

*The Art of Not  
Falling Apart*



# *The Art of Not Falling Apart*

Christina Patterson



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In fact, may you be dull –  
If that is what a skilled,  
Vigilant, flexible,  
Unemphasised, enthralled  
Catching of happiness is called.

Philip Larkin,  
'Born Yesterday'



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## Prologue

I was writing up an interview when I got the call. Five minutes later, I felt as if I was falling off a cliff. The letter had been bad enough. The letter had used words like ‘synergies’ and ‘integration’, and the ‘synergies’, it said, would ‘reduce costs’. The letter had been followed by a meeting with a young blonde from HR who talked about ‘consultation’ while she gazed at her nails. But now what the man in front of me was saying didn’t seem to make any sense at all. When I asked him to explain, he started fiddling with his pen. ‘You’ll have,’ he said, ‘to see the editor.’

When I walked into the editor’s office, he was hunched behind his desk. Something about his mouth made it clear he was raring for a fight. I had, I told him, accepted the ‘synergies’, but I had been promised a contract to sugar the pill. Now the promise seemed to have been broken and I didn’t understand what was going on. The editor, who is fat and bald and looks as though he should be wearing a nappy, stared out of the window as he told me that he had decided to ‘freshen the pages up’.

It’s quite hard to swallow when the boss has just made it clear that your older, male colleagues are still ‘fresh’, but you are not. I tried to keep my voice steady as I told the editor that readers liked my work. I told him that I couldn’t have worked much

harder. I told him that I had given ten years' loyal service to the paper and I did not deserve to be treated like this.

Now the editor looked at me and his cold, grey eyes made me think of a fish. 'And what,' he said, and he seemed to be smiling as he said it, 'is so special about you?'

When someone asks you why you're special, there isn't really anything you can say. You could, I suppose, say that some people think you're special, but it isn't easy to say that to someone who's looking at you as if you're a stain on the carpet they would like to blast with bleach.

I told him that I didn't like his tone. I told him that I didn't like the way he was treating some of the senior women on his staff. The editor looked away and then back at me. He said I didn't know what I was talking about. I was surprised to hear myself shouting that I did. And then he threatened to call security. This big bull of a man actually threatened to call security.

When I walked out of the office, for the last time, after ten years, nobody even looked up.

I always dreamt of being a journalist, but never seriously thought I could be. I grew up in a family of teachers and public servants and was brought up to believe that saying you wanted to write for a living was very much like saying you wanted to be a punk. At university, I had vague dreams of sitting on a frontline, looking like Martha Gellhorn, bashing out pieces that 'spoke truth to power'. But the only things I wrote, as dawn broke and the birds in the college grounds shattered the silence of the night, were essays about alliteration in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* or the use of allegory in *The Faerie Queen*.

I was thirty-eight, and running a small arts organization called the Poetry Society, when I got a call from the literary editor of *The Independent*, saying that his deputy was leaving and asking if I wanted to apply for the job. I had been reviewing books for the national papers since I was twenty-six, but had given up all dreams of journalism as anything other than a sideline to a full-time job. I loved my job, and my colleagues, and I also quite liked being the boss. But I knew that if I wanted to work on a national paper, this was my chance.

A newspaper, my new boss told me, was like a medieval fiefdom. At first I didn't understand what he meant. In the arts world, bosses pretended to be interested in getting the views of their staff. In the arts world, you got sent on courses on 'diversity' and talked about things like 'continuing professional development'. I once even got sent on a course to learn the Alexander Technique. I thought it was very nice of the taxpayer to let me lie with my head on a cushion, 'allowing my neck to be free'.

Newspapers were not like this. On a newspaper, or at least on my newspaper, no one cared about your 'continuing professional development'. You didn't get training for anything except IT. There was only really one item on your job description: do whatever the hell your boss says. On the books desk, we would sweat over each semi-colon and piece together the pages as if they were the fragments of a Ming vase. At five o'clock on press day, the deputy editor would stroll down to look at the proofs. He would glance at the pages, grab his pen from his pocket and slice it through the air as if it was a machete hovering over a neck. When he handed the proofs back, we would gaze at the marks like gashes on the pages and wonder how to salvage something from

the wreck. My boss said it was just ‘willy waving’, but dealing with ‘willies’ seemed to be quite a big part of the job.

When I moved upstairs, to be an editor on the comment desk, I learnt more about stress. It started with the tension in the faces of the section editors as they tried to put together their morning list. A list on a newspaper isn’t like a list you write on a notepad, where you might or might not tick some of the items off. A list on a newspaper is a miracle you have snatched out of air. You have got up, you have listened to the *Today* programme, you have read, or at least flicked through, all the papers, and tried to grasp the latest developments on quantitative easing in the Euro-zone and the Nigerian government’s shift in policy on Boko Haram. You have strained every neuron in your brain to put together a list of ideas that will make editors on other papers feel sick that they didn’t come up with them first. But when you see the editor’s PA opening the door to his office, you know that there is only one view that counts.

A ‘conference’, according to the dictionary, is ‘a formal interchange of views’. Perhaps, in some places, it is. In conference on a newspaper – not ‘a conference’, because there’s no time to mess around with indefinite articles – the ‘interchange of views’ is just one-way. The editor asks you to read your list, and then stares at you as if you had just projectile vomited on to his new Damien Hirst. If he’s in a good mood, he might nod. If he’s in a bad mood – and editors are in bad moods quite a lot – he will pick out something on your list, and repeat the words back to you as if you had just suggested a front-page story on Jane Austen’s use of the quadrille. He will then ask you about a tiny news item on page 36 of the one paper you didn’t get a chance to skim.

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It's hard to explain why we all love it, but we do. Perhaps we all like to think we really are in a war. The relief that it wasn't you in the firing line, or that it was you, but that the bullet somehow missed your heart, sends some chemical flooding through your veins. It makes you want to climb up on your desk, raise your arms as high as you can get them and bellow that you're still here, you are actually still alive. After that, all you have to fear is the later prowling round the office. That, and the ticking clock. If you're editing, you get on the phone. You talk, you wait, you hone, you chop. If you're writing, you do as much googling as you can squeeze into the minutes before you have to get that first mark on that blank page. At the start of the day, there is nothing. At the end of the day, there are a hundred pages of what you hope is sparkling copy. This happens every day and it makes you feel as if you are, or are working with, God.

When I was asked to write a regular column, I felt like singing an aria. When I was told I could drop the editing and write full-time, I felt like singing the Hallelujah Chorus.

As well as my column, which I now did twice a week, I did a weekly interview. I had been interviewing writers for years. Jeanette Winterson had given me the number of her psychic. Jacqueline Wilson had told me that she sometimes only just managed to 'get her knickers on' when people asked for her autograph at the gym. Philip Pullman had talked about a satire he had written on journalism called *I Was a Rat!* He seemed to think that being a journalist was something that should make you feel ashamed. I wanted to tell him that nothing in my life had ever made me feel as proud.

And nothing had. The truth is, nothing ever had. It was certainly stressful. Writing two columns a week and finding someone famous to interview, and doing the research on them, and going to meet them, and transcribing the tape, and writing it up, meant that I ended up working nearly all the time. Sometimes the interviews were interesting. Sometimes they weren't. Alice Cooper told the same anecdotes he had been trotting out for thirty years. Eddie Izzard compared himself to Nelson Mandela. Carlos Acosta complained about being a sex symbol. I told him that it might be a good idea to do up the buttons of his shirt.

Candace Bushnell, who wrote *Sex and the City*, gave me some advice on dating. I thought I could do with some advice on dating, because my so-called romances never seemed to last more than a few weeks. 'The people I know who are happily married,' she said, jabbing her finger, 'don't expect their husbands to bring home the bacon. If you're very wedded to a narrow idea of what life should be like,' she added, 'you're going to run out of time.' When I realized she thought I was trying to find a rich man to support me, I had to make an effort not to laugh. I thought of the date with the man with buck teeth who had shouted to the whole restaurant that I was 'a cunt' and left me to pay the bill. Never mind bacon, I wanted to tell her. I'm thrilled if someone buys me a drink.

When I was asked to write the lead column in the paper once a week, I started reading newspapers all the time. A lead column can't just be about some little thing you find quite interesting, like the return of the legging, or the fact that men seem to think they should get a medal for saying that Helen Mirren is still 'quite hot'. A lead column has to be about a big item in the news that

day. It could be a change to the definition of child poverty, or a cut to tax credits, or whether you should try to extradite a radical preacher with a hook for a hand. I started to feel as if my life was a twenty-four-hour viva for a PhD in current affairs. I went to bed with the news and woke up to the news and felt like yelling at the presenters of *Newsnight* that the news they were discussing was now rather old.

Every Tuesday, when I heard people stumbling over their interviews with John Humphrys, I wanted to tell them that they should count themselves lucky. *They* should try to think of a ‘fresh’ argument about a piece of news they’d only just heard about, wait for the comment editor to take the idea to conference and wonder if you might then have to write about something else that has just leapt into the editor’s head. And then churn out 1100 words of interesting, thought-provoking, editor-pleasing prose by 3 p.m.

When the emails started pouring in, they sometimes made me laugh. ‘*If you had done your research, Miss Patterson*’ was a fair sign that what followed would make me smile less. Yes, I wanted to say. Yes, if I’d had time to do research I might well have come up with a different argument. If I’d had time to do research, I would have had a different job. I sometimes wondered whether readers thought columnists sat in libraries, rifling through Socrates and weighing up arguments like a judge. A columnist, I wanted to say, was someone who showed up. You licked a finger, stuck it in the air and hoped to catch a breath of wind. What you did next was fill a page. Whatever else you did, you had to fill that page. And your photo and name would be stuck over it whether what you produced was Plato or Russell Brand.

Freud talked about love and work. He said they are ‘the cornerstones of our humanness’. Most people have taken that to mean that if we want to be happy, we need work we like and someone to love. As Candace Bushnell pointed out, my search for love wasn’t going well. Work I could do. Work was what I had. And then a new editor arrived on the paper, and a junior member of staff was given my boss’s job, and then I got a letter about ‘synergies’, and then a bald, fat man asked me why I was special and threatened to call security, and then I walked out of an office on Kensington High Street knowing that I had lost the thing I had spent my whole life building up.

It’s interesting what happens to the body when it’s in shock. Shock, according to the medical definition, is ‘a life-threatening condition of low blood perfusion to tissues resulting in cellular injury and inadequate tissue function’. But this, it says, is not the same as ‘the emotional state of shock’. When you’re in emotional shock you’re not likely to die. You’re just likely to feel that someone has tried to kill you.

What you experience in emotional shock is an ‘acute stress response’. This is triggered by something called the ‘sympathetic nervous system’, which is specially designed to respond to phrases like ‘I don’t love you any more’ or ‘what’s so special about you?’ You might think that a sympathetic system would be trying to calm you down, wrapping you in a nice chemical blanket and offering you a choice between Green & Black’s cocoa and a whisky sour. It doesn’t. The sympathetic nervous system has decided that what you need when you’re really, really upset is to be flooded with hormones that set your whole system on fire. It



thinks that what you need, when you're trying to keep upright as you walk out of an office on Kensington High Street, is to be able to gallop over a savannah.

It's actually quite hard to do anything when your heart is thumping in your chest like a mad prisoner trying to hammer a way out. And when your whole body is trembling, like one of those Power Plates you never use at the gym. You think, at first, that it's quite interesting that you can actually see your body shaking. You wonder if this is what it's like when people say they have 'the shakes' and can't do anything until they've had a drink. You think that the shaking will surely soon stop. You honestly don't see how it can carry on. But your heart keeps hammering and your body keeps shaking and you still find it hard to swallow, while you're still gulping air and wondering why you seem to have forgotten how to breathe.

I was still shaking the next day when I got a phone call from Harriet Harman's chief of staff saying that they were keen to fix the interview she had agreed to do for my planned series on 'women and power'. I had to explain that I wouldn't be doing any interviews on 'women and power' because I didn't seem to have any power any more. I didn't, in fact, seem to have a job. A few minutes later, the phone rang again. 'I've got Harriet on the line,' the voice at the end of it said. 'She wants to speak to you.'

I was wearing torn leggings and a stripy Primark top as I paced around my study and told the shadow deputy prime minister what had happened. Harriet Harman had started something called the Commission on Older Women. Three days before, on the Sky News press preview on which I was a regular guest, I had talked about her commission. Now she said she

wanted to understand *The Independent's* policy towards women. Why, she wanted to know, was a national newspaper that had a reputation for being liberal forcing out quite a few of its forty-something women?

I wanted to be helpful, but I couldn't tell her why. I knew I couldn't have worked much harder. I didn't think I could have done a much better job. I had, for example, recently done a big campaign to raise standards in nursing that had had a record response from readers and been mentioned in a debate in the House of Commons. I wanted to tell her that I wasn't so naïve as to think that hard work would always be rewarded, but that nothing in my life had prepared me for this.

I had a wild urge to tell her about my father's seventieth birthday dinner, some years before. He had cancer and we knew he was dying and my mother made a speech. My mother talked about my father, and some of the things he had done. She also talked about the guests. She talked about how they had met, and what their friendship had meant.

There were six couples round that table and they all met their partners when they were young. Like my parents, they got married in their early twenties, had a baby and bought a house. Like my parents, they then had more babies, in most cases another two. They didn't have to worry all that much about how they were going to pay the mortgage, since they had jobs – in teaching, the civil service or the NHS – that were theirs for life. They didn't need to worry about retirement, either. When they hit sixty, or, if they weren't quite so lucky, sixty-five, they would have the kind of pension that meant they could carry on living pretty much as they had before. They could still go to the theatre, and

eat out. They could still have foreign holidays. And they would have plenty of time to spend with the grandchildren, because that, as they all say, is one of the big joys of getting old.

In my parents' world, I wanted to tell Harriet Harman, you knew what you should be doing. You had to feed your children and you had to pay your bills. To do these things, you had to go to work. It was important to do your work well. You should do your work so well that you get promoted every few years without ever having to boast about yourself on Twitter. But a job was how you showed your responsibility to your family. A job was not a bridge over a void.

In my parents' world, you didn't wake up on a Saturday morning in your forties thinking that if you wanted to speak to a human being in the next two days, you'd better try to make an arrangement. You didn't think that, if you ever wanted to have sex again, you'd better force yourself to do some internet dating, and then hear a man say, on your fifth date, just after you've had really rather adventurous sex, that he's 'determined to hold out for something good'.

I had, I wanted to tell Harriet Harman, faced plenty of difficulties before. I had had to deal with illness. I had had to cope with sudden death. I had never thought I would face my middle years without a family or a man to love, but I had tried very hard to make the best of it. I had my career. At least I had my career. But now I didn't.

In a corner of my study, behind the filing cabinet and the printer, there's a secret shelf. On it are the kinds of books that sprang up on the Amazon page of a computer I once shared with a colleague.

He, it was clear from the ‘Related to items you’ve viewed’ section, was ordering books on Eastern European poets. I, it was clear from the same section, was ordering books with titles like *Men Who Can’t Love* and *I Can Make You Thin*. When I realized he was getting my recommendations, I went hot, then cold.

It started with a book I begged my mother to buy me when I was thirteen. It was written by Vidal Sassoon and his glowing wife Beverly, and called *A Year of Beauty and Health*. Vidal and Beverly said you should start the day with hot water and lemon and continue it with a run. Then, after ‘dry-brushing’ your skin in the shower, you were meant to have a breakfast of egg whites or oatmeal, and then prepare a packed lunch of raw vegetables and sprouted seeds. I didn’t do any of this, of course. I had toast and marmalade for breakfast, school lunch, with spotted dick or jam roly poly for pudding, and a Dayvilles ice cream or a Twix on the way home. As an adult, I’ve bought *The Hip and Thigh Diet*, *The Red Wine Diet*, *The Food Doctor Diet*, *The Easy GI Diet*, *Dr Atkins New Diet Revolution*, *The South Beach Diet*, *6 Weeks to Super Health* and *Stop the Insanity!*, which probably sums up the rest of them. And I’m not even fat.

The diet books, which I usually read with a cup of coffee and a big slab of cake, aren’t hidden behind the filing cabinet. They’re next to the cookery books, which look as if they’ve hardly been opened, because they haven’t. The diet books aren’t hidden, because women are supposed to worry about their weight, even if they hate cooking, don’t weigh themselves, and eat whatever the hell they like. And because there’s only one shelf behind the filing cabinet, and it’s pretty jam-packed.

People judge you by your bookshelves, and I don’t really want

any of my guests to see *Wanting Everything*, *Instant Confidence* and *Awaken the Giant Within*. I particularly don't want them to see *How to Meet a Man After Forty*, and particularly since the jacket is pink. I wouldn't want to explain why I'd bought a book called *You Can Heal Your Life*, or one called *Happiness Now!* I think I'd be embarrassed by the exclamation mark.

If any of my guests did peer behind the filing cabinet, I'd have to explain that the self-help books, like the diet books, hadn't changed anything, but it probably didn't help that I hadn't followed any of the instructions. I'd have to say that you couldn't actually read *War and Peace* or *The Waste Land*, and then pick up a book with a title like *Change Your Life in 7 Days* with anything like a straight face. These books weren't about solving anything. Like an action movie, or a rom com, they were about escape. They were about taking you, for a couple of hours, with a nice glass of Sauvignon and a bowl of Kettle Chips, to a simpler, perkier place.

I have never yet found a book called *I Feel So Awful I Don't Know What to Do*. If I had, on a few occasions in my life I might have snapped it up. Instead, I have bought books with titles like *A Grief Observed* and *Prisoners of Pain*. I have read books about people in refugee camps, and people who live in slums, and children who have been abused. I have certainly learnt a lot about how other people live their lives, but have ended up feeling ashamed that I sometimes seem to be making such a mess of mine.

I was once jealous of someone who was at Auschwitz. I'm not proud of this, but I'm afraid it's true. I was lying on a hotel bed in Turkey, drinking a cup of tea, and reading about a man who was trying to stay alive in a place where people were being starved,

and tortured, and made to dig railway tracks in frozen ground, in a place, in fact, where people were sent to be slaughtered, and I actually thought, at least for a moment: it's all right for you.

I had ordered *Man's Search for Meaning* on Amazon, because I felt my own search for meaning wasn't going well at all. I had met a man who had promised to be my 'rock', but turned out to be more like one of those houses in the Bible that are built on sand. After he left, I felt as though my life had turned into the lyrics of one of those soul songs where everyone wears a tight satin suit. 'What becomes of the broken-hearted?' sings a man with an Afro and a *very* big collar. 'I know I've got to find,' he sings, 'some kind of peace of mind.' Unfortunately, he doesn't tell us how he does it.

The days that followed after my lover left were bad enough, but what happened two weeks later was much, much worse. I stopped even thinking about 'peace of mind' and wondered how I would get through it without cracking up. I thought it might help to hear how other people had got through things that would make the things I had to face look like a walk in the park. So I ordered *Man's Search for Meaning*, and on page 49 I found the answer. What had kept him going, said Viktor Frankl, through the hunger, and the pain, and the screams of anguish from the bunks around him, was the thought of the woman he loved. He had found his strength, he said, in the 'contemplation of his beloved'. And I thought, perhaps just for a moment, but a moment is enough: it's all right for you.

When a book about a concentration camp makes you feel a cold thud you have learnt to recognize as envy, take it from me, that doesn't make you feel good at all.

\*

‘What will survive of us’, said the poet Philip Larkin, ‘is love.’ He says this in his poem ‘An Arundel Tomb’, about a stone knight and his lady who, even in death, are holding hands. The tone of the poem is ironic, but the simple beauty of the words is stronger than the tone. Even Philip Larkin – miserable, moaning Philip Larkin – can’t help agreeing with Viktor Frankl. In the end, what matters is having someone to love.

Most of us want love. Most of us want satisfying work. Most of us want a family. We want a place, and people, to call home.

So what do you do if you haven’t got it? Or if you had it and lost it? What do you do when you’ve made the best of what you have and then lose the thing you care about most? How do you ‘search for meaning’ when so many of the traditional ways of finding it seem to have gone? And how on earth do you keep picking yourself up when life keeps finding ways to knock you down?

Life, as Boris Pasternak said, ‘is not so easy as to cross a field’. It never has been, but for many of us there are fresh challenges now. Nearly a third of us live on our own. More of us are single than ever before. And if you do get married, you have almost a fifty–fifty chance that your marriage will fail.

You could throw yourself into work, but the digital revolution is wiping out jobs. Some economists say that about half of us will lose our jobs in the next twenty years. Some of us – particularly in areas like journalism where the business model is failing – might struggle to get a job again. We can, of course, all become ‘entrepreneurs’, but the average annual income of a self-employed person in Britain is about £10,000. You try having a lovely life on £10,000.

If this was a self-help book, I could tell you what to do. I could be the teacher and tell you all about success. I am not a teacher, and for big chunks of my life I have felt I have failed.

At the end of that phone call with Harriet Harman, I said that I didn't think there was anything much that could be done about my lost column and my lost job. If someone doesn't think you're 'fresh', I said, you're not likely to change their mind.

But no one can stop me from being a journalist. However I earn my living, I will always be a journalist. I know how to ask questions. I know how to listen. And in the weeks following that phone call I decided it was time to ask different kinds of questions and to listen in a way I had never listened before.

I can't tell you what to do when your heart is broken and your spirit has been crushed. I can tell you what I learnt, and what I did next.



## Part I

### *Falling*

‘If you want to make God laugh, tell him about your plans’

Woody Allen



## Kafka, eat your heart out

I have never had a heart attack, but I think I now have some idea what it's like. For days after I walked out of that office on Kensington High Street, I felt as if I had something crouching on my chest. I'm normally keen to lose a pound or two, but even I was shocked to lose eight pounds in three days. The day after the editor threatened to call security, I got an emergency appointment with my doctor. I told her that I couldn't stop shaking. My heart, I said, felt like a bomb that was about to go off.

I never thought losing a job would be easy, but I always thought so many things would be worse. I had been through quite a few of the things that are meant to be so much worse. They didn't seem all that much worse now.

It was the psychologist Abraham Maslow who came up with the idea of a hierarchy of needs. He talked about life as a pyramid, where your need for food and shelter come first. After that, there's a need for safety and then for 'love, belonging and esteem'. Shelter I had, at least for a while. Food, for once, I didn't want. And love? Love was a luxury I couldn't worry about now.

When mice go through changes in status, it affects their immune system and their ability to move. No wonder humans can't stop shaking when they're suddenly pushed from a perch.

One moment, you're being invited to go on *The One Show* and speak in seminars at the House of Commons. The next, you start talking about work in the past tense. It makes you feel as though you have been knocked down by a bus, and are somehow still functioning even though you have been technically certified as dead.

In John Lanchester's novel *Mr Phillips*, a man sets off with his briefcase, in a suit. Instead of going to the office, he sits on a bench in the park until it's time to go home. He doesn't know how he's going to tell his wife or sons that he has lost his job. Not long after I shouted at the editor, I met someone who did something similar. After he lost his job as an executive editor of a national newspaper, Grant Feller rushed out of the house before his children got home from school, and then strode in with his briefcase, telling them that 'Daddy was home early again'. It took him three days to pluck up the courage to tell them that he had been marched out of the office with his things in a cardboard box.

'I can remember every single moment of it happening,' he told me. 'I can remember being approached by the managing editor and tapped on the shoulder. I can remember the walk. I remember being sat down. I remember the look on his face and the sun coming through the shutters on the window overlooking the Thames. He said, "The editor has lost faith in your ability and we no longer want you to work here." I went cold.

'It was,' he admitted, 'a brutal environment, but secretly I loved it. I loved being pushed to my limits. The adrenaline, the testosterone, the thing you feel when you get that great pat on the back when you've done a great column, or even when you've written a great headline, that's the most amazing gift.' Oh yes,

that thing you feel. That terror. That excitement. That thrill. But the pressure mounted, he said, as the budgets were slashed. 'I never, ever, ever put in a bad day's work,' he said, 'but I just didn't fit any more. My wife says, "Didn't you see it coming?" And the reason I didn't was that I was good at the job.'

When Grant walked out of that meeting with the managing editor, he found security guards waiting outside the door. Newspaper editors love the grand exit with security guards. It's a way of showing the whole office that you have turned, on the flash of a whim, from friend to foe. 'I said to the managing editor that I'd appreciate it if we didn't have any security guards,' Grant told me. 'We shook hands. I left. It must have been about ten-thirty in the morning. I got on the train. It was a completely empty train, full of old people and students and tourists. There was a kind of numbness and a sort of feeling that you're not quite in this world, almost as if all people had disappeared and you were just on your own, like in those westerns when that tumbleweed rolls across the desert.'

The next day, he said, was the worst. 'I just couldn't tell the children. I walked them to school, came home, did stuff in my T-shirt, then put my suit on at about quarter to five and went for a walk and then came back when I knew the children were there. And they said, "Daddy, home early again?" And I said, "Easy day."'

Grant took another sip of his wine and then he gulped. 'When you don't have work, and you look into your children's eyes at breakfast time . . . they don't quite understand what losing a job means. But when they start worrying about money, it's just the worst thing. Being the provider that society deems a man to be, that was right at the core of things for me.'

I nodded, as if I knew exactly what he meant. I knew I should have thought that I was lucky not to have had to worry about having other mouths to feed. I didn't feel lucky. I felt as if worrying about my own livelihood, home and future was something a woman's magazine might tell you to do when you've had a hard day with the kids. Like a bubble bath, with a scented candle and perhaps a tiny glass of wine. 'Me time'. Because I'm worth it. Even if I now have a horrible feeling I'm not.

'I was fortunate,' he said, 'to live in an affluent part of London, but it makes things difficult. You start to measure your life in terms of what you possess or own. And also how you define yourself: I am a doctor, I am a lawyer, I am a journalist. And then there was a time when it was: I'm looking for something else to do, and you can't walk into a room and say that.'

Well, you can, but the trouble is that other people don't know what to say. I am an ex-journalist. I am a recovering journalist. I am a journalist who may no longer be able to carry on living in my home. 'There was a period,' said Grant, 'when there was a "for sale" sign outside the house, two or three months after I lost my job. That was awful. One morning,' he said, and he seemed to be half wincing at the memory, 'I pulled it out of the ground. I looked at it and thought "no way", and told the estate agent, "It's not for sale."'

I first met Grant at a professional networking dinner organized by someone we both knew. We were each asked to say something about ourselves and he said that losing his job was the best thing that ever happened to him. At the end of the dinner I rushed up to him and told him that for me it had felt like one of the worst. I couldn't understand how he had managed to be positive and

upbeat and all the things the self-help books tell you to be when you lose your job, while I had been staggering around as if I was carrying a corpse. When we finally met for a drink to swap stories of newspaper battlefields, he set me right. 'I was monumentally depressed,' he said. 'And I was angry, so angry and so bitter and so full of poison. Honestly, there were days when I wanted to do the most terrible things to the people I felt had wronged me.'

I poured us both another glass of wine and had to fight the urge to cheer. I had been talking to a radio producer about making a programme about compassion, following some work I'd done on nursing and the NHS. 'To be honest,' I told the producer, 'I'm currently more interested in making a programme about revenge.' I was joking, and was quite surprised when he said it was 'a great idea'. We put together a proposal. We would, we said, look at the history and psychology of revenge, from Medea to the contemporary armed forces and the judiciary. We would ask whether the import of 'honour' codes from the South and East had affected Britain's traditional Christian/liberal humanist idea of turning the other cheek. But all I really wanted to do was plunge *The Independent's* management in boiling oil.

The producer's bosses weren't, it turned out, very keen on compassion or revenge. But the producer was so upset by what had happened to me that he cancelled his subscription to *The Independent*. His act of loyalty cheered me up when not all that much else did.

Ken Olisa sounded very cheerful when I heard him talk at an event on 'finding your balance'. I was invited to it by someone I met at a conference, one of many people I bored with the tale of

my dramatic departure, and who listened and was kind. The event was in a wood-panelled hall. There were candles. There was champagne. But there was not very much champagne. Like most journalists, I have been programmed to expect a nice glass of something chilled to be quickly followed by a second. So when I listened to three leading businessmen talk about a turning point in their life, I was a bit distracted by my empty glass.

It was Ken Olisa who broke through. He is short. He wears a bow tie. I'm usually filled with irritation at the sight of a man in a bow tie, but after a while I didn't notice the bow tie because Ken Olisa is very funny. He was telling us about the dilemma he faced when the company he worked for collapsed in 'internecine fighting', the boss he liked got cancer and died and his new boss was 'as close to evil as I've found'. I'm rarely gripped by tales of corporate infighting. In fact, when the earlier speaker talked about his struggles to 'make partner' in a major accountancy firm I had to hide my yawns. But Ken talked about his childhood as the mixed-race son of a single mother in a two-up two-down in Nottingham with an outside loo. He told us how the head teacher of his state junior school had played his pupils Mozart and given them each a tiny taste of caviar, so they would know there was a world beyond the one they lived in, a world where the appointment of a black bus conductor made the front page of the *Nottingham Evening Post*. He talked about the thrill, after Saturday jobs doing night shifts at factories and painting toilets, of getting a job, and university scholarship, with IBM. He talked about his time at Cambridge, where he 'initially didn't know how to use the array of knives and forks, but sucked it all in'. And he talked about getting fired from the international computer company Wang.



Ken made getting fired sound like fun. I did not think that getting fired was fun. I thought getting fired was less fun than a cervical smear, less fun than a biopsy, less fun even than foreplay with a man who has just made you a lovely stir fry, but unfortunately got bits of chilli stuck under his nails.

‘I couldn’t work for him,’ said Ken, when I met him in his office in Regent Street to find out more. He was talking about the ‘evil’ boss at Wang in America. ‘I decided to think about how my mother would handle this, and you don’t just say: well, that’s it, I’m going to get another job. You go with a bang and not with a whimper. So I conceived this idea of a management buy-out, on the principle that you either get fired or you get to run the business. I got a promise of the money in the City and made an offer – and he fired me.’

Ken still sounded jaunty. I think he nearly always sounds jaunty. But he didn’t, it turns out, feel jaunty at the time. ‘It was awful,’ he said. ‘It was a very low moment. He fired me in his office. I remember seeing images of my children and the garden in England floating before me.’

He was offered a job with another software company. ‘Same salary, same car, same everything. I sat looking at the offer, and thought: that’s great – self-esteem saved! The neighbours will never know that I was fired. I’ll just say I moved to another company. So I’m looking at this job offer and I’m looking out of the window. I’m still at Wang doing my gardening leave bollocks, so it’s a terrible time and I look at this piece of paper and my inner imp – the one that only appears at moments of great importance – said, “So, you’re going to spend the rest of your life working for great businesses that someone else has started?”

And I think: if I'm ever going to start my own business, it has to be now.'

Ken started a boutique technology-focused merchant bank, as you do when you're a hotshot City type who knows about things like computers and banking, which make money, and not things like poetry and journalism, which don't. He got a string of board roles and chairmanships. He was the first black man to serve on the board of a public UK company and has been voted the most influential black person in the country. But the strapline he chose for his current enterprise, another technology boutique merchant bank, is 'Entrepreneurs never travel smoothly'. After talking to him, you can see why.

From 2008 to 2011 he was a director of a mining company controlled by Kazakh oligarchs. I was tempted to swap stories of oligarchs and tell him that I'd had a nice chat about Russian poetry with the one that owned *The Independent*, in the days when I was part of the editor's inner court. But my own falling out with an oligarch, or at least an oligarch's puppet, wasn't plastered all over the *Sunday Times*. 'It's a really tragic story,' said Ken. The short version of it is that ENRC, a Kazakh-based multinational focused on mining and metals, wanted to be listed on the Stock Exchange, which meant it had to conform to British governance. Ken and some of the other non-execs helped launch 'a really big due diligence exercise', but somebody produced a dossier accusing them of 'all kinds of dodgy things' and sent it to every British newspaper. 'The *Sunday Times* published a full-page article on us and how evil we were,' said Ken. 'It was a terrible story.'

Ken managed to persuade the board to undergo an independent governance review. The reviewer concluded that it was the

worst board it had ever seen. On the week of the AGM, the Kazakh government, which owned 11 per cent of the company, said it would support the directors. On the Tuesday, it changed its mind and the oligarchs followed their lead. Later that day, Ken became the first non-executive director of a FTSE 100 company to be publicly fired at its AGM. Ken published his farewell letter, saying that the whole situation was ‘more Soviet than City’.

Even when being publicly ousted, Ken kept his sense of humour. But it was, he said, ‘a horrible experience’ and for a while he felt his reputation was in shreds. In an interview a few weeks after it all happened, he said that ‘technically’ everything the shareholders did was ‘completely correct, like all great show trials in Moscow in the Communist regime’. Everything, he said, ‘is done according to the book, it’s just that the book wasn’t fair. Kafka, eat your heart out.’

It’s surprising how often Kafka comes up in stories of redundancy. You don’t have to be a big fan of German literature to recognize the feeling he describes of a man arrested and put on trial, but never told what crime he is meant to have committed. You don’t have to have read his novel *The Castle* to have that sense of reporting to officials whose jobs and actions are never explained. You don’t have to have read *Metamorphosis* to know what it’s like to wake up feeling like a creature that no longer recognizes its world.

Most people I know do not found boutique merchant banks. Most people I know work in the arts or journalism, because these are the fields I have worked in. They are not professions that

make management buy-outs a good option for going out with a bang. They are not, in fact, even professions. Most of us feel proud if we've raised the cash to buy a sofa. Most of us get redundancy deals that would make a business person laugh. But our managers seem to be as keen on Kafka, or on re-enacting Kafka, as everyone else.

It's quite a few years since I worked with Claire. She is kind and funny and conscientious and has always been very good at whatever job she has done. Claire is not her real name. Because of the gagging clause in her proxy redundancy deal, I can't give her real name. But when Claire told me about what had happened with her employer I felt like calling a big strong friend of mine who was once banged up for GBH.

'There was,' she told me, in the café where we nearly always meet, 'talk of a restructure. The seed of anxiety was sown four years ago and it continued to build and build. So there was this anticipation that we might all have to apply for our jobs or lose them.' Ah yes, that HR favourite, 'restructure', which nearly always seems to lead to all kinds of other pseudo-scientific words. 'There was a sense,' she said, 'that what had been before was wrong, and then there was talk of being "fit for purpose". From very early on, there was a sense of those people who were safe and those people who were unsafe, and those people in the unsafe camp were set up to fail.'

After the talk of being 'fit for purpose', there were appraisals. But not the kind of appraisals that were meant to make you better at your job. 'Basically, within those appraisals,' said Claire, after taking a bite of the mini biscuit they give you free with your cup of coffee, 'twelve months before the redundancy,

a narrative was being created. You could be told, for example, that you were over-conscientious, that you panicked. Or somebody who questioned was seen as resistant. It was clear,' she said, and the hurt was still written on her face, 'that the narrative from those appraisals was something that would be used to get rid of you.'

After four years of being ground down in this way, Claire decided not to apply for her own job, because she thought the odds of getting it were slim. Other people did, and should have saved their time and breath. 'I felt really, really sad,' she said, 'because for the first time ever in my working life, I felt people couldn't wait to see the back of me. I was ready to believe that I was a bit outdated. After such a positive work history in marketing, I couldn't believe that my job would end that way. Because I tend to see the best in people it was really hard for me to grasp that people would behave like that. It was such a nasty way of working, really scheming and really spiteful. It was,' she said, and now her eyes were sad, 'just so alien to anything I'd ever experienced.'

I really wish I could name and shame her former employers. I know, of course, exactly how she felt. Like Claire, I was a bit naïve. My parents brought me up to believe that hard work would be rewarded. They talked about things like honour and truth. At the first 'consultation', with the managing editor and the young woman from HR, I said I wasn't confident that the process would be fair, because the person who had taken over my boss's job had been heard telling people that I was only given a column 'because I was a woman'. The woman from HR assured me that it would be fair, but when I showed a summary of the 'consultation' to a lawyer, that was certainly not how it looked.

You have to be brave or rich to take on an oligarch's lawyers. I am not rich and I am not as brave as that. My union took over the negotiations. There wasn't all that much to negotiate, since our redundancy deal had been cut in half when the oligarch bought the paper, and there was no hope of getting the standard deal back. But at least it meant I didn't have to talk to the management any more. When the managing editor rang, and tried to talk me through the twists and turns of a process that made Kafka look like a model of what businesses like to call 'best practice', his voice made my stomach lurch.

After that last meeting in the editor's office, it took days for the shaking to stop. Even when it did, I couldn't sleep. I have always had trouble waking up in the morning, but almost as soon as I'd fall asleep I would be jolted awake by something that felt like an electric shock. It wasn't just that I'd lost my job and my livelihood. I had also lost my faith in what my father always used to call fair play.

When Gordon Brown lost his job as prime minister, he said he would do one big interview. He chose *The Independent*, and the editor (not the editor who fired me, but the one who was fired before him) picked me to do it. I nearly missed the train from King's Cross. I didn't like thinking about what the editor would say if I told him I'd missed the interview because I'd missed the train. When I left London it was a hot summer's day. As the train passed through the wild east coast of Scotland, the sky got darker and the temperature dropped. By the time I arrived at Kirkcaldy, where Brown had been MP for the last twenty-seven years, the whole world seemed to be made of rain.

I spent the best part of a day with Gordon Brown. He was probably the most interesting person I have ever interviewed. He is complicated. He is fascinating. He is, in his own way, brave. In the car on the way to the football ground of his local football team, Raith Rovers, he told me about his friendship with Nelson Mandela. He told me about the time the British High Commissioner in South Africa opened a parcel in front of an invited audience, thinking it was a medal for Mandela's wife, Graça Machel. When he ripped open the brown paper, purple sequins fell out. It was, in fact, a birthday card made for her by Brown's four-year-old son.

It took me a while to pluck up the courage to ask if he missed being at Downing Street. There was a long pause. 'No,' he said. I wasn't sure that I believed him, but I did admire his stiff upper lip.

When the interview came out, it was mentioned on the ten o'clock news. Someone wrote to the paper saying 'this is what journalism is for'. I didn't know if it was what journalism was for, but I did feel that it was what I was for. I didn't know what I was for any more.