

There was an old woman

Looking back I realise that we had quite an unorthodox childhood. My mother - a single parent - kept the family unit together albeit with some difficulty. There were ten of us, all girls and we were a happy and boisterous bunch. I was rather naughty, but on reflection I was probably trying to gain some attention from Mother - as we were all under 12. At the time it never occurred to us that our life was any different from other families and it's only since I left home that I realized that it really was quite extraordinary.

Mother started her family late in life and was consequently often very weary. When a new baby appeared she would hand over the care of the child to an older sibling. The ten of us had names nearly all starting with the letter A - I was Angel and there was Annabelle, Amy, Alice, Abigail, Amelia, Annette, Abbey and Alana but Mother then named the youngest Chrysanthemum unable to think of another A name.

We never knew any of our fathers, but mother blamed our strange house design on a young architect, Christophe with whom she had had a romantic liaison so we assumed he had fathered one of us. She used all her savings to encourage the gentleman to remain in her life, but he disappeared upon completion of his project. Mother became depressed and then we rarely saw her.

We never asked questions about our fathers but suspected there were many, as our skin, hair colours and personalities were so different. We were home-schooled and so had no contact with children who knew or lived with a father. Our home schooling was spasmodic and given by older sisters to the younger ones, so the content was often unsuitable!

Our home was a most unusual design. I soon realised this as I passed the many red brick boxes that were the houses in the local village. We had a three storey main house with a curved single storey extension and as soon as the unsuitable and impractical build was finished Mother regretted that she had not listened to Christophes's ideas more intently. His shock of blonde hair and piercing blue eyes took all her attention.

We rarely shopped as mother was determined that we should be self sufficient so we all had to look after the extensive fruit and vegetable plot and the chickens and goats. As the years rolled on she would issue fewer and fewer instructions to us each morning before taking to her bed to rest.

We were always carefree, busy and never lonely but there was one miserable and very strange time when Mother intervened - a rare and entirely out of character occurrence - to announce that we were changing our eating habits for one month. She planned to roast two chickens each Sunday and to use the bones to make a thin soup to be eaten every day until the next roast dinner. We were really mystified and not happy about this as she also decided that carbohydrates were not healthy and so there would be no bread with the soup.

One consequence of this was that we were always cold at bedtime as we did not have enough nutritional fuel in our systems to keep us warm. Mother's patience wore thin as we cried or grumbled each bedtime begging for more food, so she threatened to whip us with a red leather belt and send us to bed, explaining that at least one part of our anatomy would be warm!...

Memories, memories memories.....