

I put myself into care **AGED 9**

Starving and desperate, Hope Daniels made an incredibly brave decision. One that was to change the course of her life...

Down at the police station, two officers gave me milk and biscuits as I begged, 'Please put me and my two brothers into care.' I was just nine years old.

I had no idea what 'care' was like, but it couldn't be worse than the life my brothers Harold, seven, Jack, five, and I were living. Mum and Dad were alcoholics. Money was scarce, we were often shouted at and hit. The only hot meal we got was at school.

There were no trips to the park or bedtime stories. I washed my own clothes and ran my own bath. When my brothers were born, it was my job to look after them.

Neither Mum nor Dad worked. Their benefit cheque would arrive on Monday and by lunchtime it was all gone on alcohol.

No food, no toys

I'd sit at school, praying Mum had left £5 for food. Mondays were the only days we got two meals. After that, we relied on Dad to steal food for us.

When I was six, men started turning up at all hours of the day and night. Most were old with stale breath and made me feel ill but Mum would lead them to the bedroom. I'd cover my ears to block out the sound. After the men had gone, she'd pull a few notes out of her bra and spend every last penny on drink.

When I was seven, social services tracked us down to the scruffy north London

terrace where we'd been living for a few weeks. But even though there was no food in the fridge, empty beer cans all over the floor, and no toys (bar a single Barbie doll with no arms), they didn't take us away.

One evening, when I was nine, I picked up a letter. It was from a social worker, saying Mum was in prison for prostitution. I didn't know what the word meant, but I knew it wasn't good. That night, bricks shattered every window of our house.

In that moment I realised that if I didn't leave, I was destined for the same desolate lifestyle as my parents. So, the next morning, I marched my brothers down to the police station.

I don't know how long it was before a social worker arrived. I do remember clutching her hand tightly as we were taken to the local children's home, which was pure luxury. There were 18 children, with eight carers to look after us. We had our clothes washed, and ate three meals a day for the first time in our lives.

And yet I was still torn between loyalty towards my parents and a desire to leave them behind. So when Mum was let out of prison, three months later, I readily agreed to let her visit. She was furious with me, saying, 'You've grassed up our family.' Needless to say, she'd been drinking.

As neither Mum nor Dad faced charges for neglect, I began to wonder whether the fact they hadn't been able to look after us was my fault. Mum wasn't allowed to see me after that first drunken outburst,



*I KNEW
DAD LOVED
ME BUT
HE LOVED
ALCOHOL
MORE'*

but Dad visited, bringing sweets and toys for us. I didn't doubt he loved me, it's just that he loved alcohol more.

Overwhelmed by guilt, I began to self-destruct. By the time I was 11, I was persuading complete strangers to buy me beer. The cushion of alcohol somehow made life that bit easier to bear.

If I didn't change, I'd die

The need for attention drove me to rebel. I skipped school, stayed out all night or slept on stranger's floors. I didn't go back to the children's home, proving I was every bit as useless as my parents said I was.

Over the next four years, my drinking increased as my self-esteem plummeted.

I was 15 when I first accepted pills from a stranger. He said they'd make me feel better. I didn't know what they were, I didn't care. I blacked out, but as I came round, vomiting, I realised if I didn't do something – and soon – I would die.

I'd made one attempt to change my life when I was nine. Surely I could do it again? I went back to the children's home and they moved me to a secure unit in south London, for particularly disruptive kids.

For six months, I was only allowed out of the unit to wash and eat. It sounds horrendous, but it gave me the foundation I needed to change my life. When I left, I moved to a home in Surrey with a school attached. I became a good pupil, passing nine GCSEs and taking three A Levels.

But just as I was applying to university to study law, I met Pete, my husband, and fell pregnant. To be honest it was a radical,

but conscious, decision. I knew I'd be a ward of court until I was 21. Getting married was the only way I could get out of care and, by becoming a mum, I hoped to create the loving family I'd never had.

My daughter Lucy was born in June 1993, followed by Jake, three years later. Cuddling them tightly in my arms, I couldn't begin to understand how my parents could ever have neglected my brothers and me.

Unfortunately my marriage ended after six years but my children kept me going. They only needed to smile or call out 'Mummy' and my heart would melt.

I needed to provide for them financially, so I used my childhood experiences,

coupled with what little savings I had, to volunteer at the Citizens Advice Bureau. Within a year, I'd qualified as an advisor and after five years, I was project manager. Helping people who were as vulnerable as I'd been was incredibly cathartic – but I was still struggling to come to

terms with my childhood.

I was 25 before I felt I had enough strength to look at my social service files. It was so painful. Dad had had a terrible childhood himself after his mother had died giving birth to him. He'd grown up in a Barnado's children's home while Mum's dad was alcoholic.

The sad truth was that my parents were simply the products of their own upbringings. I couldn't hate them. I just felt pity, which made it easier to forgive them.

Alcohol killed Dad in January 2002, when I was 27. He fell over, drunk and never recovered. Mum started drinking even more and, eventually, I had no alternative but to cut her out of my life completely to protect my children from her destructive influence.

*I DON'T
HATE MY
PARENTS, I
JUST FEEL
PITY FOR
THEM'*

I feel proud of myself

I'd always tried to hide my past from my children to protect them, but in spring 2009 I decided to write a book about my life. I couldn't hide the truth from them forever, but I also felt it would be wrong to do so – after all, my parents had hidden their own childhoods from me, and look where that got us.

When Lucy, now 20, and Jake, 18, read my book, their eyes filled with tears. 'We're so proud of you, Mum,' they said and now, at last, I feel proud of me too. ☺

*** Hackney Child by Hope Daniels and Morag Livingstone (Amazon.co.uk, £9.99)**



Me with my brothers, eight months before I got us all into care