

D.E. Kendall Writing Sample 4 - Autobiography

The following is an extract from a book currently being written that is pre-publication. All characters, places, and dates have been changed to protect my client's confidentiality.

On a crisp October day in 1930, date of the 14th, to be exact, I was born at home in Newport. I spent the first eighteen months of my life in the house in which I was born. Obviously, I can't recall much from that early time, though our family home was still in Newport when we moved. Together, we filled that house with countless special memories.

During that time, everyone was in the same situation, socially and financially. Doors were left unlocked, and friendships forged then were strong enough to last a lifetime.

My parents were originally from Wrexham and Cardiff. My older brother was born in Newport in 1928, and my younger sister was born in 1937.

Looking further back into my family tree, my maternal grandfather was a master baker – he was well-known for making fantastic wedding cakes. During the Great Depression, he'd give freshly baked bread free of charge to the local community, so they didn't go hungry. Unfortunately, he couldn't afford to keep paying for insurance on the bakery, so he lost his livelihood when someone set fire to the building. The Great Depression had an awful impact on everyone.

My maternal grandmother would leave parcels of essentials – including baby clothes and food – on the doorsteps of families in the local community. She ensured the packages looked like gifts, so people wouldn't feel uncomfortable accepting them.

My paternal grandmother left when my father was only six years old. She was rumoured to have been of African descent, though my grandfather didn't talk about her, so we never knew for sure. Nor do we know the reason she left, let alone where she went. We always wondered whether my grandmother leaving was the reason my paternal grandfather was a bit of a battle-axe. Despite living in a city, he trained working sheepdogs. When my father was old enough, he trained sheepdogs with my grandfather. We're confident that was

the reason we were never allowed pet dogs growing up – we did have *lots* of pet cats, though.

Our local doctor was like a part of the family. He'd just walk into the house, announcing he'd arrived, without even knocking the door – but that's how it was for everyone. It wasn't unusual for the doctor to visit after his shift to have a drink or smoke with my parents to unwind.

I attended Sunny Hill Primary School, followed by St Agnes Secondary. (My future husband actually attended the same secondary school I did! Though we didn't know each other then.) Sunny Hill was a pleasant place that I remember with the greatest fondness. However, St Agnes was situated in a less affluent area that suffered significantly from the Great Depression's impacts. My time there was not as pleasant as my experience of primary school.

I got away with everything in primary school, as the headmaster believed I couldn't do anything wrong. For instance, one time – when I was bored, and our teacher was nowhere to be seen – I decided to lead the *entire class* on a nature walk around the local park. We had a great time until our headmaster found us and gave everyone the cane; apart from me. He was certain it wouldn't have been me who led the entire class out because I was *far* too well behaved... I also locked a girl inside a traditional wooden gymnastic vaulting horse in primary school because she said something mean to me. She was marked absent that day; by the time I let her out, she had learned her lesson that bullying was wrong (*no ironic twist to see here...*).

I felt a compelling need to fit in with the 'tough' crowd in secondary school, so I became a first aider. Although, I 'happened' to be needed whenever I had a maths lesson. It just so happened that children tripped down the stairs or jammed their fingers in doors *just before* every maths lesson. Thanks to their clumsiness, I didn't attend a maths lesson for an entire year!

Religion was an important part of most people's lives when I was a child; it certainly had a place in my family. My mother was Catholic, and my father Protestant. Because my parents didn't attend the same church, I would change the church I'd attend every so often, meaning I could participate in all their events. My favourite was the Easter Event, when we children would get to go for days out on a wagon to visit places like Usk, or have picnics in fields. I was careful not to get caught attending both church events, though – if I'd been caught, I might have missed out on all the fun!

My mother loved our community. She organised free street outings to improve community morale, and one of our community's favourite outings was

to the beach. So, my mother used local ladies' old clothes to make bathing costumes for their children, so those who couldn't otherwise afford it could enjoy outings to the beach with everyone else.

We appreciated *everything* we had. During rationing, we used to be allowed one apple per child at school, which was a real treat – especially because the apples came all the way from Canada. I'd have a bar of chocolate as a present every birthday too, which I always shared with my family. If a child was given sixpence for their birthday, it was regarded as a fabulous gift.

As a child, I used to help an aunt with her shopping – which I earned sixpence for doing. Janette was a stern lady who was always dressed in black Victorian-style attire from head to toe. My aunt Janette lived beside Longleaf Park, a place filled with towering evergreen trees that darkened the pathways beneath. In some ways, I felt the park represented my aunt's persona, dark and unwelcoming. She'd offer me a homemade biscuit as a treat, though expected me to eat it with a knife and fork! My mother used to swap sugar coupons for clothing coupons with Janette, so Janette could bake biscuits and cakes that she'd share with the few visitors she rarely had.

Along with the Great Depression, we also suffered World War II. I remember the air raids when we'd race to an Anderson Shelter in the garden. Then, as the war came to an end, we'd hide under the stairs instead. Sometimes we'd hide in a cupboard. In that cupboard was a hole through to next door's cupboard, where they'd sometimes hide too. We discovered mice using that hole in the wall to travel between the houses once, when we hid there during an air raid.

Due to the fear caused by air raids, my siblings and I disliked going into the garden. Therefore, my father built a swing out of railway sleepers in the garden, hoping we associated it with fun instead of fear. It worked well; aside from occasions all three of us wanted to play on the swing at the same time.

After an air raid, local children would collect shrapnel to create their own toys – something my parents disliked my siblings and I doing. There were a couple of bomb craters around too. In fact, there was one located near a church on Chimneyfort Road. My friends and I would rescue tadpoles from the water pooled in that crater, then find streams to relocate the tadpoles so they'd be safe.

Amidst the devastation, my mother wanted to cheer up local children – many of whom had lost loved ones to the war and whose parents couldn't afford to buy them treats. She would make Easter eggs out of powdered milk and fill the eggs with sweets to give as gifts, making so many people happy.

Sometimes, I felt a little envious of my mother's time being spent creating gifts and working for *hours* on community projects instead of making the most of her time with me – although I didn't recognise those feelings as a child. Instead of letting my mother know I was unhappy, I delved into scheming with my friends as we'd find new, inventive ways to have fun. For example, I decided to make some money one day, so I sold bags of 'sherbet' for a penny a bag to fellow schoolchildren. The next day I was the only one in class; the Andrews Liver Salts I mixed with the sugar I sold them must have had the powerful laxative effect the label warned of!

Given the financial worries everyone experienced, food went *a lot* further back then. For example, one tin of corned beef would make a stew, pasties, *and* sandwiches. Rationing allowed two ounces of butter per week, which doesn't sound like much, but my mother was the most sensational cook. We couldn't buy sweets as such then, though my mother used to make sweets on special occasions. If fruit became available, we'd have to queue! Most people had their own vegetable patch, too – I loved to eat the shells off peas from ours. Horse and cart delivered milk, bread, vegetables, and coal – there was even a man who'd travel around peddling salt and vinegar; he'd saw lumps of salt off a large block on his cart and would fill customers' empty vinegar jugs for them. Our neighbours would rush out with their buckets and shovels to collect droppings left by horses to use for their vegetable patches, since fertiliser was hard to come by. There was the Rag-and-Bone-Man too, who would give live goldfish in payment for old clothes – I always pitied those poor goldfish! I used to pick apples in a local orchard for an elderly couple who paid me in fruit, which quickly became one of my favourite childhood pastimes. My siblings and I used to help a local farmer with the hay harvest, as well – we loved being outside, enjoying the glorious fresh air on warm summer days, eating jam sandwiches in blazing sunshine. Food was fresh and more organic than it is now, so I often wonder how my parents would feel about today's throwaway culture.

It wasn't only food that was rationed, however. My mother bought me clogs as I would wear out my shoes too quickly, and it became a struggle to afford to replace them. My mother tried to make me wear stockings to save money, though that didn't last long.

Medical care was entirely different from today's expectations. For instance, I knew a local girl who'd had five children before the age of twenty-one. She'd have a baby in the morning, and then she'd be out shopping in the afternoon with the new baby in a pram! I believe people were tougher back then

because they had to be. There were no midwives or hospitals locally, so my mother helped local ladies in labour. It was completely normal for babies to be born at home naturally. Lack of access to healthcare didn't seem to faze most couples; one of my neighbours had seventeen children! Thankfully, all those children got along well and helped take care of each other.

Entire communities were more caring then, too. If someone wasn't seen for a day or two, a neighbour would check in on them without fail. And if the telegram boy came by, everyone was there to comfort the person who'd received a devastating message. People didn't carry knives back then, nor did prejudice – racial or otherwise – have a place in my community. Police officers wouldn't think twice about giving someone a clip about the ear for misbehaving, though nobody complained about it. Doors were open, and everyone was there for one another – unlike today. Now, once a door is shut, that's it. As the old saying goes, 'out of sight out of mind'.

As children, despite being in the midst of a war, we were allowed ample freedom to roam as we pleased – provided we were home in time for dinner. Our parents would pack a bottle of water with two rounds of bread and jam, then my friends and I would be off adventuring on foot. We'd walk all the way to the seaside of a weekend, which was about eight miles away, just to enjoy our sandwiches by the sea. Our next-door neighbour was the only one in a three-street radius to have a projector. She'd charge local children a penny to watch films in her living room – though she'd put newspaper on all the seats before children, including her own, were allowed to sit down!

We made the best of the time we had, for none of us knew when that time could be stolen during the war. I look back upon those memories with the utmost fondness because we were fully aware of how fortunate we were and made the most of every moment, despite all the heartache and adversity.