

If you accept that humankind is at base merely primitive, it may sweeten any distaste at my tale.

I shall offer you a – digestible - outline. You can read the rest for yourselves - if you have the stomach — in *My First Thirty Years* by Gertrude – ... Beasley.

It's an account of my 'kin' – the - ... Beasley tribe: simply the sorriest and cruellest folk that God ever fashioned.

West Texas tenant farmers, constantly on the run from eviction and debt. Morality - unaffordable. My siblings? Merely eleven uncalled-for pregnancies. My mother, who self-aborted every 12 months, regularly fended off my father's assaults with a shovel to his head.

Five of the vile brood were my brothers. Their notion of sport? To drag me to the horse stall: throw me down in the straw or tie me screaming to a halter post: I - was - four. If ever I managed to secrete myself under the floorboards to elude them, the sows and calves became their acceptable substitute ...

But – my father would usually unearth me: kick open the loose boards, abuse me brutally, then beat the boys to blackness for *their* sins, who in turn came back to beat *me*, then the animals, as if we all, poor benighted creatures, were cast in stone-cold iron.

All of them took their turn with me - regularly and routinely – only deterred by my maddened mother chasing them off with a bucket or a broomstick, and wailing in despair at the grossness of the creatures she had spawned.

After one particularly cruel day, my mother packed our bags, picked me up off the straw and we left – leaving them to wallow in their own filth. There was no money, so

we could only slink from one back-alley dive to the next, before - he - got wind and thundered through town to root us out and cart us back ...

I hid in school. Heavenly, peaceable school. Bullied I may have been, but it was as nothing to what I bore at home. Mostly the tormenters only wanted answers, anyway: How many siblings do you have? Too many. What's your father do? Fornication. Is your sister a prostitute? Guess so. Is your sister's kid your father's? Sure thing.

They slid off and I got on. I was a prodigy, so one teacher said. She pushed me on: got me into teacher training and secured me a post in a local school. Teaching? A walk in the park! Discipline maintained with a nice bit of brute physicality. You do - what you know.

Desperate for freedom, though, I enrolled for a degree at the University of Chicago - where the campus air was just singing with the big issues of the day: socialism, feminism, contraception! Thankfully, young men gave me a wide berth once they heard I championed equality and mutual respect; so - well and good.

I prospered! Five years as a journalist for the *National Geographic* and *The Nation*, then assignments in China, Japan and the Soviet Union, and a voyage to London to interview Bertrand Russell. I liked London's benign anonymity and I chose to stay awhile ...

Not one of - ...the Beasleys was ever to say well done and we're proud.

I urgently needed a name-change: something, *anything* rather than - ... Beasley - but just as I set about it, I got a publication offer! Printing and circulation! A tidy advance! Then - reviews - of course. ... All of them - excoriating! The British censors had just done a hatchet job on *Ulysses* and *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, so they were well in the mood for hewing me down too.

Back in my own land, I was simply knifed in the heart. By my very own golden idol! Janet Flanner, of *The New Yorker* magazine, condemned my book as 'perfectly frightful', worthy only of a 'nauseous, clandestine circulation'. I was no better than a 'pornographer'. As unspeakable and unnatural as Medea.

Police arrived at my lodgings, and laid charges of obscenity at my door. I screamed like a banshee and smashed my own window as they tried to haul me away, just confirming their verdict of me as certifiable: 'Take her away: to the Hospital for Lunatics, Holborn!'

'Wake up, you've got visitors! Gentlemen calling!' From the US customs authorities! Oh! Freedom? ... Nope, fettering! Handcuffs. They frogmarched me onto a ship bound for New York harbour. Any liberty I was ever to see again was a mere statue.

And not one of – ... those Beasleys - came to meet me at the docks; to claim me, as theirs.

My subsequent whereabouts were known to no one, even me. According to a curious researcher some 60 years later, an asylum on Long Island became my new prison: where I languished, unvisited, unloved and unwell for over 30 years. At the age of 63, I was generously awarded the agonies of pancreatic cancer which removed me at last from my endless string of living hells.

Women of the world, if I have any words of value to leave you, they are these: 'Life may not be worth living, but it *is* worth talking about.' Strive till the end to *be heard*.

Gertrude Beasley, 1892 - 1955

Angie Cairns