

In March 1996 Dad was diagnosed with motor neurone disease. He wasn't ill at that stage: for about eighteen months he had had trouble with his heel and been sent to various specialists - each of whom only knew one thing. He went to one - no, it's not that, was referred to another and so it went on. He told me it had come on while digging in his allotment, which he got when he gave up his house in order to prevent any of us inheriting anything we hadn't paid for. While he was waiting for an answer to the heel problem, he developed a pain in his neck, which he put down to having to back his car out of his garage and up a steep incline. It was the last specialist he saw who spotted the muscle twitches all over his body.

"I'm going to send you to a friend of mine," he said and it was this friend who delivered the final blow.

"You have motor neurone disease," he said and he might as well have been a witch doctor pointing a bone. Dad went into decline. It was a surprise to all of us, but then we realised yes, Dad had been losing weight. I remembered him buying a polo neck sweater to go to his yoga classes because he felt self-conscious about how skinny his neck had become. Mum, who had always been on the plump side, had been put on a strict diet by her doctor and at one time we thought she had been under-feeding Dad, giving him the same as herself. But no, we now had to face the fact that our Dad was seriously ill. He did not relish telephoning my brother in Cheltenham to give him the news, but it had to be done.

"What do you intend to do now?" asked my brother, indicating that Dad should 'put his affairs in order' ie dish out the spondooliks. Dad, offended, replied,

"I intend to get better." But, of course, he couldn't. He got progressively worse and was provided with aids like a mechanical arm-lifter so he could raise food to his mouth, and a thing called a Tens machine which was supposed to stop the dreadful ache in his neck, but didn't.

The news of his impending exit from this world had a strange effect on me. I became extremely angry. All the anger I had suppressed at the way he had treated me came boiling to the surface. I was sixteen and had completed my 'O' levels when he announced that we were moving to Bingley. No one discussed things with children in those days and we had no choice about it.

It was the summer holidays and I was busy adjusting to the new house and town when one day he told me to start looking for a job.

“I’m going to Bingley Grammar,” I said.

“No you’re not,” he said, “I’ve got uniforms to buy for these two lads and I can’t afford one for you. You’re going to work.” Of course I objected. I was a bright child - in the A stream and always in the top ten. If he’d tried to force me out to work in Heckmondwike I’d had had the support of my teachers but in this new town I had nobody. He dragged me off to the Careers Officer who asked me if I had any idea what I wanted to do. I remember saying,

“I don’t want to go inside.” So they put me in a Library. It was about the dullest, stuffiest and most inside job they could have found. I suppose in Dad’s eyes if he wasn’t going to give me an education he was at least giving me a career. I would study for Librarianship exams and there was every hope that I would one day have my own Library. But I wasn’t thinking that far ahead.

There was more to come. I was unhappy at the Library. The only clothes I had were my school uniform and I was teased horribly by the other girls, most of whom came from well-off Bradford mill families. In the end I asked Dad if I could please have a blouse and skirt so the teasing would stop.

“It’s not your turn for clothes,” he said, repeating that he had to buy uniforms for my brothers. That was like a red rag to a bull.

“What about the money I’m bringing in?” I asked. The Library wage was £20 a month, twice what a hairdresser or a shop assistant would get. He took it all, giving me only my bus fares back.

“That’s a drop in the ocean!” he shouted angrily. I decided there and then that I would take that drop and live on it. Bedsitters in Bradford were thirty shillings (£1.50) a week and that left three pounds ten shillings (£3.50) to live on. I made my plans, gradually sneaked my clothes out, leaving them in my locker at work and when I got my wage I bailed out. I left the house at 7.30 that morning with the rest of my stuff in two carrier bags.

But when I went to pay my rent the following week the landlady asked me to leave. I asked what I had done wrong but she

would not say. There were plenty of bedsits and I soon found another. After a week the same thing happened. And it went on happening until I found a place where the landlady was on my side. She called me in one evening and told me that my father had been to see her. He told her I was a runaway and a bad character and that she should tell me to leave. I told her my story and she let me stay. He had hired a private detective to track me down. I suppose he thought if I had nowhere to live I would have to go back and live under his regime, but I was not stupid. I had been to see a Probation Officer before leaving home to make sure what I was doing was legal. So long as I lived in a decent manner no one could make me return home. What he did was mean spirited and I had never forgiven him.

Luckily, when all this anger came spewing out I had Wolfram's help. He was extremely patient and listened to everything I had to say without comment or judgement. All I needed was to let it flow and he let me do that.

It wasn't just the anger at the past: it was the fact that now Dad was going to die without ever saying he was sorry, without ever making things right between us. He was going to get out of it, get away with having never paid the price for his sins. I was so angry it occupied all my waking moments and often woke me in the night. I waited for the apology that never came. And I burned with resentment.

Mother didn't help. Always top of her own to-do list, she was centre of the Universe around which everything else revolved. *She* was the one who was ill, the one who needed looking after, and she greatly resented the fact that now the tables were turned and she was expected to look after Dad. This wasn't in the script she had written for herself! I could see how much she resented it in every line of her body language when he asked for help because the stupid mechanical arm didn't really do a proper job. She was perfunctory, making minimal effort then walking away. I'm not excusing myself, I didn't do anything. I did nothing at all.

The social workers got at her, telling her her needs were as important as his and that she needed help and respite. Respite! She had had respite all the fifty-six years they had been married. He had carried her as his burden, we all knew that. You might need to tell a normal person to think of themselves a little, you

certainly didn't need to tell her! She was straight on the phone to me, self-satisfied smugness in her voice - I was to come over one whole day a week so that she could have time off. No way was I playing that game. She owed him. Now was her payback time, not mine.

"I can't do that," I said, "I have a blind husband to look after - not to mention three allotments that need all my attention."

I did go over to see them, a journey of two and a half hours on bus and foot, a journey I had made regularly before Dad became ill. I sat and waited for Dad to apologise. He did not, but one day when we were left alone together for a few minutes he said,

"I remember coming up Cornmill Lane after the war, and seeing a little girl with blonde hair and blue eyes standing at the top of the front steps, and after that it all went wrong." But I only remembered my terror at the hole that appeared in the wall - the door that had never been opened before - and the stranger in rough clothing who picked me up and hugged me while I screamed the place down. He said more to my brother than he did to me:

"I went to Belgium in the war on a troopship. There were three ships went together - all loaded with men. The first two were torpedoed and went down, but I was lucky, I was on the third, and we got through. My number wasn't on either of those bombs, but it's on this one, and this is the one that's going to finish me."

I got my fascination for India from him, listening over and over to his tales of elephants carrying logs in their trunks, charwallahs, and the tiger he met on the jungle path, staring it in the eyes until it went on its way. My brothers and I have never forgotten that tiger, and one year all three of us independently sent him a birthday card with a tiger on. Dad may have been mild, but he had a tiger's heart when pushed.

He accepted his fate, never complained and went to his death bravely. I remember the last time I saw him in the hospice, turning as I reached the door and seeing the look he gave me, his eyes glittering so strangely in his wasted face. Such a hard glitter - I didn't know what it meant or what he was feeling. They had put him in Room 14, I noticed that because 14 has always been a special number for Wolf and me. 14 June my birthday, 14 years

between our ages and 14 steps up to bed as Wolf was fond of saying. It was November 14 when Dad gave up breathing and left the world.

The weather on the day of his funeral was atrocious. There was a blizzard but Wolf and I made our way to Bingley where the service was to be held. Mother told me on the phone that the vicar had been to see her and between them they had concocted the address the vicar would give. I was entirely unprepared for what was to come.

The first shock was standing in the church and seeing the coffin carried in with my two brothers as bearers. Why was I not asked? A fit woman with three allotments and a proven cycling history - no one could claim I was not strong enough. It was like a slap in the face. I should have been there, carrying my father to his last resting place. Worse was to come.

The address was more or less a tissue of lies.

“On days like we had this summer,” said the vicar, “Frank would have been out walking up the Dales, coming home with a camera full of photos”.

“No he wouldn’t!” I wanted to shout. “If he ever took your photo you likely had to wait a year before he finished the film. And he only ever took one shot. If it was a failure, hard luck. He was too mean to go round lavishly snapping everything.” Then they got onto a synopsis of Dad’s life. It was when I heard:

“And his daughter’s two children he more or less brought up as his own,” that I reached breaking point. He and my mother had done nothing for us. Work colleagues had been appalled that he was not even paying my rent - we got not one scrap of help from them - the children were even bought essentials when it was their birthday - ‘she needs a new coat, I’ll get her that,’ or ‘he could do with a new pair of shoes’ - things which any grandparent with means would have gone out and bought if they saw it was needed. I remember when they passed on their old three piece suite, Dad standing in our sitting room and saying he was worried we weren’t looking after it properly, the room was too damp and cold for their furniture. I didn’t tell him that I put off lighting a fire until the kids were due home from school - I wore thick jumpers and ski salopets, jumped up and down and chopped logs in the field next door to keep warm, if I was not at work.

At the same time he went on to tell me that he had reached a level of income where he felt he ought to devote part of it to charity. Apparently charity did not begin at home with him and I was too proud ever to ask for anything. Even if I had, it would not have been forthcoming.

So I was pretty seething mad by the time the whole charade was over and we were waiting in the vestibule for everyone to gather for the takeoff to the crematorium. I don't think I was even thinking about that - I wanted to get out of there, away from the lot of them.

"Come on," I said to Wolfram, "I've had enough of this. Let's get out of here." Conditions outside were still frightful and we were lucky to make it back to Nelson before the buses stopped running. I suppose if mother wished to make any excuses for my absence, she could use the weather. But no one ever asked.

The whole thing, of course, was down to my hurt and pain. Because, as he had in life, in death my father had rejected me all over again. In time I calmed down and saw the man as he really was - a wounded soul himself, the child of the village bobby and the daughter of the Big House, who had to get married when he 'got her into trouble'; followed by his mother's death when he was three. According to Mum, Dad knew happiness for a couple of years while he lived with his mother's family, who doted on him. 'If they'd have let him stay there,' she said, 'it would have been a different story. But 'is Dad wor jealous an' wanted 'im back. So when 'e got another girl into trouble an' got married again, yer Dad 'ad ter go 'ome.' And that was the end of Dad's idyll. His new stepmother Eliza had no



My Dad (born 1915) and his Mum, who died when he was 3. It always amazes me that the mother has the face of my brother Geoff and my Dad looks exactly like my grandson Matthew.

time for him and I am sure the whole thing was a culture shock for the poor lad. It doesn't seem that there was any contact with the maternal family after this and I imagine that Dad's father possibly resented their intrusion and took Dad back to spite them more than anything else, as he does not seem to have had any real love for his family, to judge by his drinking habits and his wife-beating. There must have been some good in him though, as he raised another two sons and a daughter and all went on to do well in life.

As a child I identified and modelled myself on my father, priding myself on my resemblance to him and assuming that I would grow up to be like him. Maybe I thought I would become a man, I don't know, but I do remember the shock of finding out that I was destined to grow up like Mum, and become a woman. Maybe this was because Dad had no respect for her, he derided her and encouraged us children to do the same. So to find out I too was a member of the despised sex came as a blow.

In the days when I grew up, parents and children were separate races - they didn't talk to us about anything that mattered and they certainly didn't treat us as friends, as parents do now. No doubt they were one step ahead from the Victorian era, but only just! We didn't communicate with them, nor did we share our thoughts, hopes and fears. We answered questions such as 'Did you wash your neck?' or 'Have you got a hanky?' and we obeyed orders like what time we were to be in, whom we could speak to or associate with and so on. Children had to get on with life as best they could. This we achieved by staying out of the home as much as possible. We roamed the fields, woods and lanes free as birds, coming home to meals when called by our mothers, who developed carrying voices for the purpose. Each mother had her own call - a sort of tune like the street vendors of old - so even if you didn't hear the words, you recognised the tune. My mother could never get our names right, she called us indiscriminately 'John Geoff Val' - which also might give you some idea of her priorities.

So I didn't know a lot about Dad, apart from mother's tales: little as she spoke to us, he spoke even less and most of what he said was sarcasm. Me he called 'hopeless and helpless' because, a dreamy child, I never knew where anything was and was the least practical of mortals. But what I came to know of him as I

grew older and picked up the snippets of his life earned him my respect, if not my love.

I always thought my parents an ill-suited couple - Dad an intellectual and Mum a simpleton. She was thwarted in love - falling for the local baker, he turned up to ask her father for her hand. He was rejected on the grounds that Arthur Ingle felt his family was going up in the world when his sister married into the Butterfield¹ dynasty, and wanted only white collar workers for his daughters. Such a pity - with her own love of baking, they would have made an ideal pair. But she had to make do with the cold love of an accountant as compensation.

Dad came to the house as a friend of her two brothers Bill and Rob, but often stayed long into the night talking to her mother by the cosy black-leaded kitchen stove. His own home life was bleak and he found a welcome at 1 Park Road. Perhaps he thought by marrying mother he could carry some of the warm coals away to set up his own home.

No one knows why he elected to go and fight in the Second World War. He need not have gone, he was a trainee accountant and his firm offered to 'put him in the works' until the trouble was over. He refused. I heard from Mum that as a school leaver he was afraid of having to walk through the works, where he was teased and jeered at - a bit like DH Lawrence being called 'a stool-harsed jack' - so war may have seemed a bit less intimidating than facing a barrage of daily insults. Or he may have been glad to get away from Mum, perhaps showing her true colours early on. Who knows, anyway, he went. He was promised that he could sit his accountancy exams while in the Army, but that came to naught and he was refused permission. He cut up about this and was told he could take Officer Training: he hated authority so much that he refused. He was 'bolshy' as the word was then and was often in 'jankers' because of his obstinacy and his refusal to give upper class toffs the respect they thought was due them.

He continued his parsimonious ways to the end, which my brother cannot understand as he feels Dad must have been on a good wage. My feeling is he never entirely prospered or reached the heights other accountants reach because of his basic integral

¹ *Tank works, Shipley*

ingrained honesty. He refused to 'cook the books' or get up to any other dirty tricks, however much he was assured they were above the law and could be got away with. He stuck to his basic honesty like glue and could not be shifted, whatever threats were made. Because of this a vendetta arose between him and the owner of the factory where he was accountant in Bingley, Aunderton Springs. He took this job when I left school, thinking to raise the family out of the doldrums of the Heavy Woollen District where we grew up and take us to the salubrious heights of Bingley, where our posh Aunts, who had married a manager of a bank and a woollen mill respectively, lived. I know he was persecuted and tormented almost to the point of suicide by this man, whom he referred to as 'Kitch'.

My Dad was a man who never gave in, never compromised his principles, who took his final illness on the chin and died as bravely as when he faced that tiger in the jungle. And what was in those glittering eyes I shall never know. Perhaps the unshed tears for what he did to me and for which he could never apologise. But he wasn't finished with me yet.

When the seed swap lists came out in December, I decided to add some more colour and variety to my aquilegia stock. These had become quite my favourite flowers - they appealed to my Gemini nature as they interbred and self-seeded all over the allotment and it was always exciting waiting to see what would come up. And as they are some of the earliest flowers they make a delightful show in May. I sent the requests off and then forgot about it.

When the first packet of hollyhocks arrived in the spring I was pleased, although I couldn't remember ordering any, or naming them as one of my 'wants' in the seed list. But I might have asked for them had I thought of it, as I'd tried to get them started here, without success.

When I began gardening in my forties I uncovered a whole set of memories of every plant and tree in the garden at Heckmondwike where I grew up. And I wanted them all in mine, now I had one. Lily-of-the-valley with its sweet scent and shyly drooping heads. Tiger lilies, fiercely striped with orange. Chocolate-leaved copper beech, where I climbed and had my swing.

Chrysanthemums I never wanted. Dad grew them for show and we children weren't allowed in the part of the garden where they grew. I hated their great curly heads, on which he lavished so much care. They even wore paper hats to keep out the cold and lived inside tented frames of net curtain. Silly, pampered things I thought them, not real flowers at all.

He hoped to make his name with them and I heard people saying they were the best in the district, but when he hurried home from work to check on his 'babies' he often found the best ones missing. The church ladies had their eye on them for flower arrangements and Mum was a pushover for a few compliments and the promise of a reward in Heaven.

In the end he gave up and grew tobacco instead, thinking it would save him money. He brought the leaves in and hung them to dry on the pulley clothes rack in the kitchen. Mum moaned but I thought the big green leaves wonderfully exotic, like living in a jungle. When they were dry he put them in a press in the cellar, shaking what looked like liquorice juice over them. I don't know if he ever produced anything fit to smoke.

The hollyhocks were my thing, not his. I saw them growing, unbelievably huge, in other people's gardens, bees going in and out of the cup-shaped flowers, pollen bags bulging.

"Why can't we have hollyhocks in our garden, Dad?" I asked.

"Common as muck," he said. "We don't want them."

In the autumn, green packages replaced the fallen hollyhock flowers and, opening them up, I discovered seeds, tightly rolled together in a ring and done up the way the baker twisted the top of a bag of yeast. I prised the seeds apart and sowed them secretly in a narrow strip of soil next to an old brick wall.

As I looked at that gift of hollyhock seed, I could see Dad scratching his head every year as he pulled up the plants and threw them away, calling them 'dratted things' and wondering how they got there. I never told him I planted them.

When the second pack of hollyhock seed arrived I wondered if I was mistaken and had ordered them. I went to check my seed list entry - no - only aquilegia was against my name.

The hollyhocks kept coming, one packet even came from Australia. Then I realised. I should have known when the first packet came and Dad popped into my head. He was sending

them. It was his way of saying sorry. Sorry for pulling up your plants. Sorry for pulling up your dreams.

“This is going to be a great year for hollyhocks,” I told him, “Thanks Dad. I’ll put on a good show for you. And I’m sorry it didn’t work out too.”