

Care Leavers' Stories project

Christine O'Mahony

Interviewed by Tamisan Joe

C1597/03

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Social Care Institute for Excellence

Interview Summary Sheet

Title Page

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Collection title: Care Leavers' Stories

Interviewee's surname: O'Mahony

Title:

**Interviewee's
forename:** Christine

Sex: Female

Occupation: Equalities trainer

Date of birth: 1952

Dates of recording: 30.04.13

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**Interviewer's
comments:**

Track 1

What's your name?

Christine O'Mahony.

Could you tell me what you're doing now?

Well, I've just started my own business, which is called Disability, Equality & Diversity Trainers Limited. I'd been working as a freelance equalities trainer for about seven years, and before that I was sort of training manager for a disabled people's organisation, delivering training across the country and, you know, employing other trainers. And I've just decided to launch out on my 'cause I'm fed up with paying other people half my fees. [Laughs]

[00:47]

So why was you keen to tell your story?

Erm, I was just interested, really. I got the email from the Alliance for Inclusive Education and I thought well that sounds interesting, and I just thought why not? And just wondered what people wanted to know really, you know. It's obviously something I think about and something my sisters and I talk about, but not all that many people know about me.

You mentioned you and your sisters talking about your situation. Could you elaborate on that?

What, now or then? My situation at this point in life or –

Yeah, this point of life.

Okay. Well my elder sister is retired. She was a solicitor. And I think she got a big shock when her company made her redundant, sort of just like that, overnight. She thought she was there for life. And she's been quite depressed since, so a lot of stuff has come up for her. And the other sister, she works as a sort of person in child – prevention of child, in charge of the Prevention of Child Abuse for the NHS. So she obviously thinks a lot about what happens to small children when they're separated from their family. So we talk about it from time to time, and what it was like for us.

[02:12]

So could you tell me about when you went into care?

Okay. The reason we went into care was my mother had a breakdown after my brother was born, although we believe she was having it for quite a while before, but nobody noticed, you know, she was behaving very strangely during her pregnancy. And she went into hospital to have him, where they noticed that she was, you know, completely off the wall. And so she didn't come home basically. And my dad took my sisters and I to stay in the convent down the road from us. I think he thought it would be a weekend or something like that, but it landed up being nine months. And they didn't really have room for us there, so they transferred us to a sister convent in London. That was in Northampton, where we initially went in. I think we were there about a week or so and then we came to London. And my little brother got sent first of all to my mum's sister, and then to family in Ireland, and he stayed there till he was about eighteen months, I think. So that's how we got to be there.

How old were you?

I was four and my sister, Sheila, was six, and Maggie was seven.

[03:27]

You said that your mother, she could've had difficulties before and nobody had noticed?

Yeah. I mean she was very odd, but I don't really remember that. I mean my sisters do. Sheila says apparently, you know, we had a house full of Irish lodgers, we had a big, tall, Georgian house in Northampton. And my dad worked away, he came to London sort of Monday to Wednesday, and then came home on Wednesday, stayed overnight, and then went back again till Sunday, and came home for the day on Sunday. So I think she was kind of really overworked. She had three small children, another one on the way and a house full of lodgers. And I think for some reason or other she couldn't cook our lunch and we used to have to go to the neighbour next door for lunch. But then we'd hardly ever sat down for it when she'd be back in, sort of saying, 'I need my children, they've got to come now.' And my dad always told me [laughs] with great indignation, about how she'd cook his dinner and then, when he came to eat it, she'd throw out the window before he could sit down [laughs] which I thought was quite funny to be honest. [Laughs] So she was behaving bizarrely and I guess it showed up more when she actually when into hospital for the delivery, you know.

[04:45]

So what age did you go into care?

Four.

Four?

Yeah. And it was, you know, for a short period, it was only nine months or so, and it had a major impact on all our lives, you know.

So what do you remember about being in care?

I remember the first children's home, which was in Northampton. I remember the Cloister and my dad carrying me, and my sisters either side of him, walking into this very polished, long corridor. And then oh and I remember seeing my mum for the last time, before we went in. We went to the hospital, only we weren't allowed in to see her, so my dad pointed up to her window and said, 'There's your mum and your little brother,' and she was at a window with the baby in her arms. And that was the last time I saw her, for ages. And then I remember being in the next children's home in Isleworth. And we were sitting on the, erm, what's that thing ... fire escape steps, and my big sister was telling everyone proudly, 'Oh my mum's sick and she's coming to get us.' And another child was saying, 'Oh they always tell you that, but actually your mum's always dead.' And at that point I was convinced my mother was dead. Nothing any adult told me changed my opinion, ever really. That was what I believed to be true, even though you had to pretend to believe what adults told you. So I remember that. I remember not being allowed to cry at all, and my big sister kneeling in front of me and begging me not to cry, because that was like the worst thing you could do, was to cry. I don't know, how much detail do you want me to go into? [Laughs] I remember quite a lot, really.

You can go into detail.

I remember being in a big dormitory, huge big dormitory, maybe about eighteen beds or more in it. And sleeping in the same room as my sisters, but my sister Sheila used to wet the bed [laughs] and because she wet the bed it was assumed I would wet the bed. And so she had to get me up in the middle of the night, when she'd got up, to take me to the toilet in case I wet the bed, and she had to go to the toilet and look after me. She was only six. And then one night she forgot me, I was on a potty underneath the sink all night and I was found the next morning, fast asleep on the potty, and she got in terrible trouble for it. I remember feeling very guilty, 'cause I didn't think it was her fault in any way, you know. I just didn't know why I had to get out of bed, because I didn't wet the bed. [Laughs] So I remember that. I remember the food we used to get, erm, which was okay, you know, I didn't really have any problems eating there. I remember on Sundays we used to get bacon and everyone used to give me their bacon rinds 'cause nobody liked eating them except me [laughs]. And I

remember waiting a long time for a huge big Easter egg that we were going to get when Easter came, that was on display in the hall. It was really big, well I say that, well it looked like that big to me as a child. And it had icing sugar flowers on it. And every day we stood there praying and looking at this Easter egg [laughs] for what seemed like years. And then eventually when we got it, the priest came with a silver hammer and sort of smashed it and made a big ceremony of it, and we all got given a piece of this chocolate, and it was stale and it was disgusting. And it was one of the biggest disappointments of my life [laughs]. So I remember that. They had systems of kind of punishment that meant the nuns hit the big girls, who hit the smaller girls, who hit the littler girls, and it kind of went down. So everyone had someone in charge of them. I think children stayed there till they were about fourteen or so. And I remember seeing nuns beating bigger girls, I do remember that, and being very, very frightened by it, you know. I mean they ain't just slap them, they beat them, you know. But I never got beaten, I must admit. And I was really lucky, I had a nice prefect, she was very kind hearted, you know. And they were in charge of a group of about, I guess she must have been about ten or so, she was probably was in charge of a group of about four or five little girls, and it was her job to make sure we all behaved ourselves. So [laughs] one of the punishments went, if you wet yourself, you had to wear your knickers on your head for the day. And, you know, it was hugely mortifying and everyone called you stinky bum and things like that, you know. Anyway, I finally did wet myself and I was really terrified, and I went and told her and she was really kind, she hid the evidence and she got me a dry pair. Which she would've got into big trouble if one of the nuns had found out, she would have got in really big trouble for it. So it was incredibly kind. I remember these sort of random acts of kindness, more than the unkindness, if you know what I mean. But it was a very harsh place, you know, very harsh. I remember my sister's First Communion, and she was seven – no, she was six. She made it a year early. And I remember going to the church and being really pleased 'cause my dad was coming for the whole day that day. So I was allowed to sit next to him, up in the front of the church. And then I wanted to go to the toilet. So my big sister, Maggie, had to take me out. But when I wanted to go back to him, they wouldn't let me, so I started to call out to my dad, and I landed up in terrible trouble, locked in a room all day and didn't get to see my dad. I remember that as absolutely devastating, totally devastating. I think it was

a library. You know, it was a room with no windows, lots of polished wood I just remember. I think I cried myself to sleep in the end, you know. Erm, my dad used to come about [sighs] I think he came every Sunday. Sometimes he came with my uncle, who would bring a big bag of sweets, and that kind of gave us currency in the place, you know, gave us this sort of sense of power, we had relatives, a lot of people didn't have any relatives. Only the nuns would be all nice while they were there, and then as soon as they were gone the sweets would disappear, you know [laughs] we never got to keep them. We'd try and eat as many as we could while my uncle was there, you know, but they took them away. I don't know whatever happened them. I mean, they didn't share them out with the other kids or anything like that, they just disappeared. Yeah, my dad would I think every week, on a Sunday. I think he was, you know, really at his wit's end. He had his wife in hospital in Northampton, his children in a children's home [laughs], his three girls in a children's home in London, and his son in Ireland, and he had to work full time and he had this house full of lodgers to deal with, you know. So I think he was, you know, very close to walking off completely. And I think – and I was only four, but I kind of had a sense of that, and that I had to be ever so charming whenever he was around in case he didn't come back. [Sighs]

[12:14]

What were your first impressions of care, before you went into it?

I didn't know anything about it, I'd never heard of it. And for years my family were in denial we were in care. They called it being in the convent, or going to the convent. And it wasn't until [laughs] we grew up I realised I'd been in care. Nobody actually used those terms in our family, you know, it was 'being in the convent', you know. [Laughs]

Do you remember what your first night was like?

No. No. I imagine it was awful, but I don't remember it. It was like I saw my mum and then I woke up sometime later, if you know what I mean. There seems to be a

gap between mum going off to have this baby and then I'm in this place and don't quite know how I got there, you know. So the first memory is on the stairs, you know, the girl saying, 'Your mum's dead.' That's the first memory I have of being in care.

When the girl said this, how did it make you feel?

Erm, well I know I wanted to cry, but I also thought I knew it, you know. I knew it. Because people kept saying, 'Your mum's ill,' and I kept thinking nobody has a cold for this long. [Laughs] That's what I thought being ill was, you know, you have a cold. So it didn't occur to me – I didn't know anything about psychiatric illness and nobody ever, you know, sort of explained anything about that. They would just say, 'Your mum's ill, she's in hospital.' Nobody's ill that long, you know, it was a long time. [Laughs] I think it was several weeks before this girl said this thing, and I suddenly thought oh that's what it is, my mum's dead but nobody's saying so.

[14:07]

You did see her after?

After the baby was born, yeah, but I didn't really 'cause it was just this sort of figure up, way up high. I didn't get up close, or touch her, or speak to her. It was just this kind of shadowy figure through a window, in a hospital, could've been anybody, you know. If they'd said, you know, 'That's the man in the moon,' I would've said, 'Oh hi,' you know. [Laughs]

[14:35]

You mentioned in two care homes?

Yeah.

The first one was?

The first one was in Northampton and it was just down the road from where we lived. It was a sister organisation, there were three of them, they were called Nazareth House. And there was one in Isleworth, one in Northampton, and I don't know where the other one was. But there were three. Which they used to do a thing where each children's home went on holiday to another children's home [laughs]. It was great. So in the summer that I was there, it was our turn to host another children's home, so they came to our one. And it was really overcrowded. And Sheila and I had to sleep in a camp bed that was like just a kind of hammock thing, end to end in the same camp bed. And I remember her wetting the bed and kind of [laughs] lying in a pool in this hammock [laughs] with it slowly seeping through and us wondering how we were going to cover this up and her not get into trouble, you know. But also during the period that they were there we had to eat our food in the playground, we had to eat our dinner in the playground 'cause there wasn't room in the dining hall. It gave me a lifelong aversion to mash potatoes [laughs]. Because one day we had something like shepherd's pie, and when I looked down my shepherd's pie was literally heaving with wasps all inside it and all over it. And it was a place where you ate everything on your plate, and I just didn't know how I was going to deal with these wasps and this food and I knew, beyond a shadow of doubt, there was no way I was going to eat it. I don't know what I did, but I do remember the horror, and it's put me off mash potatoes forever [laughs]. And I remember another act of kindness, which always confused me. When I was, I don't know where it came from, but one day the woman who was like the seamstress for the children's home, she was a lay person, she wasn't a nun, she just came and got me out of the playground and walked me out through gates. And didn't say a word about where we were going or what we were doing, and I was completely stunned, you know. I didn't say a word [laughs] to her either, you know, we just walked along. And then she stopped outside a shop and she went in and bought me a tube of – she left outside and she went in and bought me a tube of fruit pastels and gave them to me. And I was completely gobsmacked, you know, nobody did anything like that, ever, there. And then she took me to school, which was my first day at school, but nobody said, 'You are going to school today,' she just sort of took me there and deposited me sort of mid-morning after the school day had started, and went off again. So then I spent a lot of time kind of hanging around her,

hoping she'd do it again [laughs] but she never did. And she never spoke to me either, ever. [Laughs] So maybe she couldn't speak, I don't know. But I kind of lived in hope she'd do it again, but she never did. So we went to school. I mean Maggie had it really tough. She had responsibility for getting me and Sheila and herself up and dressed and ready for school. She was seven years old, you know. And she figured out that we got better treatment if we went to Mass every morning as well. So it wasn't just getting us up for school, it was getting us up for seven o'clock Mass, which means being ready by quarter to seven and, you know, getting us all clean and washed, and shoes polished and on, and into your uniform, and down into the church by quarter to seven. I mean she was quite amazing really, you know. And she had a hard time, I think. I think I was quite protected by having two older sisters. I think Maggie particularly got it hard. And she used to get in trouble at school for being late, and the reason she was late was 'cause she had to drop me and Sheila off on the way, and she used to get the strap every morning from this horrible teacher, who hated her and just mistreated her really because he'd all the kids who came from the orphanage, you know. And then there was a time when Sheila and I, we got sent to some posh family for two weeks' holiday, who lived in Richmond. And [sniffs] [laughs] it was very strange for us. It was very odd. Maggie went to her godparents for a holiday. And Sheila and I got sent to these people, who were kind of part of the Catholic Church who did good by taking in a couple of orphans for a nice holiday from time to time [laughs], and we didn't appreciate it at all. A, they had a maid, who tried to dress us, and we was like really stunned. We were used to dressing ourselves. And B, it was really quiet, you know, where we're used to being somewhere where there was a lot of people around and suddenly we're in this room, on our own. The adults barely spoke to us, as far as I remember. You know, it was just a very lonely, cold, rich household. And we'd be in the garden, and there was a big garden there with just me and Sheila and nobody else around. And I think the only person who really spoke to us was probably the maid. And yeah, we wondered what the hell we were doing there. And then on Sunday, I remember this 'cause we knew they were showing off, they had two cars which was a really big deal in the '50s to have even a car, but to have two cars. And he took Sheila to Mass and she took me to Mass, so they could show off they had two cars and how rich they were. And we knew it, even at four, I knew they were just showing off, and I'd much rather have been in the back

of one car with my sister, than in the front of a car with an adult that I didn't know, who just wanted me to be impressed, you know. Anyway, those people, they wanted to adopt us, me and Sheila, and I'm very thankful my dad refused. The nuns thought he was terrible. And it was a big deal for him to stand up to nuns as well, you know, he was a very conscientious Catholic and if the Church says you do something, you do something, you know. And he said no, that he wouldn't separate the family and he wanted us to stay with Maggie. And the nuns said, 'You know, you're ruining their chances, they could've had a good life,' you know, 'best private schools, two cars, a maid.' [Laughs] And he wouldn't have it. So after that I think we got treated a little bit worse by the nuns 'cause they thought we're ungrateful, my dad was ungrateful. But we didn't stay much longer after that, I don't think, anyway.

[20:56]

Could you tell me about your initial thoughts of the house, or what you remember?

What, the children's home, or the house of the rich people?

The house.

Erm, gloomy, dark, posh, but not nice, you know, kind of showy. I think it kind of had a cocktail bar and things like that, you know, that were considered kind of nouveau riche in the fifties, I think, you know. It was very alien to me, it wasn't homely or comfortable. The bed had a satin bedspread. We had a double bed and I have an impression it was actually a four poster. I remember it being very big and we shared the same bed, but we were still kind of lost in it, me and her, [laughs] you're only little. And this damn satin bedspread kept sliding off all the time and we kept pulling it back on the bed 'cause we thought we'd get in trouble for it sliding off, but we wished we just had things we could tuck in like we did at the children's home, you know, [laughs] it would've been easier. Lots of carpet everywhere, which was also a bit unusual in the fifties. I think there was a grand piano, I think there were sort of French doors out into the garden. The garden had a big high wall around it. And a boy next door kicked a ball over one day, and asked for it back, and that was the only

connection we had with another child while we were there. They didn't give us anything to play with, there weren't any toys or anything like, you know, there wasn't a skipping rope or a ball or anything, we were just told to go and play in the garden. So we didn't actually know what we were supposed to do, you know. I remember us just being a bit lost and missing our sister and missing the other kids that we spent out days with, you know.

[22:42]

So once you left there, how did you feel?

I think relieved to be back in the children's home with my big sister, to be back with what was familiar. And I think by that stage my mum was getting a bit better, I think it was that summer. And she started writing letters to us, and my big sister was really thrilled. And I was absolutely not thrilled at all, I resented her totally. And I couldn't read, but I can still picture the letters, my sister would show them around proudly, you know, 'My mum's coming home, my mum's getting better.' And she always wrote on Basildon Bond, I remember that, blue Basildon Bond, and I can remember what her handwriting looked like. And I can remember that I was supposed to feel pleased, but I wasn't at all pleased.

Why?

'Cause I thought well, a) you're dead, b) you bugged off, c) don't think you can come back and mess us all up again like you did before. So I didn't want her back really, I'd got used to the way we lived, even though it wasn't that great. And, you know, and my sister Maggie was my mum by then and I didn't want this woman who had just disappeared, coming back and making things difficult again, you know. And she knitted us all boleros, I remember that, you remember those little things, fluffy ones, and Maggie and Sheila wore theirs with pride and I kind of wore my reluctantly, you know, identified us as sisters 'cause we all had matching ones. And I liked wearing matching clothes to my sisters, but I really hated my bolero, it's fluffy and

got up my nose. And, you know, Maggie would go, 'My mum knitted this.'
[Laughs] Yeah.

[24:33]

So we were there and then I think, about the autumn, my dad came one day and said he was taking us to see our mum. And we got on a bus, it was a trolley bus with an open top, and it was a really, really long way, I remember that. Well it would've been, it was from Isleworth to Camden, because by then he'd moved to Camden and rented a railway house. He worked for the railway. And my mum, I don't know if she was actually out of the psychiatric hospital, but she was obviously home for a weekend, and we were getting a weekend with her. And I didn't know her from Adam. She could've been anyone. She seemed quite nice, but I didn't recognise her, I didn't know who she was. And my dad said, 'There's your mum,' and I said, 'Oh hello.' [Laughs] But I was not impressed, I was not pleased to see her and I didn't believe she was my mother. And then the bizarre thing that happened was my dad decided that I would stay home with my mum, and my sisters would go back to the children's home without me. He had this notion, because I was the youngest, I needed her most. But actually I think my sister needed her most, the eldest one, you know. So he took my sisters back to the children's home, and he left me and my mum alone in this new house. And it was very bizarre, very strange. She was really quite, really withdrawn, probably really depressed. And I don't know where he went, he went somewhere as well, so it was just me and her, alone in this house for a week. And it was – we had nothing to say to each other, we had no relationship, you know. She'd kind of put me to bed and tuck me in and I'd kind of [demonstrates?] [laughs] I didn't really want her at all. I mean I grew to love her, but she was never the person I believed to be the mother I had before I went in the children's home.

[26:32]

So what changed exactly?

What, in her, or me?

In you, your emotions towards her, before and after.

Well I just believed she was dead, so how could she come back to life, it's got to be a different woman, you know, it's not the same person. And also, I mean she'd had masses of electric shock treatment, so she'd had quite a bit of her brain fizzled out, so she wasn't behaving the same as she had before the children's home. I mean she didn't remember my brother being born, she lost six months of her life, she lost six months' memory, which she always felt really guilty about. And she didn't remember what had happened before the birth, or after the birth, until she sort of came to in the psychiatric hospital many months later. So I guess a bit of her personality probably got carved out by the electric shock treatment and I didn't know who she was, you know.

[27:35]

So could you walk me through a daily routine?

What, in the children's home?

Yeah.

Okay. So you get up, well you get up with a bell, with a nun ringing a very loud bell, I think at about six o'clock. And it's all rush. It's rush, rush, rush, you've got to get dressed, you've got to get washed, you've got to get your teeth cleaned, you've got to go to the toilet. You've got to be ready, you know, in half an hour, but everybody's all trying to get at the sinks at the same time, so it's hard. But you're not allowed to talk, it's a very quiet way, you're not allowed to talk. And then it's breakfast, and it was usually porridge, which Maggie hated 'cause it had lumps in. I don't remember hating it, but she was always trying to sort of, you know, get me or Sheila to eat it for her. [Laughs] I can't remember it's Mass before or after breakfast, I think it's Mass and then breakfast. You did a short Mass, which was a bit of blessing, 'cause a long Mass, I don't know if you were raised religiously [laughs]. No. Believe me, a long

Mass is very, very long when you're four years old [laughs] about an hour and a half. A short Mass can take as little as twenty minutes, but I think probably we did half an hour. And so we'd have to walk in a kind of crocodile down to the church, which was ten minutes away, something like that. I'm pretty sure we did that before breakfast. Then back, then breakfast, and then in a crocodile again to go to school. But before I went to school, I think I just sort of played in the playground, I do remember that, until my sisters came home, and then I hung out with them. Oh, we had assembly though, in the children's home, as well. And I don't know if they were every day. I think they probably were. We had a kind of assembly, you know, where we prayed and sang hymns and the nuns pulled out whoever was in trouble for whatever. I remember one scary assembly when someone had stolen something, from the seamstress apparently, and they lined up all the big girls. 'And this nun walked up and down them, you know, no one was going to leave the hall until they'd found out who the culprit was. And she kept sort of, you know, sort of pacing up and down. And I think she had a sort of twitchy kind of cane with her, you know, sort of slapping on her hands, and then every so often she'd turn and pounce on someone and say, 'Did you do it?' And two or three girls, they either wet themselves or fainted, you know, I mean they were that scared. And I don't know whether it was the same occasion, but I do remember really beating, a nun really beating an older girl with this thing, you know, across her back, hitting her really hard and the girl bent over, trying to protect herself, you know. And this nun just so red in the face with fury, you know, and her habit flying back, you know, kind of really bashing her really hard. And just being so intimidated by it, you know, it was terrifying to watch, it was really, really scary. [Laughs] You made sure you didn't do anything wrong [laughs]. And I made sure that I did whatever my big sister told me, because she understood the rules better than me. You know, she was very smart, she figured out what we needed to do to keep ourselves safe and she passed on the information to me and Sheila, so we did anything she told us, just like that, you know. Wasn't very good for her when we came out and we stopped doing it [laughs].

[30:48]

So what was a day like? So before I went to school I think I'd have lunch, play in the playground. I remember an occasion where a boy was bullying me, and one of the big girls – the big girls they sent out to service, when they got to about fourteen they used to send them out to work as maids and things in the local posh houses. So they had a bit of income, so they would buy things. And this particular girl, she was home from work 'cause she had a broken arm, which I suspect the nuns had probably done, she had a broken arm and she had a cast on. And this boy was bullying me and this big girl said to him if he did it again she'd hit him with her cast [laughs]. And then she gave me a piece of angel cake, which was like heaven. Do you know what angel cake looks like?

Could you describe it for me?

Yeah. It was three layers, pink at the top, yellow in the middle and blue down the bottom. And I just thought she was the most wonderful person ever, you know. 'Cause there were sort of very, you know, random acts of kindness, and random acts of unkindness as well. Like one time, I still think that angel cake looks lovely, but it didn't actually taste that nice [laughs] but at the time I did. But one time when my dad came to get me, to see us, this nun came to get me across the playground. And I'd had an accident, in fact I've still got the scar there, on this rusty swing. And this – the chain was broken in way, and it had got underneath a bit of cartilage, I think, in my finger, and it really, really hurt. And I showed it to this nun, and I always had thought she was at best neutral, I wasn't scared of her like I was a lot of the nuns. And I showed to her, and she kind of took it as if she was going to sort of say, 'Oh poor you,' but what she actually did was she sort of bent it back, really hard, and she put it in her pocket, and she held my hand and we walked across the playground to my dad and my uncle. And the message was, 'You don't say a word about this.' She didn't tell me not to say it, but she was holding my hand, you know, in a really punitive grip, and I remember there trying not to cry and not tell my dad or my uncle, and feeling really scared, really scared, you know.

[33:00]

You mentioned before that you was bullied by a boy. Was this boy staying at the orphanage?

Yeah. He lived there.

It was a mixture?

Yeah. I think boys were only there till about seven, though, and then it was girls only after a bit. Yeah, so there were only little boys there and then I think they went to somewhere else, you know.

[33:24]

And you also mentioned about the nun squeezing your hand?

Yeah.

After you endured an injury?

Yeah.

How did that make you feel?

Erm, well really scared of her, and really like there was no one on my side. That, you know, I couldn't expect to get any help and that I'd better shut up and put up, you know or it will get worse. Yeah, that's what I think I thought.

So who did you feel you could talk to?

Hmm?

Who did you feel you could talk to?

My sisters, and that was it really. But also I did recognise they had their own problems, you know. [Laughs] My dad ... absolutely not really, you know, the thing was to be charming and sweet so he'd come and rescue us, and not complain and not, you know, moan or cry. [Sniffs] No, that was it. I don't know even know if I told my sisters about the injury either, I think I kind of got the message from this nun, 'You don't tell anyone,' you know. [Sighs]

So how did you bandage it?

Nothing. It just got over it, you know.

Did your father ever see it?

I don't think so. I don't think so. You know, I don't remember how it got better. And, you know, it hurt for a long time, I know that, you know. Yeah, and the scar's still there. And I don't think I ever told anyone about it. [Sniffs]

Would you like a tissue?

Yeah. [Pause]

[35:44]

You mentioned feeling you weren't able to talk to anybody about what you was going through?

Well nobody [laughs] gave you any opportunity. I don't think I would've tried. I mean, people didn't talk to children in the '50s [laughs] they told you things, they didn't ask you what you thought or felt or – or even explain things to you, they just told you what to do. You know, adults didn't talk to children, or talk with children, you know. I don't think it was just me, I think that was part of the culture, you know, it was just get on with it [laughs].

So what were your coping strategies?

Erm, thumb sucking. [Laughs] [Pause] I don't know, I just, you know, did what I did really. I think probably I developed a poker face. And – and I think it got me into trouble in a lot of ways as well, later on, you know. Because what would happen is, when anything awful happens, I'm absolutely fine with it. And then some way down the line, I'll have a melt down but it won't look like it's anything to do with what really happened, it will look something minor. Like breaking a plate, and I'll burst into tears or start yelling about that, and then I'll get in trouble for making such a fuss over such a little thing. But it's not really the little thing, it's the big thing that happened some time ago.

[37:15]

Could you give me an example?

Erm [Sighs] [Pause]. Okay. When I was seven I think, I had a teacher at school who didn't explain anything, you know, at a Catholic school [laughs] they're not good on explanations. But I was clever at school, so on the whole I did really well. And I had this teacher who had some dire punishments, but I didn't get any of those, but one day I took my maths book up to her and she ripped out a page, ripped it up and threw it in the bin, without a word. And I had no idea why she'd done that. Very taken aback, I didn't know what I'd done wrong, she gave me no explanation, nothing. So the next day I obviously repeated the same mistake, so she ripped out two pages, tore them up, chucked them in the bin, and there was still no explanation. So that night I kind of tried to tell my mum about it, but she'd just come in from work and she was really busy. She was in the kitchen, and I said, 'Miss Ainsworth tore two pages out of my maths book,' and she said, 'Yeah,' you know. And I wanted her to pay some attention to the fact, and she didn't. And I landed up having a tantrum and being put to bed with my bum smacked. But actually it was nothing to do with Miss Ainsworth, it was the fact that my mum had disappeared for several months of my life and we'd never talked about it, and I couldn't talk to her about anything, you know, or expect her to pay attention when I had any kind of distress, you know. [Sniffs] [Sighs]

So who did you feel could pay you attention?

Well maybe I guess, if anyone, my dad in a kind of way, but not really with any of my issues. My dad kind of babied me, you know, 'Oh she's such a sweet little thing,' you know. [Pause] I don't think anyone did really, you know. [Laughs] I mean I was the littlest of three girls and we were struggling, you know. [Pause] My mum really didn't have any attention at all. You know, I mean she was chronically depressed, even after she got out of the hospital, and she had several other psychiatric admissions later on in life, you know, so she was never there, you know. And we knew not to tell her things as well, you know. Like I got sexually abused on a train once, when I was ten, and I was terribly upset about it. And I came home and I told my sister Sheila, and the first thing she said was, 'Don't tell Mum.' But of course I'd been, you know, that had been my thing, I would go and tell my mum. But as soon as she said that, I knew oh of course, don't tell Mum, 'cause we had to protect her from anything that happened to us. You know, we mustn't upset Mum. My dad was always, 'Don't upset your mother,' [laughs]. So we didn't, we didn't tell her things, you know.

[40:08]

Could you tell me a bit more about the incident on the train when you was ten?

Yeah. It was really horrible. I was [sniffs] there with my little brother. I was taking him to school by then, so he was six and I was ten. And we used to get the North London line from Camden Road to Hampstead, where our school was. And in those days they had carriages, they had long carriages like they've got now, but they always had these single ones with just one door with only six seats in, and Kieran and I used to like getting in them 'cause we could lean out the windows and sort of yell at things and stuff, you know. So we'd gone quite far down the train to get one of those particularly, and we loved getting one of them to ourselves, you know, so we could sort of bounce on the seats and things like that. And this man came running down the platform, just at the train was about to pull out. And I thought it was odd for a start, because he, instead of jumping in the nearest door he could, he chased all the way

down to where we'd got on and jumped in our one. And I thought it was kind of strange. And my brother was a very attractive child, you know. He was blonde haired and blue eyed, and people always about how beautiful he was. And this man didn't pay attention to my brother, and that struck me as odd as well. I was used to people saying, 'Oh, you know, is that your little brother, isn't he pretty?' and things like that, you know, 'What's his name?' and stuff. But he started talking to me. And I wasn't comfortable with that, I knew there was something a bit off, but I didn't know what. So [sighs] 'cause I was completely deaf in this ear, and of course my parents hadn't noticed for a long time [laughs] 'cause they didn't notice a lot, but I kind of turned my deaf ear to him and I leant out the window to sort of not him. I don't know what he was saying, but I knew it wasn't okay. And as I was leaning out the window, and Kieran was sort of that side of me [demonstrates] and the man was sitting like there, and as I was leaning out the window he started putting his hand on my leg and kind of running it up my leg. And I thought that was very odd. And then he sort of ran it up into my knickers, and I sat down very abruptly, kind of like that [demonstrates] you know, to get as far away from him as I could. And he said, 'Give me your hand.' And I didn't know what do, you know, 'cause we'd been taught to be polite to adults. And I didn't want to give him my hand, but I didn't know how to say, 'No, I don't want to give you my hand.' So I very reluctantly kind of gave him my hand like that, sort of the back of my hand, rather than my hand, you know. And he sort of took it and rubbed it against his penis, which was flaccid. He was, you know, he was sitting there with his willy hanging out. And I was – I was very scared. A was very scared and I was very humiliated, 'cause it was in front of my little brother as well and I was supposed to look after him, and I felt completely powerless and really, really frightened of this man. And I kind of – oh, he said, 'Isn't that nice and soft?' and I kind of went [demonstrates] [laughs] meaning, 'That's not nice at all.' And he stayed on two stops and then he got off at the next one, still with his willy hanging out, and just pulled his coat round it, you know. And we got off the stop after. But it frightened me a lot, you know, and really upset me about men. I started wondering if all men did that, 'cause we'd never had any, you know, education about it, we were just told to avoid undesirable men and I didn't know what that meant, you know. [Laughs] Undesirable [laughs]. You know, nobody explained anything, and I didn't know it was a crime either. And I didn't tell anyone, except Sheila. And then

when she said, 'Don't tell Mum,' I realised oh yes of course not, we don't tell either things like that. But a few weeks later, my best friend came round, and Sheila said, 'Did you tell Benny about the man?' and I really didn't want to tell her, but I did. And she said, 'Oh that happened to another friend of mine and they went to the police and they caught the man and he got put in prison.' And I was – I didn't even know it was a crime, I didn't know he'd done anything wrong, I just knew I really, really, really did not like it, you know.

Did you feel vulnerable at any point?

Yeah. Yeah, I did. You know, it made me scared to go in a single carriage again, for years, you know, and very frightened. And also that I couldn't protect my little brother, which was part of my job, you know, that I didn't know that I was in charge anymore. You know, like I'd been in charge, I'd been taking him to school and everything was okay, but suddenly I wasn't sure I was capable of looking after him or myself, you know. Oh yeah it did, it made me feel very vulnerable.

Did you ever talk to the local authorities about it?

No. It wouldn't have crossed my mind. You know, there wasn't anyone that we had any connection with, you know. I suppose in some Catholic communities you might have talked to the priest, but then our local priest [laughs] was a pervert as well [laughs] you know. [Laughs] So I'm very glad I didn't bother talking to him 'cause he [laughs] he tried, you know, I mean he actually got pushed out for sexual abuse in the end. But I remember being in confession and him making very weird suggestions to me, and being very upset by it as well, you know. [Laughs]

[45:25]

Could you tell me about memorable events in your second children's home?

[Sighs] I think I've told you them all, really. There was the Easter egg, there was my sister's Communion, there was getting my hand injured, going to school. [Pause] Leaving, going to the rich people's house. Er, yeah, I think I've told you them all.

[46:00]

You mentioned something about your father coming to see you, with an uncle?

Yeah. I mean I find that a bit strange, 'cause my mum's sister [sniffs] it was her husband who came with him. And Maggie and I went to see her a couple of years ago, and I haven't her in a long time, and she maintained that she came there every week. I don't ever remember seeing her there. And my cousin, who is her daughter, said she remembered coming to see us every Sunday. I never remember them coming. So I found that very odd, and I think they're lying. And I think – my brother went to them initially, and she says she had him till he was ten months. And I don't think she did, I think she had him for a few weeks actually. But, you know, she likes to remember herself as being better behaved than she was. So I don't ever remember my aunt coming. If she came, I don't think it was more than once or twice. She said she came there with Kieran in the pram. I never saw either of them that I remember. Maggie politely said she remembered, but when I asked her afterwards, she said, 'I think they did come, I don't really remember,' you know. But their – her husband, I think he used to drive my dad, I think it was quite hard to get there. It was one of those places, you know, that didn't have direct transport and that, and my dad didn't have a car. And Uncle Roy, he was a very kind man. And like I say, you know, he would've come with a big bag of sweets, I certainly remember that. But I don't remember his wife or my cousin coming. And Sheila now says, you know, actually we had all these relatives and why were we in a children's home, you know, why didn't any of them take us in? Which is a good point, you know. [Laughs]

And why do you think?

I think Aunty Daphne was terribly house-proud, and the thought to her of taking four extra children into her house would've been horrific. And she and my mum didn't get

on that well. They were sisters, but they were never that close. And my dad had a brother living in England, I don't think it was even a question of whether or not they'd take us in. I think he was an alcoholic and I think his wife was really struggling with his alcoholism. And then we had – my dad had two other brothers living in Ireland, one of which took Kieran, but nobody – I don't think anyone offered to have all of us, so it was just like the baby was taken in, but we weren't, you know. I don't know. Maybe their wives felt they couldn't cope, or whatever, you know.

[48:38]

So how would you say your relationships were with your family and friends?

Which family and friends? [Laughs]

The relatives you knew of and the people you considered friends.

I would say my relationships with my family were distant, as a kid. And I think some of that was to do with me being deaf. Nobody noticed I was deaf until I was seven, and I think probably they thought I was a rude little girl who didn't answer. And I don't remember any of them liking me particularly, or, you know, wanting me around. I got the feeling they liked my siblings better than me. I was very close to my mum from seven onwards, or so, you know, very clinging. My relationships with my sisters went downhill when my deafness was discovered. I suddenly started getting a load of attention like I'd never got before, and they got jealous and they started bullying me, and that kind of broke my heart. So they went very downhill for quite a long time, [sighs] well into our teens. With friends, I don't really remember having any friends until I was nine. Benny was my first friend, and I kind of – my sisters were my best friends, so that's why it broke my heart when they started bullying me. You know, I had acquaintances. I don't remember having any friends until I was nine, and I noticed this other little girl at school liked me, and I was a bit stunned, you know. [Laughs] And we became best, best, best, best, best friends for a couple of years. And then when I eleven, we changed schools and she went to a different school, and I became best friends with Marie, who's still my best friend from school, I

still, you know, know her and we're still close. Erm, relations, yeah, I just got the feeling they didn't like me very much really, you know, [laughs], the, you know, extended family that I was, you know, a bit of an annoyance. Apart from my Uncle Roy, who was kind to me, you know, mostly they ignored me or seemed a bit irritated with me. [Laughs]

Could you describe how your sisters would bully you?

Do I have to? [Laughs]

If you want to.

Okay. I'll have to cry, probably. [Pause] [Gets upset]

You don't have to if you don't want to.

[Gets upset]

You don't have to.

Hmm. [Sniffs] [Sighs] Oh it was really horrible, and for a long time. From about seven till – I guess until sort of Benny became my best friend I was completely under their thumb, so I always just wanted them just to love me again. [Sighs] [Pause] And they did really mean things, really mean, you know. And I don't know what it was about really, I still don't. [Sniffs] Like, for instance, one day – they used to pretend to be my friend, you know. So they'd say, you know, 'Oh come and play with us,' and of course I always would 'cause I wanted them so much [sighs] even though I often knew that they were just setting me up, you know. So this particular day they said we'd play pirates, and I had to be hung from the yardarm or something. So they hung me from a lamp post, and ran off and left me there. [Sniffs] And, oh, it was horribly, you know, it was horrible, it was really horrible [sobs]. They sort of put the rope round there [demonstrates]. They knew better than to put it round my neck, but they left me dangling from this lamp post, sort of – yeah, really upset. 'Cause I kind of

knew that was what they were going to do, but I let them do it anyway, you know. [Sniffs] Or they would do things, like we had an outside toilet, and after school when I went out there they'd lock the back door so I couldn't get back in. And they thought it was hilariously funny, to sort of stand at the bathroom window, laughing while I screamed and kicked and tried to get in the door. And I think a lot of the humiliation was worse when adults noticed and told them off, 'cause then I'd get it worse somehow, you know, they'd think up something else. And what I really wanted adults to do was help us be friends again [cries] but all they did was tell them off, so that didn't really work, you know. My dad found me dangling from the lamp post apparently, and went bananas at them. I don't remember that, I just remember dangling from the lamp post and feeling absolutely mortified in front of the neighbours, who, you know, came out to tell them off and things like that, you know. It was kind of mortifying that my sisters hated me, you know. [Pause] Oh, they were very mean. I mean some of the things they did were just so horrible. [Sighs]

What were your coping strategies, at the time?

I think at the time I got really depressed, actually. I used to say I felt ill, so I'd stay off school a lot and that was so I wouldn't have to travel to and from school with them. 'Cause most of the bullying happened there, and, you know, they'd let other kids join in as well, and that was really humiliating 'cause you might bully a younger sibling, but you didn't let anyone else do it. But they encouraged other people to do it as well. And Maggie was responsible for taking a few other kids to school, so everyone joined in and ganged up on me, and it was just really, really awful. So I used to say I had a headache, and because I was having all this hospital treatment for my ears, my parents just believed me. I mean they never kind of questioned whether I had a headache or not. I never did, but I got diagnosed as having migraines. And so I could get a day off school by just saying I had a headache, and I would stay in bed and I would read. And I used to read an awful lot about the holocaust really, for some reason we had all these books about the holocaust in our house, which made me even more depressed, about Jews going into gas chambers [laughs], I identified with them. I wanted to die, actually, in that period of my life, I really wanted to die. My mum and dad were both working, so I'd be on my own. And my dad did shift work, so he

might come home at lunch time, and he'd bring me a tin of tomato soup and some bread, and, you know, then I'd sort of get through the day by kind of staying in bed and reading. I think that was my coping strategy, hmm. [Pause] I don't know what got into them, really, you know, 'cause they're okay people. And I remember in my teens they did this really horrible thing that I've never quite forgiven them for. I've never spoken to them about. But me and a friend, we were going out with two cousins, and [sniffs] I didn't particularly care about mine but she really liked hers; they were Jim and John O'Neill. Anyway, we went down to the West End, and she and John had a row and the two boys walked off. And we were fifteen, I think, at the time. And we came back eventually to my house, and my sisters were in the sitting room. And they were asking us all about it, in this level of interest that they didn't usually show in me, but I was answering them. And I was annoyed that they'd walked off, you know, and I said all these horrible things about this bloke. And they'd actually put them in the bathroom, which was off the sitting room, so the two boys could hear everything we said. And it was just really cruel, it really was, you know. He came out, absolutely white faced. 'Cause I'd said horrible things, you know, like, oh I was going to dump him anyway, you know, and he needn't think he can do that to me, and da da da, you know. And even crueller to Evelyn, who really liked her bloke, and who they'd, you know, goaded her into saying horrible things about him as well. And – and cruel to me. But they thought it was such a joke, you know. I mean, unkind, you know, not just to me, to other people too, you know.

[57:17]

So how were your hopes and aspirations affected by their actions?

By what?

By their actions.

[Sighs] [Sniffs] Well, the one thing I was very clever, and – I mean it's hard to say what was – what was them, what was being deaf, what was my mum and dad, you know. Like I say, my dad was an alcoholic, my mum was chronically depressed, my

sisters bullied me and my brother was [laughs] truanting and acting out, you know. Our home was very dysfunctional. But my dad's big line was – I mean Maggie was very clever, and my mum, I guess at best, thought she might do teacher training. Like higher education hadn't really crossed anybody's minds in our house, but, you know, Maggie went to Grammar school and that was a big deal. She passed the Eleven Plus and she went to a posh Grammar school in Southwark, which was a long way from home, with a weird uniform, which meant she got bullied by kids in Camden because she wore this weird uniform, you know, she was getting bullied as well. And so my dad used to say, you know, 'Oh, you could be as clever as Maggie if you tried,' and I used think I don't want to be like her, she's horrible. So, if you like, her bullying made me decide against wanting a higher education or wanting to be clever at school, 'cause I didn't want to be identified with her, you know. It had exactly the reverse effect on me. I did not want to be as clever as Maggie, I did not want to do what she did, I did not want to be what she was like. And when she went to university, she got incredibly snobby towards the family, and patronising, and that put me off even more. You know, she'd bring home university friends, who saw us as this sort of quaint little sociological study, and laugh at my dad and patronise my mum. And [laughs] I just thought I don't want be like her, I don't want to be one of those people at all. So I guess that was an affect it had. But I knew I wanted to be a teacher, from about eleven. I kind of knew how to do it, and I understood what teachers were doing wrong and I wanted to do it better. So I did eventually become a teacher, although I left school without any qualifications. I did eventually become an adult educator and, you know, rose up the ranks and ended up as an acting head, deputy head, head of service sort of thing, you know. I had managerial positions, and I am a really, really, a really good teacher, you know. I still train people and I like to train teachers how to teach. So I suppose ultimately it had no effect on me, because I always knew what I wanted to do, I just did a fairly circuitous route to get there, you know.

[1:00:05]

At what point did you –

FS?: We've had the hour now, you can ask maybe one more question and then we can have a break.

Okay.

[Discussion re: recording]

[[Track paused, then resumed]

[1:00:36]

Could you tell me about contact with your family during care?

I think I had really, like I say, my dad came probably most weekends. I mean it was his last great act of heroism to keep the family together really, you know. I think it was really, really tough for him and, you know, he would do everything he could to kind of get there. I don't remember the Irish family coming. I remember my uncle coming. My mum wrote letters and sent boleros. That was it, I think, yeah.

How did that impact you?

What, the contact or lack of?

Lack of contact.

I missed my dad terribly. I mean, like he was the, you know, the constant and [sighs] when he came I hated sharing him with anyone else. You know, I wanted him – I didn't mind sharing him with my sisters, but I hated sharing him with the nuns or other children, or anything like that, you know. I wanted my dad and us to be a family together, but there always seemed to be other people kind of in the way, you know, that he had to be polite to. And I kind of understood it. I know my dad probably would have tried to befriend the sisters, on the grounds that they would be nicer to us if he was good to them. But it always seemed to me there was a lot of time wasted talking to the nuns and, you know, generally kind of being Mr Nice Guy. And I also kind of understood it, even as a kid, that the reason he did that was because if he

was nice to them, they'd be nice to us. But, yeah, I didn't like sharing him at all. I mean if I'd had my way, he would've taken us three out and we'd have gone somewhere on our own, and been a family. But it was always like he visited us there, it was never long enough, it was never private enough. I don't remember, I probably just sat on his lap and was affectionate. I don't remember conversations or anything like that, you know.

You mentioned it not being private enough, could you describe the contact and where it would be?

Probably in the playground, we were probably in the playground with him. And, you know, with the other kids coming up and kind of trying to get some attention, you know, 'cause everyone was desperate there, everyone was really needy. And probably he would've been talking to nuns. I kind of remember being indoors sometimes, but I think mainly we were just in the playground with him, you know. And he left quite quickly, you know, maybe an hour or something like that. I don't remember going out anywhere with him, or doing anything, except we saw our dad and he saw us and then he went away [laughs] again, you know. Hmm. I think my mum was really upset that Sheila made her First Communion in the convent, because like, you know, it's a big deal for Catholics to have your First Communion. And she was actually younger than she should've been, you're supposed to be seven, and if she'd waited till seven she would've made outside of the convent. And as it was she landed up wearing somebody else's First Communion dress, and looking not how my mum would've turned her out, and my mum missed it and, you know, it's a big milestone in a child's life. He must have agreed to that. He must have, you know, encouraged the nuns to go ahead and put her in for the First Communion too early, probably to curry favour, you know. Whatever [laughs].

Do you remember how you felt before he left?

[Sighs] Well they used to do this thing where they try to distract you so you didn't notice he was leaving, which was, you know, a load of rubbish really, 'cause you always knew. But that was a very Irish thing to do, a child must never be upset, must

never show an adult that they're upset in any way whatsoever. So it would be, 'Look at the birdie over there,' and then your father would slip out while you politely pretended to look at the birdie over there. So [sighs] if I thought about it, I was probably upset but I wouldn't have shown that I was upset, I would've been polite and done what I was told to do, and be distracted like I was told to be distracted, and I would've held in any tears, and been very good and gone about my business once he'd gone.

[1:05:13]

You've mentioned quite a few times holding in tears.

Hmm.

What did it mean to release tears?

Well [sighs] you know, that was a rule. You were not allowed to cry [laughs]. So [sighs] it's like, you know, if you cried you got more trouble, so best not to, you know. If anyone was caught crying, they got in trouble for it, so you learnt not to cry because that would only make things worse. Yeah?

How would you say you found that rule?

I think Maggie caught on very quickly, and I remember her kneeling in front of me and begging me not to cry. I think it might have been when I heard my mum had died, and I can remember her in front of me saying, 'Please, please, please don't cry.' And it wasn't only that I would get in trouble, that she would get in trouble as well, and that's how I learnt to hold onto my tears and not show them because I knew she would get in trouble, 'cause she was supposed to keep us under control.

[1:06:25]

Did you feel ... that you had privacy?

No. Actually, that thought just came to me. I think I did sometimes try to go off somewhere in the playground and find a quiet place to be, but there were very few places you could ever be on your own. I think I have a kind of memory of sort of trying to get under the fire escape, or round the back a building or something, but someone would always find you. [Laughs] You know, there wasn't anywhere that you could go off and be on your own. I think later on I learnt, you know, when we moved out of there, that I would go and cry somewhere private if I wanted to cry, you know, when I was seven or whatever. And I used go up to the station, up at the top of the road, and go behind these big doors and cry there. So I must've probably tried to look for somewhere to cry when I was little, but I don't think I did. I don't think I found anywhere.

[1:07:25]

Did you have any clashes with people?

No, I don't think I did really. I think I was a quite a sort of cooperative little blob, really [laughs], just trying to keep out of trouble, you know.

Did you feel that being in care had an impact on your health?

[Sighs] I don't know, I don't think so. I don't know. I mean perhaps somebody might have noted I was deaf a bit earlier, if all that hadn't happened. Like I say, it was the school nurse that finally picked it up when I was seven. I don't know if I was tested for deafness as a child. I mean now they do it at birth, don't they? You know, as soon as babies are born, they test for deafness, and so you know your child's deaf very early. But like my family didn't have a clue. And yet I had a deaf grandmother, you know, so it wasn't sort of a major surprise, it is genetic. [Laughs] But I think they just thought I was inattentive, or rude, or deliberately obstructive, if I didn't hear things. And obviously, you know, I didn't know I hadn't heard, so when I found myself in trouble for things, sometimes it was a total mystery to me. But that seems to me to be later in my life, you know, post being in care. But it must have been true

when I was in care, I probably just watched what my sisters did and did it as fast as I could, you know. And the security of having them there probably meant I didn't have to hear that well in order to follow directions, I watched what they did and I did it. Toot suite I tell you [laughs], I saw what happened if you didn't [laughs].

[1:09:25]

You mentioned your sisters being security?

Yeah, they were. They were my security, you know. I felt safe because I had them. I think it would have been much, much worse to be an only child in there, much, much worse, you know. Partly 'cause they could interpret the rules for me and they looked out for me, you know, and we were a unit, the three of us. And that wasn't especially discouraged. I know in some place, you know, they separate siblings, don't they, you know, like just as a matter of principle. They didn't separate us, we slept in the same dormitory, we ate at the same table, and we went to Mass together, we went to school together. So yeah, they were my continuity. And they were kind to me, in those days, they were, we were kind to each other, the three of us, you know, we were very good friends, you know.

[1:10:20]

Could you describe your dinner times?

[Sighs] As I remember, it was long, refectory table tables. I don't remember the food as such. I think it was probably okay, because like school dinners, later, were a real trial to me. But food in the children's home wasn't a real trial to me, apart from the incident [laughs] with the wasps, you know, I just ate what was put in front of me and I don't remember it being horrible. I kind of remember lot of bread and butter, probably bread and margarine, I like bread and margarine. I don't remember being hungry, I don't remember feeling disgusted with food or anything like that. I remember we ate, you know, sort of probably about twelve children per table, and there were probably all sorts of rules about, you know, clearing your plate and eating

everything on it and stuff like that. But I don't remember it that specifically. I think we had special food on a Sunday. 'Cause we got a cooked breakfast on a Sunday, I do remember that, 'cause that's the bacon rinds. But most I can't really remember. I think we had a cooked meal at lunch time and tea in the evening, you know, so it would've been bread and jam and a cup of tea, or something like that for tea.

So did you ever receive any pocket money?

No. [Laughs] Are you kidding? [Laughs] They'd have fleeced us for it straightaway [laughs]. No.

So how did you get money?

In the children's home?

Yeah.

We didn't have any money. We didn't have any use for it. Even if we had, we wouldn't have been allowed to spend it. There was nowhere to spend it anyway. I mean, you never got to go to a shop or anything like that, you were just in the children's home or in school, and there was no opportunities [laughs] for using money in any shape or form, really, you know. [Laughs]

Could you tell me about days out? Days when you would go out?

We never had any days out, that I remember.

Any trips?

No. No. No, nothing like that. Seriously not. I think it was crowd management. You know, there were a lot of refugees from the War and things around, you know, stateless people and homeless children and things who were in England at the time, and I think they landed up in those sort of orphanages. I think it was just crowd

control, you know. There wasn't anything about child welfare, it was like keep them clean, keep them fed, keep them tidy, keep them obedient and turn them out when they're old enough to leave, you know.

And how did that make you feel?

[Sighs] I don't know that I had any feelings about it, it's just the way it was, you know. It's like it is, what it is. I don't think it would've crossed my mind to think we should have an outing. I mean it was only just now, talking to you, that I thought it would've been nice if my dad could've taken us out somewhere, but I don't think that was on the agenda at all. You know, the first time he took us out, was that day he took us to see my mum, when we left and we went on the bus. And I got chewing gum in my hair, I remember that [laughs].

[1:13:53]

Could you tell me about birthdays? What they were like?

I didn't have a birthday while I was there. Maggie had a birthday. Sheila didn't either, hers was October, I think we'd left just before her birthday. Er, I don't believe children had any birthday celebrations. I don't remember anything about birthdays. And if you think about it, there must have been a birthday about every day of the week, you know, I don't remember cakes or candles or anything special happening to anyone 'cause it was their birthday. I don't remember anything happening for Maggie's birthday. Nothing.

And what about Christmas?

Oh I wasn't there for Christmas. We were there from February till October, so who knows. And like I say, I was there for Easter, which is a big deal, and then we got stale chocolate, huh. Do you know what I think happened? I think that some manufacturer had made that egg the year before and hadn't been able to sell it, so they passed it off to the children's home, you know, in a sort of act of charity. And, you

know, there were newspapers there photographing, it was a big deal with this egg. And I think it was a year-old egg and we'd got it because they hadn't been able to give it to anyone else, you know. [Laughs]

How was Father's and Mother's Day?

Oh God – I don't remember anything about them.

And parents' evenings?

No. [Laughs]

[1:15:28]

And you mentioned you was in one foster home and you moved to another one?

Sorry, say that again?

You mentioned you was in one orphanage and you went to another one?

Yeah.

How did the move affect you?

I think because they were same bunch of people, the same nuns, they just transferred children between children's homes, you know. So how did we physically move? I've no idea. Possibly on a train, we probably went on a train.

How did that emotionally affect you?

[Sighs] Well you see, I only started remembering about the first one quite recently. But I think it must have made me feel I was getting further away from where I wanted to be. Because the other one was literally down the road from where we lived in

Northampton, so it felt – and I think we'd been there before, you know, because it was attached to our church, so it was, you know, part of my life, part of the life that I lived, this children's home. So that probably didn't feel such a big jump, you know, from my own house to down the road. But I think moving to the other one just felt like I was losing everything, you know, like everything was going to be left behind and we just taken into an alien environment, much more alien than the first one, you know.

And how did that affect you, feeling that way?

I think I went numb. I think, you know, I decided not feel anything for a long time, you know.

And how did you do that?

[Pause] It wasn't safe, it wasn't safe to have any feelings, if you know what I mean, so it was best not to feel anything. So I don't know that I made a conscious decision, but it wasn't safe to have feelings or to show feelings, so best not feel was [laughs] was probably the message I got as a four-year-old, you know. Just do what they tell you and don't feel a thing, you know.

And how do you feel the nuns treated you in the new orphanage?

I think by and large they ignored me, and I think by and large that was the safest policy you could possibly adopt, you know. If you attracted attention from a nun, it was usually for something you'd done wrong, or you were a big girl and you were about to get a beating for something. So I think I probably consciously tried to keep under the radar and was very grateful that they let me stay there.

[1:18:20]

So you mentioned good acts by nuns?

Hmm.

Was that in the first placement or in the second placement?

Second one.

And did it occur more than once?

Actually it wasn't a nun, it was the seamstress, the one who took me to school, that was the act of kindness from her. I don't remember any acts of kindness from nuns. She wasn't a nun, she was somebody who was employed by them.

And how did that make you feel, that act of kindness?

Astonished. Totally astonished. And wanting more, you know. I kind of hoped she'd do it again or that she'd acknowledge me in some way or at least, you know, notice I was alive, you know.

Did that change your view?

[Sighs] It changed my view of her. She stopped being a blob and became a human [laughs]. I don't think adults were people that you kind of had any views about, they were best avoided, if you ask me [laughs]. Best not to go there [laughs]. But I kind of hoped she'd show me some sort of generous act again some time, you know.

Hmm.

So did you feel like you gained something from her act of kindness?

Yeah. Yeah I did. I mean it was astonishing, but also it kind of made me remember that people could be kind to little girls, you know. I think I'd forgotten, you know, that you weren't just a bit of a nuisance and to keep out of the way, that people could actually see you, you know. Hmm.

[1:20:25]

And how did being ignored, you mentioned?

Pardon?

You mentioned you was being ignored?

Ignored? That seemed the safest option, to be honest, you know. I think the first time I remember – I mean this all sort of tied up with my sisters started bullying me as well, was when I started to get attention, partly it was about me being deaf, but also it was about me being clever. And it all sort of started about seven. And I got a lot of negative attention from my sisters [laughs] as a result of getting positive attention from adults. And when I was seven I remember I was chosen to, you know, make the school play, and I had no idea it was a big honour at all, you know. They just, you know, gave me the script and told me to go away and learn it. And my sisters were horribly jealous, they were really angry, you know, and, 'Why should she get this big honour?' I didn't even know it was an honour. But I remember them teasing me a lot about it and really giving me a hard time. So attention felt like something, you know, you get good attention and then God you're going to pay for it, you know. So probably I picked up quite early that attention was not such a good idea, and if you got, you were going to pay for it, you know.

So how did that make you feel, because you wanted that attention and, once you got the attention?

Then my sisters [laughs] wanted to kill me. [Pause] I remember feeling very uncomfortable with my parents' attention. I mean once they realised I was deaf, they probably had a lot of guilt about it and I had a lot of admissions to Great Ormond Street and a lot of medical treatment, and that meant I had a one to one connection with my parents for the first time in my life, really, you know. Until then, anything I wanted them to know, I told Maggie, and anything they wanted me to know, they told Maggie. So we had this sort of like little interpreter between us. And suddenly I'd be

in this hospital bed on my own with these two people who I felt like I didn't really know at all, and I think who probably felt the same about me. And we didn't know what to say to each other at all, you know. I felt like I had to entertain them for an hour, you know, they were only allowed into hospital for an hour and my sisters weren't allowed to come, so I just missed my sisters and felt uncomfortable with my parents and didn't really know what to talk to them about or how to be around them really, you know.

[1:23:10]

Would you go through a typical kind of conversation you would have with your parents?

It would be like, 'How are you?' 'Fine.' 'Are they treating you well?' 'Yes.' 'Are the doctors very good?' 'Yes.' Erm. 'You're very lucky to have him, you know?' Erm. 'Yes.' And that kind of thing, you know. It was – we didn't really know how to talk to each other in any way. And my mum never really did. I mean my mum never really learnt how to listen to me at all. You know, I can probably count on the fingers of one hand the times my mum actually heard something I had to say, and I was astonished that she did, you know. Like, for instance, I'll give you an example. My grandmother on my dad's side was deaf, and they always talked about her like she was blimmin nuisance, she was a charlatan, she was putting it on to get attention, she could hear very well when she wanted to but she tried not to, and so on. And so they've said those things about me as well. You know, they've said, 'Christine, none so deaf as those you don't want to hear,' was one of the things. 'Christine can always hear a sweet paper unwrap, but she never hears the washing up being done.' You know, 'You heard,' was what they said when I asked them to repeat things, 'you heard that,' which always puzzled me terribly. And they always told these funny stories about my grandmother, like, you know, that she was – I didn't know her, you know, she died before I got to know her, and they would always tell these stories, which were quite puzzling and difficult for me to listen to. But it wasn't until, I don't know, about four years before my mum died, that I actually had the nerve to say, 'Actually, Mum, I find those stories really quite upsetting.' And she looked at me

astonished, you know, she was about to tell me the story, again, about how my grandmother got some watches into England by pretending to be deafer than she was, which probably wasn't true. And she looked at me and she said, 'Oh, yes, I suppose they must.' And I thought, bloody hell, she heard me. [Laughs] But I must have tried to tell her before that I didn't want to hear these things and that, you know, they were really unkind stories about my deaf grandmother, and they felt like they were about me as well, you know. And my family did, have consistently told unkind stories about my deafness, actually [cries] and I've only, since I was fifty, been able to interrupt them and say, 'Stop it,' you know. Like, for instance, one of the stories that went around my family for years, was that when my children were small I would take my hearing aid out so that I didn't have to hear them. Which [sighs] everyone laughed at, and I would laugh politely. It was so bloody untrue, because I was terrified of losing my kids, I was terrified of having my kids taken into care, so there's no way I would even have a bath if I was alone in the house with them, when they were little, 'cause I was terrified they'd do something and I wouldn't hear it and I'd lose them. And that story, you know, just got repeated like a family myth, for years. And finally, when I heard my nephew telling it to his wife at her wedding, I just thought enough, and I said, 'Actually that story's not true.' And it was like, 'Oh my God.' And I said, 'I wouldn't have dreamt of taking my hearing aid off when my kids were little 'cause I'd have been too scared of losing them.' And everyone was in shock, 'cause I wasn't playing the game, you know, doing the ha ha, the deaf person's always a bit of a joke story, anymore. And since then my sisters have got better. My big sister is still strange about it, still tells, you know, really off stories about disabled people, and mostly I interrupt her. The second sister has got it now, and knows not to and knows to interrupt it herself. But phew, it's been a long journey [laughs].

You mentioned the fact your family would say these things about you that was similar to what they said about your grandmother?

Hmm.

What were your thoughts on this?

It was very confusing. 'Cause when they said things like, 'You heard that,' I would think well I must have done. And I would literally spend days trying to figure out what somebody had said to me, literally, you know. Until finally I'd worked it out, and then I thought oh they were right, I did hear it. But it was very, very confusing, you know. I believed what my family told me about me, you know, so if I didn't hear things and they said, 'Yes you did,' I'd think well I must have done, and sit around, puzzling out what it was I'd missed. And I still do that a lot, you know, I still look like I can hear when I can't. And I act like I can hear and then go away and work out what it was somebody said, some time later. [Sighs] The stuff about the sweet paper and that, I never, ever considered defending myself, I would laugh along with them. Because actually there might be some truth in that, because it's true, like when you're deaf, if you decide to listen, you're more likely to hear something, and if the washing up's being done it's not something I would decide to listen to. But if sweets are being opened, then I would decide to listen, you know, you pay attention. But, you know, I mean why would I, to something boring [laughs] you know [laughs]. So, you know, [sighs] it's not like – you know, you choose to listen or you choose not listen when you're deaf, and you have to work quite hard listening. So obviously you don't listen to everything, you don't hear everything 'cause you're not paying attention to everything. You know, you've got other things on your mind, like your homework or whatever, you know.

Did they ever make you feel like it was your fault?

Oh, God, all the time. Yeah, I was deliberately being awkward, yeah absolutely, and it was all my fault [laughs].

Did you believe it was all your fault?

Hmm. Yeah, and my mum, like she really didn't want me to have a hearing aid, she didn't want me to look deaf, but I really needed one when I was in, you know, about eleven – about nine, this ear started to go deaf. This ear was completely deaf from birth, and then this one started go deaf when I was about nine. And she so did not want me to look like a deaf child, so she would say, 'Oh, you don't want one of those

great big things on your chest, do you?' which, you know, they used to wear these big kind of battery things around you, strapped on your front. And I would say, 'No,' because of course who would want to wear one of those when your mother says you don't want one, do you. [Laughs]

Sorry, could you describe how it looked?

It was like a big square box, and it had straps over your shoulder and around in a kind of harness. And my grandmother had one. And they used to laugh at her because they said she was always saving the batteries, but actually she probably really hated the noise, you know, 'cause they weren't very good things. So she used to turn it off a lot and that used to annoy them, and they would say, 'Oh, you know, she's always saving the batteries.' But, you know, I realise now that probably what she was doing was saving herself from a lot of feedback and horrible noises in your ears, 'cause it's not like hearing.

How did she connect it to her ears?

Well, then you had a strap up and a bit that went in your ear, so, you know. I mean these days it probably didn't look that weird 'cause everyone wears earphones, but in those days it looked really weird, you know. And National Health colours, of course, you know. But [sighs] yeah, so my mum would say that. And then, you know, when I went to secondary school it really was a problem, because teachers don't face you much in secondary school. You know, they would write on the board with the back to you and kind of go, 'Are you getting this?' And you don't sit in the same place every lesson, you know. So like at primary school like my parents would say, 'Sit in near the front and pay attention,' so I'd try and get a seat near the front, and that would be it for the year. But in secondary school, we sat in alphabetical order, so depending on how many desks there were in the room, or where O came along the list, you know, I could be sitting right next to a window that blocked out all sound, or I could be sitting over the side where I could hear, or I could be sitting somewhere I couldn't even see the teacher, you know. So my work went down, and then they said I was lazy, that I wasn't trying. And honestly, I really didn't know it was my deafness that was the

problem, I really didn't, you know. And so then I got a reputation of being a problem. And my big sister, to this day, tells everyone I was expelled from school and look at her now. I wasn't expelled from school. [Laughs] And I only finally interrupted that recently, you know, I was, phew. I mean she's very proud of – she's really proud of me and she's proud of my achievements, you know, because I had something, for instance, presented to the House of Lords not so long ago. You know, she likes to tell her friends, 'My sister's deaf but she's done a presentation to the House of Lords.' It's not really being proud of me, it's proud of what I do rather than me. But [sighs] so – 'But,' she says, 'but she was expelled from school.' [Laughs] Actually, I wasn't. I left, you know. And about a year ago she said this again in front of her husband, and I said, 'Maggie, I don't know why you say that, I wasn't expelled from school, I left.' So she said, 'Well they didn't try and stop you, did they?' So I said, 'No, but there is a difference between not being stopped from leaving school and being expelled from school, I never got expelled.' And it's like I've messed up her story, you know, by telling the truth about me. But there's lots of myths in my family about me, you know, that I was an absolutely teenager, who did dreadful things and, you know – I wasn't actually that bad. [Laughs]

[1:33:00]

Do you believe that you leaving school was anything to do with being in care or being looked after?

[Sighs] I don't know. I mean I think my family was in such disarray that I couldn't say whether it was the family or being deaf or being in care. I don't think it was directly to do with being in care, I think it was more directly to do with the mess in my family really, you know. And it was a mess, you know. And also, I couldn't hear, you know. I started bunking off, I think, in the fourth year, and when I went back I was out of touch with what was happening, and it was the GCSE year, the O-Level year. And I think I kept saying to my parents I wanted to leave. Mainly I think what I was saying was, 'I want you to pay attention to the fact that I'm struggling,' but I didn't know how to say that to them, so I kept saying, 'Well I want to leave anyway,' 'cause they kept getting reports that I hadn't turned up to school and things. And I kept saying, 'I want to leave anyway. Anyway, I want to leave.' So in the end they

said, 'Okay, leave at Christmas,' which was when I was going to be sixteen. But I didn't really want to leave, 'cause I did like learning, I really loved learning. I just wanted someone to notice that I needed something else different, you know. So I left, and then I got really crap jobs [laughs].

Is there no teacher you could've spoken to about this?

Come on, now [laughs]. You don't understand the relationships we had with our teachers and our nuns, you know. You never told them anything, you just tried to avoid conflict. I did have a nice head teacher, but actually she got it completely wrong. She was quite sweet. I spent a lot of time outside her office in the last two years before I left. And she would arrive and she'd see me and she'd go, 'Christine O'Mahony, get in that office,' you know. And then she'd take me in, and she'd try her sort of psychology, she'd kind of go, 'Christine, is it a problem with your father, 'cause he's a very nice man, he comes from Cork like I do,' and I'd go, 'Oh yes, Sister, it's my father.' And she'd go, 'Well try and be a good girl now.' And that was about as far as a one to one conversation with anyone in authority ever went, you know. Nobody ever sort of said, 'What is the issue?' If she'd said to me, 'Do you think it's a problem with your deafness?' I probably would've have said no, 'cause my mum had trained me to tell everyone it wasn't a problem, but if somebody had worked that out – I said this to my sister, you know, when I told her I didn't get expelled, I said, 'Actually, I couldn't hear in secondary school, and I was really struggling.' And she looked stunned. It had never crossed her mind, never crossed anybody's mind that I was having trouble, you know. [Laughs] And a lot of my teachers didn't even know I was deaf, my parents didn't want them to know. And I think my mum didn't want me sent off to deaf school, you know, which is reasonable, 'cause they just put deaf children in institutions in those days and left you there basically. So probably, you know, she didn't want to lose me.

What type of institutions?

Into deaf school, you got sent to deaf school, and, you know, where you were at school with other deaf children, boarding school. And that was the norm, you know.

So if it was obvious that you were deaf, you just got sent to deaf school and you didn't – you might come home in the holidays, but you would be in an institution, you know, right up until – well, it still happens actually. But up until the sort of eighty-five or so, it was standard procedure, you know.

[1:36:40]

So academically what was your source of motivation, or who was your source of motivation?

Hmm, that's interesting. I did like to learn things, I like to read things. [Sighs] My mum read an awful lot, and that was a big role model for me. My mum read, I think mainly to get away from us [laughs] in retrospect, but she always had about four books on the go, you know. She'd have one on the dining table, one in the loo, one by her bed, one by the bath. She always had a book in her hand, and we had a lot of books in the house. And that was one way to get her to talk to me, and to talk about something that we'd both read. And it wasn't until I was eighteen that I read something my mum hadn't already read. You know, she knew an awful lot about books and it was interesting, you know, to sort of discuss it with her. My dad's family, I mean we were a working class family, but her dad had been a scientist and he died when she was young, and she got – evacuated and her mum kind of abandoned her when she was about thirteen. So she'd been kind of institutionalised herself, to a certain extent, at a young age. You know, she'd sort of went with the school to Wales and her mum didn't contact her or visit or write to her, or anything. So she was kind of raised by her school teachers, so she sort of saw them as the role models, you know. And she wanted to be a teacher or do higher education, but when she got old enough to work, her mum sent for her to come back and work so she could contribute to the family purse. But she didn't have her back home, she put her in lodgings and got her to pay money to her. Anyway, there's a back story [laughs]. So yeah, so the fact that there was a lot of books in our house made me read, particularly when I was bored, and telly was much worse in those days, wasn't it. At school, I just was quite interested in it really. I mean particularly primary school, you know, the work was easy for me and I understood it and I got praised for doing it well and there

were kind of high expectations of me. At secondary school it kind of went pear shaped because I really wouldn't know what I hadn't heard, so, you know, there were gaps in any class. Where the bit where the teacher was facing us, I was, yeah, sucking it all up, and then there bits when they weren't and I didn't know what had happened, you know. And I didn't even realise that was the problem, for a long time, not until after I'd left school, you know. I just felt like I'd become stupid or something, and I didn't really understand why it wasn't easy for me anymore. Erm, I loved literature, a lot, and understood it easily, you know, Shakespeare and all that, I understood easily and so I got praised for that, you know.

So who would you say played the role of the parent in your life, your younger life?

Well my sister, Maggie, initially. And then my mum later, but she was also a child, you know, she wanted me to parent her quite a lot. You know, even when I was young, she was [sighs] [pause] yeah, she was, you know.

Could you explain, parent her in what way?

She wanted us to look after her, you know. Not physically, but emotionally, you know, we had to be – like we were the only friends she had. She always said she didn't want anyone but her children, she didn't have any friends, she didn't have any adult friends, she didn't like people. She didn't want to do anything socially. She wanted her sister to pay attention to her, but her sister wouldn't, she only saw her about once a year. So she was very, very dependent upon her children to provide the emotional support that a range of adults should have. She didn't depend on my dad, he was at the pub every night. My sisters left home quite a way before me and so I was like her support person, for years really, you know, well up till I was about thirty-nine, when I decided I wasn't going to do it anymore. [Sighs] So yeah, she was my mother, but in many ways I was her parent, you know, I sort of looked after her emotionally a lot, as a child, as a teenager and as an adult, you know. And then as an adult, physically as well, you know.

[1:41:30]

And how did the care experience affect your choice and voice?

My choice and voice? Hmm. [Pause] [Sighs] I think I have an empathy for young people that a lot of people don't. I think that's why I became a foster carer. You know, when my kids were in their teens, a lot of their friends were struggling with their families and things like that, and a lot of them would kind of hang out at my house or run away to my house, and things like. And that's why I became a foster carer, 'cause I realised people weren't listening to young people at all, you know, their parents couldn't listen to them, and they weren't listening to them. So I think possibly because I had the experience of not being listened to as a young one, it made it important to me to listen to young people and have someone who listened to them around, you know. I think [laughs] – I think the experience of sort of watching people being treated unfairly makes me very angry about inequality and want to change the world that way. You know, I don't think [sighs] like I hated adults who mistreated young people, really quite young. And I remember in my top class at primary school, like I was the teacher's favourite, I mean she just loved me, but I did not love her 'cause I saw her mistreating other children. And one girl in particular, who was very dirty and clearly quite neglected, and although I didn't want to befriend this child, I didn't want her mistreated, you know. And this particular teacher, she – this girl, her mother had pushed a needle through her ears to pierce her ears, she tied a rag either side. And the ears got infected, you know. And we kept saying to Mrs Rogers, 'Miss, look at Susan's ears, look at Susan's ears,' you know. And they got worse and worse and you could see the swelling coming every day and I remember being ever so disturbed by the fact that this adult would not take any responsibility. And you know, pus started to kind of pour down, you could see she had blood poisoning, even though I didn't know what it was, you know. And eventually the poor girl fainted in class, so she had to take her to hospital. But I remember hating that teacher for it, I remember just really hating her. And the fact that she, you know, loved me, did not make me love her back. I just disliked her for being so cruel to a kid who had no resources, you know. So I suppose that, I think, you know, seeing children badly treated at a young age, made me feel very anti adults that mistreat children, and made me want to do something about it.

So did you feel you had a voice?

As a young person?

As a young person.

No. No, not at all. And even as an adult, I mean I know I do, I know, you know, 'cause I get a lot of good feedback for being really articulate, but I never feel like I'm articulate. People say, 'Oh so you're articulate, you're so clear, you say what you think, you know, you absolutely say it.' But I don't feel like that's true, even though I know it is. Objectively speaking I know I'm articulate, and I know I'm intelligent, but I – I do feel intelligent these days, but I don't feel articulate a lot of the time. And [sighs] as a kid, no, you know, there was no, there was no one. I think about it now, I think we were a very isolated family, you know. We were an Irish family living in England, at a time when Irish families were really very unwelcome. You know, we lived in an area where there was no Irish, no dog, no blacks, no coloureds, signs everywhere, you know, so I decided I better not be Irish either while I'm at it. You know, it was not a good environment. And I think we had a very good doctors' practice, I do know that, they were extremely good and they took a kind of kindly interest in our family. But I think we probably needed more help than we got. You know, my mum was quite good at making it look like things were all right when they weren't, and my dad was quite charming. But we were a very isolated family, I think my dad was very lonely in England, as an Irish person, you know, 'cause you could only be one thing, you're either a drunk or you're a terrorist, and he was neither of those really, you know. I mean he was a drunk, but he wasn't, you know, like lying round the streets like a lot of the drunks were in that time, you know. Hmm.

And how much freedom did you feel you had?

At what point?

At the point of being looked after?

Oh, we didn't have any freedom at all. But I mean I was only four, so probably it wouldn't have been such a good idea to giving me freedom. But, you know, before we went there, when we lived in Northampton, Maggie was, like I say, seven when we went in there, but from the age of five she was taking Sheila to school and other children to school, she was walking the streets herself, and going to the shops and things like that. So it was quite normal for a very small child to have quite a lot of freedom, if you call it freedom or neglect [laughs] in those days, you know. But I don't remember ever getting to do anything on my own in the children's home, we didn't have any freedom at all.

[1:47:08]

And could you tell me about some highlights of being in care?

Well, it was getting taken to school and getting [laughs] the fruit pastels. I remember getting a new dress once, from that woman. [Pause] My dad coming, that was always a highlight, when my dad came. That's about it, I think. Hmm.

And would you say because of being in care, that you have different values?

I think so. I've got some different perspectives from my friends, particularly on looked after children for instance, you know. You know, there's a lot of people who think that looked after children have done something wrong and that's why they're in care. That never crosses my mind, you know, it's never the fault of the child as far as I'm concerned. But that is, you know, quite a common perspective. And that also anyone who's in care is by nature a truant, or difficult, or whatever, you know, that they're going to in one way or another misbehave, and that doesn't, you know, sort of be part of my makeup either, you know. I assume it's just something to do with the adults in their lives, never anything that they did, you know.

[1:48:50]

What does trust mean to you?

Erm ... [pause] [laughs]

Or what did – let me rephrase that [laughs]. What did trust mean to you while you was in care?

I don't think I even knew what the word meant, or had any concept of it, really. I trusted my sisters, obviously I did trust my sisters. I don't think I quite trusted my dad, I wasn't sure he wasn't going to just disappear. I didn't trust my mum, definitely, because she had disappeared. Didn't trust the nuns. The school I went to, I don't remember the teacher at all, all I remember is sitting in the corner and eating plasticine. So I can't have – that can't have made any impact on me. But I do remember being in a room with some other children and eating plasticine. So yeah, I guess if I had any trust, it was in two other young people, but not in adults at all.

Would you say that's affected your adult life?

Yeah, I think it has. I don't think I really do trust people, I expect them to let me down on some level, you know. I kind of hope they won't, but really I'm kind of expecting it, you know, and I'm never surprised when they do. Yeah, so yeah, it's not good.

Who would you say cared for you and had your best interests?

Maggie. My sister, Maggie. When I was in care, yeah?

Yeah.

Yeah, Maggie I think, definitely.

[1:50:36]

And if you could go back in time, what would you tell yourself?

That you're all right, you haven't done anything wrong, your mum's not dead [laughs]. [Pause] Yeah, you're doing the best you can, that's what I think I told myself, you're doing all right.

[1:51:04]

What advice would you give people going into care?

Going in to care today?

Yeah, based on your experience.

Well its very different, init? Erm, like one of my daughter's friends, she was in care, and she came on holiday with me recently and was talking about it. I mean, she was in a children's home in Highbury in her teens, you know. And I've known her since she was twelve. And all her siblings all ended up being taken away, apart from the youngest one. So I think about her quite a lot. And what would I have told her? I mean she's raised herself, and she's raised herself very well, but she's had a hard time with it. So I suppose, you know, I would tell people that, 'Really it's not your fault, it's not your fault, you didn't do anything to deserve this and, you know, just hang on to who you are and it will come out all right in the end,' that's probably what I'd say. You know, even if it's horrible now, you'll be fine. You know, you have not done anything wrong, you're fine. [Laughs]

What is your thought on this statement?

On what?

On this statement.

Okay. Can we have a break, 'cause I need to go the toilet. [Laughs]

[Track paused, then resumed]

[1:52:32]

What is your thought on this statement? 'No one can change their past, but they can shape their future'.

I think that's true. I think you can decide, you know, what you want out of life. And actually I wouldn't want to change my past, it made me who I am and I think I'm fine. Yeah, you know, bits of it have been hard, but actually I wouldn't want any of the things that have happened to me, not to have happened to me, 'cause I think you learn something all the time. And you can't undo it, so it's best just to sort of use it and move on really, you know.

And what are the overall positive effects of being looked after?

Compassion probably, and an understanding of other people. And understanding that, you know, things happen to people that are absolutely not their fault. You know, some of those children who were in that children's home with me, they were there because of War, they were there because their parents were dead, they were there because, you know, terrible things had happened, and it really was not their fault. And I think that's probably true of most people who find themselves in some dire institution or other, that actually [sighs] it's not their fault. It's really not. You know, I know lots of people who grew up in disabled people's institutions and the things they were told about themselves are just such nonsense, you know. But [sighs] it can make you very confused, you know. Like I've got one friend who's got cerebral palsy, you know, she's got hands that don't tie laces, and the boarding school she was at wouldn't you let you do maths until you could tie your laces. [Laughs] Okay? How logical is that? So of course she could never tie her laces, so she was never allowed to learn maths. So now she's got three degrees, because she's constantly proving to herself and to everyone else that she's really very clever. And I think it's a bit sad that she has to do three degrees in order to try and convince herself that she's clever, but I also understand that she has to convince the world she's clever because of her background, you know. So those sort of things, you know, kind of

understanding where people are coming from. Other people are, 'Why would she do another degree, she's made?' I understand exactly why she'd do another degree, you know.

If you could close your eyes and describe what you felt the future was –

What, when I was a child?

When you was a child, what would you say?

[Sighs] Oh. Well, I knew that I wanted two girl children and I wanted them by the time I was thirty. And I knew that I wanted to be a teacher, and I knew that I wanted to own my own property. [Laughs] And so I had all those things in my head. And I did it all, in fact. I bought my first house when I twenty-nine and three-quarters, and I suddenly realised that my three goals, and that my two children were girls [laughs] you know, had all happened before I was thirty. So I probably had all those things in my head from quite a young age. You know, that I was going to qualify as a teacher, I was going to have two girl children, I was going to own a home. And after that I didn't really have any plans. But my life's been very big, you know. [Laughs]

[1:56:10]

And could you tell me a bit about your adult life?

Yeah, okay. Oh, God [laughs] where do you start with that? Okay. So, I mean [sighs] I left school when I was sixteen, I didn't have any qualifications. And then when I was about twenty-one, I think, I went back to adult education and started doing some A-Levels. And I got pregnant with Regan when I was twenty-two. I was living with her father, we were living at my mother's house in fact, not because my mother approved of me living with a man, but because my mother couldn't bear me to move out. So we lived together there. And she wanted us to get married, 'cause then we'd look more respectable. But anyway, I got pregnant and she got very angry and said, 'Well he'll have to marry you,' and I said, 'I don't want to marry him.' So she kicked

him out. So I was a single mother, which suited me 'cause I wasn't really in love with him and I did really want a child. But then when Regan was born, I had very severe postnatal depression, or psychosis, and landed up in a psychiatric hospital, just like my mother. And Regan and I went in together until she was nine weeks, I think, we were in a psychiatric hospital. And I was working as a secretary in an adult literacy scheme at the time, and I just about made it back to work in time for my end of maternity leave. I moved out of my mum's during that period, and I went to live in East London, which was well scary, 'cause I'd always lived in Camden Town since the children's home. And I was very far from where my family and friends, but, you know, we did all right. We sort of landed up on the twenty-first floor of a tower block, and really it should've gone disastrously wrong. You know, I'd just come out of a psychiatric hospital, I was a single mother, I was living in an area of London I knew nobody, on a very rough estate, you know. But I kind of just took this decision, well I've had this child, now I've got to figure out a way to support her. So I really worked to getting qualified as a teacher then.

How old was you at this time?

I was twenty-three. And – so what did I do? I met Jenny's father at the place I was working, when Regan was only a couple of months old, and he seemed like good father material at the time. How wrong can you be? And about a year and a bit later we started going out. And then I got pregnant with Jenny when Regan was ... let's see, well she must have been just over two. And he was all up for it, but it was really a disaster. He was a violent man and he beat me up and he hurt my children. And [sighs] and he had a way of presenting himself to the world that made everyone think he was Mr Nice Guy, so it was very difficult, my family didn't really believe me, you know. And I didn't go to them for help for quite a long time either, 'cause I didn't think they were going to believe me, and I was right, you know. I mean I actually went to my mum's when he beat me up one day, and had big cuts on my head, I had a footprint bruise in the middle of my stomach and a lump of hair pulled out, and I said, 'Mum, he beats me up,' and she said, 'I don't believe you.' That was the first thing she said [laughs]. You know, it was so not a surprise to me that she was going to say that, 'cause they all thought he was really wonderful and, you know. And then he

kind of managed to persuade them all that, you know, I was very awkward, and they all believed that anyway, so almost all my family started thinking well, you know, Christine is very, you know, annoying, and things like that. And so I kind of gave up on them and I had to go back to him. And [sighs] we were together eight years, most of the time I was trying to get him out of my life, and eventually took him Court, got an injunction. But I had witnesses, in fact my mum was a witness, finally, to his violence. And got him out of our lives, got him out of mine.

How old was you then?

So let me think. Erm, I was twenty-six when I had Jenny, so about thirty-two I think. Erm ... and yeah, I qualified as a teacher. I mean he and I had the same job, we both worked as adult literacy providers, and I sort of did community work kind of things, you know, in community projects. I worked for NACRO. Became a lesbian, and had my first lesbian relationship with I was about thirty-two, when I was still with him actually, although, you know, as far as I was concerned we weren't together. And it was a great act of rebellion and courage, I tell you, I was so scared he was going to kill me. I really was, you know, but I just faced it out. It wasn't a very successful relationship but, you know, I kind of made it clear that was it. And then I had quite a long relationship with a woman that I really loved, that I met through work, and she lived with me and the kids till Regan was fourteen. I've done well at work. I mean people always promoted me, you know, always wanting me to do more. And [laughs] my mum always took the view that anyone only ever employed me because they felt sorry for me for being deaf. So she would kind of go, 'Oh, that's really nice of them to give you a job, isn't it dear?' you know. And when I kind of started to sort of stick up for meself a bit, I'd say, 'Well mum, I'm actually quite good at what I do.' And she went, 'Oh yes, I'm sure you are, but it's very nice of them to promote you.' And, you know, for years I actually believed her that people only gave me jobs 'cause they felt sorry for me. And then, you know, when I became a manager and I'd be on the other side of the interview table, I think I know exactly why they employ me [laughs]. I can see, you know, that most people don't do very good interviews, or don't actually know what they're talking about, or do bluff and things, you know. But my mum really had me convinced that, you know, I was this pathetic little thing that nobody

would really give a job to if they weren't trying to be nice, you know. Not very helpful, but there you go. So I'm glad I learned that that's not true. And I looked after my mum a lot, I mean I was definitely the one left holding the baby, i.e. my mum. My sisters left home and my brother was a teenage lout and my dad was, you know, emotionally unavailable, so I looked after her a lot. And as I was an unmarried mother a lot of the time, that was, you know, my relationships weren't considered to be real relationships so obviously I had time, where my sisters who had proper husbands, didn't have time. So I was expected to take her shopping and put her plugs on and put the carpet down and put the shelf up and, you know, be there and be there. And I did, for a long time. And she carried on sort of having emotional crises. I mean she had a major one the week Jenny was born, she was hospitalised. She used to have these kind of things where she would talk for hours and hours and hours, days, thirty-six hours, she would talk non-stop, she'd get really, really hyper. And then she'd have like an epileptic seizure, but she didn't have epilepsy but that's what it was like, and we'd call an ambulance and they'd take her to hospital. She'd kind of go catatonic for two or three weeks, and gradually her mood would lift and eventually she'd come out again. And then it would happen again. So [sighs] I think that happened three times in my twenties when my dad was still around, he died when I twenty-nine. And my dad's view was always, 'Why is this happening to me, again?' [Laughs] And I would say, 'Dad, I think it's Mum it's happening to you'll find.' But he always felt it was him that it happened to. And then he died when I was twenty-nine, he died of cirrhosis of the liver, what a surprise. I think he was a bit surprised, but I wasn't. And my sister, Maggie, always is denial that he was an alcoholic, but he really was, you know. When we were kids, maybe before she left home, it wasn't quite as obvious, but by the time I left home my dad couldn't get out bed without a drink in the morning. You know, he kept beer under the bed so that he could get up in the morning. And, you know, most of his day was, 'Where's my next drink coming from?' you know, that was what he thought about most of the time, you know. And though I loved him, and he could be there for me at times, it was also [sighs] you couldn't rely on it at all, you know, you really couldn't rely on him. And my mum couldn't rely on him. So, you know, he was a kind man, he wasn't a bad man, but he was an alcoholic and they're just not there really are they, you know. So I kind of despised him a bit. My mum, well she was very needy, she really was very needy you

know. I mean she – she used to kind of claw at your guilt [laughs] happens all the time, you know [laughs]. And finally, I mean the worm did finally turn when I was thirty-nine. I was going through a hard time myself, I was breaking up with my partner who I really loved. And I worked down the road from where my mum was living at the time, I was working in Goldsmith's College and doing this research project. And she would phone me up, and I'd be at work, and she'd say, 'You've got to come, they're coming through the letterbox, you'll have to come and save me, you've got to come now.' And I was constantly having to leave to work and go and sort her out, and by the time I got there, she'd always be fine because she knew someone was coming. She'd go, 'Oh, they're gone now.' [Laughs] So one day I said, 'Mum, I'm going to phone the hospital, I can't look after you anymore, I'm going to phone the hospital and I'm going to ask them to come and pick you up this afternoon.' And she said, 'Oh, you're not going to abandon me, are you?' And I said, 'No, I'm not abandoning you, but I'm just not going to look after you anymore.' I was just absolutely burned out with it, you know. I mean it was constant, constant looking after her. And I went home and I expected to feel absolutely terrible, like the worst thing in the world, and actually all I felt was relief. And I phoned my sisters up and I said, 'Mum's back in the hospital and I'm not going to see her for three months. And you can tell her anything you like, but I'm not going to go and see her for three months.' And to my astonishment they did kind of, well Sheila stepped up to the plate a bit, and Kieran did. Maggie didn't, she sent flowers and money. But [laughs] but I didn't do it anymore. And I stayed that way, you know, I resisted it. I did still look after her a bit, but I was never like her sole carer after that, you know, I just refused to kind of be the one. And, you know, they were very happy to leave it to me as long as I did it. And dad's line always to me was, 'Look after your mother, look after your mother, look after your mother,' you know. So I kind of grew up thinking it was my job, you know, and everyone else thought it was my job as well. Love my kids, absolutely adore them, I still do. I think they're best thing ever. You know, really, the best thing I ever did was have my two girls. I just think they're the bee's knees. I kind of expected them to be difficult in their teens, but they were nothing like as a difficult as me [laughs]. The worst thing that ever happened was Regan got pregnant when she was seventeen, that was the only thing really, you know. And after a week of thinking oh God that's terrible, I then got on with it and had a lovely

grandchild as a result, and she's got two others now. Yeah, and she's a teacher, you know, she's middle management, she qualified after she had a child, you know. Kind of focused her the way it focused me. And Jenny has this amazing job where she travels all over the world all the time. But she's just lost a baby, so she's heartbroken. And she's very rich and she's married to a rich man and they have a lovely house and a beautiful garden, but no children. Regan has no money, but three children and [laughs] you know. So life is good really, you know. People tend to like me, people like want to have me around and want to help me. And I have friends of all ages, which are like, you know, I mean I have, you know, friends in their twenties and in their teens, as well as friends in their sixties and forties and thirties, so I like that, you know. Hmm, it's good. I moved to Enfield about four or five years ago, after living in Hackney. And the reason I moved there was because Regan moved there. And her second child was born with a sort of whole series of impairments, he's got this strange syndrome called VACTERL, and she really support, you know. You wouldn't know there was anything wrong with him to look at him, but he's had like eleven surgeries in his first year and he nearly died so many times, and she was like on her knees a lot of the time, you know. But, you know, he's a lovely boy, does street dancing and he's great, you know. He's really great. And I like being around her and her kids. I'm kind of semi-retired, but I still work. And, you know, like being a freelance trainer, once the recession hit, I was working a lot before that but as soon as the recession hit nobody wants to pay for training, particularly around equality. And equality goes the door when a Tory government comes in. But it seems to be picking up again, it's quite strange, you know. Lately I've had quite a few enquiries and seem to be getting work again. And I've got used to living on less money and having more time, and that's nice. You know, it's really nice. A garden, I look after my grandchild, Poppy, one day a week, and Dillon, and, erm, I have a good relationship with my sisters-ish, now. For a while it was very good, we had about ten years of, you know, very good relationship, but the last year or two it's got a bit difficult. And at my sixtieth birthday party Sheila made a speech about me as a child, and talked about the time they hung me from the lamp post, and I did not appreciate the story at all frankly. And I was really pissed with her for telling it, because she made it like a joke story and I thought actually I think this is really inappropriate for you to come to my sixtieth birthday party and have my friends laugh at you and

Maggie bullying me as a kid. So a few weeks afterwards she asked me what I thought about her speech, and I thought well I'm going to tell her. So I said, 'Yeah, I was a little bit concerned about the story you told about hanging me from a lamp post, what were you thinking?' And she said, 'Oh, I wanted to show what bullies me and Maggie were.' So why is that important at my party? And I said, 'Hmm, yeah,' I said, 'well you certainly did that,' [laughs] which is the first time we've ever directly referred to the bullying, so that was quite a door to go through, you know. And she said, 'Oh, and I kind of wanted to show, you know, how Dad stuck up for you,' and that really didn't come across. I asked a few of my friends afterwards, you know, what they made of the story, and they said, 'Hmm, it's a really weird story to tell,' and I said, 'Hmm.' And it made me think that actually one of the things she does is she makes everything about herself, so it was my party but it had to be about her somehow. And, you know, I thought I could stop talking to you about this, but I'm not going to. But we don't talk about it, we don't talk about the fact that they bullied me, and that's the first time she's ever referred to it. And obviously she was trying to do some sort of confession, just in a very inappropriate place. I once, you know, tried to broach it with her. Because she's the one I'm closest to and she's the one I loved the most. You know, even though Maggie was like my mum, Sheila and I we've had a very close ten years since her marriage broke up. We've been on holiday together and I've stayed over with her, she's stayed over with me, I've helped her decorate her house, you know, we've been back and forth a lot. And now she's got a boyfriend, so that's gone down the pan. But [laughs] during that period, you know, we've been very close and I tried to sort of say to her, you know, 'What was your perception of me when we were children?' And she sort of said, 'Oh you and Maggie used to fight a lot,' and I thought that was quite interesting, because she certainly was on Maggie's side against me, the two of them ganged up a lot against me. And I said, 'Hmm,' and I said, 'what do you think that was about?' She said, 'Oh I don't think three is ever a comfortable setup.' Well, we were very comfortable until I was seven, I don't remember ever fighting with either of them until then, and then things changed. But I don't know what they think about it 'cause it's still such a touchy subject, you know, for me, and presumably for them, I don't know. I don't know, we just don't refer to it, you know. But they were quite horrible, they were horrible to other people as well as me. I remember feeling really ashamed of them sometimes, you know. I saw them

mistreat other children and I felt really ashamed. At one time we all had a job in St James Park, selling ice cream. And the couple who owned the place they were Auschwitz survivors, you know, and they still had tattoos and everything. And, you know, they were obviously very damaged by their experience, hardly surprising. But they had a daughter called Anna, who they adored, and she was like the light of their life. And she was difficult, this girl, but then she had difficult parents, you know [laughs]. And the father used to want to buy friends for her, 'cause they were quite rich, so he asked Maggie and Sheila, they were going to Paris, he asked Maggie and Sheila to take her to Paris with them, when she was fifteen. And, you know, he would chip in money or the thing. And I just remember them being so mean to her, you know, they'd run away from her in the street and they used to tell everyone she had hairs on the back of her knees, and things like that. And I just couldn't understand why they were so horrible to this girl, you know, what had she ever done? And [sighs] I kind of think they was like that with me. What had I ever done? But something, you know. But they felt absolutely justified in being that mean to her, but she'd never done anything to them, it wasn't her fault her father was trying to buy friends, you know. It was weird. And Sheila still talks about it, as if it was a great joke, you know, 'Anna Kessler had hairs on the back of her knees.' So bloody what, you know. [Laughs] introduce her to Veet-O [laughs] or something, you know [laughs]. Why would that be a reason to mistreat someone, you know what I mean? I get uncomfortable when she says things like that, I don't really challenge her. You know, there's certain women she sort of kind of has it in for. Myleene Klass, for one. She goes on and on about Myleene Klass, you know the person I mean? And do you know what it is? My daughter looks like Myleene Klass, my elder daughter, and she's very beautiful and I think Myleene Klass is as well. And when she was in whatever she was in, was it S Club 7 or something? Or whatever band she was in. People used to say all the time, 'Oh Regan, she really looks like Regan, Regan really looks like her.' And I think she was just being bitchy, you know, like she'd sort of – she puts onto Myleene Klass the bitchy things she'd like to say about my beautiful daughter. She can't quite say them, so she's always saying bitchy things about her, and I'm why've you got it in for Myleene Klass, what has Myleene Klass ever done to you? [Laughs] She's also very bitchy about my friend, Marie, who is very beautiful. And she always says, 'Oh, in her teens Marie always thought she was such the bee's

knees,' and actually she didn't, you know, she was my friend. And she says nasty things about her and, you know, like how she was, you know, thought she was the cat's whiskers and things like that, and how Marie thought she was so much better than me. Actually Marie didn't, she was just my friend, you know, and she doesn't now, you know, and she is still beautiful and I like her being beautiful. And she never did anything to Sheila, but Sheila is bitchy about her, you know.

How does her attitude towards other people make you feel?

It makes me feel really uncomfortable, you know, 'cause I love my sister and I, you know, why are you, you know, what's going on for you that you would say that? But she thinks she's the sweetest natured person in the world, she really does, you know. She thinks she's really grand [laughs] so to challenge her is like really challenging her self-perception, you know. I think she got a real shock when I said, 'I wasn't happy with your speech.' Like, 'Everyone loves me,' you know. And that's true, you know, she's the one that everyone always adored, you know. She was the sunny child that everyone thought was lovely and sweet and kind and gentle, so for someone to say to her, 'Actually, you're not,' is like, phew, massive culture shock for her [laughs].

[2:17:00]

So tell me a bit about your family now, that you've created?

Okay, so what I've got now. I live on my own, which suits me perfectly, and I have Regan and Jenny and Dillon and Poppy and Wayne and Eden, living half a mile down the road. Regan's my daughter, Wayne's her partner, Eden is coming up to nineteen. That's really weird, he was the one who was born when she got pregnant at seventeen, he was born when she was eighteen, she hasn't paid her student loan yet and he's starting one now. I mean it's bizarre. And Dillon is eight, Poppy is two-and-a-half. And I have a lot of fun with the family, you know, we hang out together a lot, at least a couple of times a week. I take Dillon to school and pick him up, and so I know a lot of the mum's at school and we hang out together and do things. It's a very friendly school that they go to. [Sniffs] And Jenny and Rob live in Berkhamsted, which is

about twenty miles from me, and I see them less 'cause they're always travelling around the place. But she's just lost a baby, and it was her first pregnancy, so I've been seeing her a lot lately. And we get on very well. I mean Jenny and Regan and I, we were a very good unit as they were growing up, the three of us. We really had each other's back and it really annoyed people in a certain way, you know, 'cause we were very close knit, the three of us. And it made it difficult for foster children I think, you know, because I did teenagers and I did emergency care, you know. So somebody would come in and there'd be a honeymoon period where they got to know the new girl and everyone loved each other, and then it looked like my house was really easygoing and there were no rules. But there were rules, but they just didn't look as serious as they were, you know. And the rules were quite simple ones, you know. Like you must tell me where you're going, you must be where you say you're going to go, you must keep yourself and you must come home at the time that you say you're going to come home or phone me. You know, it was not that difficult. And you're not allowed to run away or commit suicide, which I added on. [Laughs] But, you know, they were quite rules. My girls kind of understood that, you know, if they broke those rules that was really, really bad. But of course foster children were pushy and, you know, so like the first one within a week I had to pick her up in Mayfair at two o'clock in the morning, absolutely drunk, from a police station. And so, you know, then the foster child would get a bit abusive, and then my girls would go in like a bloody nuclear warhead, you know, 'How dare you talk to my mum like that?' And then, you know, I'd be trying to sort of calm mine down but also, you know, get the foster child to understand that I was serious about my rules and I wanted them to stay with them. So that would be difficult. And we had one foster child for a long time, who came, who deaf, profoundly deaf and who used sign language, and was autistic. And we had her for seven years. And she used to come weekends, she went to deaf school, and she'd come weekends and part of the holidays. And [sighs] she had challenging behaviour but she was also extremely lovable. I mean we all loved her dearly, but she was very hard work. So my kids used to just disappear when she came, they'd sort of go off to stay at Jenny's dad's, or they'd go and stay with their friends and things as they got older. Yeah, I like fostering, but Jenny said in the end that if I took anymore she was going to leave home, so I had to stop. I liked doing it,

but, you know, my kids didn't like it in the end. Yeah, I had to just stop doing it, you know.

[2:20:55]

And what impact do you think you will have on the next generation?

[Sighs] Well I think there's things my grandchildren don't know about me. For instance, they don't know I'm a lesbian 'cause my daughter doesn't want me to talk to them about it. So my eldest grandson knows, but the two smaller ones don't. Erm, I know they're very keen on me, you know, they want me around a lot. You know, my grandsons are always saying, 'Oh grandma, do a sleep over, come on holiday with us, come out with us, be here,' you know. And the little one goes, 'I want to go in your house, I want to come in your house.' So obviously I have an impact, but I don't think it's as me. And my middle grandson kind of, because he's a disabled child, you know, he has a very strange set of issues, and one is that he's permanently bowel incontinent. So [coughs] you know, it's kind of managed but he needs medical support at school and things like that. And he can be known to say, 'I'm a disabled kid, you can't talk to me like that,' which is really quite funny. But I'd say, 'So I'm a disabled adult,' and he goes, 'Yeah, but you're not really.' And I say, 'Yes, I am, I'm deaf and that counts as disabled, same as you.' And I won't let him be the only one who's disabled. You know, when I grew up I was the only one in my family who had an impairment, and I felt very out on a limb, so I insist that he notices that I have one as well and that we have similar issues. And that's quite good, in a funny kind of way, you know. He wants to sometimes put me down for being deaf, you know. He said, 'You're really hard to talk to, Grandma, 'cause you're deaf.' And I say, 'No I'm not, you just need to face me.' And he'd go, 'But I don't want to face you when I'm hanging upside down,' [laughs]. So I say, 'Well then don't talk to me when you're hanging upside down,' you know. [Laughs] So I mean I know they all love me dearly and they think I'm really good, you know. And I know that other people's, you know, my daughters' friends, you know, will go, 'Oh, I wish I had a mum like you,' and things like that, you know, which is annoying for my daughters. They all say, you know, 'I wish my mum was like your mum.' And I think I've been a really, really

good mother. Erm, I certainly didn't learn it at my mother's breast [laughs]. I think I learnt it in spite of her, you know, I think I kind of looked at a lot of adults, a lot of teachers, and my parents, and thought I'm going to do the exact opposite of you, I'm not going to do what you did, I'm not going to make the same mistakes as you. I'm not going to be unkind to small people and I am going to listen. And I think that probably that impact, you know, it's kind of had a good impact in the way that I can actually take it on, and it's made me a better person that I might have been, you know.

[2:23:59]

And have you had any reunions with people you knew at the children's homes?

No.

No?

Sheila remembers the surname of her prefect, who was really cruel to her, Pat Pinhorn, but I don't remember any names at all. But I did read this article not so long ago – I mean my sister Maggie's in denial that it was as bad as it was, but it was a bad place to be. And I read this article a while ago in a women's magazine about someone who'd been in one of the Nazareth House convents. And there were three of them, they were taking the Church to Court because of cruelty in them. And this particular person, you know, she talked about being beaten, and also that when she had scarlet fever she was forced to sleep on the fire escape because she moaned in her sleep, and so they punished her by putting out there, left her with weakened lungs and things like that. So they were trying to sue the Catholic Church or whatever. And I sent the article to Maggie, and it wasn't our actual home, it was one of the other ones that these three girls had been in, but they were about our age so it must have been about that time and that sort of treatment was going on around us. But Maggie was, 'Oh it wasn't that bad, you know, it can't have been that bad,' she always, you know, denies that our childhood was in any less than perfect and our parents weren't rosy cheeked, salt of the earth, lovely people, you know. They were nice people, but, you know.

What was your view on it?

What, on my childhood?

Yeah.

Well, when I was a child I didn't know there was anything wrong with it. But as an adult, I think it was appalling actually, really bad, I think my parents were totally wrapped up in themselves, we didn't get any support from anyone outside the family. And, you know, they were neglectful. We lived in a slum, it really was disgusting our home, you know. And, you know, we had bed bugs and things like that, you know. I mean it was awful. And we had silver fish in the cupboards, there were mice in the fridge, it was disgusting. And, you know, when I was a kid I didn't like it, but I didn't know it was wrong. And now I think actually it was appalling, you know, and that [sighs] we needed a lot more that we got in terms of adult attention. Yeah.

Have you ever thought of making any complaints?

No, I wouldn't know who to complain to. And it [laughs] who is there, you know.

And what's your outlook of being in care? Are you proud?

Proud? Erm, I'm not ashamed of it. I'm a bit bemused, if any thing. You know, like, hmm, because, you know, because we were in care, but it was never called that. And there was denial that I would, erm, I think I've said it while you were out of the room. My mum always said to me, 'Oh you won't remember, you were only four,' so I'd obligingly not remember anything. And it wasn't till my children were born, and four, that I thought, it's nonsense to say I don't remember. Of course I remember when I was four, look at them, they're sentient human beings, you know. So I'm not ashamed of it, I'm not necessarily proud of it, it's just something that happened, you know, just a fact of my life really, I think, like a lot of things.

And who would you say in your life has cared for you?

Erm, what has loved me, or who's looked after me?

Cared, loved, showed you affection that you've always wanted?

My friends. I've got friends who do. Yeah, I've got very close friends who care a lot about me and look out for me, and will go out of their way to watch my back, you know. My sisters, when I was younger. Sheila these days, still I think. Kieran in the past, but he's pretty damaged and he's married to a woman who's very difficult and who doesn't like his family, so, you know. He's tried to care for me. When I came out of psychiatric hospital he came to live with me, but he was [laughs] useless at it, really useless [laughs]. I was better at looking after myself than being looked after by my little brother, he was just absolute rubbish. No, one partner. Hmm. My children, yeah. I don't think they look after me, but they do definitely care about me a lot, you know.

What would you say your issues are around safety, trust, control and freedom?

Safety, probably I'm a bit reckless, physical safety and, you know, in terms of being burgled or stolen from, and things like that. It's happened to me loads of times, loads and loads of times. I've, you know, lost count of how many times I've been burgled and things like that. What was the next one?

Choice?

Choice? I think I have a lot of choice. I think I decide what I want to do. Like for instance, you know, I've been doing a house swap and I went to Thailand for a month and swapped my house. And Regan was appalled and was saying, 'Mum, you're so impetuous, you know.' And I said, 'No, this is an opportunity.' And what was it that she was saying, that I'm risky. And I said, 'No, it's not a risk, it's an opportunity.' This is how I see risks, and she thinks I'm reckless. But actually it was a really good opportunity, you know. They came and lived in my flat for a month and I went to

Thailand for a month. And she, 'Now supposing they wreck your house?' So I said, 'Well I'll wreck their house back,' you know. Those kind of things. So safety trust. So I am more likely to trust a stranger on a superficial level, than I am to trust someone very close to me on a deep level. And actually I've been treated quite well by strangers, like, you know, someone who's never hurt me I'm more likely to trust than someone who has hurt me. But once you've done that, that's it. [Laughs]

Choice?

Choice? Well I think I make the choices that I want and that, yeah, I make good choices for myself on the whole. Like at the moment I'm not choosing to lose weight, but I should do [laughs] but I'm choosing not to right now. So [laughs] you know, I understand that it's my choice, it's not up to anyone else, you know. But on the whole yeah, I feel like I have as much choice as I want in my life. Hmm.

And control?

Control? Well, you know, both my daughters are real control freaks, and I worry a bit about that [laughs] I worry what did I do to make them so scared [laughs] of not having control. And, you know, I don't think I'm particularly controlling, I don't think I am. And I certainly let them take control, you know. Like I just went on a holiday to Ireland with Regan, and when we got to the airport to pick up the car she said she was going to do all the driving, and I just, 'Yeah, whatever,' even though I know I'm a perfectly safe driver, she's scared and she wants to be in control. So I let them, you know. So I think I'm quite prepared to let other people take control, as long as it doesn't inconvenience me too much. I don't think I have an issue with it. But, you know, ask someone else, who knows?

And freedom?

Freedom? I think I have a lot of freedom as well. I think I, you know, I decide what I want to do, when I want to do it. And I feel free, you know. I've never been

incarcerated, which is apparently what is supposed to happen to everybody who's ever been in care, init, you're suppose to go to prison next stop. [Laughs]

[2:32:28]

Would you say, looking back, your life has turned out how you expected it to?

No, it hasn't actually, and I'll tell you why. Because when I was sixteen a doctor told me that by the time I was thirty I would be completely deaf. And really what I kind of heard was, I might as well be dead, you know, that I would have no contact with anyone, that I would be totally on my own, I'd be absolutely isolated. I didn't know any other deaf people, 'cause my mum had made sure that I didn't. So all I could see was that my life would stop at thirty, which was why I had this plan to have two children, a house and a teaching job [laughs] by the time I was thirty, 'cause I couldn't see past it. And of course it hasn't really happened like that. In fact, you know, I am much deafer now than I was in my teens, but I hear much better because the technology is much better. And, you know, I wasn't profoundly deaf then, I was profoundly deaf in that ear and hard of hearing in this ear. Now I'm profoundly deaf in both ears, but I can hear really well. So I couldn't really imagine having a job past thirty, I couldn't imagine who was ever going to employ me, or what my life would be like, I just had a vision of myself on my one, reading books, getting on with it. And actually it's full of people, it's been full of experiences. I have jobs where, you know, I have to communicate and listen and hear a lot. It's turned out a lot better than I expected it to, actually, much, much better. Hmm, it's a good life.

And looking back, what would you say the impact of care – what would you say the impact care has had on your life?

[Sighs] Well I think it just made me aware of people around me. You know, seeing suffering and that at an early age, made me aware of people's feelings and what's going on for them, and I think that's been a good thing really, you know, seeing other little kids crying. I remember being in hospital once when I had to have my tonsils and adenoids out for whatever reason, and in those days they just used to do, you

know, everybody's tonsils out, just like that. And I woke up in this ward, and it was very like the children's home if you like, you know, with beds, children strapped in tight, and every person in the room was crying. And I just thought it was the saddest thing I'd ever heard, you know. And I was seven then, and I just wanted to make it better somehow, you know. So I think it's probably made me sensitive to other people's sadness and distress, you know.

What were the positive and negative experiences you had while you were in care?

I'm sure I've told you all them [laughs].

Are there any you've missed out?

I don't think so. Not any I can remember anyway.

So what do you feel could be improved?

Erm, oh blimey, where do you start with that? Well, the adult who actually sat down with a child and asked them what was going on for them might have had [laughs] you know [laughs]. But that wasn't the culture in the '50s anyway. But, you know, like, you know, I think it's in – is it in Sweden where a child keeps the same social worker for all their life or something, you know, for a very, very long period. And I think that sounds really excellent. You know, when I saw the foster children I had and they had social workers coming and going, and guardian *ad litem*, this one and that one dropping in, taking a bit of interest, bugging off, how confuse – and me too, you know. They come to me for a few weeks, a few months, or whatever, you know. A bit of consistency, you know, an adult who reliably stays there with the child and follows up after you leave and, you know, takes an interest in you and sees you as a long term commitment, not until they get a new job or something like that, you know. I think that would be really, really good for any child, you know. Even if they didn't particularly like each other, just the fact of someone staying, being there and being reliably there, would be really good, you know. Say for instance that couple who wanted to adopt me and Jenny, maybe if they'd stayed in touch with us and shown a

genuine interest in us, instead of, 'Oh we can't have what we want so we don't want you at all,' you know. What would have been so bad about that, you know? Maybe they could've come and taken us out once in a while. If they really, you know, really wanted to get to know us and didn't just want two children to look in the Catholic community, you know, that would've been quite nice.

What are your hopes for the future?

Hmm. [Sighs] I hope my oldest grandson [laughs] is going to get into uni. That I'm going to be rich by the time I'm seventy, I'm working on it and starting this new company is good. That I continue to get interesting work, I think I've been really lucky with that, you know. Like my working life started really boring, doing sort of secretarial and temp work and stuff like that, and it's got more and more interesting the older I've got and I really feel like I've been so lucky to earn good money, doing something that I love doing, and getting paid for it, you know, such a privilege. And trips to America and all sorts of things, you know. I love all that. So I don't want to stop working, you know, I want to be working till I'm at least seventy. Future of the world, it looks pretty bleak at the moment [laughs]. The Tories will leave [laughs] Labour will get its act together and remember they're supposed to be there to represent people and not fiddle their bills. [Laughs] Yeah, and my family will be fine, you know, solvent, happy. Hmm. Hmm. I do have good relationships with them. You know, like I've got a nephew in Australia and I went there last year and just was treated so well, you know, they're just so nice. You know, I'd like all my family to be like them but I think life's easier for people in Australia than it is here, you know. It's an easier life. I mean I kind of hope that life will stop being so stressful for everyone, so they've got more, erm, slack around each other, you know. I mean London's mad, you know, and people are so unkind to each other. Just this morning, you know, I was coming down the road by my grandson's school, and I had the right of way. A white van comes towards me, so I back up and like, you know, and he goes [demonstrates] – so I said, 'It's normal to say thank you,' and he's going 'Whoo whoo whoo', you know. And it's like [sighs] will it hurt so much to just say thank you, you know, I actually moved out of your way when you didn't even have the right of way, and he's sort of telling me off for whatever, you know. And you just think [sighs] whatever's

gone on for him it's not my fault, nothing to do with me, I'm accommodating him, would it hurt so much for him to just say thank you instead of giving me a [laughs] rudeness, you know. I kind of would like us to be gentler with each other, you know, that's what I'd like. In Thailand, you know, people are dead nice to each other, they're so, you know, I'm sure they're just as horrible as we are really, but it looks nicer, you know, it's politer. What are my hopes for the future? Yeah, that people, you know, stop thinking that the only thing to do is to earn money and that everything can be measured in money, you know, every single thing, you know. The things that we used to get for free, you now pay for, like water and things like that, you know, drinking water and stuff. You know, that people start remembering actually it's not all about how much money you can make, it's more about the relationships you can make with people. You know, that's what's going to matter when you die, rather than, you know, whether you got a huge salary or not, you know. That's what I'd quite like, I'd quite like us to remember. [Laughs]

And that would be my last question.

Are we done?

Yes. Is there anything else you would like to say?

No. No. Thank you.,

Thank you.

[End of Track 6] [2:41:07]