

## That Time Remembered

It may well not be true for children growing up now but, for me, my childhood was such a simple, happy time. We lived in a council house and had very little money but we were happy. Despite the fact that my father was a garage mechanic, we could not afford a car until I was into my teens. The only time we used a car was when we borrowed my auntie's to go on our annual two week holiday to the same bungalow, Windy Ridge on Hayling Island, year after year.

We eventually got a television but my father would not have a telephone installed in the house as he didn't want to be called out to a breakdown in the middle of the night; family time was his priority.

I loved school, though again that may be a slightly distorted memory. Even some less pleasant memories in junior school, being threatened with the slipper by the Deputy Head teacher for accidentally crossing the line separating the boys' and girls' playgrounds and being humiliated in front of the class by Mrs Miles for rushing my work, did not dampen my enthusiasm.

Everything a child could need, and more, was around; I had friends, I was able to cope with work at school and was successful in passing the 11 plus without giving it too much thought. It seems that the sun always shone and the winters brought snow and ice that kept us outdoors sledging and skating on frozen lakes instead of playing football or going fishing.

We were a happy family. My father was the true authoritarian figure in the house and there was a natural distance, respect and even a slight fear of his presence even though we knew him to be a kind and generous man who did everything for his family. We never went short of food as my father took nothing for himself before handing over his small, brown, cash-filled envelope to my mother on pay day. She worked too as my grandmother lived with us and took care of us when we came home from school.

I was the youngest of four children. Significantly, I was the youngest by six years. I say significantly because it meant that I spent a fair amount of time playing alone but also there was very little opportunity for the usual sibling sparring. I felt safe within the family but there was a certain 'distance' between myself and my siblings who had their own friends and between myself and my parents who were busy people, working to support the family.

Knowing the family support was there and, with a growing number of good friends, I created my own little world, happy, stress-free (not that stress was the phenomenon then that it is today) and I had the ability to take everything as it came. An ability that was to be tested sooner than I had anticipated.

I performed at an average level at grammar school and being mediocre never caused me any anxiety. I had reached the 4<sup>th</sup> form, nearing the end of the academic year when I was rudely diverted off my smooth path.

A sunny July in 1970 was just like any other at school. I loved being there and there was a good balance of work, time with friends and sporting opportunities. My friend, Trogg, and I decided to play tennis after school, as we often did. Grammar school tradition dictated the use of nicknames and Trogg, a boy of Polish descent, was the shortened form of Ryzard Witold John Pietrowski, otherwise known as Richard.

After the tennis, we went our own ways home and I used the 47 bus back to where I caught it every morning and then walked the last mile to my house. I reached the end of the alleyway that ran between the church and my old primary school. Turning into my road, I became aware of flashing blue lights in the vicinity of my house. I quickened my pace and thoughts. Was the ambulance outside our house or the neighbours'?

Certain it was our house, my thoughts turned to my grandmother. She must have had another fall. That could be the only reason. We had only recently moved her bedroom into the downstairs front room after she had fallen down the stairs.

I was running now and turned into through the gate. My sister had been standing on guard there waiting for me and ushered me past the back door down to the end of the extensive back garden and we sat down on the seat under the huge tree, laden with cherries.

The responsibility had fallen to her to give me the news that my father had passed away; a heart attack she said. I had been totally unaware that he had felt unwell during the night and had assumed that he had left for work, as usual, in the morning.

It was a surreal situation. In my world, at that age, things were always the same and would never change. The thought of losing a family member, even my grandmother who, by this time, was frail and blind, had never entered my thinking and that's what made it surreal.

I am sure there were a few tears from my mother as, later in the evening, after the body had been taken away, we stood in the centre of the living room and hugged each other and my mother announced that I was now the 'man of the family'. No tears came from my eyes that night and the next morning I went to school as usual, following my mother's wishes, clutching a note for my teacher advising her of the sad news.

My tears did flow. I think reality struck the moment the coffin, bearing my father's body disappeared behind the curtain at the crematorium during the funeral service. They flowed and then it was all over and 'normal' life resumed.

There is a part of me that still feels guilty that I did not react more emotionally and a part of me that is proud that I coped with my loss and enjoyed a happy end to my school years. I recognise that it helped turn me into an independent individual, able to deal with whatever life threw at me. At eighteen, my mother decided to use the '£10 Pom' scheme to go and live with my brother, his wife and family in Australia while I opted to stay here and train as a teacher, meaning I had no home and relied on my sister and friends in the holidays from university and I was delighted for her that she found a great lifestyle during her 3 years there.

She returned and was given another council house so that she could offer me a home when I finished my 4 years of study. I could sense that she yearned to return to the Australian lifestyle so I insisted she went, again not thinking that when I said goodbye to her at the airport, it would be for the last time.

Seven years after the death of my father, the call came from my brother. My mother had died. At the age of 22, my parents had passed away, my siblings were married with families and I was beginning my teaching career.

Through the happiness of my early childhood and the adversity of my teenage years and early adulthood, I had developed a strength and resolve and an empathy towards others. I always try to see the good in people. There are times when I feel bitter and resentful that my parents were snatched away from me before I was barely able to form mature relationships with them but I am also grateful that my times with them were full of such happy memories. I wish I had seen them both one more time before they passed away, there were things I wished I had said or done but it was not to be.

I don't know where I was when Elvis died, Kennedy was assassinated, John Lennon was shot or any other celebrity death that marks history but, whether my apparent lack of emotion and the way I dealt with the deaths of my parents might be frowned upon, I still remember those two days vividly and they, and my parents themselves, are always in my thoughts.

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