

Hungry

Embargoed until 24th October

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Grace Dent

A memoir of wanting more



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For David Dent.
The funniest person I know.

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This is a sort of memoir.

It's about my memories.

Other people's memories of how my life happened may differ.

Names have been changed in order to give privacy to people who never imagined their secrets would end up in a book published by HarperCollins.

Some places, events, dates and times have also been changed for that reason.

The past is a foreign country; they eat chips differently there.

Grace Dent, 2020

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‘When I was a little lass, the world was half a dozen streets,
an’ a bit o’ waste land, an’ the rest was all talk.’

Ena Sharples, *Coronation Street*, 1965

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CHAPTER 1

Sketty

Carlisle, 2017

‘Where would you say Carlisle is, George?’

I shift uncomfortably in my seat.

‘Where’s Carlisle?’ the nurse repeats.

My dad does not answer.

‘Have you heard of it?’

I look at my phone, merely to self-soothe.

Instead, an email from a *Guardian* editor arrives, begging for the incredibly late 800-word restaurant column that I had promised to write on the 10.03 out of Euston. I did not write the piece. Instead, I placed my face against the cold window and drifted off, letting Milton Keynes become Wigan North Western become Shap become home.

‘Can you have a guess?’ she says. He looks at her and says nothing. His silence wounds me.

The nurse marks something down in her notes.

I look at her and maintain my gaze. She believes me, doesn’t she? She looks away, sharply.

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Carlisle, summer 1980

My dad is making sketty for our tea. And I am helping, because I'm seven years old and nothing goes on in this house that I don't have my nose in.

Any rustlings of supermarket carrier bags, any raised voices, any arrival at the front door of 21 Harold Street, I'll know about them. Tonight my dad's in charge, as my mother is out doing the job that she doesn't like mentioned. My dad's childcare regime, like that of most Seventies dads, is a rudimentary affair. As long as we've had food, we're allowed to 'play out' until it's dark. Sometimes later. We roam free over two square miles of back-to-back terraced streets and fields. We're warned to mind the busier roads. Me, my little brother David and the eleven or so kids from along Harold Street 'play out' for hours and hours, chucking tennis balls at the sides of the houses and hurtling ourselves on roller skates down the cement slope from the nearby Bishop Goodwin C of E Primary School car park. Or we'll break off in splinter groups into different kids' bedrooms. I'm often found loitering around Tracey Scaleby's house at Number 17, sending Cindy dolls on a sexy caravan holiday with her brother Scott's Action Men, a burly gang with eagle eyes and clasping hands. On Sundays we go to the Currock Villa Youth Club and dance in long formation lines to 'Freedom' by Wham!, throwing our arms in the air to 'once, twice, forever', and then we'll play dodge-the-local-shady-grown-

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up-helper-who-wants-to-wrestle-you-for-a-little-bit-too-long.

On warmer nights we'll take the bags of misshapen mint Viscounts our aunties buy us from the factory shop inside Carr's biscuit factory down to the abandoned allotments near the West Coast mainline railway track, which takes you the 317 miles into Euston, London – a terrible dirty place where everyone is unfriendly. It's not like here. If you got attacked in the street in London, no one would help you. They'd pretend not to see. Not like in Carlisle where folk would shout and scream at bad people and think it was wrong.

We take our biscuits down to where the gypsies keep their horses and feed the tamer ones bread crusts from our mams' bread bins. Or we'll play houses or make grass cuttings into the boundaries of princess castles. We'll hurtle through hedges playing Japs and Commanders. We'll sit in our favourite den inside an enormous overgrown bush, sharing bottles of Barr's Scotch Cola and leafing curiously through tattered copies of *Fiesta*, gawping at women in no knickers holding their knees apart. Sometimes we'll roam beyond our boundary of Currock, wantonly searching out the dens that belong to rival gangs of kids from nearby Carlisle districts like Upperby, Harraby or Botcherby. We howl with glee as we stomp all over their leafy hideouts.

But I am equally happy when I'm indoors just kicking about with my dad, and tonight we're making sketty – the more complex of his two-recipe artillery. His other stock standard is baked beans on fried bread. At a push he could

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open a tin of corned beef. Sometimes – and this is the very best possible turn of events – we'll get a bag of Salt 'n' Shake crisps and fifty pence to buy us all chocolate at Cellar Five, the off-licence at the end of Harold Street. My little brother David likes a Curly Wurly and my dad, always, a bar of Cadbury's Fruit & Nut. My big brother Bob doesn't stay in with us anymore. He lives at Gran's house sometimes. Now seventeen, he comes and he goes, always with hair that antagonises my mother – too long, too short, too dyed, too spikey; the neighbours must be having a field day – often off out to one of the many pubs in Carlisle that serve the underage unblinkingly.

My dad sits in his chair and skims his thumbnail through the foil on his chocolate. I will never see Cadbury's purple without thinking of my father. Cadbury's purple is love. Cadbury's purple is me and him toddling slowly back from the NAAFI shop before he left the forces. My first memories of Dad are him in his REME (Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers) uniform in 1976. Me holding one finger of his big hand, examining the puddles, dawdling; both of us laughing together. Me carrying a bag of Cadbury's Buttons with a nursery rhyme of 'Little Jack Horner' on the side. Cadbury's purple is two identical Dairy Milk Easter eggs from Gran. One for me, one for David, perched on the top shelf of the living-room dresser. We are forbidden to touch them before Good Friday when Jesus gets on his cross. The waiting is agony. Cadbury's means being sent down the 'offy'. That said, I'm also partial to a Rowntree's Lion Bar, as it lasts longer than other chocolate. It is the best thing ever when David

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wolfs down his Curly Wurly in two minutes and I'm still sat watching *World in Action*, languishing through at least two more inches of knobbly chocolate heaven.

Dad lets me peel an onion. He lets me take a knife with a serrated edge and begin to chop it up on our glass chopping board. The knife isn't that sharp. None of the knives in our house are sharp. The onion makes my eyes weep, but I am not put off as I've watched a lovely lady called Delia who cooks every Saturday on Noel Edmonds' *Multi-coloured Swap Shop* and she says that the onion tears are normal.

Me and Dad locate one of our cheap, stained frying pans and Dad puts it on the most reliable electric ring and adds a glug of Spry Crisp 'n Dry. We add the onion and Dad smooshes it around in the warming oil with a wooden fish slice as it gently softens.

My dad's large blue inky tattoo scrawled across the hazelnut-brown skin on his lower right arm will never not be fascinating. Nor will his refusal to answer questions about it.

'What is it?' I say.

'Oh, it's a daft thing I did in the army,' he mumbles.

'Is it a picture?' I say. 'A lion? Is that bit a heart? It looks like a heart.'

'No, it's just a thing,' he says, moving things on.

'Is that a word?' I say, tracing the smudged letters under the blurred picture. 'V? E?'

He has put the spatula in my hand. Now I am smooshing the onion.

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‘Mind what yer doin’. Yer don’t wannalerritburn,’ he says.

‘I’m not lerrin’ it burn,’ I say, my accent already speckled with his Merseyside tones.

My father was born on the Scotland Road in Liverpool. He is known to all his old ex-army crowd, and in his civilian role now with the RAF, as simply ‘Scouse’. Dad is there in some of the ways I sound my words. In the way I laugh and the way I have begun to make other people laugh. Liverpool genes are like a rogue pair of red knickers in the washing machine with your whites. They leave a trace.

Softening an onion will be a lesson that lasts a lifetime. It will be the genesis of shepherd’s pie, frittata and a thousand restorative soups, stews and curries. Decades later, I will attempt to teach highly intelligent, otherwise practical friends to cook and realise that the fine art of onion softening is almost unteachable. It is a deeply mindful act that needs to be carried out absent-mindedly.

Now into the pan we tip a pound of raw beef mince bought from the local Co-op butcher’s counter. It stinks something awful at first as I mash it about, like flesh, like something wrong, but as it browns and meets the onion it becomes marginally less disgusting. My childhood – in fact, almost *all* British childhoods in the 1970s and 80s – contains a lot of mince. Mince in a pie, made on a plate at my gran’s house in a kitchen that always smelled vaguely but rather deliciously of gas. Mince in bread-crumbed Findus Crispy Pancakes with McCain oven chips after swimming lessons. Mince *inside* a

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ball of mashed potato, battered, from Donny's Chip Shop on the Five Road Ends in Currock.

Sometimes when my dad gets home from work he gets a piece of steak. Maybe now and then a piece of liver with fried onions, although offal is generally balked at in our house. My mam and dad grew up through the 1940s and 50s when tripe and tongue were delivered to your front door by mobile van. It lurked, unrefrigerated, hairy, veiny, in the pantry for days. They lived through mysterious faggots and dripping smeared on toast. They lived through guts, stomach linings and offcuts being the only options. By the time I appeared in the 1970s, a nice sterile tin of Fray Bentos Chicken Pie felt to them like progress. Or a shiny tin of Spam, so cheap and so easy to cut. Sirloin steak, if you were lucky enough to afford it, was fried 'well done'. Only 'that French lot' ate it with blood. Steak, to us, was the epitome of fine eating. A symbol of eating like a king, living like rich people do. Today, the moneyed boho foodie crowd revel in eating the gnarliest, most disgusting parts of any animal. The brains. The tendons. The ears. The hooves. 'Oh, the pig's tail is the most delicious part, Grace. Just flash-fry them with Szechuan peppercorns and some Madeira wine and eat them with your fingers. Try them with a good New World Burgundy!' But it will be at least 2018 before I see one of my Dent family order something as outré as a slow-cooked beef cheek. Why put yourself through that when something as openly delicious as a gammon steak with a fried egg is on offer?

* * *

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I push the browned mince around the pan. It is time for its glamorous transformation into bolognaise. But I won't know this word for several more years; I'll just carry on calling it sketty. This is dad's Scouse way of saying 'spaghetti'. His recipe is Spag Bol à la Skelmersdale and the magic ingredient is a tin of Campbell's Condensed Cream of Tomato Soup. It flops out of its tin in a vivid orange, coagulated, tube-shaped lump. Condensed soup was how we did 'Italian' in Currock. I did not see a bulb of garlic until the mid-Eighties and that was round the neck of someone in a beret in 'Allo 'Allo, to illustrate that they were truly French. It will be at least the late-Nineties when I accept the wild nonsense that celery, carrots, milk and bay leaves should form a delicate *sofritto* base to Italian sauces or stews. On the other hand, I will always think that hurling a small can of Heinz Baked Beans into a spag bol is no disaster if you need to make it stretch further. As for seasoning, my dad's cooking only ever had nods towards it. 'Salt,' Dad says, nudging the big barrel over to me. I fling two handfuls in. Salt is brilliant. Salt makes everything nicer. Then, a liberal shake of Saxa ground white pepper from a white plastic canister – grey, powdery and liable to fly up my dad's big nose and make him sneeze.

Our road, Harold Street, is a row of terraced houses in the most northern part of North-West England, eight miles from the border of Scotland, close to where Hadrian built his wall. I was born in Aldershot, where we lived on the army base. We moved to Carlisle soon after, back to my mother's hometown, first living in a council house on the outskirts, before my

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parents bought their first home. Our house sits in the centre of the row. It is newly pebble-dashed, with a front door that opens straight into the living room. Like every dad along Harold Street, all my dad wants is a quiet life, the pinnacle of which would be to read his paper every night. Reading the newspaper is one of Dad's only interests. His others are squirting WD-40 at squeaky things and watching telly in his armchair uninterrupted. But for George, this peace is constantly marred by the endless flinging open of the front door, followed by five or more children running past, heading for the muddy back lane behind our terrace. This is a time before 'playdates' and long before scheduled fun. The kids along Harold Street live largely to their own schedule. We are always in and out and in again at 21 Harold Street, shouting and sobbing and sometimes carrying a kitten. We are bouncing past on pogo sticks and begging to make Rice Krispie cakes for the *Blue Peter* bring-and-buy sale, and always, always leaving the door wide open and makin a drrraughhht.

Dad stands at the stove sliding an entire packet of spaghetti out of its long plastic covering and snapping it in half to fit it into a pan of cold water. The pan will take at least half an hour to come to the boil on our temperamental stove, but this will give me time to find David. At half past six, along Harold Street the air will be peppered by a dozen front doors opening and the yelling of names.

'Traccccccey?

'Gerrard?'

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‘Kevin?’

‘Daaaaaaaavid, yer tea’s ready, gerrrrrinside!’

Dave appears, pulling his Raleigh Tomahawk through the living room like he’s been told not to twenty times.

Me, Dave and Dad eat the sketty from bowls on our laps using old copies of the *Evening News* to stop our knees getting hot. We watch the end of the news show *Nationwide* or *Play Your Cards Right*, or *The Krypton Factor*, where brave contenders in Bri-Nylon tracksuits puff and pant around an army assault course. Dad’s sketty is always, always delicious. Comforting, sweet and gloriously stodgy, because Dad boiled the pasta for at least thirty to forty minutes too long.

I eat it without thinking about calories or portion size. I am hungry and I devour it freely and take second helpings if there’s any left, filling my belly without the smallest trace of guilt.

I am not a cuddly child. I am a slightly Machiavellian one who hates being sent off to bed, and I can always stay up later if I wheedle my way under my dad’s musky armpit and stay very quiet. Now invisible, I keep my trap shut, lapping up *The Professionals*. Or, very best of all, *The Kenny Everett Video Show* with my absolute hero, Cleo Rocos. Cleo is an amazingly funny lady with big messy hair and lipstick and smudged eye make-up, who often only wears her knickers and sexy stockings, and her friend is a man called Kenny who sometimes pretends to be a punk. It is naughty and silly and rude and I am not meant to be watching it, which makes it all the

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more delicious. At the beginning every week, the Thames Television ident flashes up with a loud triumphant jingle. It is terrifying and exhilarating all at once. It's a bright-blue skyline with St Paul's Cathedral, Big Ben and the Post Office Tower reflected in the bright-blue River Thames. In London, Cleo and Kenny hang out all day long and have fun together and I want to be there too. But London is a very, very long way away from Carlisle. It is the other side of the world.

At some point, my mam will return from her job cleaning the betting shop, carrying a tattered copy of the *Sun* with all the racing fixtures and results filleted out of the back. I snap it up and sit reading the sexy problem page and puzzling over the vital statistics of the Page Three stunnas.

'Nikki is 36-24-36! She'd love to work in a zoo one day ... but for now she's just making you fellas growl with pleasure!' These measurements are destined to be seared on my brain forever as I stare down sadly at a tape measure a hundred times through my life.

My mother, incidentally, would strenuously deny that I was allowed to stay up past 10 p.m., aged seven years old, reading the *Sun* problem page. My mother's capacity for denial and revisionism would make Chairman Mao blush. She still claims she did not refuse to buy one of my infant school photos because it was taken on a day when I had a sty on my right eye and she'd cut my fringe wonky, so I looked like a small Hunchback of Notre Dame. 'Well, we're not gonna put that thing on the shelf, are we?' she hooted, stuffing the

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photos all back in the envelope. I would say that I remember this specifically happening. My mother would say that I have an overactive imagination and have always made things up. We have been having a variation of this argument roughly three times a week since at least 1978.

Inevitably, something smutty will occur on the telly: a pair of tits, a swear word, something that reminds Mam we're past the watershed and she'll look up from her sewing and say, 'That child should be in bed!'

My dad will wrap his arm around me, cuddle me into his armpit and say, 'Oh, give her five more minutes here ... she's my only little girl ...'

My mother will roll her eyes and say, 'You're as thick as bloody thieves, you two.'

And he'll say, 'Oh, she's my only little girl.'

And at this point in time, I have no reason not to believe him.

November 1980

'Six spoons of it. That's what we agreed,' my mother snaps.

'I've had six,' I lie.

'You've had three,' she says.

I am sitting on our brown squeaky leather sofa, peering mournfully into a bowl of tepid Ready Brek. My mother, also called Grace, is scribbling on the back of the gas bill with a BIC biro. She's doing some rough maths. She is planning some

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home improvements. It is not good enough that we merely own a home now. She must make it better. These types of doodlings will provide a constant source of peril during my formative years. They mean we will spend at least the next three months in a thin layer of cement dust while walls are being knocked through and other ones built.

‘If I put the door there,’ she says, ‘then it’ll stop the draughts and yer dad might stop being a mard-arse,’ she says.

It’s eight o’clock in the morning, but Mam is already brimming with ideas about ‘partition walls’ and ‘opaque glass’. That is, I learn, glass you can but can’t see through, which sounds weird but at the same time very classy.

The bleak lukewarm oatmeal mulch in my bowl has grown a skin.

Mam stops doodling and stares at me. Her mid-length Diana Dors blonde hair spills down over her purple Marshall Ward-catalogue dressing gown.

‘Gerritdownya,’ she says, pointing at the Ready Brek. ‘A car cannot run without petrol.’

‘Ammnot a car,’ I argue. ‘Noteatingit.’

‘You bloody are,’ she says.

Mam has been promised by a new TV campaign for Ready Brek – running in every ad break – that this porridgey slop in an orange box will be the solution to one of her other biggest problems. That neither of her infant-school-age children will touch breakfast. This makes her a very lacking mother indeed.

‘*Breakfast is the most important meal of the day,*’ she’s been hectored for decades – by her own mother, by the

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government and by her teachers. It is her sole responsibility to administer it. Except that morning after morning, as Terry Wogan pipes 'Forever and Ever' by Demis Roussos across the ether on BBC Radio 2, we have rejected all of her options.

Eggs were her first try; she poached them and served them on toasted Mothers Pride. But her whites went all stringy and the toast turned soggy, as she didn't drain them properly. She then moved on to dippy soft-boiled eggs with soldiers, which we turned our noses up at. The good thing about the egg stage was that at Bishop Goodwin Infant School we were collecting the shells to make a large mural of Jesus entering Jerusalem on a donkey. It was a religious school; we found bold new ways every term to praise the lord.

After eggs, Mam tried Weetabix with warm milk, which we complained was both too sludgy, too soggy *and* too dusty all at once. She tried us with toast and orange marmalade, but the bitter slugs of rind caused hysteria. She tried us on Scott's Porridge Oats – very grown-up this felt – and let us add our own heaped teaspoons of Silver Spoon sugar.

But that was ruined by her admitting that our eccentric great-uncle, John, in the days before refrigerators, used to make his porridge once a week, pour it into a kitchen drawer to set, then cut a slice out of the coagulated lump each morning. By Friday, Uncle John's breakfast would inevitably contain a beetle or two, she admitted.

Well, that was it for us with the oats. Game over.

Eventually Mam caved in and splashed out on the Kellogg's Variety pack of mini-cereals that David and I had become

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utterly fixated on after Karen Steeple's mam down the street got some to take with them on their caravan holiday in Filey.

They were exactly the same as big packets of cereal ... but smaller.

Our tiny minds were blown.

'Can we have the mini-cereals, Mam? Can we?'

Of course, once we'd got them, ripped open the cellophane, rejected the Bran Flakes and remembered we didn't much care for Rice Krispies anyway, she was back to square one.

And now it's November and there's snow on the ground and she's been promised that Ready Brek is 'central heating for kids' and it'll send me to school with a glowing aura around me. But I'm not having it.

'Mam, it's just the same stuff as the porridge, but slimier!' I cry.

'Oh, shut up,' she says.

Winter's arrival also means stiff north-westerly winds blasting the back of Dad's head continuously as me and my brother fling open the front door, coming and going into the street to play. And then he 'starts whining', she says, or 'being narky'. My parents, although I do not know this at the time, have been married precisely eight years. They made that decision in haste and spent the Eighties repenting at leisure.

But, on one front at least, things were about to improve.

Because we were getting a vestibule.

'A vestibule?' I repeat.

This all sounds very grand.

Mam shows me her drawings.

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It sounds continental and by default insanely glamorous. Like something JR's house would have in *Dallas*.

It's like nothing anyone else has along Harold Street and is most probably the beginnings of my working-class delusions of grandeur.

'We'll take a bit off the living room,' Mam says, 'so when you come in the front door ... there will be a little space ... then another door!'

'Like another little room inside the room?' I say.

'Yes ... and we can have coat pegs in there,' she says. 'And a little table to put letters on. And maybe a shelf for our books ...'

Her voice trails off.

The only books we have are a *News of the World* part-work on serial killers and a copy of *The Thorn Birds*.

'OK, maybe we could put the phone in there,' she says brightly. 'And the phone book. Anyway, no more draughts.'

I stare at her and then back at the Ready Brek. I've eaten five whole teaspoons of the stuff and I seem to have more of the evil sludge than when I set off.

Seven days later, with a swiftness that accompanied many of my mother's good ideas, work began. Frank the carpenter arrived with a spirit level under his arm and a pencil crammed behind his filthy left ear.

He needed half the money up front for the wood, panes and the paint, and he'd have the job done between Tuesday and Friday as long as he could work until after midnight.

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‘Dad, do *you* want a vestibule?’ I asked, as a terrific banging and clattering began and we all cowered in the kitchen, covered in dust.

‘Well, your mother does,’ Dad said. ‘She’s full of these good ideas.’

News of the vestibule spread quickly along Harold Street. The neighbours were transfixed. It must have felt a lot like when Pope Julius II got artists in to do the Sistine Chapel. Except our vestibule was being hammered up by a man called Frank, who turned up every night after six o’clock, as he was being spied on by the dole office. Almost everyone who did odd jobs on Harold Street during this time was ‘signed off on the permanent sick’ from Cavaghan & Gray pie factory with bad backs.

‘He could not move until that day, your honour,’ local lawyer Geoff Clapp would say, defending another of my mother’s friends caught skipping out of a cul-de-sac in Morton Park carrying a twelve-foot stepladder and fifteen litres of Crown Marigold Emulsion, despite a debilitating spinal condition.

In my mother’s mind, family bliss was only ever one more home improvement away. First came the pebble-dashing.

‘George, the stones add an extra layer of warmth to the house! Our gas bills will be right down,’ she informed my dad, as two listless skinheads on a Youth Training Scheme hurled around handfuls of shilly. ‘It *adds value* if we ever sell!’ she added. Before that, she added a spare toilet just off the

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kitchen to stop the arguments when anyone spent too long in the upstairs one. She did this by paying someone to hammer up MDF boards roughly two feet south of the chip pan. This was great as you could wee and still mind your fish fingers. The vestibule, however, was her most ambitious project to date – and she had her naysayers, like Stella at Number 3, who said it would make our front room poky, but things like that don't derail a good woman like my mam.

I learned tenacity from her. I learned from the best.

When I was a little girl, my mother felt like a preternatural force. She was five foot ten with golden hair and pale-blue eyes. She had been married once before she met my dad. I didn't know many facts about this, but I thought it was very exciting. Mam laughed a lot but was frightening as hell when angry. She would threaten to kill us often. Strangle us. She could, if the mood took her, move large items of furniture all on her own.

It made no sense, us all facing that way, she'd say, when we came home from school at lunch to find the couch and TV somewhere else.

In a time before health and safety, she would pull up outside Bishop Goodwin Juniors on netball-match day, cram nine girls in blue bibs into her Austin Princess and ferry them across town, no seatbelts, faces squashed against the windows, off to play Kingmoor Primary.

She was a woman who just got things done.

So within days, when you opened the front door to 21 Harold Street, you stepped into a brilliant-white, gloss-painted, three-foot-by-three porch.

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But *please*, this was not a porch.

This was a vestibule.

‘We can hang out in my vestibule,’ I’d say airily as rain began to beat onto Harold Street’s flagstones, ruining our evening of chewing Hubba Bubba and swinging around a lamppost. Excitedly, we would tumble into the space. This was my own mini youth club. Obviously, this meant my father was now reading his *Carlisle Evening News* four feet away from five kids doing a dance routine to ‘September’ by Earth, Wind & Fire with only partition wood separating us.

But, importantly, there was no longer a draft on his back, and this made him happier. And for a small moment in history, we had the poshest house along Harold Street, which made my mam happier too.

‘So, the vestibule,’ she said, weeks later as I sat before school eating a breakfast she had recently chanced upon that I’d begun to secretly enjoy – Shippam’s Sardine & Tomato Paste on toast with real butter. My mother had marked this as ‘something our Grace likes’ and was now making noises about something horrific called Bloater Paste.

‘Did I do the right thing, then?’ she said, pointing to the opaque glass and fresh paintwork.

‘Yer, it’s smart as owt. I love it,’ I told her.

Over the last few years, as I’ve struggled to make sense of the present, I’ve thought about that living room in Harold Street: me, David, Mam, Dad, sometimes my big brother Bob appearing temporarily from the terrific din of Bowie, Japan and The

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Specials that always blared from his room when he was around. I've thought about nights when we'd sit around watching *Name That Tune* with Lionel Blair, eating bowls of butterscotch Angel Delight and Neapolitan ice cream and passing round the big red tin of Rover Assorted Biscuits, fighting over the pink wafers until only the crap ones were left. I've thought about us all in the living room, snug as bugs because the vestibule cut out the draughts, and always chattering and fighting and telling each other to bloody shut up as this is the only programme they want to watch and now everyone is blabbing on. I've thought about how there's a weird happiness in the rhythms of a cat coughing up hairballs as five people bicker over who last had the *News of the World* TV supplement, until someone stands up to go to the loo and gets lumped with the chore of doing four rounds of toast.

I would give anything to go back there for just one normal evening. I was loved and I was never hungry, and for a small girl from Currock, that was as good as things got.

Carlisle, 1982

'Warm up the teapot,' says Brown Owl, 'by pouring a little hot water in and swirling it around!'

I'm doing my Hostess Brownie badge; that's the one where you plop a teabag in a pot and arrange some Custard Creams on a plate before serving them to Brown Owl's husband, Trevor, who plays the part of 'an important man who you're

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on your best behaviour for'. Trevor takes a biscuit and pretends to ignore my hands shaking as I pour his drink.

Aged eight, there is much to cherish about being part of the eighteenth Carlisle Methodist Church Brownie Pack. The Brownies attempted to teach me discipline, forward planning, a sense of duty and, best of all, it gave me my first formal lessons in how to cook and entertain. Plus, there was a cool brown tunic pulled in at the waist with a brown buckled belt and a yellow cravat tie with a Velcro tie strip. I especially loved the shiny silver shamrock Brownie badge that we got after enrolment. This ceremony involved pirouetting around a large rusting metal 'toadstool' splodged with red and green paint, unlocked from the cleaner's cupboard for this most grand of occasions. Dad came to my enrolment and watched from the sidelines, sitting on a stiff-back chair. He didn't fall asleep once. Dad was rarely trusted to take me or my little brother anywhere outside the house after he fell asleep in Carlisle Odeon Cinema during a trip to see *The Boys in Blue* with Cannon & Ball. He only woke up when the usher pinched him and asked if those were his kids in the foyer. My dad looked dead proud when Brown Owl gave me my badge, and I think he was glad he came; even if his head was lolling about sleepily during our mid-ceremony performance, when eighteen girls sang 'Alice the Camel' in a three-part round.

My second badge was House Orderly: a two-week crash course on shopping-list crafting, bed-making and dust vigilance. On reflection, this primed millions of little girls across

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Britain for a life, someday soon, as some bloke's skivvy, but at this point trying to make an imaginary fiver stretch to feed a family for a week seemed like a terrific game. Then on to my Cookery badge. For this, Trevor got half a grapefruit, a scrambled egg on toast and a serviette folded into a triangle. The 1980s Brownie ethos, unlike today, contained no mention of us girls striving towards a career or a vocation. There were no balm-like words on body image or self-belief. We had been put on earth to be really, really helpful. The highlight of each Thursday-night meeting was when we separated into our three sub-sets – the Pixies, the Elves and the Gnomes – and sang our little theme tunes: 'Here we come, the jolly Pixies, helping others with their fixes!' Or 'Here we are, the happy Elves, we think of others, not ourselves'.

I often wonder how many women of my age still think it is purely wicked to think of themselves first.

But where the Brownies may have ignored the concept of self-praise, we did not shy away from praising God. Oh gosh, quite the opposite. Loving the Lord went hand in hand with toadstool pirouetting, and my Brownie pack were smilingly coerced just before the weekend into going to church the following Sunday at 9 a.m. As a Bishop Goodwin Primary School child I was well primed in God's mysterious ways, but this was next level.

I began rising early for church and soon began confirmation lessons so I could taste the blood of Christ at communion and all that palaver. And why not? This Jesus, with his good deeds and magic tricks, sounded a decent enough fella. Be nice to

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everyone, he says! Sing hosannah for the king of kings! And say thank you to God who gave us his only son ... and then let him die, except not really, because Jesus was only kidding and leapt up again from the tomb, shouting, 'HALLO, FOOLED YOU ALL!' and this was all further proof of how much God loved us.

Something like that anyway.

I found these bits of church really confusing.

The very best thing about church was the coffee morning afterwards, where a small industrious troop of ladies laid out a table with slices of Madeira cake, jammy dodgers and sometimes even a Bakewell tart. This made it worth going.

Around now, despite being merely a stubby little thing with scabbed knees poking out of a sixth-hand Brownie tunic, I was experiencing a subtle awakening on class.

On every third Sunday of the month, the most shining glory was awarded to one of us: the chance to carry our bright-yellow flag up the aisle at church, during 'parade'.

Here, as one of the stars of the show, you would parade side by side with key members of the Boys' Brigade and Currock Girl Guides. The Guides were so impossibly chic I trembled in their presence. They wore neat navy shirts with a pencil skirt, navy-blue bonnet hats and forty-denier tights. Through the congregation, made up largely of sour-faced OAPs, local businessowners and people nudged towards God by their Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, you'd walk up the aisle hoisting your flag. Then, to a tuneless rendition of 'To Be

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a Pilgrim', it was placed behind the altar by the vicar, who asked God to bless our pack for another month.

Flag-carrying was a role I was never, ever given.

We were all normal, everyday sort of people where I came from. We were all more or less the same. Except I was starting to suspect that maybe sometimes we weren't. There were tiny, subtle differences. Some of us were better, a bit fancier, and I had my suspicions that, in the eyes of Brown Owl at least, I was a bit common. Brown Owl, in real life, was a woman called Joyce who lived in a detached house, drove a Ford Cortina with a National Trust sticker and was once spotted by my mother in our newsagent's buying the *Telegraph*. She had her card marked as 'up herself'.

Brown Owl was not supposed to have favourites, but I knew I did not make her eyes light up like, say, Darlene Phillips. Lovely Darlene, with her long legs, blonde bob and nose smattered with freckles – evidence of her family's two-week Canvas camping holiday in France. 'Camping? *Pghghg*, lying in a bloody tent being feasted on by bugs,' my mam tutted when I asked if we could go to Brittany instead of Pontins, Weston-super-Mare.

Darlene's life was much fancier than mine. Her dad was a builder, and by this I mean an actual builder, not just someone with a spirit level conning the dole. Her dad built them a breakfast bar – with tall barstools to sit at – and he designed and hammered up a lean-to on the back for their washing machine, which Darlene loftily called 'the utility room'. And she had her own SodaStream at home.

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An actual SodaStream.

She sat at her breakfast bar drinking SodaStream Dandelion & Burdock in tall glasses with a scoop of vanilla ice cream. When we did our Cookery badge she brought all her ingredients in Tupperware and carried it to the hall in a wicker basket. I brought mine in a crumpled Lennards carrier bag full of old ice-cream cartons. What dismayed me most of all was that Darlene was a natural type of pretty; whereas by the age of nine I was already wondering how I might improve. Just a dab of my mother's blusher on my cheek gave a defined cheekbone, I found. A touch of pale-blue shadow on my lids made my eyes bluer. Darlene's mother, a gossipy type who came to church each week, once took Brown Owl to the side and tipped her off about my tinted lip-gloss. It's not right, she said, that a girl that age should look so much like a little tart.

'How can you decorate your Christingle orange with sweets when you've *eaten* all your sweets, Grace Dent?' asks Brown Owl as I sit beside an empty Revels packet with my cheeks distended like a pre-autumn hamster.

We are making Christingle oranges. I am trying extremely hard to symbolise God's fruits on earth by attaching a packet of Revels to an orange with cocktail sticks, but it's a shambles. This is the wrong sweet for the job.

The whole point of Revels is that they are a random assortment: the Malteser one, the coconut one, the orange cream and the coffee one that has to be a joke as it tastes of armpits.

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Revels are a surprise each time. Christingle is a task that needs definites. I haven't thought this through.

At least I've got my ribbon wrapped around the orange, representing Christ's blood, which he shed to save us.

Darlene Phillips's Christingle orange is perfect.

It has a perfect red ribbon around the centre. It is festooned with midget gems on cocktail sticks, representing Mother Nature's abundance. She has scooped a hole out of the top and pushed in a candle to symbolise Jesus, 'who is the light of the world'.

'Darlene really is so good with arts and crafts,' says Brown Owl proudly. 'She should take *her* orange up to the Reverend Kevin at the Christingle Ceremony.'

I push the last of the Revels into my gob and seethe. Darlene is always up at that flipping altar with the flag and her mother cheering her on. The Son, the Father and the Holy Ghost must be sick of the bloody sight of her.

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'Worrya doin', precious?' my dad says, looking over his *Evening News* as I clamber up the back of the sofa, attempting to fish an object off the top of the dresser in our living room. I've been told off for this at least sixty times and warned it'll topple over and kill me. It went in one ear, out the other.

'I'm just gerrinthisbutton off the dresser,' I tell Dad, mirroring his scouse lilt.

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‘Whah button?’ he says.

‘The one that fell off me school blouse,’ I say. ‘Mam purrit up here to keep it safe.’

‘Mam’ll go wild about you climbin’ on that settee in yer shoes,’ he tells me.

Dad is not quite telling me off; he is merely pointing out the inevitability of my mother’s ire. It is a technique he uses throughout my life.

‘Oh yeah,’ I say, remembering that I am wearing my Polyveldts; a pair of chunky treated-leather monstrosities that Mam has bought me and David. She cannot afford to keep up with our rate of destroying shoes. Polyveldts – a hybrid of moccasins and trainers – will survive the rough and tumble of Bishop Goodwin life. We hate them but have agreed to wear them ‘until they wear out’. This was sheer folly on our part, as Polyveldts do not ever wear out. They are unkillable.

I sit down on the couch and take a small empty Lion matchbox from my grey school cardigan pocket. I open it and pop the button inside.

‘Worrayou up to?’ he says.

I sigh in a defeated manner.

Last week’s take-home task at Brownies was to find an empty matchbox – a small one like any of us would have around the house – and see how many little tiny items we could cram inside. And the winner would get a prize!

‘How about’, Brown Owl hinted, ‘if you took a grain of pudding rice? Or a tiny dried pea? Or you folded down the wrapper off an Opal Fruit?’

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We stared at her in wonder.

'So next week's winner will get these,' she said, producing a small box of Terry's Harlequin.

'Wow,' we all gasped, ignoring the fact that these chocolates had clearly been hanging around her house a bit, as the corner of the box had been gnawed by her golden retriever, Clement.

Dad has put down his *Evening News & Star* and is stood up, peering into one of the drawers on the dresser.

'There's a tiny nut and bolt in here I saved off your roller skate,' he says.

He retrieves it and then unscrews the small, delicate fastener from the tiny bolt. He plops them both inside the matchbox.

'Two things!' I say.

'Yeah, two things. The nut and the bolt count as two. Don't be tellin' Brown Owl that nut was ever attached to that bolt or she might count it as just one.'

Dad's ethos in life was always that rules were for bending. And that you can get away with anything if no one finds out.

We add three more things to the matchbox:

The corner of a 67 bus ticket from Five Road Ends,
Currock, to the Town Hall.

A piece of thread off the hem of my dad's work sock.

An apple pip we find on the floor, both rolling our eyes in agreement that my mam's Hoovering skills can't be up to much. We'll mention her slackness to her when she returns from driving Grandad to dominos at the Working Men's Club and has got all our teas on.

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‘OK, let’s see what we can find in the kitchen,’ he says.

(It’s funny how those magical moments that parents strive to create for their children very often make no impact at all. Daytrips to theme parks, Christmas pantomime afternoons, trips to the zoo; they can pass without much joy. But I remember vividly standing on a chair, shoulder to shoulder with my father, rooting through the kitchen cupboard in joint determination to win the matchbox game.)

We add to my tiny haul:

A tiny dehydrated pea from a Bachelors Barbecue Bacon & Tomato Cup-a-Soup.

A tiny piece of dehydrated carrot.

A grain of long-grain rice.

A grain of tapioca pudding rice.

A Whiskas duck and liver cat biscuit.

A red lentil my mam put in pressure cookers of Scotch broth.

A corner of foil from an Oxo cube.

A corner of a Smith’s Salt ‘n’ Shake salt packet.

A hundred and thousand from a Birds Trifle.

The toe of a Pickled Onion Monster Munch.

Eventually, after some rooting around down the back of the sofa and in the lean-to at the back of the house, we have pushed twenty-eight items into the matchbox, cramming them in until the tray can barely slide into its white Lion outer cover.

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‘Ere, don’t be opening it again before you do the big count,’ Dad says, ‘cos we might not gerrit shut.’

‘I won’t,’ I say.

‘And don’t you be letting that Brown Owl make you feel daft,’ he says. ‘Does she know that you’re top of the class in your reading and your writing? You wanna tell her that.’

I’m not sure how I’m going to drop that into conversation, but I like that he is clearly proud.

My dad helped teach me to read at the age of four with flash-cards made from the back of cereal packets.

Cake.

Bake.

This.

That.

Tree.

It took me at least another two decades to work out how poor he was at reading and writing himself.

It took me years to realise how much he had shaped who I am. Dad taught me never to say no to paid work, even if you’re snowed under, because work dries up. Dad taught me that keeping money rolling in – no matter what – and relying on no one is the most upstanding thing a person can do. Dad taught me that no one is indispensable; never think you are above being replaced – perfect advice, though it wasn’t his intention, for a career in media. The story he used to demonstrate this, which he told me often, involved one of his friends when he was a young man in the REME, who accidentally

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shot himself through the head one weekend in the barracks. The following Monday morning everyone was very sad, until about lunchtime when all the man's tasks were redistributed and no one mentioned him again. It took me at least three decades to work out that his friend had not accidentally killed himself. Dad also taught me that work is a fantastic place to hide. Head down, chop-chop, keep busy, keep working; you can keep on running from yourself.

I have been finding tiny items to stuff in the matchbox for days. Rooting in drawers, opening folders, putting my face in places I really shouldn't. I have been looking at two photos I have found stored in an envelope and reading letters that are not for my eyes. Some things I have seen are very confusing. I have found a black-and-white photo of two little girls in my father's bedside drawer. Two happy little girls. Smiling and waving. I do not know who they are. I will not mention them to anyone for many years. My dad taught me that everyone has secrets. He taught me that no one is ever truly knowable. Dad taught me that everybody – and I mean everybody – fibs.

I skip to Brownies the following evening, quietly confident that I am in with a chance of winning, because me and my dad have properly put the graft in over this.

As all the little Brownies gather round the trestle table in the Methodist Hall clutching their Lion matchboxes, a whisper begins to grow throughout the pack that Darlene has forty-five items inside hers.

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‘Forty-five?’ I say.

‘But her matchbox is different,’ says Tracy Fitzackerly.

‘*How* is it different?’ I say.

‘Her matchbox is sort of longer,’ Tracy says, not seeming overly fussed as she’s only stuffed ten items in hers anyway.

I walk down the table to find Darlene Phillips holding a neatly packed-to-the-brim yellow Swan Vestas matchbox.

Some girls are muttering that this doesn’t seem fair. The Swan Vestas box is much larger than a normal box. We all had to have the same size box. Brown Owl, who looks ruffled at first, is now saying she did not specify which type of matchbox we could use. Also, if you think about it, Darlene’s box is not as deep, so that makes everything fair. People seem to bend the rules for girls like Darlene. It’s like anything is possible.

‘I don’t think this is fair,’ mutters Tracey Fitzackerly.

‘Oh Darlene, that is very clever,’ says Brown Owl. ‘Jesus is in there too!’

Brown Owl is thrilled that as Darlene opens the box, a tiny gold crucifix is inside among the other items. A tiny Jesus on the cross, borrowed from Darlene’s mum’s necklace.

‘Isn’t that marvellous,’ says Brown Owl.

‘It’s a bigger box,’ I say audibly.

‘No, it isn’t, Grace,’ says Brown Owl. ‘They’re the same size.’

Somehow I manage *not* to say some of the best swearwords in my nine-year-old cursing artillery. I do not say ‘piss’ or ‘arse’ or the bizarrely effective showstopper ‘twat’.

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I do not say any of that.

I don't say anything.

I stand quietly, inwardly bubbling, as Darlene Phillips is given the box of Terry's Harlequin.

And then, in the final minutes of the meeting, Darlene is made Sixer of the Pixies and is given her silver lapel badge.

I find my BHS ski jacket under the pile of other coats, pull it on over my Brownie uniform and skulk home alone.

As I reach the Five Road Ends I see my dad in Donny's chip shop, fetching everyone's tea. I tell him what went on. He hugs me into the armpit of his work jersey. It smells of sweat and WD-40.

'Oh, presh,' he says. 'Bugger thalorro'them.'

And then he buys me a pickled egg.

Life, I was starting to see, was really not fair and some people simply had a much smoother ride than others.

That said, seven years later, when Darlene Phillips had a surprise baby in their utility room, then wrapped it in a towel and handed it to her mother after she kicked the door down, everyone at church was completely scandalised.

Except for me.

I thought it was really, really funny.

My mother is pushing a small rickety shopping trolley with a wobbly back wheel down a narrow aisle at Presto supermarket on Botchergate, Carlisle. She's trying to do the big Friday shop between five o'clock and half past six, leaving enough time to drive across the city, drop off odds and ends

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to my gran, spin back, unload our car, then make everyone's teas before my dad gets narky.

'He won't think to make his own,' she says.

Being a mam never looks like very much fun. I am starting to have notions that I do not want babies of my own.

Even as a toddler, on being handed a Tiny Tears doll I was slightly flummoxed as to the point of it all.

'Look, she cries,' my mam said, 'so you pick her up to cuddle her. And she wees herself so you can change her nappy!'

It was fun for half an hour.

Grocery shopping, however, felt more like a fun game. By modern standards, Presto was little more than a mini-mart – as big as a couple of tennis courts – but in 1980 it was one of the largest places in Cumbria to buy groceries. It even had a multi-storey car park with exciting concrete ramps. My mother never seemed more like a warrior than when she was jamming the accelerator on her Austin Princess and speeding up the steep entry ramp, yelling, 'Weeeeeeeeeee!'

There were very few men in the supermarket.

Women in cream tabards ran the tills, stacked the shelves and cut and weighed out slices of that spooky pork luncheon tongue slab with the boiled egg lurking inside. Women roamed the aisles, peering at shopping lists, trying to make house-keeping stretch a full seven days, pleading for their kids' patience but inevitably losing them in the aisles. Leaving your kids at home alone became very much 'not the done thing' in the 1980s. A cacophony of ghoulish public-safety ads played

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on Border TV during all daytime ad breaks, warning mothers that slipping out to the shops was hazardous. Within moments of popping out to get bread we would drink bleach, drown in slurry or climb electricity pylons. Presto's tannoy system rang incessantly with news of missing or found kids. Being one of the found kids, I learned quickly, was actually rather exciting. You sometimes even got a biscuit. Sometimes I'd lose myself purposefully, taking right turns and wrong turns along the aisles, merely for the thrill of sitting in the petty cash office in Lennards hearing my name being read out.

'We have a little girl here who is lost called Grace. She is three years old.'

This was my first taste of fame and I loved it.

My mother found it less jolly. Once, in Woolworths, after being reunited with me by the Pick 'n' Mix, she grabbed me, turned me round and smacked my arse as passers-by begged for clemency. This story, which is now part of Dent folklore, is always told humorously, but I can't help but think that it was not remotely funny at the time, when Mam was struggling with two kids under three.

My little brother had arrived very quickly after me. Me in October 1973, him in May 1975.

'I still have no bloody idea where he came from,' my mother has often remarked. 'I could hardly stand your dad for most of 1974.'

But I have a pretty good idea. My father was swarthily handsome. He was witty and devil-may-careish in a world of dour-faced, rule-abiding Cumbrians.

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He was Lee Hazlewood to her Nancy Sinatra.

They fought like hell, due to his moods and her big plans, but never fell out for that long.

By the age of nine I was at least useful on the big Friday shop.

‘Box of Daz,’ she’d say, and off I’d run to the washing-powder aisle.

‘Two tins of peach slices,’ she’d say. ‘And a tin of Tip Top.’

Back I came, with an extra Heinz Treacle Sponge Pudding under my arm. The one you pierced with a tin opener, then steamed in a pan of boiling water. Sticky, satisfying, delicious.

‘Yeah, shove it in,’ she’d nod.

That nod was the best thing ever.

Supermarkets made me happy.

I liked the methodology of filling the trolley, trying not to squash the bread or bruise the fruit. I liked the set-in-stone way that supermarkets always seemed to be laid out: fresh fruit and veg aisles giving way to tinned fruits and dried packets, then shampoos, then toilet paper, then wonderful-smelling washing detergents and then finally booze and tins of cat meat.

The Heinz steamed pudding, I knew by the age of nine, would come in handy for a quick after-tea pudding. Each grocery we bought at this stage had a roughly assigned purpose. We didn’t buy willy-nilly. The small tin of Heinz Vegetable Salad was to go with the curly lettuce and the tin of red salmon for the 4 p.m. high tea when Gran came over

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on a Sunday. The tin of Smedley's Marrowfat Peas was for fishfingers and mashed potatoes on a Tuesday night. I still adore fat, squashy, slightly bland tinned Marrowfat peas, even if nowadays they've been eclipsed in the public's heart by trendy takes on mushy peas. I learned a deep respect for things out of tins early on; tinned macaroni cheese on white toast with ketchup will always cheer me up. Eating cold beans with a spoon from the tin will forever be one of my least attractive habits.

Choice, when shopping in the early Eighties, was limited. If you wanted tinned spaghetti, orange squash or raspberry jam, there were often only two sorts: supermarket brand or the posh one you'd seen on telly that your mam wouldn't let you buy.

'Shut up, it's all out of the same factory,' my mother would yell, as me and Dave begged for Robinsons Lemon Barley Water like Björn Borg drank at Wimbledon. 'Ere, this one is nice,' she'd add, loading in the Presto Mixed Fruit Squash.

The Dents' trolley contained virtually no spice, heat or evidence at all that Britain was part of the global commonwealth. Or that we even had much to do with Europe. We fried in White Cap lard. We ate Presto medium-sliced, slightly plasticky white bread. Our cheese was orange, almost always Cheddar, and we were still cagey about the idea of melting it. Rice was always white and it was used almost exclusively for puddings, which my mother would make in the oven in a glass dish. But, despite these narrow horizons, watching *Ivor the Engine* at 5.50 p.m. on a cold autumn night with a bowl

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of Mam's rice pudding on my knee is one of my happiest memories of all.

The lack of choice back then only made the sparkly, frivolous things off the telly that we were allowed all the more magical in my mind. The box of Nesquik Banana Milkshake powder we were allowed to mark the start of the summer holidays. The occasional box of Cadbury's chocolate zoo animals sneaked into the trolley but given the 'OK' nod. The tension along Harold Street as we waited for one of our mothers to cave in and buy Birds Eye Supermousse: sweet strawberry-and-vanilla-flavoured goo, in a small pot, with a brightly coloured cardboard lid. Those adverts played from 4 p.m. every evening and every fifteen minutes on Saturday mornings. Our small, determined hearts and minds were hostages to Kellogg's, Rowntree's, Smith's Crisps and Wall's. If you could sweet-talk a Sara Lee gateau or a bottle of Bird's Ice Magic onto that conveyer belt on a Friday, you were one of life's winners. Although more likely was that your mam would discover all those items you'd sneaked into the trolley when she got to the tills and hit the roof. Cue: more screaming, more smacked arses.

Primary school started so well for me. As one of the top kids in our class, I learned my times tables by heart and was doing joined-up writing when the others were still peering at vowels. I galloped through the Griffin Pirate series, in which the Red Pirate faffs pointlessly around the Black Cliffs for sixteen arduous volumes. Outside of 'the three Rs' of reading, writing

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and arithmetic, I took a keen interest in the small array of completely useless topics a Seventies working-class kid was taught: fictitious hokum about the life of Robin Hood, the feeding habits of a brontosaurus (which may or may not have existed), Viking longship building and, at my school, New Testament parables – water to wine, the feeding of the five thousand, the good Samaritan and so on.

‘Grace is a bright spark,’ it said on my school report each term, but without any further nod to where this could lead.

It is hard, perhaps, for some younger people nowadays to understand a world where no one mentioned further education to the lower classes, ever. Not once. Not even in passing. Perhaps it feels unfeasible that this vacuum of ambition or aspiration could possibly exist. But it did. The only thing I wanted to be when I grew up was glamorous. This was within my power. I wanted to be really, really glamorous. Like Margi Clarke in *Letter to Brezhnev*. Or Joanne from The Human League in the ‘Don’t You Want Me’ video in an ankle-length mink coat. Or Alexis Colby in *Dynasty* striding from a helicopter to push Blake’s annoying second wife Krystal into the koi carp pond, again. Glamorous was something I could get my teeth into. It was there on the telly on *Coronation Street* or the Miss World competition.

Still, despite doing well in school, by the age of eleven I’d seen almost none of the classic children’s books that make those broadsheet ‘100 Best ...’ lists each year: A.A. Milne, C.S. Lewis, E. Nesbit. Those tomes that apparently enrich the soul. I’d never heard of Dickens, Shakespeare or Tolkien. I

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knew nothing of Greek mythology or been tipped off that Latin was even a thing. The stuff you need a smattering of if you want to pass as posh.

Like most kids of my ilk, as a small child I was exposed to no foreign languages at all. And while I knew basic spelling, I was taught next to no grammar. I still feel these gaps constantly, despite incessantly trying to improve and catch up during my twenties and thirties. The difference between ‘fewer’ and ‘less’, for example, is something I only discovered in my late thirties when people sneered, ‘Surely, you mean FEWER restaurants have opened, not LESS?’ But that’s generally always the lower middle classes, for whom pedantry is their affliction; an inability to stop pointing out minor errors in people with less bright starts, before basking for the rest of the chat in a dank pool of bad feeling. Speaking perfect grammatical English, for people with my childhood, will always be like speaking a second language near fluently. We’re very impressive – and such a breath of fresh air to have around – but of course we make minor errors. That said, my primary-school days had their uses – if you want help nurturing frogspawn into tadpoles and releasing them in a patch of marshland around the back of Allied Carpets, look no further. It’s a shame that even this relatively bright start soon fizzled out.

I arrived at Caldew Secondary, a state comprehensive, in 1983, at the tail end of corporal punishment, just as the teachers had been requested to stop beating the pupils with

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belts, canes or shoes. It was a disappointment for them, as they clearly missed it. Now, in this moribund centre of non-excellence six miles outside of Carlisle, the powers of this old guard of angry male tutors were sorely reduced. Shouting was their only option. The corridors rocked with their stale-breathed impotent threats. Hurling kids out of class, out of sight, out of mind was a chief tactic to deal with the troublesome. While a small sixth form catered for the more promising handful after the age of sixteen, until then you were part of a one-thousand-strong mob. There had been no grammar-school option to spirit me away to more promising climes – not that the eleven-plus exam had done my family any favours. Both my parents had failed it. My mother – bright as a button – went to a secondary modern and by fourteen was working in a local hat shop. Now a similar fate awaited me and my little brother. My big brother Bob had left school at fifteen and, after a few futile Youth Training Schemes, had packed a bag and left for London with friends. He told us in a letter he was working washing dishes.

I missed Bob a lot. His dad was my mam's first husband, she explained delicately when I was about seven. This made no odds to me: he was my brother and that was that. After he left, the house was much more boring. I missed the sound of David Bowie coming from under his rude remarks about Margaret Thatcher – Bob wasn't a fan like Mam was. I loved him bringing home videos for me to puzzle over, like *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. Bob was funny and brave; he dyed his hair wild colours, rode a Vespa scooter and would

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travel to other towns to go to nightclubs with his friends. Mam and my dad were always furious at him for not ‘sticking in’ at his latest job creation scheme at a carpet warehouse or a gent’s barber. The fights about his hair, his nocturnal hours and ‘Maggie’ were loud and endless. Then one weekend Bob left. He gave me a turntable and a copy of *Parallel Lines* by Blondie. He moved to Kilburn and then to a squat in Manor House. No one could tell him what to do anymore. One day, I will run away too, I thought.

The 1980s British comp-school education was a rudimentary affair. I learned French language for five years from a woman with a broad Carlisle accent who I am now unsure ever set foot in France. ‘*Uhhhhn sandweeeech, seel voooz play,*’ we’d all repeat, sharing Tricolore text books full of scenes of everyday life in La Rochelle. The French were weird; they couldn’t even buy a lump of cheese without a three-hour round trip on a *bicyclette* to a specialist *fromagerie*. The French made a right fuss of food. It seemed bizarre to me. They spent three hours having dinner, as they wanted to chat to each other and enjoy their food. Absolute madness, I thought.

By the age of thirteen, I was already predicted to leave school without a maths GCSE. No teachers made any attempt to explain that a university application form in the 1980s needed a maths GCSE as an absolute minimum requirement, plus at least one GCSE in a science like chemistry, biology or physics. Instead, to worsen matters, I was chivvied towards a qualification called modular science: a sort of holding pen for children too frightening to be allowed near Bunsen burners.

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In modular science our teachers attempted to explain difficult concepts like rainbows, before inevitably pinching the soft skin between their eyes and letting us draw a rainbow instead. In absolute fairness to the science department, I can't blame them for giving up on us. I'd been brought up loving the Lord, who created all things heaven and earth in six days and spent the seventh watching *Bullseye* and drinking Kia-Ora. I had no interest in anything as unfeasible as physics. When Heston Blumenthal shows up making a risotto with a Dyson Airblade and a conical flask of formaldehyde, I still think: Use a pan, mate. Stop dicking about.

Lessons began to leave me behind. I loved swinging on my chair at the back, surrounded by a mob dissecting last night's *Top of the Pops*. I loved doing impressions of popstars or making up song lyrics. Words were my one strength: daft poems, song words, nicknames. Finding joy in the mundane. In fact, the very same things that pay my mortgage now. But then, as a difficult pupil – gobby, booby, easily distracted by anything in Insignia body spray – I made a natural ally for the kids in King Kurt T-shirts who liked setting fire to stuff and locking stuff in cupboards. To our credit, we always let them out in the end.

So, by fourteen, despite being a shining star at infant school, I was quite patently out of the running for Oxford or Cambridge. Or Durham, Manchester, Cardiff, Leeds or, for that matter, any of the tried-and-tested routes to where actual power lay in the 1980s. This story is not remotely unusual. It is absolutely bog-standard, Grade-A humdrum. Being bright

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but working class in Eighties Britain was a huge game of snakes and ladders. You could ascend for a while, but a few bad choices here and there and down you'd go again. Thankfully, in that era, Carlisle still had industry. Pupils who left school at sixteen could pack mint Viscounts at Carr's biscuit factory or count pies off the conveyer belt at Cavaghan & Gray, and there was always a job at the Southwaite service station on the M6 clearing tables. The good thing about these jobs was the ten-till-three shift option, which you could fit around picking up kids, and then grandkids, from the school gate.

My one joy at school was home economics, where I mastered toad in the hole and the incredibly chic party canapé stuffed boiled eggs (the innards mixed with salad cream and Cheddar). At Christmas I perfected yule log by smearing a Co-op chocolate Swiss roll with a rudimentary 'ganache' made of Stork SB and hot-chocolate powder. Home economics was the only lesson where my teacher's eyes actually lit up at my 'panache'. I had panache. My chicken and tinned pineapple skewer was praised hugely both for presentation and seasoning – even if Dad did look a bit green around the gills on the twelfth occasion he got it for tea afterwards. At least here was a class where I could shine.

But when I think about secondary school now, I never think of learning at all. I think of crowded corridors, the arch cruelty of kids and, from just before noon every lunchtime, the uplifting aroma of gravy.

* * *

Sketty

‘What’s that up your sleeve, sonny Jim?’ screamed Haggis, the school dinner lady.

The small boy shuddered in fear.

‘Is that an iced bun? Gimme that bun. Gimme it!’

Caldew’s head dinner supervisor was a terrifying lady from Scotland who we called – with great ingenuity – Haggis Basher.

She was six foot two, broad-chested like a sergeant major, with a curly mop of black hair and a voice like an angry velociraptor. If Roald Dahl had created Haggis for one of his books, he would have probably edited her out of the final draft as a touch unbelievable. Her greatest obsession was the school rule ‘No food items are to be consumed outside the hall’. Haggis, who had at least six sets of eyes, some definitely on her back, adhered to this rule with great tenacity.

‘You can get this bun back tomorrow!’ she shouted, snatching the boy’s sticky baked treat (which he’d hoped to enjoy on the playing field) and plopping it into her tabard pocket. As good as her word, Haggis would give him that bun back the next day at noon – squashed and with washing-machine lint tangled in the icing.

Haggis ran the hall like a military manoeuvre because – I see now only with hindsight – hurtling one thousand children, in three sittings, through a dining hall in seventy minutes is no small task.

Every day she delivered nothing short of a gastronomical miracle.

Three sittings, three hundred kids at a time, fed by a squadron of fierce women in duck-egg-blue tabards flinging

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beige, battered and breadcrumbbed items out of a hatch in the wall. Dinner consisted of three stainless-steel terrines of mushy, lukewarm, delicious chips sat close to warm jugs of lumpy, powder-based gravy. There were fearsome fist-sized breadcrumbbed balls of mashed potato and diced ham known as 'rissoles' and square slices of 'vegetable pizza' – spongey white bread strewn with diced carrots, runner beans and melted cut-price Cheddar. Those Turkey Twizzlers that upset Jamie Oliver so greatly were yet to be invented, but instead we had ominous burgers and cheap hot-dog sausages, which were 20 per cent salt water, 80 per cent pig's lips and bumholes. Prices for all these things were rock bottom: for sixty pence a day you could eat like a king. Albeit a king who might have died quite young from scurvy.

To be fair, health and wellness were not ignored completely. There were jacket potatoes – never with fancy fillings, mind; just the potato. The true sophisticate ate theirs smeared with sachets of ketchup. And for the very stiff-nerved fitness freak, there was salad. Well, to be exact, three salads – that's three pre-made salads to cater for one thousand pupils. They were plated up, cling-filmed over and placed by the chips. But, by Christ, it would be a raffish, vagabond child who'd touch one of these la-dee-dah fucking school-swot salad plates of chopped iceberg, grated carrot, boiled egg and a few dessert-spoons of canned sweetcorn. Salad was one of those things a posh person like Penny from *Just Good Friends* might eat. And as kids, the majority of us were desperate to never, ever stand out. Standing out was suicidal.

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Haggis needed to keep us all eating inside the hall because no sane person wanted to linger there: it was a hotspot for bullying. If we'd had our way, most of us would have bought food and fled, scattering crumbs and ketchup through the yard. This was the era of proper old-fashioned Eighties face-to-face school bullying. The more headbanger kids at our school took a pride in their daily visitations. The school pond was full of dumped satchels, the toilets were perpetually blocked with coats and matron's office perpetually full of sick children who were actually hiding. Secondary school affected how millions of British children felt about other human beings forever. Home-schooled children are a liability in the workplace and in social groups; they are naive, malleable and overly trusting, because they didn't ever learn at school how awful people can be.

I got off semi-lightly, in as much as I was called a slag or an ugly cow by older girls at least every other day. This was just normal and, if anything, I was being provocative. My half-decent posture was definite evidence of supposing I was 'it'. Reckoning you were 'it' in Eighties working-class Britain was a grave crime. It required almost no evidence to prosecute; a confident manner, a new ski jacket, some shoes with a fancy toe cap all constituted putting your head above the parapet in some way.

And in the lunch hall, all our differences were laid bare.

I say differences with a caveat: we were one thousand Caucasian children raised in the Church of England faith. Our backgrounds were as uniformly beige as our lunch plates.

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None of us had the sheer brass neck to be openly gay, bi, queer or trans. A ‘tranny’ was something your Uncle Brian might borrow to do a twenty-four-hour booze-buying trip to Calais. None of our parents were especially rich, poor, smothering, feral or absent. Our uniformity only made the bullying more innovative. By my second year at ‘big school’, I had learned – rather depressingly – that when Joanne from the year above sent a message wanting a fight, the pragmatic option was to walk directly over to Joanne by the chips, grab her by the demi-wave and drag her backwards past the millionaire’s shortbread with her skirt riding up so everyone could see her pants. Clever retorts did not work with these people. It is no accident that so few of the working classes go on to choose a life on the debating circuit and choose hobbies like cage fighting instead.

With all this in mind, perhaps it’s unsurprising how the working classes have such a soft spot for that type of school-dinner pudding that they remember making their day feel slightly better – like sweet, cheaply made apple crumble with custard or honking square lumps of chocolate sponge smothered in some sort of pink creamy sauce. I’d dispatch a sainthood to whichever culinary genius invented Australian Crunch, crushed cornflakes, desiccated coconut, cheap margarine, sugar and cocoa-flavoured powder churned into a tray-bake and topped with thick melted cooking chocolate.

School dinners were where an entire generation of working-class kids learned that beige food is a blanket of happiness to snuggle around you on an otherwise shitty school day. This

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stays with many of us for life. After a woeful day dealing with dickheads at work, very few people experience a guttural yearning for a bowl of mixed leaves with oil-free dressing.

No.

Give me a chip booty covered in vinegar and so much salt I can feel my heart valves clogging. Give me pizza so inauthentic that it would make a Neapolitan weep. Give me food that helps in the short term but in the long term reduces my lifespan.

When Jamie Oliver finally went to war on school dinners and what mothers fed their kids back in 2005, I couldn't help thinking: God love him, his heart's in the right place, but he has no idea what he is taking on. These mothers were my age group, they'd lived my life. Oliver was on a hiding to nothing, telling them a plate of broccoli was a lunch option for their little Lee-Reuben. Even when he managed to ban the Twizzlers, some mams came to the school and pushed emergency Happy Meals through the school fence. It looked shocking, I know, but I understood. They just wanted their kids to be fed and happy.

By the age of fourteen, a division was growing between me and my father.

He could not protect me from Caldew or possibly understand how it felt for me growing up.

He left the heavy lifting of all my hormonal teenage stropiness to my mother. And as I grew curvier, bolshier, more belligerent and less likely to show my face at school five

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days in a row, my father hid away from our arguments. I turned my mother's hair silver with anger. I told every lie I could dream up to stay at home and read Jackie Collins novels in bed. Sore throats, bad heads, heavy periods, imaginary teacher training days. Sometimes just plain old-fashioned screaming 'I'm not bloody going!'

All this was nobody else's fault but my own.

Fourteen-year-old girls in the 1980s were a law unto themselves. We did not consider ourselves to be children.

We read *Cosmopolitan* magazine cover to cover and loved the articles on stronger, harder orgasms. We pooled our pocket money and bought Thunderbird or Merrydown cider or Kestrel lager to drink in the bogs at school discos. We stole Cinzano Bianco from our mothers' drinks' cabinets and knocked it back neat with a Feminax period pain pill to get us more dizzily drunk. We danced to 'Rebel Yell' by Billy Idol or 'Blue Monday' by New Order or 'Male Stripper' by Man 2 Man and we had sex in our grandparents' seaside static caravans or standing up in bus shelters and it was all bloody brilliant. The pubs served us vodka and lime without question and we went to nightclubs without even needing fake ID, just with false birthdays and star signs memorised. We drank snakebite and black or shots of Dubonnet and pints of Caffrey's and long vodkas made with Rose's Lime Juice Cordial and Angostura bitters. We doused ourselves in Anaïs Anaïs by Cacharel and had older boyfriends with Sun-In-streaked mullets who drove Ford Fiesta XR2s and Escort Mk 3s, who would get banged up in young offenders' institutes

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for low-level soccer hooliganism. We had boyfriends who smoked bongos and listened to AC/DC who were scaffolders and picked us up from school in their Ford Capri to drive us home.

The word grooming was just something posh girls did with their ponies.

We smoked Regal King Size, which we stole from our nans. We wore our school skirts rolled over at the waistline with Pineapple boxer boots and neon fishnet tights and Rimmel Heather Shimmer lipstick and we tried to hide the lovebites on our necks with Constance Carroll concealer stick, although we were secretly proud of them, especially the ones on our boobs. We put ourselves on the pill at the local family planning clinic (carting along random willing teenage boys to play the parts of steady, responsible boyfriends), which the nurses dished out with grateful abandon, because they knew the alternative was that many would fake consent forms to book abortions, which in a time before computerised records was as easy as pie.

And we did all this without many tears.

It didn't occur to us that we were victims.

We were Generation X, raised without playdates, allergies, safe spaces and CRB checks, when getting your tits felt up – not entirely consensually – at the back of the Manchester Free Trade Hall was, we reckoned, the best part of going to see Spaceman 3. It was a world before TikTok, before cameras in every pocket, before it felt imperative to capture, log and broadcast every experience in order to harvest attention.

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Teenagers in the Eighties knew the value of discretion.

Of sworn-to-the-heart secrecy.

Of sneaking about.

And we generally got away with it. And now that Generation X are the parents, we pretend none of it happened at all.

My dad stayed right out of most of this. He buried himself in work and tried hard not to be there at tea time. Thatcherism was working out beautifully for some portions of society – much less so for others – but for him it brought a new way to earn money. With consumerism on the rise, he bought a white Ford Escort van and set himself up as a delivery driver. He acquired a hard-luck-story Alsatian puppy with a black ear whom he called Cilla, who sat in the front seat guarding the goods. People needed more stuff – white goods, home office supplies, even the occasional computer – and now my dad worked night and day to deliver them, never refusing a job.

Dad was happiest when he and Cilla were on the motorway driving away from the fights in our living room. Driving away from the television that never played what he wanted anymore but was now showing ‘that clown’ Morrissey spinning with a handful of gladioli, Michael Hutchence in bike shorts ‘acting like a poof’ or endless episodes of *Airwolf* while me and David gave each other dead arms.

He found family life – being the one supposedly in charge – no fun at all. My mother took up the slack.

That said, he had very limited experience of being a good example. And his sins had only just come back to haunt him.