

women
talk



Be Informed
Be Inspired
Be Ignited!

*The Women
Talk Book*

Inspirational & motivational real
life stories written by women in
Luton

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Acknowledgement

The *Women Talk* Team would like to thank the women who have contributed to making this book come to life by sharing their stories. We would also like to extend our sincere thanks to Diane Corriette, who guided and encouraged the women through the stages of putting their story down on paper building confidence and self-esteem. Kate Denisova, who assisted with helping with the administration of running the fortnightly sessions and her contribution to the book. The Community Learning Trust Team who have supported Women Talk throughout this process.

The *Women Talk* sessions were held at the offices of IODT (Institute of Development & Training) our gratitude to the staff who provided the space and the ambiance for the women to feel comfortable and safe.

Most importantly *Women Talk* would like to say a huge thank you to Yvonne, Loy, Tishy, Shola, Kate, Anca, Helen, Diane, your words of wisdom, love, family, challenges, sheer tenacity have contributed to make this book a reality. The first book for *Women Talk* is for everyone to be encouraged to share their own moments of motivation a testimony that anyone can.

Introduction

By Helen Tucker – *Women Talk* founder

The story behind the story. The *Women Talk* book is a compilation of stories written by women who live and work in Luton. The memoirs are a snapshot; a moment in their lives. The women have chosen moments to write about a particular event, place, thing that happened in their life. The stories will take you on a journey that will motivate and inspire you to improve and or change your own outlook on life.

In the words of Sylvia Plath.....

“And by the way, everything in life is writable about if you have the outgoing guts to do it, and the imagination to improvise. The worst enemy to creativity is self-doubt. “

The *Women Talk* inspirational stories give you an insight to the many ‘life moments’ of the women involved, be it an event which had an impact on the way they live their lives now, an encounter with love, or how their lifestyle when younger can stir the imagination to create and carve out a lifelong career. Women took us on a journey of leaving their native home country to make a new life in the UK, experiencing fear which resulted in strengthening a relationship bringing two people together again.

These stories have been written from the heart, tapping into emotions that have been buried because life just happens, and time passes by. When shared in a forum, where teacher and author Diane Corriette encouraged women to write their memoirs, amazing ‘stuff happened’ life stories burst into life!

The motivation behind the book lies with Helen founder of *Women Talk*, having over 20 years’ experience of developing women’s skills, knowledge and passion. Having an understanding of the reality women face, ie a variety of challenges when thinking about returning to work, starting a business, raising a family or thinking about doing a course. Lack of confidence, low self-esteem, unsure about how to get started can cause stress, alienation and isolation can elevate women if they know they have a focus and tap into latent talents.

Women Talk gave women the space, motivation and inspiration to get back on life's track, to share their stories, laughter and engage with ordinary and extraordinary women.

Helen Tucker, providing Career and Business Coaching launched the series of *Women Talk* sessions where women get to share their views, opinions, stories, history and listen to Guest Speakers, this brought women together where they were ignited, inspired and motivated to share their stories. *Women Talk* is getting women to talk, debate, question and interact with other women, whether it's about parenting skills, health, life plans, business or issues close to their hearts.

In reading this book *Women Talk* would like to encourage you to keep developing yourself, keeping in mind that nothing will ever be perfect. You will not be perfect. Life's circumstances will rarely be perfect. So don't allow that to inhibit you from taking action towards your goals. Your written down plan may rarely be executed in the step by step manner in which you originally wrote it. Life will happen causing your plan to have to change. Always remain flexible while still keeping your eye on the end goal and remaining true to yourself - living with integrity and authenticity.

The women in this book were risk takers; they were willing to be unconventional, different to the crowd. Doing the things they thought would be hard, they definitely have been courageous so have grown, as this is where growth will happen. *Women Talk* encouraged women to lead change by proactively putting themselves outside of their comfort zone. They were lived on the 'edge' and made that their new comfort zone, in order to keep expanding.

Women Talk encourages you to be a change maker. Don't wait for permission or approval. Remember that mostly, our limitations are in our mind. Overcoming fears and self-limiting beliefs don't come from analysing your thoughts it comes from using what we learn to take action. By reading these women's amazing stories it will help you continuously move you forward.

Helen Tucker

Founder of Women Talk

<http://www.womentalk.org.uk>

Foreword

By Diane Corriette – Author of *Memory to Memoirs*

I have always kept a journal. It has allowed me to reflect on times when life was fun and also when times were challenging. From those life moments of mine I have been able to write stories. They are very short stories, under 1,000 words, called Flash Fiction.

When Helen told me about her desire to put together an inspirational book based on stories from the lives of women in Luton I stepped forward without hesitation. With my workshop facilitator hat on I had written a chapbook that I wanted to run as a workshop. It is called **From Memories to Memoirs** and this was my first opportunity to use it. The outcome of the course was to get people using their life stories to write a very short story under 1,000 (1,500 max) words. I wasn't prepared for how very excited people would get during the workshop until I ran this two part session for the Women Talk group. It was a very emotive experience for us all.

Included in this collection are stories from women who attended that workshop. They live in Luton and they have used their life experiences to inspire you. In one story someone who was bullied, became the bully, sought forgiveness and used that event to empower her life. In another story we learn how a messy bedroom inspired a future career. Other stories share experiences of leaving a homeland to come to England and live in Luton. All of these stories provide insight into how an event shaped who the author is now. Every story is an inspiration. There is even a story from someone who attended the session simply to observe the workshop and nothing more. That is how inspiring and invigorating reflecting on and writing down our own personal history (or her-story!) can become. You can't help but want to get involved.

People walked into the session, some of them totally unclear on what to write about, and left fully motivated and inspired to write. Their work is here before you and I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I enjoyed putting it together. I haven't

touched their “voice” and, aside from grammar changes, I have done my best to leave the story intact.

This is not an exercise in “correct” story writing. It is an exercise in self-expression. Too many people believe their own story to be boring and/or that they do not have the ability to write. I believe we all have something to share and my job was to create a space that allowed each individual story to flow.

I knew, from personal experience of doing it, how writing about the things that happen in life can heal, excite and re-connect us to memories that have the potential to deliver a story. As I start my own journey into independently publishing chapbooks I hope **From Memories to Memoirs** will be given more opportunities to inspire people to write for their own empowerment and for the enjoyment, and inspiration of others.

I want to personally thank all the women who actively engaged and took part in this workshop. Through their words this book has been created.

Diane Corriette

Pen and I

<http://penandi.com>

A room with a view – walls of a dream

By Shola Wright

Today was the day. The day I had been eagerly awaiting. It seemed like an eternity but in actual fact it had been nine years and two months to be precise. It had been my greatest life journey so far. A journey that would take me away from everything that I was use to and which was full of joy, pain, great determination, and dedication. It was a journey of long life friendships with people that I may never have met and travelling to places that I may have never aspired to see.

Whether I liked it or not I knew this journey had dictated the person I had now become and would surely shape the person I was to become. My perspective of the world and the aesthetics of my surroundings had now been tailored to the point where what was insufficient details to most meant a great deal to me.

I had signed up to a 'club' where a new form of language was spoken. The nonchalant use of 'juxtaposition, axis mundi and notion were considered acceptable. A place where the secret dress code of various styles of black turtle neck with thick rim glasses was the norm and the constant reminiscing of a place called 'the studio' was often spoken about.

It was now clear to me that there was no turning back. This was it; a point of no return. A mixture of emotions rippled through my body. A mixture so great it was impossible to even be able to pin point one. The Brutalist modern architecture of the Barbican's grand hall was softened by the joyous harmony of applause. I looked around me and absorbed the familiar faces of those who I had shared my journey with. It was official two degrees and a post graduate diploma later we were now Architects.

Thinking back it was hard to believe that a childhood dream of an 11 year old could be responsible for this, a dream that had started in the pages of an A3 sketch book, and a desire to one day create my own space.

It was a standard weekend, typically grey and rainy like so many of the weekends I remembered, but I was happy. I would even go as far as saying I was content. For once I had our bedroom to myself. My older sister had gone away for the weekend, which meant I could enjoy peace and quiet with just me, music and my sketchbooks.

The sudden opening of the door signalled the end of my tranquil weekend. She was back. My sister waltzed into our bedroom bringing with her a string of destruction and drama. My heart sunk. It had all come to an abrupt end. I knew that hours of dutiful cleaning and TLC would be ruined in a matter of minutes.

'What are you doing here?' She bellowed across the room.

'Where else should I be?' I replied with a hint of defensiveness, trying my hardest to stay calm.

'Oh get lost,' she responded 'I don't want you here, go and find somewhere else to be annoying.'

With a heavy sigh I knew this was my time to walk away. I gathered up my sketchbooks thinking of my shattered opportunity to get lost in my imagination.

For in these books were my dreams. Alongside the sketch portraits of my teen idols were rough orthographical lines which eventually formed clear concepts of 3D spaces. My ideal space that I spent hours dreaming would one day be mine.

It was the sound of her screeching voice that eventually broke into my thoughts and brought me back to realisation

'Oi! I'm speaking to you.' She said scornfully, 'You and those stupid books. Give them to me.'

She snatched the books from my hands and started thumbing through the pages. I jumped up trying my hardest to conceal my secrets.

'It's none of your business give it back to me' I yelled. The familiar smirk spread across her face and I regretted my words as soon as they came out of my mouth. My defensive behaviour had triggered off her curiosity and vindictive nature.

'If you want it so much you have to come and get it', she yelled, and so the pursuit began.

She fled towards the bedroom door causing the neatly formed piled items that I had spent hours organising to be freed of my straight lines and uniformity. However, this no longer seemed important. I needed to have my dreams safely back with me where they belonged.

She made for the staircase and I was in hot pursuit behind her. The house was now full of our shrieks and the thunderous sound of thudding on the floor boards. As I came within reach of snatching the books back a third larger hand appeared from out of nowhere and got there first.

‘What’s all this noise about?’ It was my dad, now standing in between us and holding my books.

‘It’s her fault. She’s the one causing problems over those silly books,’ my sister announced in her most matter of fact voice.

Before I could say anything, my dad had already begun examining each page. Silence filled the air. Once he had finished looking through it all he handed the books back to me and with a smile he looked at me and asked

‘Have you ever considered becoming an Architect when you grow up?’

The Giant Awakes

By Yvonne M Sinclair

From the distance, I could hear the laughter and the jeering from the other side of a rather small play ground. I could feel my heart beating faster and faster as the talking became closer, louder and nearer to me. I could feel a bead of nervous sweat release itself from my forehead.

It's going to be one of those days...one of those wretched days!

You see my mother had not long died, it was very sudden, I was in shock and I was totally lost; it was really a dark time in my young life. I didn't really understand death and what it meant as I had never had to deal with anything like that before. I can only tell you I felt alone, bewildered, and misplaced and I had to learn how to cope with those feelings, I had to learn how to get by, how to survive as an 11 year old girl; I also had to learn how to be parent...yes a parent.

Dad was hopeless he fell apart, mums passing meant that he was left to raise the five of us, me and my four other siblings. I was the second youngest of the five children, my three older siblings were deemed old enough to fend for themselves which just left me and my 5 year old brother. Dad didn't cope with life or responsibilities after that and gambled our home away, then disappeared and left us (me & my brother) to fend for ourselves. We were taken to live with an aunt for a while, so it was me and my little brother against the world and it was up to me to protect him...but that's a whole other story in itself.

My hair, which should have been, as soft as cotton wool, with bouncy black curls that glistening in the sun; but instead was almost ashy grey, nappy, unkept, tangled and was a conversation piece to what felt like most of the school. The subject of my hair was always the brunt of his and his friends jokes...I hadn't mastered doing my hair myself, I never had to do it before and with little money or know how it was admittedly a total hot mess. And to top it all off, I had really embarrassing buck teeth so most days I would hide, duck & dive around the school playground to avoid being notice. It didn't work.

This particular day was neither hot nor cold, the sky was blue, the sun was shining a slight breeze but the air was crisp, the weather was typical of a spring day in the UK. It was what seems to be an ordinary day. The playground was its normally busy place with different groups of school children participating in several different games such as football, marbles, and tag. Groups of girls walking around having different conversations with boys they seemed to like but pretended they didn't and the ever faithful queue at the tuck shop extending all the way into the playground. Everything was normal; normal until...

The moment I saw him sprawled out on the floor laying flat on his back, his eyes dazed with an almost confused look on his face I knew all those feeling of despair and fear had accumulated into what I can only describe as an erupted volcano inside of me. The thing is I didn't realise this eruption until after the fact. I didn't consciously realise that my brain had disconnected from the fear, anxiety low self esteem and depression that I had been experiencing since Mums death but these words were ringing in my ears – ***No one can make you feel less than who you are unless you allow them too;***

It was like it was on repeat in my head - ***No one can make you feel less than who you are unless you allow them too!!***

As the words became louder and louder and the volume of the words increased in my head, my fingers began to tingle; I realise that I had no control over them, they came together in Union and made a small fist, I felt my arm swing backwards in what seemed to be slow motion; I still had no control. As my arm and fist journeyed forward with great force connecting with his face I could see the smug look on his face begin to change as he started to fall backwards.

The gasp in the playground was deafening. It didn't just feel like time had slowed down. It felt like it had actually stopped. I could still hear those words sounding loudly in my head like a new song that had been written especially for me. ***No one can make you feel less than who you are unless you allow them too!!***

As the rhythm of my heart raced along with the words in my head to make an unusual melody I suddenly thought 'shit! What have I done?'

The children in the playground gathered around the incident almost immediately, there was sounds of laughter clapping and cheering which saddened my heart and filled me with fear as I heard the laughter I thought they were laughing at me; but I was so wrong, my peers were coming over to me and embracing me, telling me well done, I couldn't believe it, all of a sudden I became the 'It Girl' of the school.

That day my school life changed, I was never bullied again. From being the small fussy haired buck teeth girl I became 'The Little Giant' and the giant was awakened never to be asleep again.

Now, I do not condone physical violence/fighting but at the time and on this occasion it worked for me. But, that is not the end of the story, it is only the beginning, you see after being bullied I became a bully too. I forgot what it felt like to be the one on the receiving end of things. I got swept away with the popularity and notoriety of being the 'IT GIRL' of the school, I thought I had a reputation to live up to and I became spiteful and thoughtless.

I had forgotten the words that empowered me that day when my school life changed... ***'No one can make you feel less than who you are unless you allow them too'***; I had forgotten the tears I once cried, until I saw those very tears in the eyes of the girl I made my victim. At that very moment I realised my behaviour was no better than the boy who bullied me, I felt sick to my stomach, absolutely disgusted with myself. I knew that it was not in my nature to hurt a person knowingly, I knew that my heart had always been pure and honest and I knew I was wrong and I had to take responsibility for my actions against this girl. Later that day I saw her in the playground after lunch, offered her a 'Refresher' sweet, and said I was sorry. I needed her forgiveness and I needed her to know how sorry I truly was for how I had treated her. She accepted my apology; humbly forgave me and took the sweet and my behaviour was never spoken about again.

Now, as an adult with children of my own, I can reflect back on my days of being bullied and smile. If I were to see him right now, at this very moment I would give him a great big hug. I have forgiven him and myself for the pain and suffering I endured as a young girl. It was that same pain and suffering that drove and gave me the determination to succeed and achieve. It was the pain and suffering of being ridiculed about my hair that drove me to understand and learn how to do my own

hair and I did it so well that I went to beauty school. I passed all my qualifications and after a little while I opened my own hairdressing business. I currently own a coaching, mentoring & training company, inspiring women and young people to achieve the highest and true expression of themselves in order to live an exceptional life.

I have replaced my tears with a smile, I smile because of what I have learnt about me, I smile because of the experience it has given me, I can smile because all things have worked out for my good, I smile because the giant is awake inside of me that drives me and inspires me; I smile because I'm free.

Travel to love

By Anca Tinica

A successful career ahead. A good salary. A good place to work. That was what my friends thought I was enjoying. In reality, I was living alone and often walking alone on the big city streets. And I'm not a lonely person. In fact, I hate being alone.

I had been betrayed by someone I thought was a really good friend. I won't go into what happened but it made me see that sometimes people hide behind a mask and when we see them for what they truly are it shouldn't be a real surprise. Only this time it was. I guess it is because we rely on people and we cherish the moments when we are with them.

My boyfriend was away in England and I wanted to end our relationship. I couldn't stand the time difference and the fact that he wasn't there when I needed him. My life had become too planned. That routine I was trapped in took away the best of me. I was going to work only to get things done and come back home as soon as possible. I was not enjoying myself anymore. I had this mood that made me see the bad things as big things and good things as small things.

As time passed by, things started to go bad at work. We only knew about stress, more tasks, more ideas and so much work to do but less appreciation. This was another thing that affected my state of mind. Both my personal and professional lives were unsatisfying. I knew that I had to make a change. I wasn't dedicated to my work anymore. I didn't want to overcome that stressful phase I just wanted to get rid of it. My mind was somewhere else and I noticed that when you are not emotionally fulfilled you cannot perform at your peak. Work suffers.

There were things I was clear about. I knew I wanted to finish my studies and do a masters degree. I knew I wanted to do something with my job as its negative impact had started to damage my health. I knew my boyfriend was still in England. So, I will let you make the connection about what happened next.

My parents were pushing me to finish my studies and settle down. My boyfriend was still supporting me from far away. So together we decided to go where he was and finish my studies as well. I had made the huge decision to leave Romania, my only home since birth, and go and live in England.

I was so relieved when I quit my job and I didn't feel sorry not even for a second. I sensed that there was nothing left for me at that job as I had first imagined. I was lucky as well that I could afford this decision without thinking about money. The most important thing was to take my inner peace back.

So I moved to another country. As simple as it sounds. I took only one bag with me, kissed my parents and my friends and left. I knew that when I arrived in England there would only be the two of us but that didn't scare me. There was so much love waiting for me I knew it would help to bring me back to life.

There are so many things to see and learn in this life that you cannot stay with those that make life seem miserable. Starting a new fresh experience made me proud of myself as I was the kind of person who couldn't imagine living in another country.

Now, he brings me flowers and cookies every day and I have a smile on my face again. He is protective and caring and I think he needed me as much as I needed him. I enjoy studying here as much I enjoy experiencing new food and meeting people of all nationalities. Every day has something different to offer and I am making the most of it.

Love has liberated my mind and I can think clearly again. I think love is one of the most powerful ways to defend oneself in this world we living in.

Becoming a MUM

By Heather Tims

Was an immense privilege and something I feel exceptionally lucky and blessed to be! Oh how my perceptions, opinions, values and feelings have changed since I've joined the realms of parenthood and had my wonderful hansom charming boys.

Let me take you back to just over 20 years now (gosh how time flies!)

I was one of those women totally fixated in my job, working long hours and full weeks often without a day off (not that I want sympathy) – work was my life I loved my job.

I never ever had what they call a maternal bone in my body; to me babies were strange, wired almost alien objects that did nothing. Only one of my friends at this point had children, even with my two God Children I felt awkward and strange, yet I loved dearly and was very proud to be their God Parent. I just didn't feel comfortable holding babies, I did not know how to comfort them and felt clumsy and useless. When asked if I wanted a cuddle I'd be back of the queue, avoiding any contact for as long as possible I'd offer to make tea and walk the dog to not hold a baby.

However, out of the blue on a wet and dull October weekend I met My Mr wonderful and my life changed dramatically. I decided there was more to life than work and changed my job – got married and funnily enough began to hear the faint ticking of a clock – time was passing me by – more of my friends were settled and having babies - my head telling me if I wanted children it was time...

This is part of why I consider myself exceptionally lucky – In today's society I am an older mum one of those people who had a career first, and it can be argued cannot have both... However, I followed the advice, did what I was supposed to and after a very short time was elated to discover I was pregnant – don't get me wrong I was overjoyed but scared as hell what had I done – I still didn't feel mumsy or maternal, I still looked at other people's children and thought they are wired and strange things and still avoided cuddles with new born babies...

Fortunately, I sailed through the pregnancy and the birth. I remember joking with my mum that in my birthing plan I intended to put “I want my baby handed to me clean, dressed and smelling of baby powder”. I still remember the look on her face was she thinking I was totally disillusioned or just God help her poor child! Who knows?

I soon found out she knew that was never going to happen and I had a very rose tinted view of birth. SO Imagine my surprise once my child was delivered being promptly handed to me in a small cloth, all wet, a bit slimy, and slightly blood stained, by the jolly midwife who had delivered him – saying congratulations you have a baby boy. “My son” – perfect in every way with a huge mass of dark hair (that explained the only discomfort of my pregnancy massive heart burn throughout..) and these big eyes staring up at me and when he suddenly wrapped his tiny fingers around mine my heart just melted - if that were possible?

Instinctively he fed – then it hit me like a massive thunderbolt straight to my already melting heart - feelings of love I never imagined existed. My perfect boy in that very instant of looking at me changed me for the better.

Intuitively, I knew what to do – how to hold him – how to soothe and comfort him. What had happened to me? It was nothing I had learned, ok I read the book from the pre natal class but only half-heartedly, It kind of just happened, AGAIN I consider myself so very lucky because of this.

My son taught me so much – in many ways he still does.

Two years later I was blessed again and our family became complete. I was so very fortunate to have a second beautiful baby boy and am now the incredibly proud mother of two exceptionally gorgeous yet different as day is to night boys.

I know I am fabulously blessed – I still have to pinch myself when I look at them, (even though they have grown into young teenagers now) how did someone like me have things so easy? Two trouble free conceptions, pregnancies, births when some of my dearest friends who have been desperate for children, have had painful struggles and heartaches trying to conceive those so hoped for children, they have endured troubles of which I could never have imagined or coped with to have their children.

Yet there was me the one who was not maternal – the one who avoided children never had a real desire to become a mum. Life is definitely strange and unfathomable. This is why I consider myself so extremely privileged, exceptionally lucky and blessed to be the very proud Mum of two fabulously, gorgeous spirited young men, they have made me a better person for having them in my life.

A Scared Moment

By Letita Thomas

Letitia Lorraine Thomas otherwise known as Tishy to my friends and family. I have lived in Luton the majority of my life however I am very grateful at the age of 28 I'm trying to live my life to the fullest to my ability as I was born with cerebral palsy therefore I spend 100% of my time in my wheelchair.

Life for me has not been easy at all as I have had some traumatic experiences in my time. One of the scariest moments was when I had an operation on my back to correct my curve in my spine, this involved me having metal rod inserted in my back. This was also a very difficult decision to be made by my mother and father at the time however to see me prolong my life they decided to take that chance. Without the operation to straighten my spine, I would eventually have crushed my organs. At the time I was about 15 years old. There were quite a few consultations and examinations which took us through the risks on my life and the possibilities of the operation being unsuccessful. Being in my early teens I would have said yes to anything to help me get on. The time was here and it was the day we were to travel up to London to book into admissions for the pre-operation consultation. I think nerves got the better of me and my family as I remember getting tearful and having thoughts of hope I get through this and I may be able to reduce the time I spend in my wheelchair. The day of the operation had arrived and I can remember being taken down the corridors to the operation theatre. This would be the last moment I recall until I woke up in the recovery room.

I woke up in the recovery room with my parents by my side smiling that I made it through. All seemed well at this point and the insertion of the rods seemed to be a success however, whilst I was still in hospital things turned for the worse as my temperature had spiked and seemed to be getting to a life threatening stage. This turned out to be I had picked up an infection which was spreading through my body. At first they put me on a drip to counteract the infection but after a day there was no improvement and they decided I would need to go back into surgery to reopen my back and try and remove the infection. The wound is from the nape of my neck right down to the base of my spine. During this time my parents stayed with me 24/7 and my family were very concerned as they said each time they need

to go back into a raw wound it increases the risk of infection. The second operation was complete and all seemed well and my temperature was dropping, however once again this time after a few days my temperature spiked yet again to everybody's alarm, as it was clear the infection was still there. This meant another re opening of the wound for the third time.

This time was even more traumatic as I woke up in intensive care attached to monitors and a oxygen mask. My body functions were deteriorating and things were not looking good. I spent almost a week in Intensive Care. I honestly think because of the love and attention I received from family it kept me positive throughout my ordeal. My temperature was starting to drop and my organs became functional again. To everyone's surprise i moved back to a normal ward where I stayed another 3-4 weeks in hospital for observation, then I was allowed home. I still have the scars physically and mentally.

This has made very humble and grateful I have life albeit I'm still in wheelchair. That traumatic experience will never disappear from my mind but this has made me stay positive in my life as I escaped a near fatal moment.

Graduation Blunders

By Loy Laverne

It was a great day, a day for recognising talent and achievement, a day to be celebrated exclusively, with family and loved ones; it was the day of my graduation. Three years of hard work, sacrifice, blood, sweat and tears had finally come to this. As I entered the cathedral where our graduation ceremony was to be held, a sense of pride washed over me. We graduates had to collect our gowns and caps before we made our way to our designated seats. I remember wearing these really high silver killer heels which really hurt my feet, but I didn't care, this was my day, and it wasn't often I had the opportunity to look glamorous or to graduate for that matter. As I sat down, I didn't really hear what the tutors and heads of departments had to say. I sat there with my comrades and fellow achievers, we gave knowing glances to each other as names we recognised were called out, a look of shared pride for the for those we had established friendships with, and a look of disregard for the ones with whom we hadn't, the one's who we hadn't, for whatever reason. Finally I heard *my* name called, it was time to go up to receive my certificate. All kinds of thoughts flooded my mind, "what if I miss the step?" and "What will the course leader say to me as he shakes *my* hand" and "What if I trip up and fall in front of him...or on him?". The nerves were starting to take a hold and I needed to put those thoughts out of my mind and deal with the task in hand.

The time had come for me to collect that almost at times, elusive award. I looked back at my friends knowing that this was goodbye for most of them, and would never see them again after this day. It was a bitter sweet moment, but I had to move on, my family were watching-proudly, my tutors were looking, my class mates, other peoples families, the church saints; everybody was watching as I went up for this momentous occasion. I walked up the steps with great fluidity, reached out for my certificate with the greatest of ease; I even showed amazing charm as the course leader shook my hand and congratulated me. I had made it; I had got through with absolutely no glitches. I saw the cameraman right at the back of the church, lurking behind the congregation and impressive flower design; I was ready for my close-up. I smiled my best toothy smile and worked those heels until my foot somehow was no longer in my shoe. I had, in my enthusiasm and radiant charm, managed to kick off my shoe. What was worse was that I couldn't even hide it,

because it was at least three yards in front of me. It had slid down the isle then veered off to the left. Whilst this fiasco was unravelling in front of my eyes I was painfully aware of the fact that all eyes were still on me; the family friends, the classmates, the tutors and the church saints were still watching me and to put the cherry on the cake...so was the cameraman. You may ask what happened next, well I, as best I could, had to gracefully hobble over gracefully and put on that stupid shoe which was a size too big anyway, and make it back to my chair without any trouble, but before I got to my chair I looked that camera square in the...lens, and gave my best smile, a smile that said "Oh well, whacha gonna do?", and walked back to my chair, not in shame but with pride because after all, an ill fitting shoe was not going to spoil *my* day.

It's not as black and white as you think

By Janeth Daniel

As a child in the West Indies in my day we thought we were indispensable. When on school holiday we would roam for miles collecting fruits and at the same time collecting firewood for fuel as part of our chores, quite unaware of any danger. We were fearless. We made sure all our chores were done if not later our bottoms would experience the most excruciating stinging from the comforter, commonly called the cane used by the ever long strict arms of parents, which could be anything-to-hand. You would not want to repeat this experience too often. I remember one evening I came home and I did not do one of my chores and Mum was in a rage and she got hold of a piece of freshly green stripped bark from a tree and she gave me about 3 of the best! That night I had the shakes for hours, so badly that it caused my mother such concern that she never smacked me again, but I always did my chores before she got home so I was seen to comply. Well who would want to repeat such an experience and I learned that if I did them early, I would have time to play with my friends and go scrumping as long as I got back home before Mum got back from work!

It was almost at the end of the summer and the mango season so fruits were few and far between. However, I wanted to go on an adventure to collect mangoes mainly and whatever fruits I could find. I didn't want to go too far from home as my partners in crime weren't at home that particular day, so I went to one of my neighbours' yard who had a lovely mango tree, which bore the most succulent tasting mangoes. As I entered the yard (they were not at home) and looked up into the tree, I couldn't see any fruits whatsoever, but on second take, I spotted a lovely set of golden mangoes at the top of the tree – the best and prettiest fruits are always at the very top of the tree. I therefore began to climb this tree to pick these mangoes, I then noticed what looked like a strip of black and white cloth. I had not experienced this before so I thought it was a piece of rag which blew into the tree and was just hanging there. I decided to climb the tree and I continued the ascent still not realising the danger I was facing. I reached out to pick the first fruit, but with a sharp withdrawal, I quickly realized that black and white cloth had come alive, then there appeared a head raised above this supposedly piece of fabric. This caused me to jump from a height inconceivable for a child. Nevertheless, I would

not be beaten, I wanted my mangoes and I ran back to my yard to get a long bamboo stick to kill that snake so that I could get my mangoes and I managed to get it from the top of the tree and beat the living daylights out of that snake with no fear as to what could have been. I had my mangoes and felt quite the hero!

I left the body of the snake in the main road and sat on a bank above the road as our yard had a bank which overlooked the main road, so that passerbyers could see this great heroic work and when they asked who killed the snake that I could answer, "I did "and to tell them the whole story over and over again.

Feeling quite the victor, I couldn't wait to tell my story to my mother when she came home from work – my father worked and lived abroad most of the time, so Mum was the one to we had to answer to most of the time. To say the least, she was quite alarmed to hear of my ordeal. I had many warnings about snakes but that did not stop my adventures. It only increased my curiosity in other areas. If I was to tell my mum about all of my adventures during the course of the day, she would have had a heart attack. However, the scratches on my legs tell quite a story. She was forever, buying bandages and dressings for us.

I just could not stay still at home doing nothing. As long as I had all my chores done, I was off roaming looking for fruits, wild flowers and discovering new springs or fishing. As mentioned previously, we lived on a mountain and there were so many things to discover. It was a place of excitement and very pretty indeed with all the wild flowers and waterfalls that I could not help but try and discover every facet of this lovely volcanic mountain.

My First Second Chance

By Diane Corriette

You couldn't see it but I was trembling. I was physical shaking and I felt sick. I smiled and opened my mouth to talk but it was drier than a wadi in summertime. My lips were just as cracked and if you listened carefully you could hear a quiver in my voice. The sound of fear mixed in with my words as I addressed the class. I had thrown myself into the deep end of the pool and now I had to sink or swim.

'We are going to play a game that will help us all get to know each other.' I announce after my customary introduction.

I looked at the faces looking back at me; my students for the next three hours. Their eyes on me cause my insecurities to rattle my metaphorical protective cage. The cage I use to protect myself from my negative voices so I can teach undisturbed. I could feel them there, just on the outside of my already cluttered mind, desperate to get in and mess with me, but I refused them entry and continued teaching.

The game goes well. It was over in less than ten minutes but that was enough time for me to take some deep breathes and control my trembling. Enough time to repeat my affirmation of being an energetic, entertaining teacher (my own little pep talk to keep my negative voice well away from my protective cage) and to slow down my speeding heart so I could remove the quiver in my voice.

'That was brilliant' one student remarked as she handed me her evaluation form at the end of the class.

'Really enjoyed myself' another one said, smiling.

The class had gone really well. The three hours passed by so quickly. All the feedback forms were great and the tutor observing me praised me for a job well-done while providing some constructive criticism to improve. At that point my self-confidence was still so very fragile that a negative review would have meant the end of my teaching career before it had really begun but things had gone better than I had expected.

I walked back to my car and collapsed on the seat. My first lesson in adult education was over. In a few weeks I would receive my certificate and be a fully fledged teacher in adult education. For the last 15 years I had worked as a secretary and now I was changing direction. I was giving myself a second chance by entering the world of teaching adults and I couldn't wait.

As I sat, exhausted but happy in my car, I thought back to my shy girl days. The girl who hated herself had done good today. I had kept my negative voices at bay and even managed to get over my fear of people looking at me. I was amazed at my transformation. I had always been the tall, thin, young girl, who only spoke when people spoke to her, and that wasn't often. I was quiet, shy, insecure and full of self-doubt. I had changed all of that to become a teacher. Oh, the insecurities were still hiding around every corner. Like a crouching tiger eager to find prey they sat ready to pounce on me if I made the slightest mistake. That negative insecure voice of mine would taunt me and remind me I was useless and for a long time I listened to and believed it. The difference was I had grown stronger now. I had realised that I was in control of my thoughts so, after reading books and getting help, the negative insecure voice that once owned had become much smaller than it used to be. A bigger, more positive, voice had taken over helping me to become a radiant and more confident version of my former self. It seemed a strange way to help myself overcome my insecurities. I had put myself in a position where I had to face them head on by becoming a teacher. I knew that having done that I could do anything and that a new life awaits me.

That was my first second chance. I have given myself other 'second chances' over the years and each time I have increased my sense of self worth. I truly believe that it is our biggest life challenges that provide us with the greatest opportunities for increasing our self-confidence and inner strength.

Never too old to fall in love, with life and with you

By Helen Tucker

Strolling hand in hand along the warm white sandy beach, the grain of soft, hot, fine particles finding its way in, around and through my toes. Oh how I love the sinking feeling of my feet making imprints. We laugh about our antics the day before, we breathe in deeply and soak up the sun rays and the heat of the Caribbean sun as it washes over us, making us perspire gently. Beads of sweat rolls down his temple, the side of his face to his neck, it glistens and sparkles like a handful of diamonds.

How handsome he looks, I think, and then share my thoughts with him. He slips his right hand and arm around my waist pulling me closer to his side, I feel the dampness of his linen shirt, and the heat rising from his body. I lean into him and let out a smiling sigh of comfort, tranquillity and contentment at 'this' moment not wanting it to end, not wanting it to carry on as it will soon end.....just be in the moment.

As we continue to stroll we hear people laughing, shouting, screaming with joy splashing in the sea, the joy of seeing other couples acting like children broadens my smile. I have a cheeky thought that pops into my head, I stop abruptly, which takes him by surprise

'Hey, what's up hun?' I look at him with a mischievous look in my eye.

'Oh no you don't,' he says. He positions himself in front of me. Why does this man know every move I'm about to make? 'I know what you're scheming so don't even think about it,' he quickly gives me a wink as the corner of his sweet mouth raises to a slight smile.

'Hey babe, I'm not scheming anything...just this...'

I quickly run behind him and jump on his back letting out a loud screech

'GOTCHA!!...GIDDY UP!....'

He swiftly picks me up and secures me on his back and starts to trot along the sand, I start screaming with laughter telling him to stop as he picks up momentum heading towards the salty sea water.

The day turns to a glow of orange as the sun starts to set, we sit calmly and peacefully on the beach, the heat dropping one or two degrees and a slight breeze that cools us down a little.

We talk about how it would be wonderful to own one of the colonial houses and refurbish it to its fullest glory, adding our own artistic flair to make it one of the most admired houses on the island. I would exhibit my paintings; he would have his collection of African artefacts within the grand entrance. We sit for a few hours recapturing the days adventures, the helicopter ride, our exploration of mini caves, the people we have met (and still yet to meet) the characters and quirky personalities.

Being still, is not something that we do back in the metropolis but here every second lasts a minute and every minute an hour. What bliss! The next day comes too quickly and he gets ready to fly off back to the busyness of life.

From Stability to Insecurity, from Independence to Strong Love

By Jekaterina Denisova

They say family is the basic social unit; family represents people living together by ties of marriage. But what if this basic social unit falls into pieces one day? For me, family is something irreplaceable and very important in my life because they are people you know will never fail you no matter what...until they do...

It all happened when I was 16 years old. One spring day of my life turned me around in a way that I never expected. I could feel my body trembling, my heart beating faster and my face becoming numb when my mum said the words.

'Me and your dad are getting divorced.'

It felt like someone took a breath out of my soul. Pope Francis said "Words can kill". They really can! I kept on asking myself

'Why is this happening? How do I deal with it?'

Like a rising volcano the anger followed swiftly because I could not believe it had happened to me.

'God, what have I done that this has happened to me?' I pray, I believe in you, I regret when I sin, I love people around me, I love you! Please forgive me, please let it all be my dream!'

Unfortunately, the next day was not promising and it followed the same way as yesterday - a lot of thinking, talking to myself, crying, and compassion. I stopped, and realised that all this was really happening.

Things changed and my life got turned upside down. I quickly lost my stability and felt insecure. Suddenly, after having a complete family, I found myself all alone in a

four bedroom flat. Possibly, it was the beginning of my second life. Both my parents left the country straight after the divorce. My older sister was completing her bachelor degree in the capital of Lithuania -Vilnius, which is 100km away from the town where we all used to live together and where I eventually stayed. No, do not think that my dad, my mum and my lovely sister wanted to leave me alone and move on with their own lives - it was only because of circumstances. Believe me, they tried so many times to take me with them, but it just did not happen. It did not happen mostly because I was such a stubborn child who wanted to simply finish secondary school in the hometown she grew up in together with her classmates.

It took me a long time to realise that my family will never be the same and that now I go to sleep without kissing anyone on the cheek. I get up in the morning and listen to the silence. But I knew I had to move on and seek my goals no matter what.

Think back and try to remember what you used to think about when you were 16? I can only assume that most girls at this age think about: school, friends, boyfriend. In my case, I had to think about today and tomorrow. Do the shopping, check the bills, cook in the evening after school, manage my studies and cope with the 'echo' in the flat. Was it hard or harmful for me? No, I saw it all working to my advantage, because I believe, and still believe now, that whatever happens, happens for reason. This period of time has definitely changed my life, but thank God it changed me for the better.

Some people may think that when you are 16 all you need is freedom and independence. To get that freedom, teenagers always try hard to prove something to their parents, show them that they can make serious decisions and win. I did not have anything to prove. I did not have to show anything to anyone. I had that 'freedom' in my hands and a chance to do whatever I wanted to do. Imagine that. But thank God, my family, friends and my boyfriend believed in me. I tried my best to never fail them, and used this freedom so carefully, with the sense and clear mind to turn it all into a sustainable independent life.

I finished my secondary school, I left home and entered University in Luton (UK), I have found a job in one month time to maintain myself and feel no shame. This all

happened not only because of my strong wish to reach my goals, but also because my family believed in me and my boyfriend supported me.

I am so delighted with my life now. I always think that we have to love the life we live no matter what. This huge distance between me and my loved ones made us appreciate each other more and love each other more from a distance. It is impossible to explain how much I love, appreciate and miss them all the time. But I am glad that we still have an opportunity to see each other at least three times a year, at least 14 days, at least 336 hours. Usually, these moments lasts like a minute, but they always stay longer in my heart. They made my life wonderful and full of love that I believe I will never fail.

VA Bella Beauty – For Busy Bella’s who rock Beauty to Business!

By Venessa Afonja

Now let’s get this fact straight to begin with. I am mature and smart enough to know this...

“Makeup is superficial but the inner confidence it creates is superspecial”

I made this quote up while whatsapping a friend one Sunday evening after she had seen my weekend creative ‘Get the Look’ makeover post on Facebook. So, what’s this all about?

I have never ever really thought of myself as beautiful, in fact I can’t remember the last time I sat down to think about myself full stop! For as long as I can remember it has always been about my children, my husband, my parents, my business, my bills, my money – or the lack of it most of the time but not about ME! So, how did I find myself?

We met in university, we had a great start, we got engaged, and we got pregnant! (Well I got pregnant. It was all good. We loved each other and my parents liked him. Coming from a strong Christian family the pressure was on to be actually married before Ase was born (now 11 years old). So to cut a long story short – we did. Just a small registry ceremony and a family lunch a month before Ase was born. No glam, no dress, and no fuss but nice. The plan was to re-visit the wedding the summer after Ase was born and make me the beautiful bride for the day that every girl dreams of but that never happened, not the following summer, or the summer after or even the one after that.

Fast forward ten and a half years and three children later we finally decide to re-visit the wedding. This was the turning point of my self-rediscovery which I realise now but did not at the time? Like any woman faced with her BIG day it was all about getting ready for the day. What would I wear, how would I look, the colours, the style....I must admit, although nearly 11 years older than what I should have been I felt just as excited as a ‘young’ bride to be....lol

Too be honest I was quite relaxed about the wedding plans as I had a wonderful sister to take care of that (which she did) so I decided to STOP and think about me.

I wanted to look my best for myself. I started to exercise every week, eat less crap and I started a course of facials to prep my skin for the occasion. At first there was no change....and then all of a sudden about 4 months into my new regime I noticed the difference, my friends and family noticed the difference too. This motivated me to keep it going up until the day before the wedding. The day came and it was truly amazing. I can honestly say ONE of the best days of my life. Not too many people and not too much fuss. A simple and beautiful day with my nearest and dearest.

The day after the wedding was when the comments started. My friends and family started saying random things like they had NEVER seen me look so beautiful, so lady like, a few friends even joked that it was as if it was not me that day. When I stopped and took in the comments and reflected on the pictures of the day it was true!

That was it! I decided that I would start to pay more attention to myself and not just wait for a 'special' occasion. Why would it not be possible to look and feel like that every day or at least more often than not? I suddenly realised that I loved makeup and what it did to my appearance as I had been transformed by my wedding makeup artist. I started living and breathing it, reading about it all the time. I watched countless YouTube videos over and over again and took a professional lesson from the lady who did my makeup for the wedding. I loved it and the compliments kept coming and more importantly I felt more confident on the inside which started to reflect even more on the outside.

I decided to share a couple of photos of the new me on Facebook one Sunday and oh my God, the number of likes and comments I received was just mind-blowing. All of a sudden my girlfriends and other women were interested in what I had done to myself and started to ask for advice and tips. This really made me laugh as this was me who knew nothing about makeup or beauty before!

However, every time I was asked for advice I was really happy to share my journey, the little knowledge I had gained and it compelled me to learn more. I was now a 'Bella' and it made me feel good inside that my friends and other women were encouraged by me to try new looks and change their lifestyles to bring out the best in themselves too. I loved it and I love it.

This is how 'VA Bella Beauty' started and the rest as they say is now history.