DOWN IN ORDER
 TO PROTECT MUM
 AND MYSELF. IF I
 DIDN'T HE MIGHT
 BLOW UP AND
 BECOME REALLY
 DANGEROUS.
 XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

It wasn't until I grew up that I saw the connection between what happened in my childhood and my inability to wait for things to unfold. It is still all-pervasive. If my partner is going out drinking, I can't stand staying home. I'll drive to a friend's place just so that I won't be waiting at home. When there's sport on television at the club I belong to, I'll leave because I feel as if I might influence the outcome negatively. It's as if my being there watching is somehow going to make it worse.

At the age of nine I went to boarding school. My auntie talked my mother into sending me to the Catholic school my cousin had gone to. I didn't know anything about Catholicism. My mother had been brought up a Catholic, but she wasn't practicing by then. Part of sending me to boarding school was to protect me, and I went with a huge sense of relief. But I was also wracked with guilt because I felt I'd abandoned my mother; so it was a double-edged sword.

One of those really bad incidents happened after I went there. The bones in my mother's face were broken. She always insisted that she had walked into a door in the dark, but I didn't believe that. She had to go into hospital and have her face reconstructed. She was numb for many years. I felt guilty that I hadn't been there when it happened. I always felt a sense of being responsible and needing to protect her. I felt she was a bit fragile and vulnerable.

I felt it was my responsibility to calm Dad down in order to protect Mum and myself. If I didn't he might blow up and become really dangerous. Once I sat next to him all night after he'd been drinking spirits because he couldn't go to sleep. He liked having his hair combed, so I used to comb his hair for ages. When I was a little kid I used to sit on the back of the couch to do it, and later I'd stand behind the coach.

I also used to stroke his head. I wonder if this was something he found comforting because his mother had done it when he was a baby. Mothers stroke their babies' heads when they are feeding them. When people suddenly suffer grief they'll stroke their face, and that's where all their pleasure feelings as a baby were, when they were feeding at the breast. I find I stroke my hair if I am stressed, and I am sure my mother must have stroked my head.

I wonder now if my father had an allergy to alcohol because I could see the difference in his face after he'd had only one drink. If you had photos of him 'in drink' and 'out of drink' he would look quite different. The elasticity of his face altered; one eyebrow lifted. It was quite sinister. He would become hyperactive. Alcohol seemed to trigger him off, like sugar does a hyperactive child. He was like a wound-up spring, and he had to be ranting and raving and doing.

He came from a family of alcoholics. His grandfather had owned breweries and hotels and used to send Dad's father and his brother to buy drinks for people in pubs as an advertising thing. They both turned out to be alcoholics. I never heard anything about my grandfather being violent to my grandmother, but his brother was a very violent alcoholic.

My father grew up feeling life wasn't fair and that he'd missed out. His mother was a Seventh Day Adventist and she was very strict with him. He wasn't allowed to play with other kids or play sport. Because of his mother's religion, he didn't drink till he was about 40 and he drank beer, hardly ever spirits.

He pulled himself up in the world and became a well-respected businessman, the manager of a branch of a nationwide company. But there was always that undercurrent that things had been unfair on him. He was quite negative about things, and I now think he probably suffered from depression.

He was a handsome, articulate, intelligent man, but there was a fakeness about him. He'd say things like "when I was in England" – when he'd never been to England. He'd put things in such a way that you couldn't argue with him, mainly by being very detailed and emphatic.

You had to be careful around him all the time. It was really hard to ask for your pocket money or whether you could go out on a Saturday night. He didn't always say no but you never knew how he would react. You couldn't ask him anything he might have to give way on. Quite often he just wouldn't hear. He wouldn't acknowledge that you were asking him, he'd just ignore you and get on with reading the paper or going out into the garden. He kept a brick wall up and often didn't talk to us directly.

I am a very untidy person and when I was a child my room was usually covered in junk. My father couldn't stand mess and several times he got into a huge rage and swooped on all my stuff, gathered it up and put it in the middle of the driveway where he set fire to it.

My mother would have a sherry, but just one, and one cigarette before dinner when she was waiting for Dad to come home. I never saw her have an excess

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX
 MY FATHER COULDN'T
 STAND MESS AND
 SEVERAL TIMES HE
 GOT INTO A HUGE RAGE
 AND SWOOPEO ON ALL
 MY STUFF, GATHEREO
 IT UP AND PUT IT IN
 THE MIDDLE OF THE
 DRIVEWAY WHERE
 HE SET FIRE TO IT.
 XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

of alcohol; she was too much of a lady. She was a quiet person. She was the sixth of eight children from a very loving family. I think she and my father were probably attracted to each others' differences, because they came from absolutely different families.

She had been 30 when they got married, 38 by the time my brother was born and 40 when I was born in 1951. She was very focussed on my father who was the focal point of the household. She was quite isolated

because she was an older mother; she no longer had her own mother, who died when she was a teenager, and she had moved to a city where she didn't know anyone and didn't drive.



As a young woman she had been very independent and had had her own car. But once she got together with Dad she never drove again. We only had Dad's work car anyway, always a big American car.

I don't know what she did – except to keep the house tidy and clean. She didn't go out much or do things on her own, apart from hat making and floral art classes, and for a while she went to the Country Women's Institute. When Dad went to the club she waited at home – in those days women didn't go to clubs.

She kept people at arm's length. When I had young children, I was hardly ever at home. I was involved in La Leche League and Playcentre, and I ran antenatal classes. I always had things I was occupied with as well as my family. And I've always had lots of women friends. If something goes wrong, the first thing I do is ring a friend and get it out. But my mother never did that. I don't think she had anyone she could talk to.

We very rarely had visitors. I think it wasn't safe to have people in because they would get too close. Occasionally we would go to other people's places and they'd all sit around and drink.



I think that because, even when I was little, I felt my father's behaviour was not fair, I've never been able to stand anything that's not fair. It doesn't matter if it's not fair to me or to someone else. This really came out when I went to boarding school and ran up against the nuns. 'Not fair' was not part of their way of thinking at all; they just dictated our lives.

I didn't like people getting into trouble. I didn't like getting into trouble either – and I did get into trouble for saying "that's not fair!" One thing I thought

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX
 MY DEBUTANTE NIGHT
 WAS A CLASSIC EXAMPLE
 OF MY FATHER NOT
 BEING FAIR. HE ARRIVED
 HOME LATE AND HAD
 HAD TOO MUCH TO DRINK,
 SO WE WENT TO THE DEB
 BALL LATE. I SPENT THE
 WHOLE TIME TENSE AND
 EMBARRASSED.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

wasn't fair was that we'd have movies on special feast days, and they'd show you two reels of the film and then the juniors would have to go to bed before the third reel. They'd show it to you the next day or even later.

I'd voice my opinion on things like that, and end up waiting in the annexe outside the headmistress's office. Waiting there, you couldn't see who was coming but you could hear them – the clomp of

shoes on the wooden floor and the rattle of rosary beads. I'd be thinking, "is it her?" and then the footsteps would pass and I'd be waiting again. She might not come at all during the period I was standing there. They didn't know how good a punishment that was for me! It fed into my anticipation anxiety.

My debutante night was a classic example of my father not being fair. He arrived home late and had had too much to drink, so we went to the deb ball late. I spent the whole time tense and embarrassed because I didn't want my friends to know that he had had too much alcohol although he would not have behaved badly socially, and he wasn't aggressive in front of other men.

I think that sense of unfairness did have a positive spin-off for me in that it made me a campaigner. I really fought for women on issues around childbirth, and was a leader in the home birth movement.

My father used to say that I was his special little girl, and my whole object in life was to please him. He used to show me off. If we went to someone's place, I'd dance or perform. I struggled to impress him. I felt that he expected me to be perfect because I was his daughter, his only daughter. So I had to be pleasant and pleasing to everyone – and pass everything at school.

I'm a perfectionist and I get quite het up over doing things well. I know this is to do with my father's expectations – that you couldn't produce something mediocre, you had to be the best. If you got 86 percent for an exam, why wasn't it 96 percent? I graduated with top marks in both a teaching degree and a nursing degree. There's a part of me that likes studying, but it's more that I hate failing – and getting a B has always been failing to me.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

MY FATHER USED TO
SAY THAT I WAS HIS
SPECIAL LITTLE GIRL,
AND MY WHOLE OBJECT
IN LIFE WAS TO PLEASE
HIM. I STRUGGLED TO
IMPRESS HIM. I FELT
THAT HE EXPECTED ME
TO BE PERFECT BECAUSE
I WAS HIS DAUGHTER,
HIS ONLY DAUGHTER.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

But there is also failure in needing to do everything well, because if I think I can't do something really well I don't try to do it. I often avoid things when I think I am going to fail. I recently started a Maori language course. I went to two sessions, then I missed a couple. After that I withdrew because I could see myself failing. You could say that was self protection, but it is also self-defeating. I chose to do the course, and it's not even as if I had to pass it, but I stopped doing it.

It is exhausting trying to be perfect, and not being perfect is exhausting as well because I feel I've failed. So I don't have much fun! I can't just relax and enjoy things.

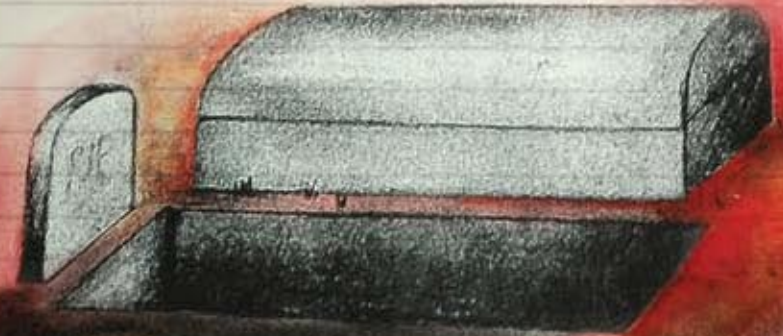
I still find that I expect there will be a payoff if I have a good time – that something bad will happen as a result. Last year I did a flax weaving course while my partner played in a darts tournament. Because I had a lovely day, I expected she would have had a bad one. I couldn't feel happy and relaxed about having had a good time. Something had to have gone wrong as a result.

I think that's how my father's explosiveness and violence has affected me – that I am always waiting for the bad thing to happen. I remember a vivid example of this from my childhood. I was in hospital with osteomyelitis and my parents visited me every day. One day I wasn't there because I had gone to a birthday party. They were really upset with the hospital for having let me go. But I had said Mum and Dad weren't coming that day so that I could go. My parents told me they'd sat there all afternoon waiting for me to come back, and I felt really guilty that I'd let them down. I still feel guilty about that!

As a teenager I couldn't go out and have a good time without the anticipation that it would go wrong because I'd always have to deal with Dad when I got home. He'd be raging up and down. He'd always find some reason to be angry – that he didn't like the boy I was out with or because I was late – and my night would always be ruined.

I chose my husband because he was totally different from my father. He seemed to be a very caring person, and I was attracted to that. But later he became fanatically religious in a very old-fashioned Catholic way, and he became controlling because he wouldn't acknowledge what was going on. It was the same as with Dad who wouldn't let you have an instant reaction to anything. You'd never answer back because life wouldn't be worth living. And then because nothing was ever discussed, nothing ever got resolved.

After those violent incidents it was as if nothing had happened. It's like an Alfred Hitchcock movie where the body disappears. Someone has come in and found a dead body and all the mess and gone off to get the police, but when they come back there's no body and everything is perfect. My mother didn't talk about it. It was as if those incidents just hadn't happened. It was a silence; no acknowledgement.



XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

LOTS OF MEN WILL DO BOTH THE PHYSICAL VIOLENCE AND THE CONTROL STUFF, BUT THE CONTROLLING THING CAN BE REALLY SUBTLE AND WOMEN HOOK INTO IT.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

are being all convivial at the club, I always find myself wondering “what are you like at home?” and thinking of their partner waiting for them – and then feeling pissed off.

In my job I have to ask women questions about whether they are in domestic violence. But because those words make them think about black eyes and split lips, I ask them if they feel happy and safe with their partner. That addresses the question of psychological control as well. Lots of men will do both the physical violence and the control stuff, but the controlling thing can be really subtle especially and women hook into it.

I see it, for example, in cases where men take the woman to live in the country. It sounds nice, but if she doesn't have a driver's licence and can't go to the doctor or the shops or have a coffee with a friend, she is being controlled by that man.

I feel that that's how my mother and I were during my childhood. It was about that controlling thing. I know this doesn't sound very serious compared with children who were beaten and abused, but the effects are still with me. It's like having a chronic illness. You are always looking for the signs and symptoms, like someone who is a haemophiliac. Mostly their life is sort of okay, but they know they'll have an eruption at some point. It's always there.

I am really intolerant of people who drink too much. I am happy to sit down and have a rum and coke in the evening to relax, but I just don't understand people who keep drinking despite the consequences. When men

