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People often say your thirties are when life settles. For Mum, they were the years when life shifted shape.

the centre of everything. Mornings were cereal bowls

She entered the decade already changed, already carrying the new weight and joy of motherhood  
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Their home in Nichefield carried a simple but lively rhythm. School runs. Bedtime stories. Shopping  
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*For my Mum and Dad,  
the best parents anyone  
could wish for.*

*Written for George and Henry.*

*This is their story. A way to  
understand them more,  
to remember the little things,  
and to keep them close  
for all the years ahead.*

# 0

*1956-66*

*England was still catching its breath.  
The war was a memory, not a story, but you could  
feel it in the soot on the brickwork and the coal in  
the grates. Streets were quiet, cars were rare, and  
children ruled the pavements until the light went.  
Radios hummed in front rooms, washing lines  
bowed under heavy cotton, and small back gardens  
worked hard to grow colour and food in the same  
cramped soil.*

My mum, Julia Heather Neal, came into the world at home, 124 Curborough Road, on 14 May 1956. No fuss, no hospital. Just family, sunlight, and the scent of the garden drifting through the open window. Lichfield was calm that spring morning, still stretching out of the post-war years. Down the street, a radio played one of those soft, hopeful tunes that seemed to hum in every British town back then.

She was the second child. Graham had arrived four years earlier. Adrian and Karen would follow soon after. Her mum, Joan, born in 1930, had been a switchboard secretary in Birmingham before marriage, clever and quick with humour. Her dad, Anthony Reginald, born in 1929, had served as a corporal technician in the RAF. Practical, calm, and quietly funny, he was the sort of man who could mend anything and did. Together they built a small, happy home filled with laughter, chores, and the smell of coal and stewed tea.

Mum remembers it as “a happy house”. A three bedroom semi on Curborough Road, tidy but never precious, with warmth that came more from people than from the fire. The kitchen clock ticked steadily, her father’s boots rested by the door, and something was always cooking. In the evenings, plates clinked in the sink while the wireless murmured softly. The soundtrack was simple: clatter, radio, quiet conversation.

Lichfield in the 1950s was the kind of place where everyone still waved to each other. Neighbours shared sugar and stories. Kids played outside until dark, knowing someone’s mum would shout them in when tea was ready. It was freedom, safety, and belonging all at once.

Mum adored her dad. They shared the same humour and curiosity. “Bit of a daddy’s girl,” she would say. He took her walking through Elmhurst, pointing out the shapes of leaves and the feeling in the air before rain. He showed her that patience, not money, was what made life work. When she was little, she decided he could fix anything.

Her mum was the quiet rhythm behind it all. Gentle, organised, with a calm authority that made the house run smoothly. Mum would sit and watch her sew, fascinated by how bits of fabric became something beautiful. Without realising, that was where her love of design began, not through lessons, but through watching and admiring.

She did not like dolls. She wanted adventure. Her brother Graham was her role model, always building something, climbing something, or thinking up the next big plan. She tagged along with the older boys, part of the gang, roller-skating down pavements, making dens, and swinging from trees. There was a big swing in Elmhurst she remembers fixing herself one day. She felt proud of that. It is a very Mum detail, quietly competent, not making a big fuss.

She dreamed of owning a horse, even though she knew it was out of reach. She never stopped imagining it. Her imagination did not depend on what she had, only what she could picture.

The house was full of life throughout her childhood. Dogs, cats and a parade of rabbits that lived in the shed, her “den”. Friends would come over to visit the animals and spend hours out there, lost in play. If you look at Mum now with George and Henry fussing over animals, you can still see the girl in the shed with rabbits, just like when I hired the Animal Man for my 40th Birthday.

When Mum was four, she took a tumble down the stairs. “Still recovering,” Dad likes to joke now. The bigger scare came a year later, on a family holiday in Beer, East Devon, when she was caught by the tide. Her dad pulled her out, calm and certain. He had trained with St John Ambulance and knew exactly what to do. What could have been a tragedy became one of the family’s most told stories, his steady heroism, her lucky rescue, and a lifetime of gratitude.

Family holidays were simple but full of joy. Her dad loved escaping. They went to Devon, Cornwall, and North Wales, often staying in a caravan at Black Rock Sands, thanks to a friendly shop manager who quietly slipped her dad the keys. Mum's first holiday was that same Devon trip. The car broke down, she nearly drowned, and yet she remembers it as brilliant. Her dad even tried to teach her surfing in Wales.

A perfect day, she says, was when her dad announced, "We are off out somewhere." Friends piled in, the car packed with sandwiches, and they would head into nature. Freedom was the word of her childhood.

Her early memories shimmer with small adventures. Blackberrying around Fradley, hands purple with juice. Collecting leaf mould on Cannock Chase for her dad's fruit trees, "good dirt," he would call it. Family trips to Dovedale, where her dad refused to bring tea in a flask. He would unpack a little primus stove and boil water by the river. "It tastes better that way," he would grin. He was right.

Mum rarely got into trouble. She laughs about one exception, stealing a pink elephant ornament from someone's garden with her friend Sandra Lote. They lugged it home, unsure what to do next. It ended up buried under rubble in her garden, then mysteriously disappeared. "I still wonder where that pink elephant went," she smiles.

At home, she shared a room with Karen. The best thing about it was sharing with Karen. The worst thing was also sharing with Karen. But there was a deep comfort in falling asleep to the sound of her parents' voices downstairs. Winters were cold enough for frost to bloom on the inside of the window, but it never felt lonely.

She had a few close friends. Lynne Canon. Liz Lawless, who would later become Graham's partner for a while. Gail Izzard. Most of their time was spent outside, skating, cycling, wandering the lanes. Boredom was rare.

And when it did appear, she would head to her den, draw, sew, or just watch her rabbits hop about.

From an early age, Mum wanted to be a fashion designer. She loved making clothes, drawing people, and transforming fabric into something beautiful. Creativity was not a hobby. It was her way of seeing the world.

When I asked her what her parents had taught her, she did not hesitate. “Be true to yourself,” she said. It is simple advice, but she actually lived it.

Her worst childhood memory is of a boy in her class who died suddenly from an undiagnosed diabetic coma. She still remembers the sadness in the classroom. It did not dull her brightness or her sense of fun. If anything, it probably deepened her sense that life can change fast, which might be why she treasured the ordinary so much.

By ten, she had grown into a kind, curious, practical child. Loyal, imaginative, quietly confident. She saw beauty in small things and could make something out of almost nothing. The world around her might have been modest, but her spirit never was.

Looking back, she says those years felt simple in the best way. “We did not have a lot,” she smiles, “but we had everything that mattered.”

### **Life Lesson**

From my mum’s first decade, I have learned that love does not need to shout to be strong. It lives in small routines, shared jokes, and laughter after long days. Freedom is not about distance or money. It is about curiosity and care.

### **For George and Henry**

The best kind of life is built from small, steady things and family and friends will always know when and how to lift you back up.

# 10

1966-76

*The world was changing fast. England had moved from greys and browns to colour. The Beatles were everywhere, skirts were shorter, hair was longer, and teenagers were discovering what it meant to belong to themselves. On ordinary streets in ordinary towns, schoolkids walked home under a sky that suddenly seemed to be opening up, carrying records, satchels, and a quiet sense that life might be bigger than their parents had dared to imagine.*

In the middle of all that was my mum. She entered her second decade with that same open curiosity that had defined her childhood, but now her world stretched further than the garden gate. At ten, she still roller-skated down Curborough Road. At twelve, she began to dream of bigger things.

School filled most of her days. She quite enjoyed it. She had lots of friends. She was a happy and hard working student. She loved art and needlework. She had an eye for detail and the patience to finish things properly. Maths and science were another story. “Did not trust equations,” she would say, half serious, half joking.

Her favourite teacher was Mr Bateman, her art teacher. He always found time to teach and encourage her. He did not rush her. Did not treat her talent as trivial. The art room was a refuge, the place where she could turn thoughts into something you could hold.

If you asked how her classmates would remember her, she thinks they would probably say she was happy and hard working. That tracks with the Mum I know. Someone who did things properly and had a laugh while she was at it.

Her friends remember her as cheerful, grounded, kind. Her circle included Lynne, Gail, and Liz. Afternoons were spent wandering around Lichfield, talking about music and boys, or heading to the Regal cinema to see whatever was on.

She listened to a lot of folk music. Cat Stevens, Steeleye Span, Melanie. Her room was probably one of the few places in Lichfield where you could go from laughter to quiet thought in the space of one song. Those records stayed with her. Cat Stevens is still her favourite, and Morning Has Broken is still one of her favourite songs.

If she could give her eighteen-year-old self advice, she would say, “Be less pessimistic. Be yourself.” Which is exactly what her dad used to tell her. She laughs about that. “He was right. I always tried to be myself.”

Life at home remained steady and warm. She helped her mum, looked after Adrian and Karen, and watched Graham take his own steps into adulthood. She missed him when he left, but the house never felt empty. There was always noise. Always someone coming in or going out.

Summers stretched long. Neighbours lingered at fences. Kids played in the street because there simply were not many cars. Evenings were full of the smell of dinner and the sound of the radio.

Her dad was still the anchor. He and Mum shared a language of humour and understanding that did not need many words. He was the one who saw her, who encouraged her art, who took her outside and taught her to notice the world. “He taught me about nature,” she says.

“He showed me how things grow.” Then everything changed.

In 1973, when she was seventeen, her dad died suddenly of a heart attack at just forty four. No warning. No long lead in. Just sudden absence.

Seventeen is too young to lose a parent and too old for anyone to pretend you do not understand what has happened. The same streets. The same school. The same front door. But the house was different. The air inside it changed.

Mum does not say much about that time, but you can hear it in her pauses. The kitchen, once filled with his boots and his voice, was quieter. The laughter did not vanish, but it had to fight its way back in.

She became quieter outwardly, more inward, but also more resilient. “He died young,” she told me. “I was seventeen. I think we would have got on even better as adults.” There is still a softness in her voice when she says that. Not anger. Gratitude. “He was very friendly, a good man. I think I took after him.”

Her mum, Joan, simply carried on. No drama. Just steady, consistent presence. “Mum was steady,” she says. “She just got on with it.” They grew closer in those years. They understood what it meant to keep going.

If you picture her walking through Lichfield that year, it is the same roads but with different eyes. She had seen how fragile life could be. She became the sort of person who listens properly, who laughs when she can, who understands that small moments become the big ones.

After school, she spent a year studying fashion design at Stafford College. It suited her. She was creative and talented, but the exam at the end came just as grief pressed down hardest. She failed one of her finals, mostly through stress. She wanted to retake both exams, but they would not allow it, so she walked out. She does not dwell on it as a tragedy. “I just moved on,” she says. That is very her.

She went on to work at Naturan making bras, then studied at Tamworth College to get more O-levels for graphic design. She was quietly determined. Not ruthless. Just steady. She wanted to create, not necessarily to climb ladders.

Looking back on her teenage years, she says they were some of her freest. If she could go back to any age, she would go back to those years. “Free spirited, totally free,” she says. Before bills. After childhood. At the edge of everything.

**Life lesson**

From my mum's teenage years, I learned that strength is often quiet. Losing her dad at seventeen could have hardened her. Instead it shaped her in softer ways. She learned to keep going. To laugh again. To notice others.

**For George and Henry**

I want you to know that grief is not the end of love. It is proof that it existed. Your nan's teenage years remind me that even in sadness, life keeps moving forward, often carrying us toward the people and places we are meant to find next.

# 20

1976-86

*The country felt unsettled and alive at the same time. Factory sirens, picket lines, closed shops with hand painted signs in the windows. Streets flickered between hope and hardship, but the mountains and the sea did not care. In places like Snowdonia the air smelled of rain and ink, and inside small print shops a few steady hands arranged letters on metal trays, building pages that would outlast the noise of the decade.*

Adulthood rarely arrives with noise. It comes quietly. A wage packet with your name on it. Rent to pay. A walk home under streetlights that no longer belong to your parents' curfew.

For Mum, adulthood began early. At thirteen she worked at Charlie's, a small corner shop, putting groceries into boxes after school. She learned the rules of grown up life long before most people did. Show up. Be reliable. Take pride in the job. She liked earning her own money. The independence mattered more than the pay.

She worked all through her teens. At fourteen she washed dishes at the George Hotel. Summers were spent changing beds at the Swan Hotel. Later came shifts at Presto. Hard work. Long hours. Never beneath her. Work was simply part of life.

Eventually she returned to the world of creativity. She studied design for print at Stafford College for three years, balancing lectures with part time jobs in shops and hotels. It was a lot to juggle, but her attitude never changed. She simply got on with it.

Her dad's death stayed quietly in the background. Instead of drowning her, it pushed her forward. She wanted to build something of her own. Not a big showy life. Just one that felt steady and true.

Then Snowdonia appeared.

On a family holiday in Wales she passed a print shop in Porthmadog and heard someone mention that a staff member was away. She asked if they needed help. They said yes. She ended up staying for several years.

Snowdonia suited her completely. The quiet. The mountains. The sea. The rhythm of ink and paper. She designed layouts by hand, arranged

type, and worked in a world where everything passed through her fingertips before becoming print. “It was my favourite job,” she said. “I felt at home.”

Life there was gentle. Local friends. Pub evenings. Weekend walks. A small world just for her before she became my mum.

After three years she returned to England and joined Cooper Combine in Stafford. She travelled from Lichfield daily. The work was creative and meaningful. She was confident in her ability by then. She knew she was good at what she did.

Her life could have carried on in that steady line. Then, at twenty eight, everything changed. She met Dad.

It happened in an ordinary way that later sounds like fate. She was dressed up for a date that never arrived. Frustrated and sitting at home, she got a call from her sister Karen at the George VI pub. “Come out. Someone is here you should meet.” Mum hesitated, then went.

Dad was already there, laughing with friends. The man who stood her up even walked in later and had the cheek to ask her for a drink. She turned him down. Dad watched the whole scene unfold. They joked about it years later. The rest followed easily.

Their first date was simple. A drink. Conversation that flowed without effort. No drama. Just two people who felt right together. She found him kind and straightforward. He found her warm, clever, beautiful. They were different, but they fitted.

Their relationship grew steadily. No whirlwind. Just the right pace.

They married at St Chad's Church in Lichfield. Photos in Stowe House gardens. A reception at St Chad's Hall in Leasowe. A calm, happy day. A friend did the catering. The whole wedding carried the same feel as her life. Uncomplicated. Kind. Full of heart.

They spent their first night at the Angel Croft Hotel, then drove to Cornwall for their honeymoon. Ribbons tied to the car. Fish and chips. Cliff walks. Sunshine. The quiet glow of a new life beginning.

After the honeymoon came real life. A small flat. Their first home. Dad travelling long distances with Johnsons. Mum keeping everything steady at home. Cleaning. Market research. Kleeneze. Hepworths. Jobs that fitted around their life.

Ask her the secret to a strong marriage and she says, "Being comfortable around each other. At peace with the flaws." She and Dad are proof of that. They tease. They adjust. They laugh.

Her twenties were years of becoming. Daughter in Lichfield. Young woman in Snowdonia. Newly married woman building a home. She failed an exam. Started again. Took new jobs. Nothing stopped her.

If her life were a film, she says the title would be *Free Spirit*. She thinks Kate Winslet could play her. I think Kate would need to train hard for the role.

Everything she learned in those years led her to the moment that changed her more deeply than anything else.

On August 17, 1985, five minutes before midnight, she held her first child. Me. The final note of her twenties and the quiet beginning of everything that came next.

## **What I Learned**

From my mum's twenties, I learned that new beginnings often arrive disguised as disappointments. A failed exam. A job ending. A date that never turns up. She could have seen those things as proof she was not good enough. Instead she kept moving.

## **For George and Henry**

You do not need a perfect plan. Your nan did not have one. She had curiosity and a good heart, and that was enough to lead her to Wales, to Dad, to the life that eventually made all of us.

# 30

*1986-96*

*Suburbs thickened at the edges of old towns, brick by brick. Retail parks rose beside roundabouts, supermarket signs glowed over car parks that never quite slept. Inside small semis, life shrank to soft night feeds and early mornings. Kettles boiled, baby monitors crackled, and washing machines turned all day like a second heartbeat. Outside, the world argued about politics and progress. Inside, a light over a kitchen table was enough.*

People often say your thirties are when life settles. For Mum, they were the years when life shifted shape. She entered the decade already changed, already carrying the new weight and joy of motherhood. Everything she had learned in her twenties had prepared her for work, independence, and responsibility, but nothing had prepared her for the quiet transformation of being needed so completely.

Those early years were full of new rhythms. Night feeds. Prams. Washing lines. A house that never stayed still. Dad was travelling long distances for Johnsons, often away overnight, and Mum became the anchor at home. She always says she found strength she never knew she had. Not dramatic strength, just the steady kind. The kind that keeps the day moving.

Motherhood was something she grew into, day by day. She learned the small rituals that matter. The soft songs. The games. The patience that lives somewhere deeper than sleep. She watched her little boy watch the world with cautious eyes and felt a kind of love that rearranged everything she thought she knew.

Life was busy even before it doubled.

Two years into her thirties, Rob arrived. Another son. Another change of pace. If I was careful and observant, Rob was bold and loud. She laughs when she tells it. Two children, completely different from the start, both loved in completely different ways. She learned how to split her attention without splitting her affection. She always says the house felt full in the best way.

Their home in Lichfield carried a simple but lively rhythm. School runs. Bedtime stories. Shopping trips. Toys on the floor. Dad away at times. Mum at the centre, keeping everything turning. She worked part time whenever she could. Cleaning. Market research. Later Tesco, the Co-op, and Hepworths. Always with the same rule. Family first.

There were difficult moments too. When Dad lost his job, worry seeped into the house, but she stayed calm, or at least seemed to. They even paused their thoughts of moving to Canada. She was the balance to his stress. The one who said, “We will be alright,” and somehow made it believable.

She filled our childhood with gentleness. This Little Piggy. Round and Round the Garden. The sort of things that stay with you long after you forget where you learned them. I feel them now when I hold my own boys.

She loved watching us grow. One cautious. One bold. She always says she was proud of both. Proud that we were healthy. Proud that we were ours.

Holidays were some of her brightest memories. Florida was the big one. A snowy stop in Maine followed by sunshine. “Perfect,” she says. Not because of the place, but because we were together. There were smaller trips too. Wales. Cornwall. Ireland. Scotland. Food poisoning in Wexford. A broken finger while hostelling. Falling off a horse in Cornwall. Any of it could have spoiled a holiday. Instead they became stories she still laughs at.

Every family has its highlight reel. One of her favourites is me scoring a goal directly from a corner in the Whittington final. She talks about it with the pride of someone who carries her children’s wins more dearly than her own.

When I asked what she hoped for me, she joked about wanting a footballer. Then she gave the real answer. For me to be happy. For me not to have too much to worry about. That has always been her guiding line.

From the outside, her thirties might look ordinary. Inside, they were her golden years. She often says her happiest moments were when her boys were born healthy and when she saw us grow into our own lives. Those simple markers hold everything that mattered to her.

By the end of the decade, she had done something quietly extraordinary. She had taken the warmth of her own childhood home and built a new one for us. Full of patience, humour, and love.

### **What I Learned**

From my mum's thirties, I learned that real success is quiet. It is not a headline or a promotion. It is the ability to build a home where people feel safe, loved, and seen.

### **For George and Henry**

Life is not about racing ahead. It is about building a rhythm that feels true. Your nan created a life that looked simple from outside, but inside it was full. That is real richness.

# 40

*1996-2006*

*The nineties slid quietly into a new century.*

*Dial up tones gave way to constant connection,  
and televisions grew larger as streets grew quieter.*

*Kids who had once played on pavements were now driven  
to sports halls and schools in cars that lined every kerb.*

*In the middle of it all, estates of near identical houses  
sat under changing skies, each one holding its own small  
weather of packed lunches, lost PE kits, and family dinners  
that kept the centre from drifting.*

If her thirties were about building a family, her forties were about living inside it.

By then, Rob and I were growing up fast. The chaos of nappies and night feeds had been replaced by football matches, homework, and the endless hum of the washing machine. “You never stop washing, do you?” she would say, half joking, half despairing at the laundry basket.

The kitchen was still the centre of everything. Mornings were cereal bowls, packed lunches, reminders about PE kits. Evenings were dinners, questions about our day, bits of homework spread across the table. She did not make big speeches about love. She cooked for us. She listened. She remembered the small details. That was her language.

I remember Mum being a master at finding us part time jobs. Luminaire. A Saturday shift at Paraphernalia with the furniture deliveries. Kwik Save, the local supermarket. Garden maintenance. Little roles with local companies. She was always on the lookout for chances to help us along. She would walk in, ask the question, and suddenly we had work and a bit of extra pocket money.

I remember one time around the age of sixteen when she used to drive me and my friend Dean to a garden maintenance company in Clifton Campville. An hour round trip every morning. That was dedication. That was a super mum!

She also continued to work, but in ways that fitted around home. Tesco. The Co-op. Smaller roles here and there. Work was never about career for her. It was about contribution and rhythm. Something that kept her moving. Something that meant she had her own world outside the house, but never at the expense of it.

She enjoyed working at the Co-op in particular. She liked chatting with customers, learning people's names, being friendly and steady in a place where people passed through every day. She is the sort of person who ends up part of the scenery in the best possible way. Well known, well liked, taken for granted in a soft, affectionate way.

At home, she balanced routine and humour with her usual quiet skill. She could be firm with us without really shouting. She kept things organised but never rigid. "Try to be organised," she would say, "but do not forget to live." It sounds simple. Most people do not manage it.

Rob and I were the heartbeat of those years. School concerts. Sports days. Parents' evenings. She was always there, camera in hand or folded arms in the back row, cheering but not making a show of it. She was proud of us. "They are good boys," she would say. "A bit cheeky, but good."

Friends and neighbours found her easy to be around. She did not put on an act. She was herself. Warm, wry, kind. She could lighten a heavy situation with one comment. Not a big joke. Just that soft, sideways humour she has.

Holidays continued, adjusted to busy school calendars and budgets. More weekends and short breaks. Days out. Picnics. Walks. Madeira became a favourite destination. "Everything was perfect there," she says. Warmth. Flowers. The sea. That sense of slow time that she loves.

At night, after everyone had eaten and the dishes were done, she would settle in front of the TV. Usually Coronation Street! Something easy. She would do a bit of crafting, maybe a crossword, a bit of reading before bed. She liked peace. Not silence. Just that gentle background life that feels safe.

My brother and I were introduced to a lot of what they used to watch. Men Behaving Badly, The Vicar of Dibley, and the old classics like Porridge and Only Fools and Horses.

She and Dad had their rhythm by then. He still worked hard. Often away or late. They had learned how to live with each other's habits. They teased each other constantly. Little comments that look like bickering but are really a form of affection. "We were comfortable," she says. "We just got on."

Underneath the comfort there was depth. She had enough life behind her by then to know that nothing is guaranteed. She had lost her dad young. She had watched friends struggle. She knew that the ordinary routine that some people complain about is actually something sacred.

By the time she reached her late forties, she had a balance that many people only ever talk about. She cared for us and Dad. She cared for herself too. She read more. Walked more. Started looking at places she might like to see one day. Japan. The Northern Lights. South Africa. They existed as ideas more than plans, but they were there, quietly glowing and still are!

### **What I Learned**

From my mum's forties, I learned that love does not always look like fireworks. Often it looks like cups of tea, shared glances on the sofa, quiet jokes in the supermarket aisle, and someone who turns up every time it matters.

### **For George and Henry**

Your nan's life in those years is the blueprint for a peaceful home. She did not chase big drama. She built warmth, bit by bit, day after day. That is its own kind of art.

# 50

2006-2016

*The world sped up. Emails, mobile phones, rolling news, a thousand new ways to be busy. Town centres shifted, old shops closed, new ones opened with brighter lights and fewer faces you recognised. Yet some things refused to move. A terraced house with familiar carpet. A kettle that still clicked the same way. A woman who walked the same route into town, past new glass and old stone, carrying the quiet knowledge that her real life was not on any screen.*

By Mum's fifties, the house had changed again.

The sound of schoolbags and football boots had faded. Instead there was the soft hum of the radio, the rattle of the kettle, and the comfortable quiet of two people who have spent decades learning how to live alongside each other.

She kept working at the Co-op and in a few part time roles for a while. She liked having somewhere to be. People to talk to. A reason to get out of the house. She was never the type to sit still all day.

Her friendships deepened. Old school friends like Lynne and Gail were still around. Liz had moved to Cornwall. Another friend, Gillian, had moved all the way to Australia. Work gave her new friends and conversations. She has a way of slipping into people's confidences. "You could tell her anything," one friend said. "She would listen, really listen."

At home, she and Dad settled into an easy, familiar partnership. They drove each other mad sometimes. They also made each other laugh. A look across the room could set them off. She says, "We would drive each other mad sometimes, but we always laughed about it." That line explains a lot.

The kitchen stayed central. Even though there were fewer plates on the table each evening, she still cooked as if expecting extras. Sunday dinners. Curries. Homemade puddings. The cheesecake that will outlive us all. "It is tradition," she says. "Cannot stop now."

She has simple loves that make her irrationally happy. Chocolate is one of them. A bit of chocolate, a quiet evening, something daft on the television, and she is content.

She has her favourites, of course.

**Favourite book:** Black Beauty

**Favourite film:** One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest

**Favourite musician:** Cat Stevens

**Favourite song:** Morning Has Broken

**Favourite animal:** Dog

She talked a lot about feeling lucky in those years. "I have had a good life," she would say. Not in a smug way. Just matter of fact. She had a loving marriage, two sons who were finding their way in the world, and a home full of memories. That was enough for her.

She watched Rob and I grow into adults with the same mix of pride and worry that she had when we were at school. The topics changed from homework and football practice to jobs, relationships, travel, and money, but the basic feeling did not. "Mothers never stop," she would say, smiling. "You think less about nappies and more about flights and finances, but it is the same thing really."

She found herself looking back more. Not in a stuck way. Just in a reflective one. She talked about her dad more often. "He was lovely," she would say. "I still think about him." The pain of losing him had softened into gratitude. Gratitude that she had known him at all. Gratitude that some of his goodness lives on in the way she is with us.

In her fifties she also began to crystallise what she believed about life. She feels most grateful, she says, for having two wonderful parents who set her up well. She believes money does not buy you everything. "Be contented," she says. That is one of the core lessons she passes on. Be contented. Not lazy. Not resigned. Just at peace with enough.

She was proud that Rob and I had gone on to further education. I went to Birmingham University in the same field she had worked in, design, only this time on computers instead of by hand.

If she had to sum herself up, she would say she is bubbly and pessimistic at the same time. There is truth in that. She laughs easily. Worries often. Enjoys life. Keeps an eye on the shadows. It is a very human mix.

She began to understand that peace is not something that appears. It is something you build. Choice by choice. Conversation by conversation. She had already been doing that for decades and it had paid off.

### **What I Learned**

From my mum's fifties, I learned that peace is not an accident. It is something you earn by treating people well, keeping your sense of humour, and deciding not to chase every shiny thing.

### **For George and Henry**

This is one of the main reasons I wanted to write these biographies. Your nan built a life that many people spend their whole lives searching for. Not perfect. Not glamorous. But grounded and good. That is worth remembering in detail. We were never given lots of expensive gifts, but Mum was always present with her love and support.

# 60

## 2016-2026

*Retirement estates and new builds spread across fields where kids once picked blackberries. Supermarkets grew bigger, high streets thinner, and everyone seemed to be walking while looking down at a lit piece of glass in their hand. In that world, a nan's house became its own country. A place where the clock on the wall still ticked out loud, the biscuit tin still waited on the side, and time moved at the speed of a child telling a story.*

By her sixties, Mum moved into a new chapter of life at a gentler pace. Little did she know that the most exciting part of her life was still just around the corner.

Retirement arrived, not as a sudden stop, but as a slow easing off. The rush of scheduled shifts faded. The noise of daily routine softened. In its place came quieter days with more choice. She had time again. Time to make a cup of tea and drink it while it was still hot. Time to walk into town. Time to breathe.

She often says she does not feel her age. “You never do,” she says, “until you see yourself in a shop window.” It is one of those lines that is funny and true at the same time. Inside, she is still the girl who roller skated down Curborough Road. The teenager listening to Cat Stevens in her room. The young woman in Snowdonia, ink on her fingers. The mum singing nursery rhymes over a cot.

Retirement did not mean stopping. It meant choosing. She spent days walking into Lichfield, meeting friends for coffee, pottering in the garden, sorting photos, doing crafts. She rediscovered the pleasure of making things from nothing. Cards. Knitted bits. Little projects that kept her mind and hands busy. “It is nice to make something from nothing,” she says.

And then came George and Henry.

Becoming a Nan shifted the centre of her world again. When you (George) arrived, everything rearranged itself. In the best possible way.

She adores you. The way your faces light up when you see her. The way you run at her. The way you talk without stopping. She loves your curiosity. Your questions. Your jokes that sometimes make no sense but make everyone laugh anyway.

Nan's house has become a place of adventure and comfort. There are biscuits and treats, but the real gift is attention. When you are with her, she is with you. Fully. She tells you stories about her own childhood. About rabbits in sheds and pink elephants and primus stoves by rivers. You listen as if she is describing another planet.

Seeing me become a father has been one of her greatest joys. "You are a great dad," she says. "Your dad and I must have done something right." There is pride in that sentence. Pride in us. Pride in herself too, even if she would never phrase it that way.

Where new life begins, old life comes to a close. Her sixties have not been all light. She had to say goodbye to friends and, most sadly, to her mum and her partner Wally, both of whom lived full and happy lives. She also lost her brother in law, Kevin, unexpectedly. Each loss marked the fragility that becomes more visible as we grow older.

She talks a lot about contentment. "People chase happiness," she says. "But contentment is the real prize." To her, happiness is loud and fleeting. Contentment is quieter. It looks like a day without drama. A good meal. A walk. A phone call. A quiet evening. She has trained herself to see those things as big, not small.

Health has become more of a conscious thought. She tells us to look after ourselves, but always adds, "Do not forget to live." She has never been into strict diets or fads. Her philosophy is balance, moderation, and humour. "A bit of chocolate never hurt anyone," she says.

She and Dad, now two people with a lot of shared history behind them, have a particularly gentle rhythm. They can sit together in silence that is not empty. They still tease each other. Argue about small things in a way that is really just another form of conversation. They have become each other's weather. Familiar. Changeable. Always there. She still teases him about spending too much time at the bookies!

She is clear about what she wants when the end eventually comes. She does not want a gravestone. She wants to be cremated and scattered randomly in the countryside. “Born a free spirit, die a free spirit,” she says. It is not morbid. It is peaceful. It fits her.

As she grows older, she has thought about legacy. Not in terms of money or status or anything like that. She wants to be remembered, she says, for her sense of humour and her ability to laugh. She wants you to remember that she was “contented, fun, good-hearted”. Those are the three words she chose for herself. If I had to sum her up, I would choose exactly the same ones.

She very rarely says no. That is one of her quirks. If you ask for help, she will say yes if she possibly can.

That generosity has shaped a lot of people’s lives without them necessarily noticing.

If you ask her for a “weird” bit of advice for you two, she does not go for something outrageous. She says, “Be kind and make good friends.” It sounds small. It is not. It is one of the best pieces of advice anyone can give you.

Right at the core of her, she is grateful. Grateful for her parents, who set her up well. Grateful for the life she has had. Grateful for Dad. Grateful for me and Rob. Grateful for you two. She looks at her life and, even with its griefs and shocks, she says,

“I have had a good life.”

## **What I Learned**

From my mum's sixties, I learned that a meaningful life does not need to be extraordinary on paper. It can be made from quiet days. Small rituals. Deep relationships. The courage to laugh even when things hurt.

## **For George and Henry**

Your nan's story is a long, gentle argument against the idea that you have to be spectacular to matter. She has never sought attention. She has never chased applause. She has been kind, funny, and good-hearted in every decade of her life. That is enough to make her unforgettable.

One day, when you are older, you might read this and think about how ordinary some of it sounds. House. Jobs. Walks. Holidays that went a bit wrong. But if you look closely, you will see what I see. A long thread of kindness, running from a little girl in Curborough Road to the Nan who laughs with you now.

That is why I wanted to write this down. So that, even when voices fade and memories blur, you will still be able to hear her laugh on the page.

# 70

## 2026+

*The years ahead will belong to touchscreens and quiet cars, talking machines and roads that remember the way for you. Cities will change their shape again, and the news will keep arriving faster than anyone can feel. Somewhere behind a neat front door, though, there will be a woman in a soft chair, a mug of tea cooling beside her, watching her family move through this strange new world with the same simple hope her parents once had for her.*

As I finish writing the first draft of this book, mum will turn 70 next year.

In the next 10 years, I believe nothing essential about her will change.

The world around her might move faster. Technology will get stranger. Towns will shift. People will come and go. But at the centre of our family, there will still be a small, steady light that looks a lot like her, sitting with a cup of tea, laughing at something you have just said.

There is something magical about the way she looks at you. It is the same way she once looked at me and Rob, only softer now, because she can see the whole arc of life behind it. The sleepless nights. The scraped knees. The school gates. The jobs. The worries. The surprises. She looks at you and sees all of that, and more, and loves you twice over. Once as her grandsons. Once as her boys' boys.

I appreciate everything now, because I can see it through her eyes.

Nan's presence is quiet, but it fills a room. She does not need to be in the middle of everything. She is happy at the edge of the sofa, watching you build something on the floor, listening to you argue about whose turn it is, ready with a biscuit or a cuddle or a little joke to cut through any storm.

As she moves into her seventies, retirement will settle around her in a way that suits her rhythm. There will be more slow mornings. More time to stand at the back door with a mug in her hand, looking at the garden. More afternoons spent sorting drawers, laughing at old photos, deciding which bits of the past to keep and which to let go.

Family gatherings will become even more precious. Birthdays. Sunday lunches. Little meet ups for no particular reason. You will run in and out of rooms. She will sit and watch, smiling, soaking it in. There is a satisfaction in seeing the family tree that began with her parents grow branches and leaves in front of her.

Babysitting on a Saturday will continue, reading you a book and putting you to bed.

She will love hearing your news, even if some of the details go over her head. New games. New music. New words she has never heard before. She will ask questions and smile at your answers.

Her humour will still be there. It might get a little drier. A little shorter. A one line comment that leaves everyone in stitches. She will still roll her eyes in that familiar way when Dad says something daft. She will still mock her own forgetfulness, misplacing things, losing track of what she came into the room for, and turning it into a joke.

There will be more rest. More naps in the afternoon with the television humming in the background. More days where plans are smaller on purpose. A walk instead of a trip. A phone call instead of a long drive. She will not see this as giving up. She will see it as choosing carefully what to spend her energy on.

And most of the time, she will choose you.

Reading stories to you when you are small. Listening to your stories when you are bigger. Watching you draw. Watching you play. Watching you grow. She will be the still point in the middle of your childhood. The one who remembers what you were like at every age, who laughs at your old stories long after you have forgotten them yourself.

Her advice, if you ask for it, will not get more complicated with age.

It will probably get simpler.

Be kind. Make good friends. Be true to yourself. Do not chase too much. Look after your health. There is wisdom in the way she has boiled life down to a handful of clear, honest lines.

As the years go on, she will think more often about the people who came before her. Her mum. Her dad. Old friends. She will talk about them more, not in a sad way, but in a grateful one. She will become the link between past and present. The person who can tell you what your great grandparents were like, and how much of them lives in you without you even realising.

She will also think about what comes after her, and that is part of why this book exists. So that when her voice is not in the room, some part of it still is. So that you can open a page and hear her laugh, see her walking down Curborough Road, picture her in Snowdonia with ink on her fingers, imagine her young and free before any of us arrived.

Mostly, though, I think she will just be glad that you will have this. That you will be able to meet the younger versions of her long after she has stopped being able to remember them clearly herself.

### **For George and Henry**

When you picture Nana in the years ahead, imagine her smiling as she listens to your stories, correcting your spelling the way she once corrected mine, chatting happily while you draw at the table. My hope is that she has many more years to watch you grow through school, through college, into whatever futures you choose. Maybe even long enough to meet the children you may one day bring into the world.

Time will move on, but her love for you will stay steady and bright, a soft anchor you will carry for the rest of your life.

*In the years ahead, I know her  
greatest joy will continue to be  
you, George, and Henry.*

*Love her and cherish her,  
just as I do.*

# Q | A

## PERSONAL FAVOURITES

**Colour** / Blue

**Song** / Those Foolish Things

**Film** / Carrie

**Meal** / Beef Stroganoff

**Dessert** / Cheesecake

**Animal** / Dog

**Holiday** / Madeira

**Book** / Alice in Wonderland

**Weather** / Warm, not hot

**Flower** / Passionflower

## CHILDHOOD MEMORIES

**Favourite toy** / Roller skates

**Best friend** / Lynne Canon

**Favourite subject** / Art

**Least favourite subject** / Maths

**Games at school** / Tig

**Favourite holiday** / Cornwall

**Childhood pet** / Oboe

**Favourite TV show** / Blue Peter

**Favourite treat** / Chocolate

**Favourite sport** / Not very sporty

## FAMILY AND HOME

**Childhood home** / Very happy

**Siblings** / Three

**Meal** / Shepherd's pie

**Tradition** / Pork pie at Christmas

**Chores** / None, and no pocket money

**Parents** / Very friendly

**Grandparent** / One nan, bit mad!

**Play** / Played with Graham's friends

**Christmas** / Always happy and upbeat

## TEENAGE YEARS

**First job** / Hotel washing up

**Favourite outfit** / Maxi floral skirt

**Music as a teen** / Folk

**Concerts** / No, not many to go to

**Favourite clothes shop** / M and J

**Hairstyle** / Always long

**First car** / Singer Vogue

**Sneaking out** / No need, freedom

**First date** / Buggy Ashley

## ADULT LIFE

**First job** / Snowdonia Press

**First flat** / Above a butcher's in Wales

**First holiday** / Loire Valley, France

**Trouble at work** / No

**Dream job** / Yes - being a designer

**Proudest moment** / Me and Rob  
(and seeing what we achieved)

**Difficult thing** / Bringing us up  
(whilst Dad worked away)

**Something she feared** / Exams

## DAD

**How they met** / Went out with Karen

**First date** / Drink at George VI

**Honeymoon** / Newquay

**Wedding** / St Chad's Church

**Romance** / Birthday gestures  
(Found a greyhound track in  
Birmingham because dad had one)

**Favourite thing together** / Nice food

**Silly memory** / Pizza in Barcelona  
Surprise / Visited him after a  
varicose veins operation early in their  
relationship. She was only eighteen and  
travelled by train to see him.

## HOBBIES AND FUN

**Favourite hobby** / Crafts

**Relaxing** / Sit back and chill

**Sport to watch** / Snowboarding

**Board games** / Yes, Scrabble

**Weekend activity** / Sunday meal out

**Hobby together** / Senior Citizens club

**Favourite TV series** / Virgin River

**Comedies or dramas** / Both

**Cinema** / Yes, but only certain films

## OPINIONS AND PREFERENCES

**Morning or night** / Night owl

**Tea or coffee** / Tea

**Sweet or savoury** / Sweet

**Countryside or city** / Countryside

**Dogs or cats** / Dogs

**Reader or watcher** / Watcher

**Beach or mountains** / Mountains

**Mood** / Tries to be organised

**Weather preference** / Warm

**Dream car** / Celica

## RANDOM AND SILLY

*Broken bones* / No

*Can whistle* / Yes

*Impressions* / An owl

*Won a competition* / No

*Weirdest food* / Calamari

*Met a famous person* / Ken Barlow

*Live anywhere* / Madeira

*Pulled a prank* / Yes

## HOPES AND DREAMS

*Childhood dream job* / Famous artist

*Wanted to try* / Jumping with horses

*Country she would visit* / Japan

*Future wish* / Travel more

*Bucket list* / See the Northern Lights

*Advice to younger self* / Nothing.

No regrets.

*Best thing getting older* / Nothing

*Live in a time period* / Teenage

*Perfect day* / Warm with cake!

*Important lesson* / Nothing on credit

# TOP 5

## FILMS

Life of Brian  
Carrie  
Jaws  
The Deer Hunter  
The Good, the Bad  
and the Ugly

## MUSICIANS

Steeleye Span  
Melanie  
Cat Stevens  
Bryan Ferry  
Revival

## SONGS

All Around My Hat  
Morning Has Broken  
Those Foolish Things  
Plus Melanie songs  
Ed Sheeran

## TV SHOWS

Coronation Street  
Emmerdale Farm  
Blue Peter  
The Two Ronnies  
On the Buses

## ENGLAND

York  
Bath  
Cornwall  
Windermere  
Somerset

## ABROAD

Madeira  
Algarve  
Majorca  
Florida  
Salou

## MEALS

Beef Bourguignon  
Moroccan tagine  
Risotto  
Tikka Masala  
Rogan Josh

## ACTORS

Oliver Reed  
David Jason  
Ronnie Barker  
Susan George  
Jenny Agutter

## PETS

Rinty, Alsatian/Lab  
Tiger, tabby cat  
Oboe, Alsatian/Sheltie  
Tropical fish  
Rabbits, inc Pepsi

## GAMES

Loved card games,  
Snakes and Ladders  
Ludo  
British Bulldog  
Hide and Seek

## DREAM TRIPS

Japan  
Nepal  
China  
South Africa  
Anywhere with culture

## LIFE

Only 2.  
  
Married quite late and  
never regretted it.  
  
Having me and Rob

# STORIES

## *Tea Comes First*

I always feel a little nervous going through bag search at the airport. For some reason, nine times out of ten, while they are scanning my bag, they insist on checking **me** as well. Nobody else, just me. I always seem to get singled out.

I used to joke that my body must be so big that nobody believes it is all me. Before our trip to Crete, I was told that the accommodation on many of the Greek islands can be quite sparse and basic, which instantly triggered my need to pack my travel kettle. I always included it, tucked safely between my underwear, which must have looked very odd to customs. Wires surrounded by knickers and bras.

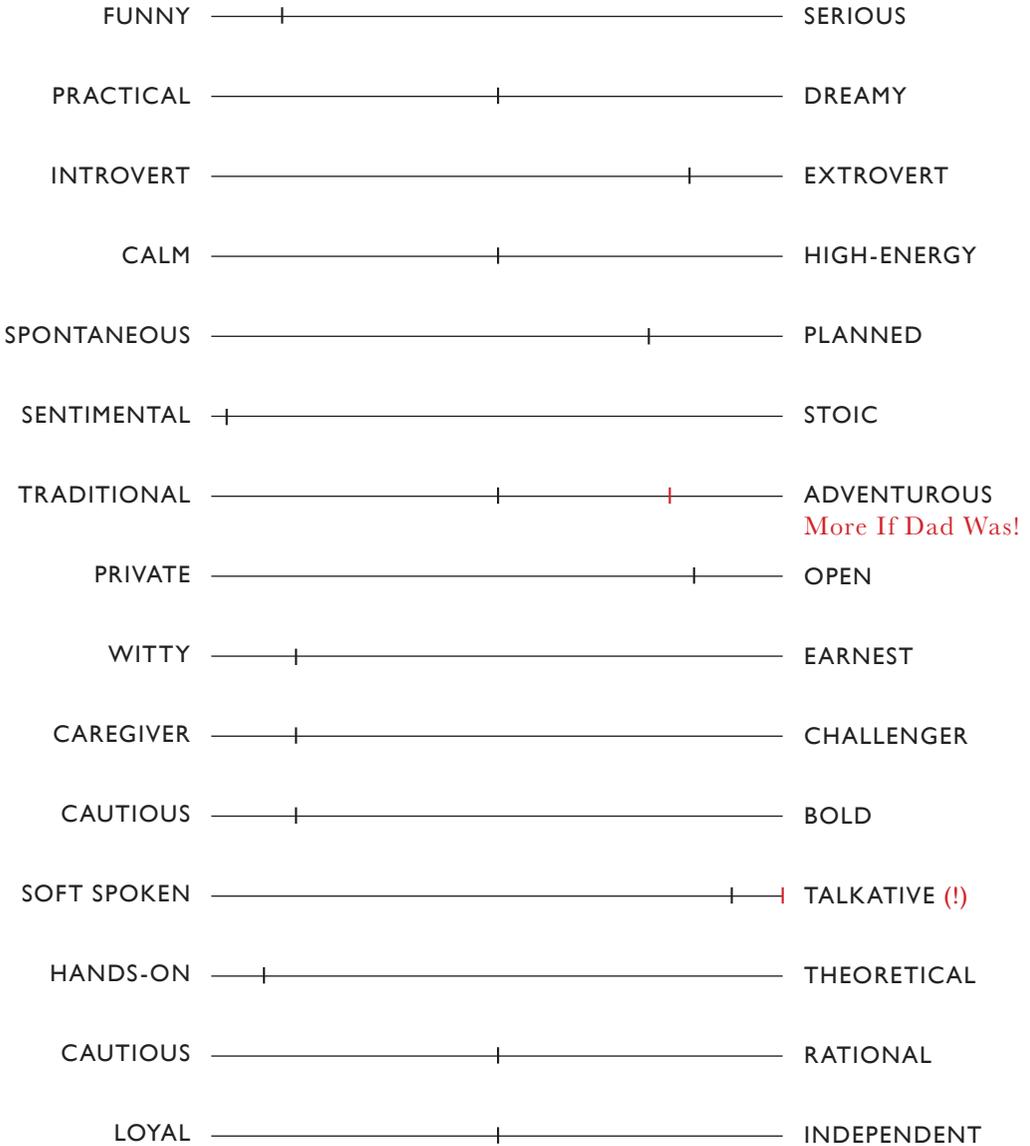
Sure enough, I got pulled aside. The officer swabbed my hands and Mum asked him if she honestly looked like a terrorist. His reply was the classic: “Why? What does a terrorist look like?” Meanwhile, I was far more worried about my underwear spilling out and revealing a kettle. Tea pants, brew knickers...

It felt like something straight out of Bridget Jones’s Diary, when the security guard holds up her knickers and asks if they are really hers. Thankfully, it didn’t go quite that far in Greece, but I am sure security took longer than usual that day, all for the certainty of a proper cup of tea.

I have learned my lesson though. The kettle, along with my underwear, now always goes in my main suitcase.

# PERSONALITY

RATED BY HERSELF (I AGREE WITH **MOST** OF IT!)



25,407

*Days on earth*





# FREE SPIRIT

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*A gentle heart, a creative soul,  
and a love that made the  
world feel safe*