

# Hidden Voices: Ella's Story



It's only through recollection later on in life that I realised my dad did go to prison. It was hidden to me as a child. I think I must have been about seven, and I can't remember being explained to why or what had happened, I just didn't see my dad for a long time.

Looking back as a kid, I had fond memories with my dad. The earliest memories were Sunday dinners. My dad would sit me and my brother on the table and he would do Sunday dinner. My mum and dad were divorced from when I was about five, so he became a weekend dad. We'd go and stay at his bedsit, go to the video shop, pick videos and just spend the day with him really.

Then he just disappeared for a duration. I can remember getting my birthday card from my dad and being told that he was digging tunnels with trains and that's why I couldn't see him. I remember being given a stone as well, a very weird stone - it was a cylinder shape - and it was very smooth. Apparently this came from a tunnel that he was digging. That's just something I've always had, I kept it.

I remember coming out of school one day - my mum would always wait in the playground - and I could see a man stood with my mum. I didn't know him. I couldn't recognize him. I walked over and he had a good three foot of the most horrific stuffed cat you've ever seen. It was completely stiff and had these long whiskers. It was really terrifying, but it was meant in a good, loving way. I remember whispering 'Mummy, who's that man?' It's awful, but I didn't know him. She was like 'It's your dad.' He was waiting for a hug and I was unsure because I didn't recognize him. He was just introduced 'that's your dad', like I should know him.

One of the earliest memories - I must have been about five - was the police coming in. We lived at the top of a block of flats and I remember my dad being carried out like he was on a stretcher by about eight police officers. As much as it's really hazy, I just remember seeing my dad shouting and kicking and screaming as they were trying to take him down the stairs. That was quite scary, but it was blocked out at the time. It was only when I was older that something triggered me to remember that.

That was normal however, so when later on in life that happened in my relationship, I had a level of acceptance. I didn't think it was wrong, I thought it was normal for marriages. Also, when you're married, you're married for life, so you have to put up, shut up and just

accept it. It's only through learning and not wanting my kids to see what I saw, that I knew it wasn't acceptable.

From an early age I experienced the two main people that as a child are your whole world disappear from my life, for no reason. I've realised recently, as much as we were loved and supported by the family, we had a lot of issues that weren't voiced. We were left to deal with our emotions and confusion at points. 'Why did someone go?' 'Why is this happening?' We just got on with it. In terms of relationships, when I love someone I was so scared they were going to leave me. I would accept anything - physical violence, emotional manipulation, being spoken down to - all of those things I accepted because I was so desperate to not be alone.

When my mum and dad broke up, my mum continued to go into abusive relationships. Again, that was normalised with me. That was part and parcel of a relationship. There were police call outs, but nothing was ever done. We were never spoken to as kids from professionals. I still think that as much as there's more support and more organisations out there now, is still all too normalised. There are so many people that live in those situations and accept it. It's something that doesn't leave you, it's a part of you.

History does repeat itself quite frequently when you grow up around that lifestyle. The majority of people that I know that have had a loved one inside, have grown up around domestics or had some sort of trauma as a kid. There's the abandonment/attachment issue, which I really relate to now. I was so desperate to cling to the family unit that I'd built, and not lose that, because I didn't have that as a child. That's all I wanted growing up, and in that desperation I was willing to put up with anything because I wanted it so bad.

I've been in the position where I've hidden it from my children - their dad being in prison. I know one day I'm going to have to explain the situation. I still don't know whether it's right or wrong to tell a child, I think that's on every family's different circumstances. Detailing the crimes as well, I don't believe every child should know that. My mum protected me from knowing my dad was in prison for a reason. As much as I question it now, it was the right thing to do at the time and I stand by that with my children as well. However, I did grow up in an era where we didn't have Google. I couldn't research anything or find anything, but these days you can find everything. It doesn't even have to be my children who find it. It could be another parent or a friend. They will get the right to know when they're able to.

That's what I've learned later on in life, I don't need somebody - it was just that fear factor from my childhood of being deserted again. I don't want my children seeing that as acceptable. The inconsistency with their dad coming in and out of their lives, it's not fair on them because it has an impact. They think that's acceptable - that people can just come and go and do as they please, and let you down time after time. It's not acceptable. I want them to be stronger than I was, be confident and have more confidence in themselves to be able to know that they're OK on their own.