

The Hidden Memory

Chapter 1

I knew my parents loved me but I've always had a niggling feeling at the back of my mind that they didn't really mean to have kids, that, perhaps, I was just a bit of an accident.

My parents had good jobs, though not particularly well paid, and they enjoyed them immensely. They had met at work, which was for an international charitable organisation helping underprivileged children from all over the world. This meant that one or other, and sometimes both, were frequently away from home and often abroad. So, in my early years, I got used to a life of spending loads of days in nurseries and nights in the care of babysitters.

Of course Mum and Dad played with me when they were home but I always got the feeling that their hearts weren't really in it. I could well be wrong but it felt to me as if they were doing what they ought to because that's what parents do, not because they enjoyed it or wanted to spend their time with me particularly. As I got older, I became used to amusing myself and I spent far too much time watching TV or playing mindless computer games. I longed to have a permanent someone around to be on the same wavelength as me and to enjoy doing the same sort of things that I was interested in. Even a sister would have done!

My experience in nurseries well equipped me to feel confident away from home and to get on with other kids. So I was quite at ease when the time came for me to start school.

I used to be pretty bad there. By that, I don't mean I was stupid or anything but I never broke my back working and I was always being chased for homework by the teachers, although Mum and Dad never seemed to be too concerned about it. No, what I mean is, I always seemed to be in trouble. I don't think it was just me but, every time, I seemed to be the one who got caught.

When I was at secondary school, for example, I remember freaking out our English teacher. This wasn't one of those 'on the spur of the moment mess abouts' but a carefully planned and well-resourced mission. I nicked some of my Dad's very thin, and almost invisible, nylon fishing line and during the break before the lesson, and with the help of another couple of criminals, I joined together the old-fashioned lights which hung in two rows on flexes from the ceiling. When the bell went for the lesson to begin, I came in and sat innocently at the back of the classroom, with the ends of the lines hidden just under my desk. From here, I was the 'silent controller'.

As soon as the teacher turned his back to write something on the blackboard, I would set the lights swinging just a tiny little bit. Of course, all the other kids started giggling. He looked around and glared at them and you could see him trying to figure out what was going on but he couldn't see anything and so

went back to writing on the board. I made the lights swing a bit more and that set everybody roaring with laughter. He then started ranting and raving at the class but still had no idea what the source of their hilarity was. God knows why it took him so long but eventually he did look up and saw that all the lights were moving backwards and forwards like swingboats at the fair. He totally flipped his lid and then started yelling at us, demanding to know who the culprit was. The whole class immediately shut up and sat at their desks looking as if butter wouldn't melt in their mouths. As he wore glasses and couldn't see very well, he just couldn't fathom it out at all, especially as, with my body immobile, I continued to move the lights back and forth with hidden fingers. In the end he turned very white and tight lipped and stalked out of the classroom, literally never to return to the school again. He was a new recruit and had been having lots of discipline problems and, I guess, my little event was the straw that broke the camel's back. I did feel a bit bad about that actually, but, on the positive side, I probably saved generations of kids from being condemned to a lousy teacher.

Of course the other kids loved it and it certainly raised my street cred with them. Although there was no proof of who the guilty party was, the head played that dirty trick of threatening punishment to the whole class if no one confessed, so I ended up with a week of after-school detentions writing some sort of pointless lines and with my parents being called in to sort me out. They didn't of course and from then on I seemed to attract more and more unwanted attention from the teachers, usually lecturing me about my behaviour and dishing out endless, pretty ineffective punishments.

I dreaded parents' evenings. There never seemed to be good news. I remember once that my class teacher told Mum and Dad he was convinced that I was on drugs, as I spent a whole day going around the building on four legs pretending to be my friend Andrew's dog. Ah yes, happy days!

By the way, I wasn't – on drugs I mean. That's one road, thankfully, I never ventured down.

I guess the problems started before that though, at junior school. One day, not long after the term had begun, my mate Neil, who lived on a farm, found a dead adder and brought it in for the nature table. I borrowed it and went into the classroom with it worn around my neck like a tie. The teacher, Granny Smith we used to call her, went bananas and ran screaming out of the classroom to Miss Hammond, the very strict and merciless headmistress. I lost a few break times for that I can tell you.

Without doubt though, the worst scrape involved my primary school's outside toilets and I have to admit that, even now, I still feel a little embarrassed talking about it. It wasn't intentional but what happened was this. There was an ongoing contest among us boys as to who could wee the highest. The greatest accolade was reserved for those, mainly older, boys who managed to send a stream of the yellow liquid shooting out of the small window that was directly above the urinal. Having tried unsuccessfully on several occasions, I decided on this particular day to make a real effort. I planned my attempt in

the greatest detail, adding extra milk to my cereal at breakfast and drinking several glasses of orange juice. I avoided my usual habit of going to the loo before being taken to school and then jumped around the playground to stave off going until the very end of break. I can tell you, I was nearly bursting and feeling confident that sufficient pressure must have built up in my bladder to ensure success as I rushed into the boys' toilets, lifting the left leg of my shorts and taking aim at the window.

The fruits of my efforts climbed up the urinal, up the wall and then, finally, out of the small window near the ceiling. In the distance, I thought I heard a high-pitched scream but this didn't stop me stop waving my shooting apparatus around and shouting, "I've done it, I've done it." Then I froze. Framed in the doorway, focusing a glowering look of hatred towards me such that I had never experienced before, nor indeed have ever since, was Miss Hammond. Clearly visible were the droplets of my triumph suspended from her newly coiffured head and some obviously just wiped from her generously powdered face. Luckily for me, corporal punishment had long been banned from state schools but I did nearly get expelled for that little escapade. However, the sentence was commuted to a five-day suspension when it came to light that there had been no maliciousness intended, loads of kids had been playing the same game for years, and it was only my bad luck that she happened to be passing along the path by the toilets at just the wrong moment.

Looking back on my school misadventures, I think perhaps that I was just trying to get the attention I had never properly received from my parents. Anyway, that's my excuse.

During term time, Mum paid a kind lady called Sandra, the mother of a mate of mine, to look after me at her house at the end of each school day. She had a couple of children either side of my age who went to my school and I enjoyed being with them. The holidays though were more difficult. I went to Sandra's as much as possible but she often went away with her children and, in any case, worked some mornings herself. I had quite a few school friends who used to invite me over for the occasional day but it was all a bit 'pick and mix' and I never felt as if I really belonged anywhere. It probably wasn't true but I always felt I was imposing, that I was a spare part and that people were just looking after me under sufferance.

When I was eight though, the holiday arrangements changed. Sandra had to go into hospital for an operation for a hiatus hernia or something and had to make arrangements for her own children to be looked after. Everyone was in a quandary as to what was to be done with me during the fast-approaching Easter holidays as Mum and Dad had both said that they needed to be away working in Sierra Leone or somewhere. Then, one evening, Grandad turned up. He was on some sort of business trip and came to stay the night with us, as he usually did when in London. It was fairly late in the evening when he arrived and, after kissing him 'hello', much to my sadness, it was immediately time for me to go to bed. My room was right above the living room and my bed was next to the radiator. With my head against the radiator, I could hear all that was going on downstairs, the sound being conducted up through the

pipe. This used to be quite useful, especially when I wanted to hear bits of the TV programmes deemed unsuitable for kids. However, my favourite pastime was to lull myself off to sleep listening to my father chatting away on the phone to his friends and business colleagues. He'd have lengthy conversations with his work people or his friends. I didn't really know what he was on about, but I just used to find it comforting listening to his voice – deep, friendly and homely and, in the end, lulling me to sleep.

On this particular day, I heard the grown-ups talking about me. I couldn't quite make out what it was all about but when I came down in the morning, it turned out that I was to spend the Easter holidays with Grandad down in Devon while Mum and Dad were away. Yesss! I was absolutely delighted because I thought Grandad was great. He usually only stayed with us for a couple of weeks over Christmas but they were definitely the happiest times of the year for me. He always gave me the feeling that he loved me for what I was: good and bad, talented and stupid, which, let's face it, at the end of the day, most of us are!

Grandad was super. Every day he'd put me at the top of his priority list and we'd do something exciting like visiting the Christmas Fayre to meet Santa or skating on the temporary rink put up for the festive season at the shopping centre. He didn't just pay and watch me tootling round but joined in by chasing me up and down the ice rink and generally acting like a kid. In the evenings, with great care, we would make and paint Airfix models of planes and warships which he had brought with him or play board games like Cluedo, Scrabble or Monopoly. The main thing was that he gave me the most valuable thing he had to offer and the thing Mum and Dad found most hard to give me – time.

Although, as I've said, Grandad came to stay with us every Christmas and Mum spoke to him every week on the phone, we rarely made the long journey down to Devon where he lived. We had, however, enjoyed one lovely holiday down there. Mum told me once that, as long as she could remember, he'd lived in his delightful little cottage nestling in the foothills of Dartmoor on the edge of the farm he managed. She had been brought up there, attending the nearby village primary school and later the secondary school in Ashburton.

When I was about three, for some reason, Dad and Mum couldn't arrange for anyone to look after me. I remember them driving me down to Devon and leaving me with Grandad for a short stay. It was my first time away from home on my own and forms the basis of my early memories of Grandad.

I remember, on one particular day, that I'd been a right pain, particularly fractious and crying all the time, probably because I was missing Mum and Dad. When it came to bedtime, I was still very upset, so he climbed on my bed, lay down beside me and started singing what was then my favourite nursery rhyme, *Rock a Bye Baby*, in his slightly gruff but very calming voice. He sang the verse over and over again, getting quieter and quieter each time, until he was barely whispering it. When he thought I had finally dropped off to sleep, he gently eased himself up to creep out of the room. The problem was,

as soon as I felt the springs creak, I started making a fuss all over again, so then he was back to square one. I don't know how long this went on because, eventually, I must have drifted off and he managed to escape. But what patience – far more, I'm sure, than I deserved.

I never knew much about Grandma except that she had died in a car accident when Mum was very young. Grandad had employed a series of au pairs and what some people still called nannies to look after Mum while he managed the farm for the owners. Apparently, these were a couple of rich Londoners, but I never remember seeing them.

Mum always said that, in spite of having no mother herself while she was growing up, she had enjoyed a very happy childhood. Apart from when he was at work, her dad was always there with her, reading her night-time stories and putting her to bed when she was little, taking her away on holidays and even running birthday parties for her, with loads of friends invited and running amok around the cottage. He did his utmost to provide her with a childhood as happy as any of those of her contemporaries who were lucky enough to have both parents. Although he never married again, he had a wide circle of friends and always made sure there were plenty of opportunities for her to talk over her problems and get female advice when necessary, especially during her teenage years.

So I had no concerns with the news I'd heard over my radiator telecom. It was with eager anticipation that I awaited the Easter holidays.