

Full Circle



When I was a little chap (as he would call me), I loved Dad. Hardly surprising, I grant you. Yet, as an adult, until recently, I couldn't make that statement in the present tense, and make it stick. I'm not at all sure that I can explain why that is, although this story, surely, started out as an effort to find out. In the process of doing so, events overtook the story, and I ended up regaining some of my feelings for my father. I'll explain all that, but much harder is the task of arriving at the truth about how those feelings disappeared in the first place.

Certainly, Mam and Dad haven't changed much over the years. I'm sure they've aged, physically. In fact, I know that to be so if I look at family photos of our childhood. Now, on the rare occasions when I fly home to England for a visit, and I walk in the door and see Dad's grey hair and Mam's wizened face, I'm momentarily shocked with the obvious signs of their old age. But after an evening

or two with them, chatting companionably in the living room, or reading, while Mam catches up on month-old newspapers, and Dad dozes with a trashy sci-fi novel on his lap, they reassume their old appearance for me, presenting the same familiarity I grew up with.

If, then, they haven't changed much, I suppose the change is all in me. That makes sense, since I'm in no way the same little boy who got up early every Sunday morning for a long, walk with Dad.

My ears stung from the biting cold wind coming off the North Sea; I lowered my head even further, hoping the brim of my parka would keep out some of the cold. Head down to the ground like that, my world was reduced to just the big snowy footsteps I was trailing: the squeaky squelch of two pairs of rubber boots stomping through foot-thick fresh snow, and the wind rattling and wooshing across the Leas, a snow-covered expanse of grass that flowed down to the cliffs overlooking the North Sea.

Dad stopped so suddenly that I collided with him, my forehead rubbing against the thick wool of his overcoat. "What are you looking at Dad?", I asked, staring up at him.

He turned round, and took off his glasses, which were fogged up with the cold wet air. My brother and I always thought Dad looked like the comedian Eric Morecambe in his glasses. It wasn't just the glasses, but also Dad's way of making a corny joke out of everything. Now, as when ever he took the glasses off, his face looked naked and different, and his ears, cheeks and nose were red with the cold.

Dad didn't say anything; he probably hadn't heard my ineffectual squeak above the noise of the wind. I looked back in the direction he was staring. A mile or so off, behind the snow-covered Leas, the sea tossed angrily, covered in whitecaps, merging, at the farthest point of gloom, with an equally gray and forbidding sky. You could hear the seas even from hear, on the hills just inland from the Leas – an ever-present roar, sometimes punctuated by a deeper crash as a twenty-foot wave hit the cliffs full on.

I grabbed Dad's hand and pulled him in the direction of home, my thick mits fitting inside his bare palms. "Aren't you cold Daddy?" He put his glasses back on, and looked down at me, with his Eric Morecambe face, nose twitching with humor.

"Ah've the North Sea in ma veins," he said. "Come on, then, let's gaan yerm," he said in his best Geordie, the dialect of North-East England. "Where's wor Sheeb gotten to?" Sheba had gone running ahead while we'd stopped to take in the view. Now she came bouncing slowly back to us, her forelegs buried up to her shoulders with every plunge. She was smiling too, in her doggy way, just like Dad. "Besides, wor sheeb's not wearing gloves, is she?", Dad went on.

"Silly. She's a dog! They come with gloves," I piped in. We put our faces down towards the ground again, and wound our way across the hilltop, heading for Cleadon Village, where I hoped upon hope that we'd take the bus rather than trudge all the way home along the Whitburn Road.

Neil and the girls would hardly ever come along with us when Dad and I took the dog for long walks; whenever they did, they'd tire too easily,

or they'd talk all the time, and ask where the shops were. Most likely they'd argue – Neil would torment Kirstie, or Sally would tease Sheba.

I thought about the scene back home right now: the coal-fire stove in the kitchen would be moaning, as the restless wind tried to break down the chimney; Mam would be peeling potatoes in the kitchen, looking out the condensation-covered windows now and then to see if Dad and I were approaching; Neil and the girls would be in the living room watching “Swap Shop” on the TV, yawning through the long Sunday, just waiting for Dinner at three.

I clasped Dad's hand more firmly, and swung along with him.

When I joined my new school, Mowbray Road, a year after my brother Neil, I was a completely different boy from the one that had left St Vincents Infants School six weeks previously. I've spent so much time and thought on why that should be so. I don't think that I can necessarily ascribe it to the most obvious external incident: the massive blow to the mouth I received when I slipped in the bathroom on the first day of the Summer Holidays.

The accident had left my front teeth bent horizontally in my mouth, and Dad had had to straighten them himself. That first night, we'd been unable to reach our dentist, and the emergency room at the Ingham Infirmary had done nothing for me except provide a pain-reliever and some gauze to stem the bleeding.

Subsequently, over the Summer, I spent hours in a dentist's chair, having a metal brace screwed into my upper jaw. All through those beautiful June days, while I could hear my friends and the swallows in the garden outside, I stayed in,

and could only eat liquid food, primarily baby-food such as Farley's Rusks (I can taste them still).

So perhaps the consciousness of my disfigured teeth, and the shock to a somewhat sensitive disposition is enough to explain why the gregarious, outgoing, popular boy of May started at Mowbray Road Secondary School as a shy, stunned-quiet, unhappy seven-year-old. Perhaps. Perhaps not, though. It's hard for me to accept that such a small physical event could set me in a course that would pretty well entrench itself for years to come.

I met Neil outside the gate. He was already waiting for me, his parka pushed open around his shoulders. The early morning nip we'd felt in the air as we'd walked to school together had entirely gone by now, and I wished I didn't have my parka on: I felt smelly and sweaty.

"How'd you get here so quick – the lunch bell just rang a sec ago!", I asked him. That opening conversational thrust produced the expected riposte of a scowl. "Don't talk then, I'll amuse myself." I knew he dreaded it when I threatened to amuse myself, because it always ended up with my doing something goofy like running into someone's backyard as if I lived there, or loping along in a silly walk. So, as we reached the bus shelter, he tried to head me off at the pass by making small-talk.

"Do you think the Love-and-Darling Lady will be there today," Neil asked? That was our name for the waitress who'd often serve us at the Meat-n-Eat, the restaurant downtown where Neil and I met Dad for lunch once a week. We called her that because she couldn't make a single statement without it ending in one of a variety of endearments. And not just to Neil and I: she sent Neil and I into tears of laughter by using one of

her terms of endearment on Dad. “And you pet, bacon and eggs as usual?”

“How’m I supposed to know if she’ll be there or not.” This wasn’t so much a tit-for-tat, ordinary shade of nastiness from me, it came more from a growing anxiety that the bus wasn’t going to come before the first wave of other schoolboys made it to the bus-shelter. Somehow, it had gotten about in my class that Neil and I met Dad for lunch once a week. In working-class South Shields, this was considered “soft” – a word used to describe any kind of child-like or unmanly behavior. Since I had an ignoble fear of being laughed at, and my powers of attack and defense, so brilliant when marshaled against my brother, just fled into a blank shyness when confronted by the kids in my class, I’d try to get out of school ahead of everybody else just to avoid contact.

“Do you think he’ll take us back to the factory?” Neil asked, again trying to be nice, I suppose.

“Neil, you’re so boring.”

I hoped Dad would take us back to the Harlow, the printing factory that my Dad managed, all the same. We always got freebies when we went to visit him there. Last time, Dad’s friend, Johnny Iredale had given me a samples book of colored vellum, each sheaf of paper different, and each with a description stamped upon it – “burnt ochre”, “silver blue”. I always imagined that when we walked onto the factory floor, the workers would be saying “There’s the bosses sons – what fine boys.”

With a distinctive, equine bay, the bright yellow Leyland Atlantean No 33 bus swerved into the kerb, and we climbed up. Neil and I sharing a quick, secret smile, for we still felt the glamour of riding a bus, even at our great ages of nine and eight respectively. We ran upstairs; with no other

kids on board, the front seats were all ours, and we bounced excitedly up and down at our good luck. The whole world was open to us now: the pale blue sea, the bandstand at Gypsy Green Stadium, the guest rooms at the Fountain Inn, and the upstairs floors of the shops and businesses as we neared downtown.

“There’s Daddy, there’s Daddy!” I shouted. From up here, we could see down the street as Dad strode along in his quick, cocky walk, his blazer slightly hanging off his lowered left shoulder. We swept past him, but he didn’t hear our knocks and shouts. I could see his lips pursed – he must have been whistling a jaunty tune.

Dad was always whistling, or even worse, embarrassing us by singing out loud in the street. Last thing at night, when he took Sheba round the block to do her business, we’d always hear him coming back when he was still half a block away. I’d be in bed, imagining the hushed street, all the curtains of our neighbors’ living rooms closed and glowing in a blue television light. He’d be sauntering slowly along, the dog panting at his side, while he’d be whistling a song by Waylon Jennings. And he’d be looking up at the stars, brilliant and white in the cool night air.

The bus bayed again, a magnificent whoop of the breaks as it pulled into the depot, and we were first at the doors, waiting to get out and run back down the street to meet Dad. As the doors hissed open, we shot out, but calmed ourselves quickly to a dignified walk as we got close to him. “Hey kids,” he smiled at us.

Later, after our bacon sandwiches and chips, we strolled along King Street, Dad and I, while Neil ran ahead to look to see if T&G Allans had any new Dinky toys. I was telling Dad about playtime: my eyes filled with sudden, bitter tears at the recollection of how the other boys wouldn’t let

me play soccer with them. “Why don’t you punch them?” asked Dad, quite seriously? I lapsed into silence at that.

They installed it on the landing, on a little round, collapsible Indian table that we’d always used for playing cards on.

“I’ll just run round to Sheila’s to try it out, shall I?” said Mam. A minute later, and the phone started to ring, sounding very loud in the echoing stairway. “Can I do it Daddy?” I picked the phone up – the receiver felt big and cold in my hands. “Hullo, is that you Mammy?”

“Yes, it is, love. Put your Daddy on.” I passed it over excitedly to him. “Hi pet,” he said. “How’s the weather next door?”

We were the only people I knew without a color television, and without a car. But at least, at last, we had a telephone. One less thing to be embarrassed about at school. If Dad had known how soon we’d make use of it, though, perhaps he’d have reconsidered. For, a couple of days later ...

We asked Mam if we could ring him at lunchtime. By agreement with Neil, I spoke.

“Daddy – we’ve decided to start calling you Dad instead. Is that okay?” All of a sudden, I felt a rush of tears to my eyes, belying the cold matter-of-fact words I was using.

There was a brief silence on the line. “I suppose so, son. Neil too?”

“Yes, Neil too.”

The telephone changed our lives in other ways too. For one thing, we gained new insight into our parents, as we overheard them talking to friends and relatives. My Dad in particular, surprised the pants off me one day, as I heard him talking to Davie Iredale, and referring to the director of the company as an “arsehole”. It was the first time I’d ever heard Dad use such a coarse word. He’d often used “bloody” and “bugger”; but somehow, the words I myself would only otherwise hear from my street friends, seemed much worse.

My so-called street friends had assumed a large place in my life. I called them my street friends because that was the only place we spent time together – in the streets. With John Bell, I’d build camps in the Back Field, out of straw and pieces of abandoned furniture. When James Delaney, and later, Michael and Graham Pinder arrived in the neighborhood, a football or a cricket-ball became the center of our lives. I must have spent 350 days a year, in all weathers, kicking a ball nervously around in the Back Garages, never gaining in skill, always cack-handed and left-footed, always in fear of being called a “puff”, because of my unmanly clumsiness.

Whenever I wasn’t out with my street friends, I’d be in my room, drawing elaborate copies of birds from books, or Disney characters, using colored pencils. Or I’d be lying under the sheets consuming novels by Robert Heinlein at the rate of two-per-week. If the house was empty, though, my only and insistent occupation would be playing with myself. I’d discovered this enormous means of pleasure accidentally, when I’d rubbed up against the desk at school after swimming practice. And now, whenever I got the chance, I’d take up the new, strange ritual.

The dangers of sexual self-discovery are that they can lead you down strange and eccentric paths. In my case, I arrived at the odd notion that I could only masturbate by first stuffing the front of my underpants with Kleenex (couldn't use toilet-paper because we used that harsh lval stuff that looked like tracing paper), and then lying on my bed, raising my legs in the air and making cycling motions, as though I were riding a bicycle upside down.

One time, Neil almost discovered me in that attitude. As I heard him bounding up the stairs, I had to quickly figure out some explanation for why I was panting so hard. All I could come up with was his own explanation for his own strange nocturnal movements ("I'm exercising, stupid"), and hope that he didn't wonder why my shirt was half unbuttoned.

All of these activities didn't leave me much time to spend with Dad. And, in any case, my sense of what was right for a young teenage boy, and my self-consciousness before my street friends, required a distancing from Dad: I couldn't hold his hand anymore, or rough-house with him on the sitting-room floor, or even go with him and Sheba for a Sunday morning walk.

I knew that this distancing aggrieved him; I felt badly for him whenever he'd knock on our bedroom door at first light to say that he was going out along to Marsden, and did I want to come? But I had other reasons, too, for limiting the time I spent with him, as I'd started to realize that he had enormous power to hurt me. Not intentionally, by any means; more by the conflict of his masculine, boisterous demeanor with my own quiet, inward-focused nature.

The first such incident I recall was when I wanted to go to Newcastle to see "On Golden Pond", with Katherine Hepburn. I asked for an advance on Friday's pocket money so that I could go up ahead of the weekend crowds. But at his "Why'd you want to see a girl's movie like that?", I timidly backed down and

said I'd changed my mind. I fumed silently inside at how wretched and ashamed his scorn had made me feel.

Auntie Doreen bayed with hoarse laughter, and I coughed, in part to attract attention, but also in reaction to the gusts of cigarette smoke. Bored silly, I grabbed Dads hand and pulled him into an arm-wrestle. Of course, I stood no chance against him - his hairy forearms were massively powerful - but he pretended to give into me, and let me push his arm down to near horizontal before he suddenly delivered the coup de grace.

He suddenly grabbed me, pushed his spectacles down his nose and peered closely at my wrists. "What skinny wrists you have!", he said, while the other adults looked over and smiled, as if Dad's comment was nothing but a bit of fun. I immediately ran upstairs to stare at myself in the bathroom mirror. I looked at my wrists, and saw that they were indeed skinny – there was scarcely any flesh on the underside of my forearm – just a long concave curve to bony, delicate hands.

Right there, in a few thoughtless, tossed-off words that I'm sure Dad no longer remembers, he wounded the rest of my childhood. My un-self-conscious physicality departed, as I became newly wracked with disgust at how skinny I was. I became scared of showing my body, and, even on the warmest Summer day, I'd wear a thick sweater, sweating with shame. I even contemplated suicide. I don't remember how serious I was. But I remember standing at the top of the cliffs at the end of the Leas looking over at the waves hitting beneath, and imagining how easy it would be to let go.

In my second year of senior school, the wall of self-conscious reserve I'd built up cracked a little, as I started to make new friends. My childhood friends had given me the self-image of a coarse, working-class street-kid, but during the first year in which I was in an ability-streamed class, I encountered bright middle-class boys. I was at first ashamed of my rough accent, and in awe of their shirt cuffs protruding neatly from blazer sleeves, and their air of well-bred sophistication. But as I realized that some of these boys saw me as an equal, not because of my background but because of my intelligence and my love of books, I grew in confidence, and started to see how I'd been pegged into the wrong hole.

With growing awareness of the possibilities of another type of life, I started to notice the difference between our home, and those of my new friends. I started to wonder, too, why it was that we never went on vacation, and why we didn't have a car. I still had an inordinate respect for my Dad. But if, on the way home from school at lunch-time, I saw him ahead of me striding home, his old tweed jacket half hanging off his right-sloping shoulders, whistling in his cocky exuberance, I'd wonder why he didn't wear a suit like Douglas' dad.

Two long pairs of legs clad in black wool pants stretched out from the sofa to the foot of the television. In the kitchen, the clatter of dishes told the owners of the legs that lunch was imminent, but neither set of legs, nor the torsos and heads attached to them, stirred. One pair of those legs belonged to me, the other to my brother, and we both watched the noontime news on BBC1 with complete attention as we heard the latest details of the Falklands war taking place on the other side of the world.

I don't suppose either of us stopped to think for a second that the men fighting the Argentinians were scarcely older than ourselves. Neil

would graduate in just a few months and, hopefully, go to college. It was hard to imagine him fighting for our country, though not as hard as imagining myself. Neil seemed to have grown up much faster than me. I was still taller than him, but somehow, he'd grown into young manhood while I still felt like a boy, even though I was only a year younger than him.

“Neil, Keith, your Dad’s here. Come in here now!”

This last shriek from Mam was unusually forceful, so we turned off the television, and hoisted ourselves up off the sofa. When I walked into the dining room, Dad was leaning awkwardly against the radiator, not wearing his jacket, looking bemused and ... something else. It was hard to characterize the look on his face, but it wasn’t one I remembered ever having seen before. I suppose it was the absence of something that I noticed, really – the absence of his customary look of cheerful self-possession.

Mam seemed, on the other hand, to be larger than normal – as if she’d sucked in some of Dad’s strength of character.

“Sit down boys,” she said, “your Dad has something important to tell you.”

We did as we were told and turned to face him. But he didn’t seem to find it easy to begin. Finally, he clasped his hands together around his crotch, and spoke while staring at his clasped hands.

“I won’t be going back to the Harlow. I resigned this morning.”

There was a long silence as we took this in. I suddenly felt a massive certainty that things had changed for ever for us. All my life, Dad

had worked at the Harlow. I'd never known him in any other capacity than the respected, competent, cheerful manager of the two hundred men at the factory. We'd never been by any means wealthy, but we'd always had the certainty of a reasonable income.

"What will you do?"

"I don't know, son. I'll look for another job, I suppose."

I couldn't meet his eyes. We all knew how bad the economy was, particularly in South Shields where the only flourishing industries were pubs and gambling. The unemployment rate was something like forty percent. And Dad was fifty-six, and had never even graduated from high-school. I just couldn't see how he could have any prospect at all of a job.

We ate our lunch mechanically, in silence, and didn't return to the living room afterwards to watch the remainder of the newscast.

Until he gave up his job, on a matter of principle, I really had no idea of the depths of Dad's well of strength. Over the next few years, he found jobs of such lowliness that I was secretly ashamed of him while marveling at his steadfastness. He wouldn't willingly allow anything to beat down his drive to find work, but even he couldn't hide the look of defeat that began to creep across his features.

I soon moved off to college myself, a year after Neil's disgraceful grades had barely qualified him for a technical school, and so I was spared seeing that defeated look on Dad's face, except at Christmas, when I returned home to a frigid Northeast and met him at the place of his latest venture, a thrift store selling

smelly old furniture in Gateshead. I don't think that store remained in business for many weeks after I returned to London, and that was to be my last visit to the Northeast in ten years. For by the time the Summer vacation rolled by, he'd found a job as the caretaker of a high-school in St Albans, a cathedral city in Hertfordshire, just North of London.

When I took the train to St Albans that first time after they'd moved,, my life too was in a state of complete transformation, for I'd just been through a "conversion" experience at the end of term which left me professing a new found faith in Jesus. It's not my intention to make this story be about that transitional and temporary faith, but it did mean that I was as strange and peculiar to my parents as their new life in a lowly bungalow on the grounds of the high school was to me. The walls of that place were made of thin wood, and it seemed that I could hear every creak of my parents' bed as I lay trying to sleep that night. After the roar of London traffic from my first-floor room in Bloomsbury, the echoing silence on the edge of this quiet satellite town filled my ears. That was to be a miserable summer for me. I struggled both with my new found faith, and my distaste for my parents' way of life. It was with enormous relief that I returned to London in early August.

I kept my curtains closed to all but a crack, and focused my binoculars breathlessly on him. He was a curly-haired, blond American guy from my floor, and I let my breath escape unnoticed as I took in his long, smooth, curving flanks and muscular shoulders as he lay on the grass, elbows propping himself up as he talked to a girl with a tennis racket.

I felt terribly guilty at being a peeping tom; I knew it was particularly wrong because it was sinful to lust; but I could hardly control myself any

longer. Every five minutes or so I'd return to my desk and attempt to take in the text on electromagnetic theory that I was summarizing for a class. But soon, I'd pick up the binoculars again and return to the window to stare across into the gardens across the street. It was a beautiful late summer Sunday evening, and you could hear the birds echoing high in the trees, and the thwack of tennis-balls even above the sound of the passing traffic.

I started as there came a knock at the door. My parents were here already, from the sound of it. I hid the binoculars in my desk, threw open the curtains, and walked to the door to let them in. Now that they were living so close to London, I saw them more frequently. I couldn't often bring myself to go to visit them in their ugly little house in St Albans, so I usually saw them on days like today, when they were in London for the day.

Mam was wearing an atrociously garish, ill-fitting summer frock which she'd no doubt picked up at an Oxfam thrift store. Absurdly, she was wearing too much lipstick, which I'd never see her do before. I could smell Dad's sweat as he perched against the radiator. They both had that look, so common in England, of being out of place. Dad slipped on the loose rug that covered the scrap of bare floor between my bed and the door, and I blushed at my own shameful thoughts. It felt to me then that the last shreds of respect I'd had for Dad had slipped away. He didn't deserve such thoughts, and I hated myself for the feelings I recognized.

My first coming-out experience was sudden, and shockingly easy. I'm using the term "coming out" loosely here, to describe a short couple of weeks of religious crisis during the winter of my 3rd year at college. I was living in a flat

near Buckingham Palace with my best friend, and spiritual mentor, Rob. One weekend evening, while Rob was away visiting his mother, I lay in bed in my cold, damp, moldy basement bedroom, shivering. But my shiverings came from the dawning realization that my Christian faith had vanished. I'd been struggling with it for weeks. Then suddenly – literally in the space of a moment's thought – I knew it had gone for good.

The next day, I got up and knew that today was the day I'd have to tell my closest friends, most of whom I went to church with, that I no longer believed. It was made easier by the knowledge that my best friend of all, Stephen, would probably rejoice that he'd get me back on Sundays for more fun activities like table-tennis, and listening to Richard Strauss on his towering high-fidelity speakers.

My two years of Christian belief, though, had put away a nest egg in the form of a plan to study abroad. When I'd made the decision to apply to do a doctorate in alternative energy in Philadelphia, it had been with the surface motivation, stemming from my religious beliefs, to put my scientific training to a more practical, socially-beneficial use. Now, as the summer approached, I was still committed to the idea, even if the faith that had caused me to make the decision in the first place was long gone.

At a deeper level, though, the decision to escape three thousand miles away from home must have come from the need to find a new, anonymous environment to explore the person I was becoming. I began my studies in the steaming August humidity of Philadelphia as a tall, gawky, socially awkward virgin. I'd end them, only two years later, as a completely different person, after coming out of the closet during the summer between my first and second years.

Sitting on the stoop, feeling placidly comfortable in the baggy, purple cargo shorts I'd picked up at the Army and Navy, and a Penn t-shirt whose sleeves I'd carefully cut off to show off my newly muscular arms, I watched the street corners, waiting for the familiar white Volkswagen to show. Center City evening in the Summer. Hot, humid, but all mine.

"Whatcha doin, pumpkin-cheesecake?"

Shawn had sneaked up on me from the other direction. He must have parked round the corner, and come down the shaded side of Clinton Street, hiding in the trees. He was dressed, but barely, in a cut-off "Silence=Death" t-shirt and scandalously ripped jeans, and had his heavy duffel-bag over his shoulder.

I grinned at him, and held my face towards him for a kiss. "Waiting for you, whatcha fink?" He looked demurely, knowingly around, cocked me a grin, then gave me the kiss, giggling under his breath. For me it was still like Christmas every time I saw Shawn. Almost every week, he'd either drive down from Harrisburg to spend the weekend here with me in Philly, or I'd take Amtrak up to visit him.

"Come on. Let's go up." I hoisted his duffel-bag, and we climbed up the four floors to my apartment. "Dougal's away," I told him, referring to my Scottish room-mate.

"All weekend?"

"Yup."

We bounded up the final stairs into the apartment, and sprawled onto the living room floor. I lay face down on the carpet, and luxuriated as

he lay on top of me, and he rubbed his strong body against mine, wrapping me in his arms.

We never even left the apartment that night. After sex, we lay on the floor in the dark apartment, as the evening filled the huge back window with the stars, and talked idly about our plans for the big trip we were making in December. We were going to stay with my brother Neil, in London.

“Have you decided what you’re going to tell your folks yet?”

I grimaced. “No. I just can’t seem to make my mind up what to tell them. Every time I think I’ve made my mind up that I’ll come out to them, I suddenly come down with cold feet.”

“I wouldn’t tell them, if I was you.”

I placed a kiss in the small of Shawn’s back. “I’m not going to hide you away in a shopping mall like you did me that time when your parents visited Harrisburg.”

Shawn pulled away from me, and lay on his back. In the darkness, I could see nothing except a stray glint in his eyes as he stared at the ceiling. He’d often pull away like this, for no discernable reason. He seemed to get easily tired of the touch I could never get enough of.

I got up, and walked over to sit in the window overlooking Clinton Street. The yellow streetlit sidewalks were deserted. “I’m going to write to my Dad when this weekend is over,” I said. “Gonna tell him I’m a homo. Dad, I’m going to say, I’m in love with a black man.”

Shawn laughed out loud. "You're not gonna say that!"

"Well, maybe not. But I'd love to see his face if I did."

I continued to humm and haw about writing. I felt, in any case, so distant from Dad, that I felt writing him would either bring us closer or sever our relationship entirely. Either way, I'd be able to stop writing strangulated, informational letters back home which entirely masked what my life was really like. Finally, though, I did write; wrote the hardest letter I've ever written. I remember standing at the mailbox once the letter was already inside, wondering if I'd done the right thing.

I didn't hear a word from my family for almost six months, until just prior to our trip to London. Then, within a week, I got a single line from Mam, saying that she was sorry not to have written, that they still loved me, but were too shocked to write, and then a much longer letter from Dad. That Mam didn't seem to know Dad was writing made me wonder.

Dad's letter would be the first and last time the subject of my homosexuality would ever be raised between us. Dad had always written well. In the written word, he seemed to find an eloquence far removed from the rigidly pursed English lips of his generation. He wrote that I'd always been his favorite son, and so my letter had been like a wound. But, despite everything, he still loved me.

After my trip home with Shawn, where, of course, I didn't introduce Shawn to my parents, I began to see the whole thing in perspective. Coming out to my parents had been a weight off my mind, but it had made no difference to my relationship to my parents. They still didn't want to hear about my personal life,

not because they didn't love me, but because they were scared of life being too real. I learned through my sisters that my Dad had been ill in the months after I wrote, and that for the first time in their married life, Mam and Dad had seen a marriage counselor. It seemed like the whole thing had been for nothing. A lot of pain and worry, and nothing to show for it.

I didn't go home again for years.

I was picked up outside of St. Albans train station by my sister Sally.

"Eeh, look at you," she said, in an uncanny imitation of my mother.

At first take, Sally hadn't changed in the five years since I'd seen her. A bit older, indications of a double chin now that she was nearing the end of her twenties, but essentially still the same chipper hyperchondriac with the ever-so-slightly off-kilter social skills and the suspect genteel accent, which wobbled now suddenly from Eastenders to Buckingham Palace.

"Mam and Dad are most looking forward to seeing you"

"How's she doing?"

Mam has always been forgetful and absent-minded, but in recent years, she'd grown to forget, even, the names of her sons and daughters at times, and had shown other alarming signs of early senility. She'd seen all manner of specialists, but, according to Dad, none of them had figured

out what was wrong with her, although the signs clearly pointed at Alzheimers.

“Not well,” Sally said. “You have to pretend she’s okay, though. She hates being fussed over. “

I've never been close to Sally. I even hated her for most of my childhood; she was truly a brat - selfish, greedy, bad-tempered, a cry-baby. Her nature cannot have been improved by how she was treated by her siblings. With the native cruelty of children, we zeroed in on her insecurities and made her feel worthless. Somehow, with a hidden tap of inner strength, she's been able to overcome her unhappy childhood, maturing into a kinder, more sensible person. She’s still as bossy as ever, still with many flaws, but she's proven to be the one of the four of us to buckle down to help Dad take care of Mam. Still, as she started to rattle on about “her boys”, referring to the young boys she looked after in her job as a nanny, I reflected that we still have less than nothing in common. After only ten minutes of reacquaintance with her in the car, on the drive to my parents’ house, I just found that I had almost nothing to say to her, beyond the obvious subject of Mam’s condition.

We soon pulled up outside a nondescript brick semi-detached bungalow on the outskirts of town - one like hundreds of thousands of council-houses all over the country; cheap, small homes built after the war and now rented out by local government. I was suddenly minded of the visits I used to make to my Grandma when I was young. Equally suddenly, there grew upon me the same feeling of dread I remembered from those childhood visits to Grandma; a feeling compounded of pity and fear of boredom.

Mam and Dad came out to greet us, and they seemed less changed than I imagined they would after five years. Mam seemed no more wrinkled, and Dad still had the same amount of hair. He'd lost his beer belly, though, and was now a spry, still-handsome man of seventy-five. Trying to forestall the danger that Mam wouldn't recognize her, I greeted her noisily. "Hiya Ollie." She always hated being called Ollie. I caught my Dad making eye contact with Sally. They probably wondered, as I did, would she say, nervously to Dad, "Who's this?" Instead, though, she exclaimed "Eeeh, look at you!" and reached up for a hug. It was only later that I reflected that she'd become a good actress, and the greeting she used on me would have worked on almost everybody without giving away whether she recognized them or not.

Mam's forgetfulness had always been a family joke. Like the time we spent the day walking around Newcastle in a light drizzle, umbrellas in hand. Suddenly, Mam exclaimed "Eeeh, where's my umbrella?" And even now, now that her forgetfulness has become a serious, deteriorating problem, we still laughed with one another when we saw Mam go repeatedly into the kitchen to pick up her cup of coffee only to get there and forget what she went for.

When Sally had gone back to work, I sat there in the tiny house, surrounded by much of the same furniture I grew up with. I remembered lying on that same carpet tracing the shapes of the patterns with my little fingers. I looked at the profiles of my parents, not really knowing who they were anymore. But familiarity came as we chatted, and before long, the old way of bantering grew on us all and it was like I'd only just been away a few months.

It was truly touching to see Dad care for Mam. Sally had told me that he'd stopped drinking beer and eating bacon – both lifetime loves of

his - purely so that he could make sure he remained healthy enough to look after Mam. You could see the love in him, even after almost forty years of marriage. Dad showed me the family-tree album of memories, documents and photos he'd compiled. He's a strange bird, incapable of verbalizing his affections, yet capable, from time to time, to reach deep inside and let something out non-verbally. In the album, he'd included his first ever love-letter to Mam. It was undated, but seemed to have been written before they married. I'd often found myself wondering how Dad had fallen for such a sheltered, innocent woman of such low self-regard as Mam, and there it was in the letter. He loved her simply because the one shining quality she had despite everything was her ability to love and care for others. She was, and still is, a woman incapable of a selfish act.

Back home in San Francisco, where I'd lived, now, for five years, one of the first things I did after unpacking was to review the photographs I'd taken of my family. I chose one of Mam and Dad sitting on a step in St Michaels Village, flowers on either side of them, Dad holding Mam's hand. I installed it as the screen-saver on my computer, and, each morning as I switched it on, I'd see Dad's guileless face smiling out at me, Mam's self-conscious grin. I'd come full circle.

