If God sends you down a stony path, may he give you strong shoes. This is an old Irish proverb your husband liked to quote when times were tough. He was not religious. Neither are you. How could you be? However, the wisdom embodied in this little Gaelic saying takes you back to a time when a gift of shoes became a turning point in your life. Only you didn’t realise it then. Your stony path had climbed to its steepest point and you stood looking over a precipice. The only way forward was to step off the edge and hope someone below would hold out their arms and break your fall.

You grew up in England, in a large three-bedroomed house, which appeared, externally, like any other house. It was situated in a typical English middle-class street lined with huge oak trees, where people took pride in their homes and washed their cars on Sunday mornings. Neighbours said hello as they walked past front gardens in which small lawns were mowed or roses pruned. Your story begins in an average street in an average English neighbourhood on an average Sunday morning.

You wake and there is a moment which lasts for a few seconds – that comfortable, warm and drowsy feeling when coming round from a deep sleep. Then, suddenly and violently, a realisation of deep-rooted pain wakes you into consciousness. You have a secret. A dark secret, so intense, so monumental and heavy, it has a physical presence. It’s a huge weight lodged in your core, squashing and cramping, twisting and turning, curled up inside, controlling all your actions and thoughts.

However, this morning, just as reality begins to take hold and overwhelm you, a lighter thought seeps through into your conscious mind. It’s your birthday. You are no longer a child, you are sixteen. Sixteen is nearly an adult. You can leave home. You can do what you want. You can be free. It’s at that moment, that you contemplate freedom. That small taste is just enough to ease the pain a little and calm the cramping in your belly.

As you lift the duvet and come out of hiding, you go to the window and look out into the garden from behind the curtains. It has been raining and water is dripping from the trees. The wet leaves glisten in the English sunshine and everything looks clean and brighter, somehow. You can see your little brother in the garden, bending over, probably digging for worms in the soft muddy soil. Your dog is sniffing around the puddles, trying to assist in the exploration. The pungent aroma of bacon drifts from the kitchen, which is under your bedroom and you realise that your mother is cooking Sunday breakfast. You suddenly feel hungry.

You slowly enter the kitchen, relieved to find your mother alone. She smiles and gives you a hug. She has placed a large box wrapped in silver paper, on the kitchen table and several birthday cards are propped up against it. The previous week you had been shopping together, and she had bought you some shoes for your birthday. Black heels with little ankle straps. You can’t wait to try them on and show your friends. As you carefully unwrap the present, your mother lays out four plates and pours the tea.

Your brother comes in from the garden, rubbing his dirty hands against his jumper and your mother tells him off and shakes her head at him in despair, telling him to go and wash his hands. She asks you to go and give your father a shout and tell him that breakfast

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is ready. You go to the bottom of the stairs and shout *breakfast is ready*, to the landing upstairs. You listen and hope that he has not heard you, so that you can have a few more minutes in the sanctum of your family – your mother and brother. The three of you have a close relationship. After your mother divorced, she single-handedly raised the two of you in the small Warwickshire village of Henley in Arden, until you were ten. Then she married again. You have very little memory of your real father, your biological father. There is just a hazy vision of standing by the heat of a fire burning in a grate and a man yelling angrily at your mother from across the room. Your mother holds your baby brother in her arms. You remember feeling frightened and push closely against your mother’s legs, for protection. Her head is bent over the baby and she is weeping. Then the man is gone. That is your one and only memory of your real father.

Quickly you return to the warm comfort of the kitchen and your unwrapped present and unopened birthday cards. Your brother is being his usual idiot self, trying to poke a sausage up his nose and making you laugh, whilst your mother tries to be angry with him but then, she is laughing too. The dog wags his tail and seeks attention. He starts yapping and gently strokes his paw against your brother’s leg. It’s just like the old days, before you started to feel sick every day, when life was fun, before your brother was made to cry, before your mother had bruises, before things were smashed, before the shouting, before things changed.

He comes in. The laughing stops. He sits down heavily at the end of the table. Your mother chats away to him, unaware of the nasty smell his presence creates. He is unshaven, which emphasises his sagging cheeks and double chin. He turns his stony-grey eyes towards you and looks at your new shoes. He says, *very nice, put them on then, let’s have a look at you in them*, and your mother agrees, not realising what she’s saying. You start to feel sick. The walls are closing in. You feel dirty. You do not want his eyes on you, looking at your legs, leering at your walk. You start to panic and stand up. You are holding back hot tears but they are escaping and start to run down your face and you are picking up your shoes and the paper and your cards, and you want to run away, to be safe from the guilt and the shame. To be a little girl again. You run out of the kitchen and you can hear your mother shouting after you.

Later, you hear a knock on the bedroom door and it’s your mother asking if you’re alright now and would you stay in and look after your little brother, until she is back. She is going out to visit an aunt who has recently moved to the nearby town of Stratford upon Avon. You know that she will be out for a couple of hours and your heart sinks, until she tells you that he is going too. You sit on your bed, with the door closed. Alone in your room of memories. Trying not to think of those times when you were younger, when he would climb the stairs and walk along the landing to your room at bedtime, to say goodnight.

He would heave himself onto your bed and tell you to be a good girl. As he lowered his weight onto your body, you would lift yourself up and rise high above him, floating to the ceiling. You would look down at yourself, at him. If you stayed up there you could almost feel nothing, as if it wasn’t happening. You didn’t even have to think about it. You could see the bright purple and lilac walls and the crack in the ceiling above the doorway and the little fly trapped and suspended in a cobweb in a corner, waiting to be devoured by the big fat, hairy spider. Your mother never climbed those stairs at bedtime.

As you grew older, you tried to avoid him. You stayed away from the house as
much as possible. You came home late. But he found other places, other times. Assignations. Ultimatums. If you were not a good girl he would hit your mother, kick the dog and bully your brother. Psychologically, he beat you into submission. So eventually, you would go in the car for a drive with him or to the workshop at the back of the garage. A little pawn. You feel ashamed, but how can you tell anyone what you have been doing. Do not tell your mother, it will destroy her. It will destroy her. He has said it so many times you believe it. He has been telling you that since you were ten. You know that you might lose your mother. She will hate you when she knows what you’ve been doing. You will lose your home, and your little brother. But you are an adult now and this is the sacrifice you will have to make. To get him away from you.

The following day you arrive home from school expecting to find your mother and brother at home. But they have gone to the shops and he is there alone, waiting for you. He is wearing an old pair of jeans which are too tight and his bulging stomach hangs over the waistband. He tells you he hasn’t been to work today. You want to go and change out of your school uniform, but not when you are alone in the house with him. You go into the kitchen to get a drink and he comes up behind you and puts his hand on your breast. His breath stinks of stale tobacco. He wants you to go upstairs with him. You shrug him off and he grabs at you. You move away and say No, I’m going out. His voice is soft and coaxing at first but because you are not compliant; he becomes aggressive, threatening. You scream at him NO and run to the door and make your escape. You go to a friend’s house and are invited to stay for dinner. Your friend’s mother phones your house to say that you will be back later, after you’ve eaten.

Your friend’s father drops you off at the door, because it is dark outside. You go inside and it is quiet. Your mother is in the kitchen. She has been crying and her face is swollen and blotchy, as if a rash has spread across her cheeks and throat. She says she is alright. He is nowhere to be seen and there is an atmosphere of heavy, oppressive silence, like the aftermath of a ferocious storm which has left devastation in its wake. She is sweeping broken glass off the floor. You walk to the foot of the stairs. As you glance in the mirror on the wall, he comes out of the sitting room behind you. He stands just two feet away, staring back at you accusingly through the reflection. This is your fault. His hostility is almost tangible and a vein in his temple pulses angrily; sweat beads on his face. Not a word is spoken and you stare back at him, challenging him, until he releases his gaze and turns away. Your guilt weighs rock-heavy, but you are not going to give in this time. You look in on your little brother and he is sleeping. Then you go to your bedroom. There are no visitors to your room tonight.

You cannot sleep. You toss and turn, the shadowy dark thoughts going over and over and there’s no escape. The night appears to go on forever, until the dawn light begins to drift slowly and grudgingly into the room. Eventually, you get up and quietly go into your brother’s room to see if he’s alright. As you enter, you can hear him crying in his sleep; his arms are thrashing around, and he is mumbling incoherently. You wrap your arms around him and he begins to quieten down, to be calmer, and he drifts back into a gentle sleep. You lie down next to him and listen to his breathing, until daylight enters the room and chases away the dark shadows. You get up feeling sick again. You go to school and listen to the teachers and make notes and talk to your friends in the break. You go through the routine of being normal. Not wanting to attract attention just in case someone sees something different about you, something dirty, a label saying

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unclean. You know you are not the same anymore and everyone is going to know and you will lose your friends. How will you be able to come back to school after everyone knows? After lunch, you ask to see the headmistress. The secretary raises an eyebrow at your request and asks the reason. You say, it’s personal and look down at the floor. The secretary says to come back after lessons at three o’clock and the headmistress will see you then.

You go to the toilets and vomit. Someone overhears you being sick and the next minute a teacher is banging on the toilet door asking if you’re alright. You open the door and see a teacher you do not recognise and burst into tears. She tells you to go home as clearly you are unwell. Younger girls stand around watching the floor- show and whispering and you need to get out, you need to get away. You tell the teacher your name and collect your bag and walk out the front door into the fresh air. It’s raining gently and you lift your face upwards, breathing in gulps of air and letting the cold raindrops trickle down your cheeks, to wash away the tears. You sit down against a wall out of sight. What to do? Who to talk to? You walk to the bus stop and wait for the next bus.

Being an adult is tough. Decisions are tough. You sit on the upper deck of the bus, letting the wind from the open window blow through your hair and your mind. You want it to blow you away into nothing. The bus reaches the city and as it turns a corner, you see a large solid looking building, stately, secure, firmly anchored to the ground, its large glass panes reflecting the vast northern sky with its dark and thunderous clouds building up before the next storm. Vehicles are lined up neatly outside in the car park, as if your brother has been playing with his Corgi cars. You get off the bus at the next stop, and walk back along the road. Crossing over the busy road and negotiating heavy traffic, you reason to yourself that if you are not supposed to tell, the next car will hit you, and silence you forever. But fate decides in your favour and you reach the other side of the road with limbs intact and only the sound of a car hooting at your irresponsible action.

The sky is growing dark and the ground is trembling. You reach the entrance of the glass-fronted building and climb the steps. The main door opens into a wide spacious area with white walls and a large desk up front. The room is empty and you walk up to the uniformed officer behind the desk. When the blue-shirted English police officer looks up from his paperwork, you quietly say, I need to talk to somebody please. I need help.

Some years later you move to Australia, to escape. Not from England, but from your memories. Your mother was not destroyed, but those dreadful years continue to haunt her. She remains angry and racked with guilt because she did not protect you. It was a long time ago, but fingers still point, voices drop, and whispers linger in the air. She was not destroyed, but the family was, and that was the price of your freedom.

Sometimes the available paths in life are difficult. Sometimes whichever choice you make continues to lead to an impasse. The only way to move forward in a new direction is to begin a new life in another country.