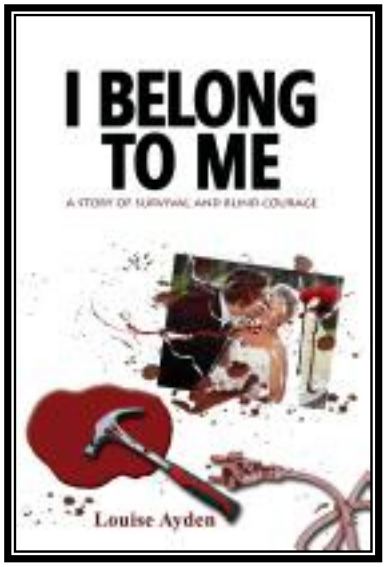
I BELONG TO ME

A STORY OF SURVIVAL AND BLIND COURAGE

Louise Ayden



I Belong To Me is a story of blind courage, an emotional roller coaster ride of shocking events that Emma Jane O'Farrell suffered and survived. A dysfunctional family life of rape, suicide attempts, humiliation and violent beatings from her physically and psychologically abusive first husband. Emma also escaped the clutches of the underworld and courage surfaced where none was expected. Emma began the fight of her life and uncovered something that would alter her forever.

I BELONG TO ME

by Louise Ayden

ISBN 978-1-62646-458-2

Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Bradenton, Florida.

Printed in the United States of America.

While parts of this novel are based on actual events, the characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

BookLocker.com, Inc.
2013

First Edition

Dedicated to
My daughter, my best friend

Acknowledgments

Many thanks to my dear friends who assisted me in the preparation of this book.

"You give but little when you give of your possessions. It is when you give of yourself that you truly give"

….. The Prophet Collection by Kahil Gibran

Part One

A Dysfunctional Family

1

CONFLICT has invaded my life for as long as I can remember, and I have long carried the emotional scars. I felt my mind resembled a room that had been ransacked, and to put anything back into its proper place was made difficult by the emotional damage. It was just too painful. Rummaging through the mental debris searching for whatever was still salvageable had become harder and harder to do, so the chaos was left for another day. Failure to tidy up the disorder had become a serious stumbling block.

I knew that eventually I would have to face the ghosts of my past and take responsibility for them. Being aware of that was one thing, knowing the remedy was another.

My childhood family life was like a battleground. My parents were continually at each other's throats and I was the referee stepping in between, desperately trying to calm the volatility. I left home a number of times, the first at age five. I wanted to escape this domestic mess.

William O'Farrell and Sarah Bernstein are my parents. They met and married in England during World War Two. My father had served in the Royal Australian Air Force as a rear gunner before his aircraft was shot down. He parachuted out of the stricken craft just before it crash-landed; severely breaking both legs, and for the rest of his life wondered why he was the only one to survive the crash.

My father endured endless operations, spending months wrapped in a plaster cast. During his long hospital confinement he kept himself amused by causing havoc in the ward. He would slip chocolate between the sheets and then wait with great expectation for the nurse's expression of utter disgust when she straightened his bed, roaring with delight at her frustration on bearing the brunt of his joke.

Although his right leg ended up permanently stiff and shorter than the left leg, Dad said he was grateful that his life had been spared and believed that his Rosary beads and his faith in God had saved his life.

The evening Dad met my mother, he had sneaked out of the English military hospital with the help of his mates and gone to the local dance. My mother accidentally bumped his leg when she passed by him and he slumped over and screamed in pain. His cheeky blue eyes and red crimped hair must have made an impression on the raven-haired beauty. They married before Dad was repatriated back to Australia.

Try as I might, I could not imagine my mother as a carefree young woman in love; she was a mystery to me. When I asked about her family, the answer would always be the same and so would the irritation in her voice, "All that is in the past, Emma. Leave things alone, why don't you?" Years later, I discovered she had two younger sisters. Her parents were Spanish and her grandfather was an Oxford University Law graduate, and her mother's death certificate was written in Hebrew. Their wedding photograph looked like any handsome, happy couple, all smiles and anticipation of a happy future. What had happened to spoil their illusion? Whatever it was, it created a great deal of unhappiness, bitterness, resentment, remorse, and heartbreak, all of which rebounded on

their four children, Tina, Peter, Mary and me. When it came to parental affection and praise there was barely enough to mention.

According to the snippet of information, my paternal aunt told me several decades later, Tina May was born in England during a London air raid. Immediately after my sister's birth she and my mother were left alone in a room, the oxygen Tina needed was not administered and she ended up slightly mentally challenged. Photographs of Tina bore no evidence of any damage. She was a pretty child, with dark hair and large brown eyes.

My only brother, Peter James, arrived 18 months later. He needed three operations to correct his right eye muscle, but eventually lost the sight in his eye. After another 18 months, I was born with an inherited Mediterranean genetic blood disorder which was not diagnosed until I was fourteen. My early childhood was absorbed in hospital stays, visiting doctors, undergoing tests and blood transfusions, in search of a name for the mystery illness. At one point, it was thought that I had the dreaded leukaemia. Apart from an exceptionally pale complexion and lack of energy and a tendency to chubbiness, I appeared fine. Chubby children in the 50's were considered to be healthy.

I was six when Mary Joy was born. My mother's pride and joy had blonde curls, hazel eyes and an engaging smile that captivated everyone. Mum doted on her perfect child, but we were soon to discover that my baby sister was not perfect. Her frightening crying fits caused havoc in our household, especially when she would hold her breath and pass out. Whenever she cried, we all would stand rigid, waiting for the inevitable and heaving a sigh of relief when it didn't happen. Mary frightened me and I detested the times when I had to watch her. I didn't know what to do if she cried and was afraid I would be in trouble if something happened to her. My

brother adored her though, and was happy to take her with him when he did shopping for Mum.

We lived in an outer Sydney suburb. I would often enter our red brick home with great trepidation, wondering whether or not there would be trouble brewing. Dad's alcoholism and Mum's bitterness for the life she didn't want made our home a battlefield. I was too young to understand what had caused their unhappiness, but not too young to be disturbed by it.

Sad childhood memories marred the pleasant ones. The times I recalled those years, I would see myself lying in my bed listening to my parents' raised voices. Initially, they would only be talking loudly but all too soon, it would soar into a shouting match. I would cringe and curl up into a foetal position and silently weep with my pillow over my head. Even pressing my hands hard against my ears did not block out their voices. One night I bolted up out of bed in fright when I heard screams and breaking glass. The commotion then fell into an eerie silence.

My stomach churned with fear as I quietly opened the bedroom door to see what had happened. All the lights in the house were on but no one was about. Gingerly, I crept through the still house looking for my parents. They were nowhere to be seen. The front door was wide open. I turned around and ran throughout the house crying hysterically and calling for my mother. There was no answer. In a panic, I ran out onto the front veranda and called out into the darkness for her. The commotion woke my siblings. We were three very small children crying hysterically in unison for our parents – and nobody came.

I never knew what happened that night, where our parents were, or the length of time they were away. The terror of that memory and similar memories remained with me for many years.

Although I was very young, I lived with the uncertainty of what would happen to my parents and wondered which one would eventually harm or even kill the other.

Relief from the tempest of my home life came when playing in the streets of my neighbourhood. I had the best time of my young life out there, where I found fun and mischief as only a youngster could. I fondly remember the baker delivering the bread by horse and cart, and the sound of hooves clip-clopping along the gravel road and echoing up the street. I remember too the wheat-like smell of the old draught horse and the children's roars of laughter when he relieved himself, scattering them everywhere as a river of pee spilled on to the pitted ground.

My mother ordered bread daily and the baker left the fresh, scrumptious, crusty product on our front doorstep. The delicious aroma wafting in the air had me salivating, tempting me to eat the middle out of the bread and then mischievously deny any knowledge of its half-demolished state.

I was exhilarated by the thrill of sneaking away from the confines of our backyard with my siblings to play with the Brady boys, who lived across the street. We were forbidden to associate with those boys or anyone else in the street. 'Wild ruffians,' my parents called them, especially the Brady boys. There were seven of them.

Joey the eldest was married; next was 19 year old Ronny. I had a crush on Ronny when I was about seven years old - he nick-named me 'Sparrow'. Bobby had joined the Air Force. Paul who came next sang in a Coca-Cola Bottlers Club wireless competition. The whole neighbourhood gathered at the Brady's home that day to listen to

Paul sing. Then came Jon, he was 12. Greg was eight years old and Mike, the youngest, was five.

The similarity between the brothers was amazing. They all looked alike, with the same large square head covered in thick black tresses and they all had the same blue eyes. The boys were keen footballers. Their enthusiasm to emulate their sporting heroes kept them in excellent physical shape. Teenage girls did double takes when the boys were around. Greg and Mike were closer to our age. They were our playmates. Because of my parents' disapproval, we could only play with them when my parents were out of sight.

On weekends or school holidays, through a hole in our fence, we would watch the neighbourhood kids play cricket or football and other games out in the street, wishing we could play too. If Greg noticed us peering through the cracks he would yell out, "C'mon," beckoning to us to join in the game. Peter and Tina climbed the fence with me after I dared them to.

Cricket was the most popular game, a wooden fruit box serving as a wicket. Once it was placed in the middle of the road, the street came alive with kids eager for a game. Any idle wooden fruit box found lying around, other than the vital wicket, became a seat for a billy cart. The mere suggestion of building a billy cart resulted in the magical appearance of the items needed for construction - a long plank, 2 sets of baby stroller wheels, a skipping rope, a few nuts and bolts, hammer and nails.

The older boys supervised and yelled instructions to the younger kids to pick up bits and hold tools. Tears sometimes spilled as tempers flared in frustration when the younger ones, helping in a chaotic fashion, were ordered to get out of the way when they did something wrong. But once the billy cart was completed hurt

feelings were forgotten as we eagerly dragged it to the top of a hill to take turns in a wild ride back down.

An afternoon at the Saturday matinee watching a 'Cowboys and Indians' movie had us eager to get home and drag out the billy cart for a game. It thundered along the gravel road under the steam of two energetic kids who imagined wild Indians were chasing them. We all whooped and hollered and chased them right past our front door, while Rastas, the Brady boys' little fox terrier, went bonkers running alongside the cart, barking non-stop in jubilation.

On rainy days Rastas merrily barked when our paper sailboats weaved and darted their way over and around make-shift dams in the gutter, as we cheered them on in the downpour.

Exhilarated laughter from the street, filtering in to our lounge room where my father spent his leisure hours, would have him storm out of the house. Infuriated by the disturbance, he would stand on the veranda in military style, shouting orders at us to be quiet and to get home. Dozens of children of various shapes and sizes scattered at great speed in every direction the instant they heard the sound of his fiery wrath.

The moment the door opened was a signal for Peter, Tina and I to dive behind the hedge along our front fence, hiding until our father went back inside. Our little hearts pounded with excitement as we waited for the shrill of an 'all clear' whistle from one of the boys. Once courage returned we would double up with laughter from nervous tension. We were not caught very often but when we were, the order "Get inside!" rang out through the air and our little legs ran as fast as they would carry us back to our yard to endure a long yelling rant from our parents about mixing with riff-raff.

2

I never understood my parents' strong disapproval of the neighbours, who seemed much like our family. They had their fights too, only it seemed not as often as my parents. Mr and Mrs Brady were always kind to Peter, Tina and me. When I saw either of them in their front yard I'd call out, "Hello Mr Brady, hello Mrs Brady," in singsong and skip across the road to visit them. I spent many afternoons sitting out on their front porch chatting with them when my father was away working and my mother was in bed nursing a headache.

Mr Brady rolled his own cigarettes. It intrigued me the way he made them. I watched him and curiously followed his every movement whenever he opened the small round tin he always carried with him. He took a tiny white sheet of paper from a small packet that lay on top of the brown fibres and placed it on his bottom lip before he pulled a small amount of tobacco from the tin and put it into the palm of his hand.

"And how are you today, little lady?" Mr Brady would ask, grinning toothlessly down at me. "Now what are you doing sitting down there? Come up here and sit beside me," he'd say, patting the top step and thereby interrupting the slow massaging of tobacco between his palms.

I'd jump up, grinning like a fool and eagerly climb the three stairs to sit beside him, but I never took my eyes off his hands as

they kept moving round and round, pressing the brown fibres into a ball. Our conversation flowed without interruption as the delicate piece of paper sat on his bottom lip. My eyes were transfixed, watching it flap like a butterfly when he spoke or smiled. I was waiting for the paper to fall off or blow away. But it never did.

"How's your mum?"

"Hmmm, she's in bed sick……Dad made her sick."

"Oh, that's no good. How did he do that?"

"Dunno," I shrugged. "Mum just told Dad that he makes her sick and went to bed."

Mr Brady smiled and removed the delicate white paper from his lip. He held it between two fingers and tipped the tobacco on to the transparent paper. In one quick sweep, with a little more adjusting, he rolled it up. He ran the tip of his tongue along the paper in a rapid sweep and lit the cigarette.

I loved visiting the Brady's home. They welcomed me with open arms. Many times I followed Mr Brady around the yard, chatting with him while he mowed his lawn. I watched perspiration trickle from his pores under the strain of pushing his sparkling clean mower back and forth. His lawn was the neatest I had ever seen. No one in the street had grass like Mr Brady. He pulled out with contempt every weed that dared grow in his green carpet. He roared like an injured bear if he ever found anyone walking on his manicured masterpiece. Although he never seemed to mind if I did when I was with him. Just about every weekend I could find him crawling on all fours trimming the edges of the lawn with clippers. It was easier for me to talk to him when he did, because I didn't have to crane my neck to look up at him. I liked to look at him when we talked. His blue eyes sparkled when he smiled.

Mr Brady would tell me that I was a funny little thing but I could never work out what he thought was funny about me. I didn't think about it too much because I knew he liked me.

Even though the Brady's backyard was huge, the blanket of grass that surrounded their house only went halfway up the back yard. The rest was bush shrubs and gum trees, where we played marbles with the younger sons. In one of the trees, the Brady boys built a tree house. Allan Davison, Paul Brady's mate, gave an excellent rendition of Tarzan's jungle cry every time he swung from the tree house to the ground below.

The Brady's home was full of laughter and rowdy people. I knew their world was not perfect, but I enjoyed being there and secretly visited them every chance I got. Mr Brady's mother also lived with the family. We all called her Nanna. Although the years had taken her youth, turned her hair snow-white and left her frail and small, she was still a feisty little lady. Nanna turned into a spitfire and mumbled colourful language under her breath when she was annoyed with the boys. Sometimes she used the cane that supported her while walking as a missile to hurl at her grandsons whenever they playfully teased and mimicked her. Her fiery temper was reserved for those who tested her patience. The blue dress and bonnet she knitted for my doll, which my mother grudgingly allowed me to keep, was evidence of her tender side and a treasured memory.

Nanna's passing was vague, but I missed her. The little old lady with the white hair, who had always worn a long black dress and a shawl draped around her shoulders was not just the Brady boys' Nanna. I thought of her as my Nanna too and felt a deep sense of loss when she died.

I can remember how from the age of four I would squirm with discomfort at my own paternal grandparents' embrace, especially my grandfather. I hated him and the creepy expression that slowly spread across his face like a dark shadow when he looked at me.

Every chance he got he would reach out and grab hold of me and lift me up onto his lap. While caught in his vice-like grip, he would slowly rub his hand up and down my arm, moving downwards to put his hand inside my panties. One day I struggled and broke free and ran away and hid under my bed, too terrified to tell my mother what he did. I told her only that I did not like him and she angrily told me to keep away from him.

So many times when my grandfather visited after that, I hid under my bed, holding my breath while watching his feet come halfway into my room and then leave quietly. I was lucky my grandparents lived in another state, which prevented them visiting us often. Even at this late stage of my life, I cringe and feel trapped when a man I'm not sure of stands too close.

As a small child, there were very few people I could say I cared about. Apart from the Brady's, I had a favourite uncle, but I didn't see much of him. My brother was top of my favourite people list. He was different when away from home, far different from the quiet 'Mr Goody two shoes' my parents thought he was.

As teenagers, we learned ballroom dancing on Saturday afternoons. My mild mannered brother and his mate Trevor, who came with us, would cut loose and smoke and swear during those outings. Initially, many of Peter's friends at the Maris Brothers' College thought I was his girlfriend, because he had taken me to his school dance. Since we danced well together, he thought, why not. My brother's olive complexion, black hair and dark eyes were a stark

contrast to mine, so much so that his mates were surprised to learn that we were related.

Although Peter was placid and shy he was confident on the dance floor. We had so much fun together that his classmates couldn't believe we really were siblings. But when we came together the following year, it really took some convincing to prove that I was his sister. They called me a 'cool chick', dolled up in my pink cotton frock, puff sleeves and many rope petticoats.

We managed to get tickets to the television show 'Teen Time' hosted by Lou Lewton. Peter and I had a great time showing off, doing the twist while nonchalantly trying to keep in full view of the camera, then basking in the glory of our five minutes of fame when friends told us that they had seen us on the show.

When he had enough money saved, Peter bought our grandfather's 1956 Dodge. It was huge, black and sturdy as a tank. One rainy night he almost ran over the top of another vehicle trying to stop at traffic lights. The near-miss would have had my parents cringing in horror if they had known, but I felt sure that if anyone had told them, they would not have believed Peter would have done anything careless.

I was glad my brother tested life a little and was not a mama's boy. Although he didn't walk on the edge the way I did, at least he had fun being a tad wild. As children, we sat together in our next-door neighbour's peach tree, close to our kitchen window. From there we watched our mother preparing the evening meal and heard her complaining about us being late. We ignored her calls to come inside, giggling between ourselves, quietly eating peaches.

"Where are those little devils?" she grumbled. "Just wait till I get my hands on them when they come home!"

When we heard that, we knew it was time to go. Quickly we scurried down the tree and over the high fence, trying to avoid getting splinters in our hands and feet in our haste.

My school years closely resembled my home life - turbulent. I was extremely guarded around nuns I had witnessed severely reprimanding students, ever mindful of possibly being slapped over the head for any small misdemeanour inadvertently committed. I was terrified that I would be beaten with the strap or locked in the cupboard, which I knew had happened to other students I knew.

Although I was only five, I clearly remember my first class teacher, Sister Mary, hitting Patrick Murphy with a ruler again and again until it broke, and shutting him in a cupboard at the back of the classroom for talking in class. I never liked Patrick. He was a bully. He always tried to thump my brother on our way home from school, but I do recall feeling sorry for him, and thinking how horrible Sister Mary was for thrashing and humiliating him. I wanted to yell at her and tell her to stop hitting him. Fear kept me silent. No one in the class was brave enough to look sideways.

Sister Mary also wouldn't let one of the boys go to the toilet when he asked. "No!" she screamed at him. "Kneel down for morning prayers and behave yourself."

The class obediently knelt down on the bare wooden floor with heads bowed. As we prayed, I noticed a puddle coming from the second desk in front of me. Trickles were running in several directions and one was heading for me. The girl in front of me saw it too. Pointing at the puddle, she sounded the alarm, "Sister! Sister!"

Sister Mary grabbed the boy violently by the neck and shook him. Every nerve in my stomach knotted. I thought she was going to strangle him.

I wasn't well enough to be actively involved in much of anything at school. Although I mixed with other children, I was distant from them. More often than not, I was content to stand on the sideline observing my surroundings. Some days I was invited to lunch with a group of pretty girls with ribbons in their hair but mostly I ate alone. I never minded being alone since I really didn't feel comfortable in their company or with the way they sniggered when one of them made a spiteful remark about other classmates. I would move away from them when they started to whisper to each other. It was beyond me why they could be so nasty without provocation.

Sixth class was my most challenging time. Prior to that the fear of the injustice developed from first class had slowly progressed to indifference. Sister Helen, our sixth class teacher, had an intense dislike of me. In her traditional nun's habit, she reminded me of a lifeless stick penguin. Her features were stern and pale, her thick bushy eyebrows framing her cold, dark eyes. The only time those stony features reflect a glimmer of warmth was when the parish priest came to our classroom.

During a math lesson, Sister Helen noticed that I was daydreaming, as I often did when bored. Math was my worst subject, I loathed the class and I loathed Sister Helen. In her frustration at discovering a disinterested student, the penguin commanded me to come forward and write the answer to the math problem on the blackboard. I stood a few moments in front of the huge board, gazing blankly at the numbers as if they were ancient hieroglyphics, then nonchalantly shrugged and said I didn't know how. A look of utter disgust crossed Sister Helen's face as she raised

her arm that held a child tamer. In a frenzy of insults, she began to poke and prod me with it screaming, “You’re a stupid ninny, Miss O’Farrell.”

She clenched her jaws tighter as she pinched my arm, prodded me several times with the stick and pulled clumps of my hair, “And lazy too,” she spat, “Just like your stupid sister...!”

Sister Helen’s face had turned purple. The nasty names, the spiteful tugs at my hair and slaps of her cane had no effect on me, but when she resorted to taunts about my sister being handicapped and stupid, causing the class to laugh, I instantly reacted. Humiliation drove my anger to rise like a volcano, exploding without warning. Driven by hysteria, I snatched the cane from the unholy monster’s hand and struck her several times with it.

“Stop saying awful things about Tina.” I yelled at her. “She can’t help it!”

The room was still. Sister Helen realised she had over-stepped many boundaries and quickly ushered me from the classroom and into the nuns’ lunchroom next door. The lunchroom had always been a mystery I was keen to solve. For years I had tried to imagine what was going on behind the green door at the end of the long veranda. Day after day I watched with wide-eyed, uncontrollable curiosity as the sisters flitted in and out of that room. What did they do in there? I wondered.

The nuns’ long strings of large wooden rosary beads, hanging from their thick black belts, clanged against the lunchroom door every time they entered or exited. I would crane my neck as far as I could to snatch a peek inside whenever I heard that sound.

After all that wondering, my curiosity was soothed to a great disappointment. I was finally in the mysterious room with the green door. It was sparsely furnished with nothing of interest.

Sister sat me down at an ordinary old wooden kitchen table. She placed a cup of coffee and a biscuit in front of me. “Here,” she said pushing them closer and then left. I sipped the coffee, which was lukewarm, then bit into the biscuit and immediately spat it out. It was stale. I sat alone staring blankly at the unpalatable biscuit and coffee, mystified as to how I was going to get myself out of this mess.

A sense of shame as much as a sense of triumph finally kicked in as I anxiously waited to be punished. Relief washed over me in disbelief when the afternoon bell rang and Sister Helen came rushing back and told me to get out of her sight. I didn’t hesitate a moment, gathering my books and belongings together and running all the way home.

When I arrived home that afternoon, I was sure that when I told my mother what had happened in class she would embrace me as a heroine for defending Tina but, quite to the contrary, she berated me for hours on end. Her response confused me. I was bewildered beyond words as to why I was in trouble and why my mother would allow the nun to belittle my sister. Her refusal to do anything about it angered me so much that it provoked a vow. I promised that if I ever have children, I will always stand by them, no matter what. No one will ever be allowed to humiliate any of them, ever.

Interacting with other families gave me insight to a fact of life; everyone, at one time or another will experience strife. I never understood my parents’ attitude towards the neighbours and most

things in general. I also wrestled with the ill feelings I harboured toward my mother.

When I lived at home the guilt about those ill feelings plagued my thoughts. I couldn't control my dislike of my mother. She complained about everything, my father, the neighbours, my siblings and especially me. I felt she didn't like me, even hated me at times. Nothing was ever good enough.

Regardless, I made every effort to appease my mother and failed miserably. To compensate for disliking her, I maintained the sense of responsibility I had developed towards her as a six year old, dutifully standing up to my father whenever my parents fought and demanding that he leave my mother alone. My father would glare down at me like a crazed man, but usually he simply stumbled away in disgust. Although I trembled in my shoes I didn't move, whatever the outcome.

Dad's excessive drinking drove my mother to nag him about it. I detested the constant trouble that lingered in our home like a bad odour. I felt utterly helpless that I could not resolve the situation. The abuse they hurled at each other was awful. My parents reminded me of wild dogs, eyes wide with rage, teeth clenched and foaming at the mouth. It was an ugly sight for anyone to witness, let alone children. It mattered little to either of them who witnessed their shameful behaviour and they seemed unconcerned at our acute discomfort at the times they fought in the company of friends.

Relief from the mounting pressure in our home and in our lives came when my father, a salesman, was away on business trips. During his absence my mother grumbled about her unhappy life, her complaints stirring within me a profound pity for her. I silently prayed that my father wouldn't come back home. Life was better without him. To lighten the mood I would sometimes mimic my

father at his worst, sending ripples of laughter throughout the house. Unintentionally, I said and did things that often shocked people. None of my siblings dared to be so bold.

I yearned to leave home, wanting to find a happier place. Running away was a constant thought. I can recall at age five, stuffing my few treasures in my tiny school case and helping myself to five shillings from my mother's purse. Slipping on my pale avocado and white spotted, hooded raincoat and my white canvas rubber tipped sandshoes, then marching defiantly out of the house. Just before closing the door behind me, I announced in a very loud voice that I was running away…and never coming back.

The reason for the escapade has faded with time, but I clearly remember the sloshing sound my sandshoes made as I trudged through the rain and muddy potholes, walking without direction along a deserted street, with only those five shillings in my pocket and my tiny case tucked under my arm.

I still remember the humiliation of falling into a mud puddle, when salty tears blurred my vision. I hated being small and helpless. I was so mad that I stamped my foot, splashing even more muddy water over myself, I sobbed louder.

Soaked to the skin and filthy, I had no other option but to return home defeated. Before I did, I spent the five shillings at the corner shop, where I bought a huge bag of sweets to help me feel better. But I didn't feel better.

Hurt by the rejection of being ignored when I came back, I boldly yelled from my bedroom while peeling cold, sodden clothes from my chilled body, "As soon as I am big, I'm leaving this place!"

It baffled me why neither my sister nor my brother ever seemed to want to leave home too. They appeared to accept what was going on around them as normal. When Dad came home drunk, I pleaded with my mother to ignore him. She silenced me with the threat of her hand. My fathers' drinking was like a red rag to a bull.

I was twelve when Mum had a nervous breakdown and was admitted to hospital. Dad took care of us then. We were used to Mum being ill, especially me. She was always ill in the winter, the month of my birthday.

Dad still drained his whisky bottles, and apart from the usual sibling disputes over whose turn it was to do the dishes, trouble was almost non-existent. We had united and looked after Dad and ourselves without any mishaps.

When we visited Mum, she quizzed me the moment Dad left the room about what was happening at home without her. She glared at me when I told her we were managing just fine and not to worry about us. Dad was a different person without Mum at home - nicer. His angry outbursts and cranky moods had stopped. He was actually good fun, even though he was still drinking. I loathed seeing him stumbling around the house drunk. My feelings for my father were a mixture of pity and disgust.

In my mother's absence, I gained new insight into my parents and my attitude towards my father changed dramatically. He no longer appeared to be a villain, simply a man who carried a huge burden upon his shoulders and didn't know what to do with it. Never did he say a bad word against Mum while she was away. He once told me that she had come from a well-to-do family and he felt he wasn't good enough for her. When I asked questions, all he would say was, "She's a classy woman."

I can't remember the length of time Mum was away, but I can remember not missing her. Dad drank less and our home was more settled without her. I wished she had stayed in hospital…forever. Mum returned - the moment she walked through the door, the atmosphere in our house changed. Fights began and Dad guzzled his whisky. Trying to reason with Mum was pointless.

As a diversion when Dad was drunk, I would sit and talk or spend hours listening to his jazz records with him, for we shared a love of music. It was during those times he dragged out his precious guitar and strummed along with one of his favourite musicians. One day he stacked several of his favourite long playing records, one on top of the other, on the arm of the radiogram turntable. Then he staggered back and sat down on the edge of his high-back papa chair. He lean forward and picked up the guitar from its case. His damaged leg jutted in front of him.

Nursing the guitar on the good leg, he'd tinker the strings into tune. When he was ready, he looked at me and nodded. That was the signal to release a record. With a click, a plop and then a short crackling sound from the needle on the old recording, the up-tempo tune filled the room. Dad's head bobbed in time with the music and his lower lip automatically rolled over as he concentrated seriously on his strumming, the melody carrying him to another place. I was curled up on the lounge in my pyjamas and dressing gown, watching him and listening to the music.

Suddenly, the door opened with such violence that it went crashing against the wall, startling us and sending shock waves through the peaceful ambience. Mum stood in the door-way with hands on hips. Her eyes were full of rage, as she stood there, dressed in her nightgown.

"Get to bed, Emma!" she shrilled.

"Get the hell out of here, you trouble-making bitch and leave her alone!" Dad bellowed back.

My mother glared at me as if I had spoken the words and ordered me to bed again. Dad told me to stay put as he struggled to jump up out of the chair. His stiff leg and the alcohol slowed his movements. Mum lunged at him. They stood in the middle of the lounge facing each other while I gawked upwards at them, expecting them to start punching each other.

"Mum hissed at Dad, pointing at me, "She has school tomorrow. The little trouble-maker has to go to bed!"

"Get out!" he snarled. They scuffled and he tried to push her from the room. They got to the doorway and Dad tried to close the door, but Mum pushed her weight against it. He gave one almighty shove and closed the door. "Stay out!" he yelled.

We could hear her cursing me from the hallway. "This is your fault you, you, stupid little bitch…... All you had to do was go to bed, you fat…"

"Don't take any notice of the old hag, mate," Dad said picking up his guitar. "Put on another record." I silently obeyed, stifling a yawn and wishing I could go to bed. I was exhausted.

My mother's hurtful and nasty words reinforced my every inadequacy and became relics I carried into adulthood. All I had ever wanted was to be accepted in spite of my imperfections. My effort to excel was marred by ill health. I eventually gave up trying, appearing uninterested and dead lazy to the less understanding. As time passed I ceased to care what anyone thought.

My mother and the holy nuns who taught me insisted I was stupid, but I knew that was not so and held dear the affirming years I had spent in the Brownies.

I was seven when I joined the Brownie pack. There I competently completed tests and earned badges and quickly became a pack leader. No favours were given to me. I worked very hard to earn every badge and my sixer (leader) stripes

.

Five years of diligence had earned me the privilege of a guard of honour ceremony when I left the Brownies, and I flew up with honours to the Girl Guides, where I also earned more badges and became a group leader. I was proud to be a Brownie and a Girl Guide, and of my achievements.

Two turbulent years later I left school with the mutual consent of my parents and the holy sisters, but not before one of them said, "By the way you're going, Miss O'Farrell, I can't see your future being any better than being a common streetwalker, a prostitute."

Contrary to the reverend sister's prophetic words, I immediately started work in a leading city hair salon. Hairdressing and make-up artistry was the general direction in which I was heading.

At 13, I had earned a few shillings doing comb-ups now and then for some of the women in my street. While I appreciated the opportunity of working in a prestigious salon, I was exhausted by midday. Being on my feet for hours on end depleted what little energy I had. I was seriously ill and didn't know it.

A boy I met on the train on my way home from work took the edge off the long journey to and from the city each day. At first I thought his attention was sweet, but when he sang love songs to me

in the crowded carriage and all eyes were on us, I shrank with embarrassment.

My admirer wore fashionable suits and worked in the men's department of Mark Foy's city store. Brylcreem kept his fair hair slicked down and held the peak he combed above his forehead. Although he was only fifteen, he oozed ambition and boasted future plans of grandeur in show business. I was not surprised to see my former admirer several years later, belting out a tune in front of his band on Bandstand, looking considerably different from the days when I knew him before he became as famous as he had predicted.

My health deteriorated so rapidly that I left my job and admirer behind and ended up at the children's hospital at Camperdown. Mum refused to leave the hospital until someone told her what was the wrong with me.

When the doctor in Outpatients saw my blood test results, I was immediately admitted to hospital. One doctor in particular made a huge impact on me; he had kind blue eyes and a gentle voice. I felt safe with him. He sat on the edge of my bed and explained in simple terms the procedures that had to be done to make me well.

"You have Spherocytosis, Emma. We have to remove your spleen," Dr Pennington said.

I stared blankly back at him as if to say, 'what the heck is that?'

"Your blood cells are round instead of oval," he quickly responded. "The spleen filters your blood, but because the cells are abnormal, it destroys them, which is why you have to have surgery….."

The doctor's casual and gentle manner was reassuring. Although I comprehended only a small portion of what he said, I understood enough not to be afraid. Other doctors had terrified me.

I hated the way our local doctor, a stout man with black, straight hair smiled at me and said, "This won't hurt a bit," every time he gave me an injection. The needles he used were as large as a drill and felt just as blunt. When I was seven, my foot became infected and blew up like a balloon. Mum had to call him to our home. After he looked at the wound, I overheard him say, "I'll have to give her a penicillin shot," as they walked out of my room and in to the kitchen.

The moment they were out of sight, I darted out of bed and hid behind our kidney-shaped dressing table, crawling in between the lining of the pink chiffon skirt secured around it. I froze in terror when I heard them come back to my room. They both gasped to find me gone.

"Where has that little devil gone?" Mum said irritated. "Where are you, Emma?" she called sharply. Their voices faded as they left my room searching everywhere for me.

Mum came back and looked under the dressing table. "I don't know where she could be," I heard her say. Then suddenly her voice was above me shouting, "What are you doing behind there?" pulling the dressing table out of the way.

"No! No!" I screamed full force. "I don't want a needle." I held on tight to whatever I could as both of them dragged me kicking and screaming from my hiding place. I fought like crazy when they held me down on the bed. In spite of my efforts, the doctor plunged the needle into my rigid bottom.

At age 13, the same doctor recommended that I have a series of liver injections to boost my blood. After the second one, I developed an incredible itch and my whole body swelled, starting with my face. I was supposed to go the pictures with Robbie Anderson that day. He was popular and looked like Cliff Richard's twin. It was to be our first date and he walked a long way to come to my house. By the time he arrived, I was unrecognisable. I looked like a monster.

My mother answered the door to Robbie and burst into laughter when he asked for me. "She's sick," was all she could get out as she closed the door, leaving Robbie utterly bewildered.

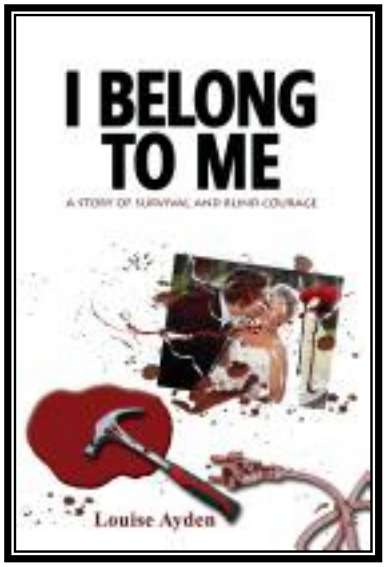
My family could not contain their laughter. I looked hideous. I didn't have a face. It had turned into a huge melon with slits. My head had almost doubled in size and the map of India had formed on my back. Even the doctor couldn't restrain his laughter when he came to the house to give me another injection. While everyone fell about laughing, I cried, fearful I would permanently look that way. It seemed that no one really cared that my tongue had swollen so badly that I almost choked.

Doctor Pennington was the first doctor to treat me with dignity. I liked that and I liked him. He was also the first doctor with whom I had ever felt comfortable. His visits were the highlight of my day. I eagerly looked forward to seeing him, even if it was just to take blood samples. It surprised me that he was interested in what I thought. No one before had ever seemed to care how or what I felt. I was raised in the 'children should be seen and not heard' era. The doctor made me feel as if I mattered.

When I asked Doctor Pennington if I could see my spleen after surgery, he smiled and promised to bring it in to show me after I was taken back to the ward. Both my parents were surprised he did

that for me. I was heavily sedated and only remember Doctor Pennington standing by my bed holding a stainless steel dish with my huge purple spleen in it. The doctor later told me that my spleen measured eight inches in length, when it should have been just two inches.

My parents had come to my room and sat with me and had even spoken to me, but I remember nothing of them ever being there.



I Belong To Me is a story of blind courage, an emotional roller coaster ride of shocking events that Emma Jane O'Farrell suffered and survived. A dysfunctional family life of rape, suicide attempts, humiliation and violent beatings from her physically and psychologically abusive first husband. Emma also escaped the clutches of the underworld and courage surfaced where none was expected. Emma began the fight of her life and uncovered something that would alter her forever.

I BELONG TO ME

by Louise Ayden