

## Prologue

There were many things I didn't have when I was younger. I didn't have a bra with three catches. I didn't have reading glasses. And I didn't have a hairy chin.

But there I was, gurning into a mirror, trying to pluck out a particularly thick white hair.

'Got it.' Satisfied, I held the offending bristle up to the light and then tried for the next. I became distracted by some words in red, written around the edge of the mirror.

'Fancy a pint?' a voice behind me asked.

I slowly took off my reading glasses and turned round.

My friends and, to be honest, most of The Red Lion, were staring at me. A guy with a beard raised his glass.

'Why didn't you stop me?' I whispered.

'You were having so much fun,' said Sarah.

'It's not like you haven't done it before,' said Jane.

I sank into my chair, mortified. When had I become such a freak? It seemed like only yesterday that I'd been an attractive eighteen-year-old, turning people's heads because I was beautiful, not because I had a beard. But I'd been having so much fun, that the intervening years had flown by and I just hadn't noticed. Suddenly I was fifty and embarrassing myself in a pub, in a very different way from when I was eighteen.

At least I had my friends with me, who would always be there through thick and thin.

'I'm off. I told Harry I wouldn't be out all night. Could do with getting to bed.' Sarah yawned and gathered up her handbag and coat.

'Got to go pick up Emma from hockey practice,' said Jane.

'What about me?' I whined.

'That guy with the beard seems nice.' Jane said encouragingly. 'Or go home and use your own mirror!'

I looked back into The Red Lion's mirror and tilted my head. There were still a few hairs sticking out of my chin, but at this angle the lighting made my wrinkles disappear and the bags under my eyes looked almost non-existent. I smiled to myself. Looking good girl.

The others rolled their eyes at each other and gathered their things. We left the pub and went our separate ways to our very different lives. I sauntered home, relieved that I had no kids and that I wasn't going to bed early with a man, just to get some sleep.

Relieved? Yes, honestly. Well I wouldn't want a man taking up half my bed, would I? Snoring and keeping me awake. And all that fuss about having to pick up kids from this and from that.

I made a cup of hot chocolate and slouched in front of the telly in my old dressing gown and watched 'Gentleman Prefer Blondes'. Again.

And started thinking.

I was very happy with my single life, but what if I did suddenly want a boyfriend? Was I still attractive enough to find one? Did people notice me or had I become one of those invisible women as soon as I hit fifty?

I was definitely attractive last year. I know I was. I was walking along the street when a man got out of a car in front of me, did a double-take and managed to splutter, 'Wow, you're beautiful.' That kind of attention from a man in the street is definitely okay.

And another guy, on his thirtieth birthday.

'You're lovely,' he said. I preened. 'I bet you were stunning when you were younger.'

I gasped. His friends gasped. The whole pub gasped.

'And I'm stunning now,' I stammered and went home and cried.

But he was right. I was stunning when I was younger. All young people are. I look at eighteen-year-old girls today, worrying about an inch here and a spot there and want to shout at them. 'You are gorgeous. Use it, while you still have it. One day you'll be old like me.' And for

all those years, I had used it and had always taken it for granted. But was it limitless? Was there a sell by date on stunningness?

Of course I was old, if you counted the number of years, but people were never quite sure how old. Only the other day I was chatting to one of my friends and I mentioned my age. Her son, who was studying American history, overheard. You could almost hear the cogs in his little brain whirring, as he calculated the year of my birth. And then he blurted out amazed,

'My God, you were alive when Kennedy was shot!'

A moment of confusion and then I countered, 'Yes, but I had nothing to do with it. I've never even been to Dallas.'

This young man hadn't even been alive when John Lennon was shot. I had to get out of there and stop dwelling on death.

Was I thinking too much about my age? After all, you can't actually stop ageing, no matter what the cosmetic companies say. I was embracing my advancing years, with my accumulating experience and knowledge, but having always looked ten years younger than I am, it was a bit of a shock to find that my body was now slowly disintegrating. Wasn't it time to come to terms with it?

Maybe it was my young outlook on life that had allowed me to keep off the ravages of time, or perhaps it was my genetics that gave me such smooth skin. Even my hair was a natural dirty-blonde with no grey and no highlights, dyes or tints. Or was it the fact that I had never had kids that kept me so young, with none of the angst and ageing that they seem to cause?

It wasn't that I was depressed about getting older, because I was quite content with life, but looking forward into my sixties and seventies I decided that it might be good to have someone to grow old with. Maybe it was time to find myself a man. And if I was starting to look old then it might be more difficult to attract a nice young one, so wouldn't it be a good idea to find myself that man now, while I still had my own teeth.

You see, in all my years of having fun and enjoying myself, I'd forgotten to get married and settle down. I'd looked for men and tried a few out, but my heart had never really been in it. I

was never sure what the ultimate goal had been. So maybe now a shift in my attitude was required. I'd better work out what it was I really wanted and how to get it. But was I capable of working this out on my own? Probably not, as I'd always just drifted along aimlessly through life and I was coming to this game a bit late. I decided that although friends would be good, they would just tell me what I wanted to hear and as I had no idea what that was, I felt it might get a bit confusing.

So I decided counselling was a good place to start. I had no problem with the idea of talking to a stranger and telling them my intimate secrets. Paying someone to listen to me seemed a sensible idea. I had tried counsellors previously in my life, to help me get into relationships, get out of relationships and get over relationships, so I knew roughly what was involved.

There was the one who really made me feel good. I was getting somewhere with her, until I phoned for the next appointment and she told me she'd given up being a counsellor, but good luck for the future. Such a lie. You should have seen her house. She'd spent thousands on that consulting room and all her exams.

Good? I felt like shit.

Then there was that one who said I should stop being the entertainment. She explained that men enjoyed the fun but always ended up marrying your boring friend. Ah, so that's what had happened to all my boring, happily married, friends.

She was very into the 'The Rules', an American 'How to Catch a Man' book from the 1980s, and told me I should just stand in a bar and let the men flock round me. I saw her one Friday night. She was just standing in a bar with men flocking round her.

I went to see her one last time and she fell asleep while I was talking. Her last comment was that if I didn't have a boyfriend in the next six months then there was something wrong. That was the point, I wanted to scream. There is something wrong! But she'd already fallen asleep again, so I closed the door softly behind me.

I thought I'd try hypnotherapy, but a friend was dead against it. She said she'd only gone to a hypnotherapist in order to lose some weight, but was now addicted to dark chocolates with sickly cream fillings.

But when I went to my first hypnotherapist it was great. I felt so relaxed afterwards that I spent £100 on clothes I didn't need. And then she told me she was giving up being a hypnotherapist and suggested someone else. Oh no, it was happening again. Was I that uncounsellable?

I gathered my self-esteem up off the floor and tried her suggested alternative, who had crystals dangling from lamps and doorways and talked in a very deep, creepy voice. She also had cats, so I spent most of the time sneezing, but sneezing within a hypnotic state.

In frustration I tried one last hypnotherapist. And she was good. Very good. I didn't see her often, just when things got on top of me. And she helped me feel positive, content and relaxed.

Now it was time to ask her what it was that I really wanted. And with her help I reached the conclusion that I had never really been ready for a relationship, but she thought that one day I would be, when the time felt right, and at that point I would understand what having a relationship involved. Until then I could just live my life as a contented individual. She helped me find the tools to carry on enjoying myself.

So I decided to use them.

## 1.

### My Favourite Father

*At university my father half-heartedly used to go along to rugby training. He was not very good, but one week he was selected for the Saturday rugby team. The war was on and maybe some of the regular players were off fighting. Who knew why a man with such little skill was chosen to play?*

*Obviously he didn't turn up for the game, because he hadn't seen his name on the team sheet on the noticeboard.*

*He didn't even know there was a noticeboard.*

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I was born in Preston in the late 1950s, in a hospital run by nuns. They were not impressed by my mother, as she made too much noise when giving birth to me. She was admonished for screaming and then was told that this was the way she should have done it, as a woman next to her squeaked twice and dropped a perfect child.

Of course, I was present at my birth, but I can't tell you much about it from my own experience. But happily, my mother has regaled me with the stories of the mice that infested the hospital and congregated in the maternity ward. The lovely mice that ran across the bedside tables. The mice that were fed and encouraged by the nuns.

In those days, mother and baby would usually stay in hospital for at least a week after the baby was born, but on this occasion my father came to the rescue and took us home within a couple of days. If we were going to be surrounded by vermin, he wanted it to be in the comfort of our own home, where he could get rid of them for us.

As I say, being three days old I wasn't party to all this, but since then I did become aware of my father's dexterity when it came to ridding our house of mice.

Once while at school, I returned from a camping trip with a rucksack containing the remnants of a packet of biscuits. Tired, I dumped my bag on the bedroom floor and went to

bed, to be woken at about 2 am by what can only be described as a chomping sound. Not like my brother eating his breakfast. Not as horrible as that. But it still made the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end.

I sat up in bed and there was a pattering of tiny feet as a mouse scurried out under the door and off to some other realm of the house. I drifted back to sleep, but in the morning I woke alert and ready, with a plan for that night's mind games, as I felt sure that the mouse would return.

I left the biscuits in the bag on the floor, but strategically placed a mouse trap just outside my room, on the landing, where the gap under the door was at its highest, guessing that the mouse would choose that line of escape.

Sure enough, at about 2 am, there was the sound of chomping again. I moved slightly. It pricked up its ears. I moved again and it scurried under the door.

Crack!

The mouse trap slammed onto the poor unsuspecting creature and nothing more was heard. My dad would sort out the mess in the morning, so I shamelessly went back to sleep. But a couple of hours later I was rudely awoken by a constant banging on the door. The mouse had not been killed and was now trying to extricate itself from the trap. The sound sent shivers through me and I knew I hadn't got the nerve to open the door to release a squirming injured mouse from the trap.

So of course I shouted for my dad in the next room. I had never shouted for my mother, ever, over the years and anyway she really didn't like mice. Of course I hadn't actually told my parents of my plan, so as my dad came out of his room, I shouted through the door. 'There's a mouse in a trap by my door and it's still alive.'

'Oh yes, you're right,' said my dad, before taking off his slipper and hitting the mouse really hard on the head a few times. He put the remains in the bin and went back to bed. All in a night's work.

And that's what dads are for. Well, one of their many uses.

These days I use humane traps, where the mouse enters one end of a plastic tube and its weight moves the tube so that a door closes and it locks itself in. You then take the trap to a lovely field far away and empty the living mouse out to enjoy its new life.

Well that's what you should do, unless you haven't noticed that the trap has closed, until there's a really nasty smell in the kitchen and you have to flush the mouse remains out with a hose.

But I digress.

After my dad's parents died, he sold their house in Wallasey and bought a big house for us in Chorley, Lancashire. And when my mum's mum died, her dad and brother moved in with us. So there we all were, in the early 1960s, my mum, my grandad, my uncle Gerald, my dad and my three brothers, Ed, Richard and Hugh. And me. It took me some time to realise that not every family consisted of three generations of men all living in the same house and that other children often had a full set of four grandparents. It also took me a number of years to realise that not everyone's parents were called Muriel and Frank and that these weren't just other words for mum and dad. Everybody had their own set ups at home and this was just mine.

I had my own little room over the front door, while my parents had a room and two of my brothers shared, until one of them decided to sleep on the landing. And everyone else had their own rooms in the attic. There was only one bathroom and one single toilet in the whole house, but somehow we all managed to survive.

When we first moved in, all the rooms had bell pushes in order to summon the servants, so we would press them whenever we wanted a glass of lemonade or a bar of chocolate or someone to switch channels on the television. After the first few weeks my exasperated dad disconnected them and explained that servants weren't included in the house purchase.

There were massive scary cellars and the garden was huge, with a summer house and an old greenhouse with vines of grapes struggling through the broken panes. There were beds of rhubarb and raspberries and a maze of gooseberry bushes. And there were lots of trees to climb and enormous flower beds to hide in.

It was great living in such a big house, but I'm sure my dad would have preferred to still have his parents around, instead of using their money to buy the house. Actually I don't know what my dad thought about his mum and dad, because he wasn't one for discussing his feelings.

He was quite shy and apart from us kids and Mum, didn't really seem to like people's company very much. I'm not sure he was totally happy that my grandad and uncle lived with us, but it seems that when my grandma died, Grandad said to my mum, 'What am I going to do now?' and out of compassion she had said that he could live with us. And for some reason that meant that because her brother had been living with them, he would have to move in as well. I know she has wondered since why they couldn't fend for themselves. I never knew anything about this and was quite happy in the house with my extended family. Wasn't I lucky to have so many people to play with and to talk to?

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My mum and dad had both worked in scientific roles at Leyland Motors in the early 1950s and met each other through the company theatre club. In 1953 they got married and had their four children. My mum stopped work until 1964 in order to bring us up. And a very good job she made of it. She tells the story of a time when she had to go to the dentist in an emergency and couldn't find anyone to look after us, so she sat us down in the waiting room and told us to be good and not to move or make a noise. Three of us at the ages of six, four and two sat as quiet as mice, quieter than the ones that invaded my bedroom, while Hugh, at the tender age of one, crawled around on the floor gurgling, until she came to get us. I'm not sure we were ever collectively that quiet again.

She went back to work when Hugh started school. She became the lab technician at Winckley Square Convent School in Preston, the school that she had attended as a child. The same school that her mother had been to before her and the one that I would go to at the age of eleven. My dad had various jobs including working in a steel foundry, a university lecturer and a salesman for a laboratory equipment company, selling to universities and schools.

They didn't earn lots of money, but then they didn't need much, as they very rarely spent any. There was very little excess in our house. My parents never went out drinking or even stayed in drinking. Of course there was a bottle of sherry in the cupboard for Christmas and funerals and I once saw my dad sitting on the kitchen floor cleaning his shoes, with an empty bottle of Newcastle Brown next to him. I remember it well because it was the only time I'd ever seen him have a beer and he was a bit giggly.

My grandad was the treasurer at the cattle market in Preston, a job he'd had since he was fourteen. He had wanted to better himself so he went for a desk job, instead of manual work, and worked there till he died at the age of seventy-six. Each week he would bring home various food stuffs, given to him by the farmers at the market, which would augment our weekly shop. He'd bring eggs and cream, vegetables and chickens or sometimes a goose.

He would also buy bars of chocolate and leave them in white paper bags in the kitchen cupboard. After tea we'd sit watching television, trying to catch his eye and getting more and more excited as we anticipated his almost imperceptible nod and the tilt of his head towards the kitchen, when one of us would eagerly jump up and go and get the bag. He would then hand out Cadburys milk chocolate bars or Caramacs or Galaxys and we would sit there munching in front of 'Coronation Street'. And we never even thought of eating any of the chocolate at any other time of the day, without his permission. How did I manage to do that? These days the whole bag wouldn't last more than one evening.

Part of our weekly food shop was on a Friday after tea. Dad would drive Hugh and me to Booths, the only supermarket in Chorley, and buy whatever was needed. Hugh would pack it carefully into cardboard boxes and then we'd race back home in time to watch 'The Virginian', while my dad did the washing up. And on Saturdays we'd walk with my dad to the market and buy vegetables and cheese and then meat from the butcher. We'd have roast chicken on Sunday or a joint of lamb and still have enough left to stew up for Monday's tea. Did we just eat smaller portions in those days or were chickens bigger?

On weekdays, when he got in from work, my grandad would usually prepare the tea by putting the meat in the oven and peeling the potatoes and carrots and cutting up some cabbage or cauliflower. We would lay the table and when Mum came home she would cook the meal, well past al dente, ready for when my dad got home at six. And Dad would help Mum with the cooking at the weekends and on a Saturday night he would make a tasty stir fry, using anything suitable that he found in the fridge. And Saturday was the day when we all helped with the cleaning of the house. I would spend ages sweeping and washing the front steps and using the donkey stone to whiten the edges. The one thing my dad wouldn't do was the washing and ironing, but I think there was a pretty good division of labour in our egalitarian household.

Sometimes we'd all go out for a meal. My mum and dad were not adventurous and had never even been abroad, but we would visit the local Chinese restaurant every now and again, learning to use chop sticks at an early age. There were odd trips to the theatre, but any extra money, after the bills, would be spent on our one-week summer holiday. We didn't do big presents at Christmas or birthdays, we didn't buy unnecessary clothes, and our pocket money was low. Life really was so much simpler and cheaper then. We weren't constantly bombarded by television advertisements telling us that we must buy a new gadget or a new smartphone or a new car. And even if we were bombarded by advertisements, we never took any notice.

Everyday entertainment involved a lot of playing football and cricket, digging holes in the garden and playing board games. And building mechanical contraptions with Meccano or houses out of Lego, which bigger brothers would take such pleasure in destroying. I had two dolls, but as they were soon destroyed by my brothers throwing them across the room or pushing their eyes in, they didn't last very long. But I didn't feel any great loss. Later on, I managed to save my Sindy doll from their clutches, but I think they'd grown out of doll torture by then.

We'd also help Dad to smelt aluminium, in a home-made furnace, in the back garden. I'm not sure that's a sentence one hears very often. Somewhere in my loft, there must be a box that

holds an aluminium letter J. I wonder if my brothers still have theirs. Not much use in themselves, but they certainly bring back memories.

And there was a lot of bicycle riding. Ed would get a new bike and then Richard and Hugh would have it handed down, one to the other so they'd all get one in the end and because I would have to have a special girl's bike, I'd have my own second hand one. And sometimes we would play with water pistols or pea guns or the odd penknife thrown between the legs. A game known as 'Splits' and very scary now I think back to it.

Dad would go away on work trips a couple of times a year and come back with pockets jangling, full of small change. These were his winnings from playing Three Card Brag. This didn't involve big money, as the stakes would start at a penny, but he always seemed to come out on top. He taught us the family-fun version, Nine Card Brag, and we would play this at weekends or on holidays, using smelly buttons, as we used to call them, instead of money. Do people still have old sweet tins full of collections of odd discarded buttons, just for such occasions?

Most evenings at home, we would all watch television together, except my dad, who would sit in another room reading the paper, or hover at the door, neither leaving nor sitting down, which could be very annoying. There was 'The Man from Uncle', 'Danger Man', 'The Fugitive' and 'The Prisoner'. I loved 'Fireball XL5' and was so pleased when 'Thunderbirds' started, because for some reason I had a massive crush on Virgil. A string puppet. I know. I enjoyed 'The High Chaparral' and then 'Alias Smith and Jones' and countless other western series. And we all laughed at 'Do not Adjust your Set', and then 'Monty Python's Flying Circus'. And of course there was 'Doctor Who', from behind the settee.

Before I started school, we used to watch 'Andy Pandy', 'The Flowerpot Men', 'Rag, Tag and Bobtail' and 'The Woodentops'. How primitive and creaky, but amazingly reassuring. There were also the European children's series such as 'Belle and Sebastian' and 'Robinson Crusoe', which were dubbed into English and shown in that dead time, after school and before tea, when you were meant to be doing your homework. I also remember enjoying the 'Magic Boomerang' and the wonderful 'Skippy'. Endless entertainment.

Have you just cried 'Weeeeeeed' in a squeaky voice, hummed the theme tune to 'Robinson Crusoe' and tutted like a kangaroo? If you haven't, then have a quick look on YouTube and you'll never be the same again.

We'd watch 'Crackerjack' on Fridays and 'Blue Peter' on other days and make lovely presents for our parents, aided by Valerie Singleton or John Noakes. I can still see my poor mother's face, when I gave her a Christmas present of two seed trays, covered in sticky back plastic, stuck together like a box and filled with reels of cotton and needles and pins. It's not like she didn't already have a sewing kit, so it wasn't long before the seed trays were being used for growing mustard and cress on the window sill. I didn't mind, because the cress was good, although I'm not sure we ever knew what to do with the mustard. Did anybody ever know?

I entered a 'Blue Peter' competition, to name a Dalek. I chose the name Lumpy, for which I won a 'Blue Peter' badge and a wonderful 'make your own cardboard Dalek' kit. They don't have prizes like that anymore.

Once a week, Grandad would bring the cash home from the cattle market, to count it. He'd close the curtains in the living room and pour the money onto the table. When we were young we were allowed to pile the notes up into their different denominations and crease them down the middle. Piles of ten shilling, £1 and £5 notes, with maybe the odd £10 or £20, all with the queen facing the same way of course. And then, as we got older and more trustworthy, we were allowed to count the coins out into different bags. It was so satisfying to find enough shillings or pennies to fill a £1 bag. I still love bagging up my spare change these days, although it's not the same without the halfpennies, sixpences and shillings. And those lovely distinctive threepenny bits.

On other evenings my dad would sit me on his knee and help me learn the elements of the periodic table or we'd pore over maps or better still draw our own. Dad was always pointing out geographical features when we were driving around the countryside and one of his favourite sayings was 'There's that river again', as he pointed out the course of a meandering river. Mum just kept telling him to keep his eyes on the road.

There were always loads of cars parked outside our house. My Grandad had a Hillman Minx and my uncle had a Ford Consul. My Mum had a Fiat 500 and my Dad had a company car, a Ford Anglia or a Cortina estate. And years later, when my brothers were old enough, they had cars outside as well. Luckily there was a ginnel round the side of the house to park the extras.

I was never very interested in cars and didn't even have any Matchbox or Dinky cars of my own, although I would play with my brothers' sometimes, once my dolls had been incapacitated. And I had no interest in pressing a lever down with my thumb to propel a car round a plastic track, where it would inevitably overturn on a sharp corner or crash into a brother's car in a chicane and where most of the time was spent carefully placing the car back on the track in order to crash it once again. But I did love the train set, which was my little rebellion against the constant talk of cars at every meal. I got sick of them always going on about how great E-type jags were, so I decided that I liked Rover 3 litres instead. Now I look back and compare the two, I realise how wrong I was. I should have listened to my brothers.

The first car I remember my Dad having was a Fiat Multipla. I think there must have been a deal on Fiats at the local garage. It was 1963 and it was one of the old Multiplas, which seemed so big in those days, but was probably the same size as a Nissan Micra today. It had a bench seat at the back, two middle flip down seats and a bench at the front and was big enough to transport us all to Anglesey in the summer, with our cases on the roof rack. Some kids saw us with the car and asked us if we said 'Tomayto', because we must be American if we had a strange car like that. Maybe they should have asked if we said 'Pomodoro', but at the time I didn't understand what they were on about anyway.

One evening my dad took Richard, Hugh and me out to Common Bank Lane, where there was a ford at the bottom across a small river. He'd heard about it and wanted to see if we could get across and where the road went to on the other side. The answer was no and nowhere.

The Multipla wheels got stuck where some of the stones of the ford had washed away. We couldn't go forward or backward. My dad was mortified as he carried Hugh and me, screaming with fear, back to dry land across the river, which was all of six inches deep. Richard

was old enough to realise that we were in no danger and waded through the raging torrent on his own.

The local farmer had to give us a lift home, leaving my dad sheepishly waiting for the tow truck. I went back about 30 years later and discovered that the ford was probably never meant for cars, only for horse-drawn carts in an earlier, simpler time, when wheels were bigger and fords were for farmers. In so many ways my dad was not adventurous, but every now and again he would do something like this, just because he loved investigating, or maybe more likely, because my mum would tell him it wasn't a sensible thing to do and he'd do it just to be contrary. Like the time he'd promised to take me and the family to Chester Zoo for my tenth birthday. On the day of the trip my mother suggested that due to circumstances it would be better if we didn't go. But circumstances were not going to stop him.

So we drove off to Chester, leaving the rest of the family at home, with Mum probably looking heavenwards at the door. And we spent a lovely afternoon, just the two of us, going from cage to cage. And when I say just the two of us, I mean there was nobody else in the zoo, except the increasingly amused zookeepers. Maybe it had something to do with the foot and mouth epidemic that was affecting the whole country at the time. Other people had more sense than to drive all that way just to see the limited group of animals that were available to us. I think we saw some snakes and a few bats.

I admit our actions were a bit odd and it was for this reason that my father was very special to me, as I was to him. I would feel very honoured when he called me his favourite daughter, which, given the makeup of my family was of course not difficult to achieve. But I knew what he meant.

My mum was also very attentive to all our needs, in her own way, and would ferry us around in her Fiat 500. There would be my little brother and me and at least three of the Leaches from down the road, squashed in the back, on the way to school. There were times when one or two of us would have to get out and walk, so that the car could make it up a hill. But I think it's an urban myth that we ever had to push.

Dad was very careful with money and hated any sort of waste, so even in the 1960s he knew where he could recycle things. He got *The Guardian* every day and my Grandad got the *Daily Express*. I'm amazed those two papers could exist together in the same house, without one spontaneously combusting. And we got the *Lancashire Evening Post* each evening and the *Chorley Guardian* once a week. This adds up to a lot of paper. Dad would spend almost a week finishing the papers from the weekend, as he read and analysed each article or comment and also wrote numerous letters to the editor. I'm not sure how he would handle it now, with all the many weekend supplements.

At the end of each month all the paper would be bundled together and picked up by some recycling guy who came round to the house. There was also the rag and bone man, of course, who would take away other recyclable items. I'm sure he had a horse and cart, although that could just be memories of 'Steptoe and Son'. But I can still remember the cry of 'RagABo' as he came round the street corner.

My dad would take books to the second hand book shop and get a shilling or two each time. He found it difficult to throw anything away, although every now and again we'd have a clear out to 'make the house lighter'. He had a number of those old National Dried Milk tins in the garage, from the 1950s, full of variously sized screws and nails. But one of them had a label on the outside saying 'Pieces of string, too short to be of use'. And sure enough, they were.

Like a lot of men in the 1960s, my dad wore a suit and tie just about every day. He usually took his tie off when he got home and would sometimes wear a cardigan at weekends instead of the suit jacket. He saw very little reason for buying new clothes, so would buy things from church jumble sales if possible and wear things until they became threadbare and my mum would make him go shopping. She was more capable of buying clothes than he was, but also made quite a few herself. I often wore little pinafore dresses for school that my mum had made and we all had hand knitted jumpers in different colours.

Simple times.

In the house, the dining room was handed over to the kids and renamed the play room and we would leave it in such a mess. We crayoned on the flowery patterned wallpaper and performed science experiments with a Bunsen burner and test tubes, with left over school chemicals, on the great big table in the middle of the room. That's what happens when you have a chemist for a mother and a metallurgist for a father. Sometimes when Mum and Dad came in after a loud bang, we'd have to be very careful not to look up to where there would be some dodgy experiment gone wrong, stuck to the ceiling.

And once my dad brought a tiny piece of Sodium home. Other fathers would bring colouring books or Airfix models for their kids. Not my dad. In the preceding weeks we'd dug a trench in the garden, which had filled up with water and formed a primitive pond, which was great for watching tadpoles turn into frogs. But this day my dad decided to throw the sodium into the water and we all watched as it fizzed around slowly and then burst into an orange flame and suddenly exploded with a massive boom. My mother rushed out and hurried a group of stunned, but luckily not injured, children back into the house. We watched through the window, as my father, banned from the house, pondered his stupidity in allowing small unprotected children to stand so close to exploding Sodium. He was very subdued and apologetic when he finally came in for tea.

But, as usual, all was forgiven and we added it to our list of experiences. We performed concerts in our playroom and mimed to old crackly 78 records. And then we'd sing along to all the Beatles LPs that Mum and Dad would buy. My first single that I bought was Freddie and the Dreamers – 'You were made for me'. Hugh's first was 'Two Little Boys' by Rolf Harris. A record that my two older brothers defaced and scratched. Did they know something even then?

Maybe this vandalism was why Hugh and I would decide to leave home every now and again. We'd pack a little brown suitcase with a towel and Hugh's teddy bear and we'd walk down to Windsor Road and turn the corner. Mum would let us go, trying to show no emotion, while my dad would worry about us and watch us from the front door. No need. We'd turn the

corner and then look at each other, turn round and come back. Didn't everybody do that when they were about seven?

My Uncle went off to be a monk in 1966 and as he was leaving, carrying his two big suitcases down the stairs, I looked over the bannisters to say goodbye, overbalanced and fell on his head. I always say wasn't it great that he was there to catch me, but then if he hadn't been there I wouldn't have been leaning over the stairs in the first place.

He went to live in a silent Cistercian order of monks up in Scotland. And that's where he developed type one diabetes. When we went to visit him he was very thin and not very well. The self-sufficient austerity of the order and the lack of meaningful communication with the other monks were taking their toll. There is only so much you can say with primitive sign language, as you tend the fields and silently contemplate. He left the order and came back to live with us to get his body sorted out, but left soon after and went to Rome to study to become a priest. There was no stopping him in his relentless pursuit of God.

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Meanwhile, in our happy little 1960s world of fun and constant sun, we'd go off on our bikes all over the countryside and play on the recreation ground, or rec, as it was known. Various brothers were gently knocked down by cars and Richard was particularly good at having accidents, falling off things and into things. He was the one who hit me in the back with a hammer and pushed me off the coal shed. But he was also the one who I spent ages with on the wash house roof, popping all the tar bubbles in the sun.

Of course it wasn't sunny all the time. Sometimes it rained, but we just played out and got wet or we played the game called 'dodge the rain drops', which was a great way for mothers to get you out from under their feet. Or it would be snowing and we'd go down to Astley Park and go sledging. One time in the very cold winter of 1962/63 my mum took Hugh and me shopping through the snow. Hugh was three and I was going on five.

Mum was in the middle, holding my hand on the road side and Hugh was on the shop side. As we rounded the top of our road onto Market Street, a mass of snow slid down off the shop

roof and flattened Hugh onto the pavement, covering him completely. Once she'd extricated him from the icy mound, Mum had to drag/carry us weeping and screaming the few hundred yards back home.

We got to the front gate but refused to enter the house. There was snow piled up on the roof and we were convinced that it was going to pour down on top of us, in a horrific re-enactment of the 'killer shop roof snow' incident. Mum rushed to the door and opened it wide and then one after the other we raced inside screaming, as fast as our little legs would carry us.

My mum was a perfectly good mother, but I'm not sure she really enjoyed it. It was just something you did, but it meant she had to give up work for about 12 years while looking after us. She was a bright woman and didn't get the conversations and feedback from us that she required. I remember she had a friend round talking in the kitchen once, when I rushed in noisily and interrupted them with some vitally stupid story no doubt. She sent me angrily out of the room to go and play.

I was mortified and very upset so I hid in the cupboard under the stairs, only for the ironing board to fall on my foot. I could feel the blood seeping through my sock but I daren't go back to my mother until her friend had gone.

As I heard the back door close I limped into the kitchen and showed Mum my bloodied foot. It was her turn to be mortified and upset and she apologised profusely.

Another time, Mum had gone into hospital to have her appendix out and Dad was looking after the four-year-old me for a few days on his own, as they'd deposited Hugh somewhere else. I was in the garden when I felt an itch on my neck. I put my chin down and squashed a bee, which stung me, before it politely died.

Poor Dad. I was screaming and inconsolable as he carried me next door to ask the neighbour what he was meant to do. He couldn't remember whether you treated bee stings with acid or alkali. Should he put bicarbonate of soda or vinegar on? Mrs Brierley knew everything, so my neck was bathed with bicarbonate of soda. Having read about this since, I

now realise that this would have no effect on the sting and it was probably just the attention, the rubbing and the passage of time that made me stop crying.

My mum came home the next day and sat down all nice and fresh from a lovely scented bath at the hospital after the operation. I jumped onto her lap because I wanted attention and to tell her all about the bee sting. In so doing I knocked her cup of tea all over her. I know she didn't mean to be horrid, but she screamed from the heat and shock and pushed me off.

I feel she wasn't the most maternal person, but I probably can't remember all the times she was lovely to me. I wonder, do you always appreciate one parent more than the other?

At school when I was about twelve, I cut my knee on a jagged bit of metal on a school bench. Health and safety? I know I should have gone to the school nurse, but I went crying to my mother in her lab and asked her to help me. She didn't hug me and comfort me but just told me to go to the nurse. It wasn't that she didn't like me, she just didn't seem to have those feelings. Or maybe she felt she ought not to have those feelings while she was at work.

My dad was the one I called for in the night if I couldn't sleep, not my mum, and he would sit there for ages while I lay with the light on, rigid on my back with my eyes staring wide open as I tried to make out the ghosts and the dragons in the dark recesses of the room. He would kick many of them down stairs for me, but I still found it difficult to get to sleep once he'd crept out of the room and would often call him back.

So years later, when my mum got her neighbour to bake a fiftieth birthday cake for me and asked her to put little meaningful icing pictures on top, I nearly cried. There was a hockey stick, some sheet music and a computer, all major parts of my life. And I realised that my mum had taken some notice of my activities over the years and did care. I can't describe the feelings of confusion and gratitude that I had, to think that she had gone to so much trouble for me. I just never knew she had it in her. A failure of communication between us I feel.

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I had joined St Mary's church choir with my mum when I was about nine or ten. Of course my mother could only become a member of the choir once the ancient Canon had died,

because he wouldn't allow married women to sing at the 11 am mass. They were meant to be at home making the Sunday dinner for their husband and children. When he died the choir was suddenly augmented with married sopranos. And of course our Sunday lunch never suffered anyway, because the extended family were perfectly capable of putting a joint in the oven and peeling potatoes.

We were all baptised and brought up Catholic and I remained one until the summer before I went to university, when one Sunday, as usual, I had dutifully climbed the stairs to the choir and was listening to Father Dooley's sermon.

I couldn't believe it. Did he just say, 'All you married people should go home after church and have babies'? Go forth and multiply? Lots of Catholic babies to keep the faith going? Added to so many other ridiculous attitudes over the years, I knew then that I couldn't continue with this antiquated, male dominated church.

When my uncle Gerald became a priest he worked and lived in Lancashire and the Lake District, very much on his own. Even in the 1970s there weren't enough priests to have more than one in most parishes. But when he died, many years later, fifty priests and the Bishop came to his funeral. Funny how they only turned up once he was dead and hadn't bothered visiting him in the hospice where he was suffering for the last ten years of his life. Very Christian. At the funeral, I thought I might have to drag my mother away from the Bishop before she hit him. But she had forgiven his hypocrisy. A very Catholic thing to do.

I don't have an organised religion that I follow now, because I am just a human being and think that humans are wonderful and generally good. You don't need to follow a god to have compassion for other people.

But having said that, at St Mary's junior school in the 1960s, I loved all the rituals and church services and there was nothing wrong with the education I received. It was a great school and most of the pupils lived close by in the same parish and we'd all walk home together.

Except one day I remember going home on my own. We'd been reading 'Chicken Licken' and the teacher had stopped, interrupted by the end of day bell, before she was able to finish

the story. Confused and petrified, I refused to leave the school. All my friends left without me. Finally, when the teachers suggested it was time to go home, I hugged the outside wall the whole length of the school. But then I had to cross the playground and run hundreds of yards in the open air until I could be at home. I was in tears when I reached sanctuary, finally safe from the terror. The terror of the sky falling onto my head. Somehow I'd missed the bit about it really being an acorn.

The next day the teacher finished off the story, again in the last lesson, leaving every one of us terrified, with nobody wanting to walk home. We'd got over the fear of the sky falling on us, now we were scared that we would all be eaten by a fox.

When we were at junior school, my parents wanted us all to learn to swim because neither of them had been taught when they were young. So each Friday night we would be driven to a tiny swimming pool in Brinscall for lessons. We got different coloured badges for swimming a width and then lengths in breast stroke, back stroke and crawl. We had so much fun. Except one time when my dad was working in Bolton at a steel foundry, mum got a phone call in the afternoon saying there had been a terrible accident. She raced off to Bolton, leaving us annoyed at missing our swimming.

A white hot molten steel rod had somehow been stabbed into my dad's thigh. Luckily it missed the artery and the bone, but he had a massive indented scar for the rest of his life where his flesh had been melted away. He was in hospital for weeks and we, as kids, never got to visit him. But when he came back he had a beard, a limp and no job. He kept the beard for the rest of his life, lost the limp eventually and finally found a new job. Better a Dad with a beard than a dead Dad.

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After Uncle Gerald left we moved to a smaller house in a new estate in Euxton, just down the road. Mum and Dad had one bedroom downstairs and Grandad had the other. And the four of us had the massive upstairs room, all sleeping in there together. Dad put two wardrobes

between my bed and my brothers, to hide my modesty and it felt like my own little room and then they had a partition built and I finally did have my own room.

Hugh and I would walk round to the Leaches' house, who had also moved close by and get a lift in Mr Leach's carpet van, the mile and a half to school each morning. There'd be about six of us in the back all balancing on rolled up carpets and we always arrived just as the bell was ringing. We'd race across the playground, hoping to get into class before the doors were shut. Maybe it would have been better to get the bus each morning, so my parents wouldn't have had to keep apologising to the school for our tardiness.

We did get the bus back home in the evening, when school finished at 4 pm. We'd all pile off the bus and walk through our housing estate, back home at about 4:20, depending on how many sweet shops we'd been to and how many friends we'd bumped into on the way. There would be nobody in at home, so we'd nip round the back and get the key from the hiding place underneath the oil tank and let ourselves in. Latch key kids for all of 30 minutes until Grandad got home. We were completely trustworthy and anyway, anything we did get up to was always cleared away by the time Grandad arrived.

Sometimes one brother would steal a couple of cigarettes from my Grandad and we'd hide in the hedge at the bottom of the garden. He'd have a proper smoke while I, at the tender age of nine, would daintily take one small puff and cough, meaning that he'd have to finish it off for me. He still smokes and I never have. He later introduced my little brother to cigarettes, but luckily he was sick after the first few drags and has never smoked again.

Richard would construct bogeys out of planks of wood and old pram wheels. As he became more adept he would add steering and a seat. We'd take it in turns to push him round to Pear Tree Lane and then he'd freewheel down to the bridge over the river at the bottom. Hugh and I were always running down the hill behind him, as he variously stopped and hovered over the river, holding onto the bridge rail, or sometimes deliberately fell into the river.

A lot of the time was spent on our bikes or wandering through the fields discovering nature or fishing for sticklebacks and tadpoles or climbing onto an old bus in one of the fields. Ed and

Richard used to go to school by train and I would stand on the platform sometimes and be overjoyed when the steam from the stationary train would condense into water and spray down on us.

When we heard that the Mallard was going to pass through Euxton on its final journey up to Scotland, my brothers rushed to the station to watch it tear through. As usual I decided to be contrariwise and stayed at home, until I could stand it no longer. I raced through the fields to get there and beheld the amazing sight of the massive blue steam train speeding through the fields in front of me. Serene and beautiful.

When we couldn't take the joys of Euxton any more, we moved back to Chorley, to a house five doors away from our previous big one. It was nearly as big, but only had four bedrooms and a massive attic. It's now a dentist's surgery. In fact it's the dentist that I go to, where I have my teeth cleaned in my old bedroom and check-ups in the room where my Grandad died. I love opening the front door and seeing the old tiles in the hall and the cornicing around the walls. Sometimes I ask to go down into the cellar again just to see if I'm still scared like I was in 1969. They indulge me. And I'm not.

The new house corresponded with a big change in my life as I went to Grammar school and began to grow up. I would travel variously by bus or with my Mum to and from Winckley Square Convent School in Preston. And this really was the best time of my life. The school was run by a very progressive and feminist order of nuns, who reinforced what I already knew: the fact that women had a place in this world and were just as good as any man. I learnt so much and made some of my best friends there. I enjoyed school and appreciate everything it gave me, including a marvellous education and the confidence to do all the things that I have done throughout my life.

I loved every subject, but especially geography and maths and all the sciences, and I also loved music and English and even German, but I wasn't very good at history. I would start essays with 'Once there was a king called Richard'. Lucy Worsley I wasn't.

I also played the flute in the orchestra and had piano lessons until everybody finally decided that I was incapable of playing different rhythms with my two hands and I was allowed to give up. A bit like patting your head and rubbing your tummy at the same time.

We did the usual silly schoolgirl things throughout our years there, like seeing how many people we could get doing handstands against the wall, one against the other. Or we would explore the old convent and hide in secret rooms, or dress up in strange costumes and sing along badly to records, especially the Bay City Rollers. Some people put chalk on the teachers' seats or flicked ink onto their jackets, but I was always worried about the mess it made and wouldn't take part. However, I was chief wasp killer during English lessons in the summer. The class would be screaming and swatting the wasps away, disrupting the lesson, so I'd use a ruler and a tissue to squash the wasps on the window. I obviously wasn't too worried about the mess that made.

I remember in one class, we all turned our desks round and faced the back wall because we thought it would be funny. The teacher just taught the lesson to our backs, until in the end we all turned back round and listened. We weren't very good at being bad.

In the sixth form I would have a free period when my best friends were having double chemistry, so one time as a joke, I hid in the cupboard under the bench in the lab, while Mr Randall taught them all about a particular chemical compound. Within minutes of the start of the lesson I realised my mistake, as I remembered why I hadn't taken chemistry A' level. My friends kept me amused for a while, but they wanted to listen, as it was relevant to their exams, so soon lost interest in me. It was rather uncomfortable in the confined space and I was getting cramp. I'm convinced Mr Randall knew I was there because, very kindly, after 30 minutes he left the class to 'get something', which gave me the chance to struggle out and hobble to the common room, where I could do some sensible work. No more chemistry for me.

The amazing old convent buildings that formed our school are still there, but it was converted into a restaurant and bar a few years after we left. One time, after a drink there, we

went exploring and found Mr Randall's last lesson, still chalked onto the blackboard in the lab. We've all moved on since then and I haven't hidden under any desks for a very long time.

My family has all moved on as well in so many ways.

My brothers all married and had children and now grandchildren. So I have seven nephews, one niece, and two great nephews. There have never been many females in our family, which means that the, not so distinctive, family name is being passed on to further generations.

At a family wedding once I ordered a taxi to take me home. Half an hour later a driver stood at the door and shouted, 'Taxi for Wilson'. At least ten of us stood up.

And then the main Wilson, my wonderful, lovely father, died from cancer of the jaw, which was a horrible illness to watch. I was living in London, so spent a lot of time driving up the motorway to watch him die and then to look after my mother.

My grief started in earnest a few months after his death when I heard my mother laugh on the phone and realised that she was coming to terms with it, so suddenly it was my turn to properly cry.

Of course, I had cried a lot already. I'd cried in the last week of his life, when he could no longer eat through his mouth. He could no longer speak and his mind was becoming confused. His three favourite things had gone.

During the day of his death one of my brothers told me that he'd already started grieving for my dad. But you can't do that. You can only grieve when they've finally gone.

I held my father's hand as he took his last breath and died, and it was horrible. I had to let go, afraid that it would go cold while I was holding it.

At his funeral, his favourite grandson asked a simple question. 'If they can recycle paper, why can't they recycle Grandad?'

## **My Favourite Father**

Will his hand go cold, if I still keep hold?  
Will I feel his death, with his final breath?

Will I break and grieve, as my father leaves  
His favourite daughter, now so distraught.

His sons stand staring, the sadness sharing  
They love him too, but what can they do?

My mother cries, as his spirit flies  
My body drops, my tears won't stop.

But why do I obsess? It's not my death  
This is his day, as he drifts away.

He leaves the room.  
It's much too soon.  
Now there's empty space  
On his peaceful face.

