

*Life Term*

by

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# PROLOGUE



## PROLOGUE

I'm sitting here in my cell watching an army of ants shuffling along the floor, pursuing their seemingly meaningless existence with determination. A shaft of sunlight slides across the room illuminating the edges of my bed, as my life becomes a spinning wheel of memories.

Memories. Words cascade from my pen in nervous, sudden jolts. Words are safe because they can be changed, but the mind plays tricks. It wanders down lanes which have been partially blocked for years and then there is always the temptation to change the outcome to one that is less painful, more forgiving.

I have been in prison for five years now, serving a seven-year sentence for manslaughter. So, it is five down and two to go.

Life is bearable here at Ford Open Prison, to which I was transferred from Wormwood Scrubs two weeks ago to serve out the rest of my sentence. I share my cell with Roddy Elmwood, who is not unpleasant. He was convicted of defrauding the investment bank for which he worked of ten million pounds. His trial lasted for nine months and hit the headlines.

From what he has told me, he operated a very clever Ponzi-type scheme, which only started to unravel after he was unable to repay investors who urgently needed their money. Roddy lost his appeal and still convinces himself that he is innocent: unlike me, he is in complete denial.

Roddy is not unpleasant, but he has annoying habits. He snores during the night and he is edgy and sometimes bumptious, always trying to justify himself. We are friendly up to a point. His one redeeming feature is that he says he is interested in literature and poetry, but as he spends his time endlessly reading the latest edition of *Investors Chronicle* and doing Sudoku puzzles, we have not had much of a chance to discuss that. Perhaps I will grow to like him more over time.

I do envy him his seemingly endless stream of visitors — there must be something in him that I fail to see. As for, me, I rarely see

a soul. Nearly all my family and friends deserted me as a result of the crime I committed. Roddy's wife is slim and elegant, and she has stood firmly by him. They have two children, both of them at some minor public school in, I think, the North. How I crave to see my own two children.

Life in Wormwood Scrubs was much tougher. I shared cells, at various times, with an assortment of cons, from drug dealers to armed robbers — a less “highbrow” population, if you like, than here on the South Downs. In the main, I managed to keep myself free of trouble by helping some of the cons to read and write, which gave me an “untouchable” reputation. The screws regarded me as something of a model prisoner, rarely causing them any concern, though violence was always likely to erupt at any moment and it was impossible to escape entirely.

For a while, a few months before I left the Scrubs, my cellmate was Frank, a violent career criminal and alcoholic. He could not read and I spent hours teaching him rudimentary words. Frank was regarded as the leader on my wing and we became sort of “friends”. His word went and he always ensured that I was protected from other inmates.

It was the boredom and the loneliness about the Scrubs which affected me the most. We were locked in our cells most of the day, with only one hour for exercise. I lost weight by the bucketful and became much fitter than I had been since my youth.

Music became my salvation. At the Scrubs, a group of us formed a jazz band, mainly Afro-Caribbean prisoners, some of them brilliant musicians. Although I am not really much of a natural musician, I had learned to play the tenor saxophone to an adequate standard and the members of the band were always kind, even indulgent, encouraging me to perform the odd solo.

*Body and Soul*, *Fools Rush In* and *Misty* became favourites of mine. We would practise most weeks and, occasionally, we performed to a group of jazz lovers, normally in November when the London Jazz Festival was taking place. On such occasions, I was invariably nervous, and the audience was always a little patronising (“you were all marvellous and so inspiring”), but how

I loved being part of this band. As far as I am aware, there is no such band at Ford.

At the Scrubs there were regular group sessions with a therapist and a mental health nurse, but resource and staff shortages meant that these meetings were somewhat erratic.

These sessions helped to reconnect me with my past and my crime up to a point, but I have never quite been able to reconcile my background with my crime. I still find it difficult to understand how a public school educated, middle-class and successful man came to . . . I find it hard to utter those words.

That's why I am writing this story. The therapist at Ford, whom I saw last week, suggested I do so: "You have an interesting past. Write it down and we will compare notes," he suggested. I am writing this story, in particular, with my daughter Julie in mind. She has never forgiven me and nor has everyone else in my family. If Julie — and all my family, for that matter — understand the motives behind my crime, they may be more forgiving. That is my hope.

Here at Ford time weighs less heavy. I am fortunate because most days I work in the prison library, which I enjoy. They have a Dewey classification system here, which inmates find quite complicated, so my job has been to simplify it and make it more manageable. Actually, the library is pretty well-stocked, and I spend much of my time leafing through books.

Last week all the new prisoners took part in an induction course. It's the usual old thing, which I have gone through before. We were warned about the consequences of being caught drinking or taking drugs, though from what I see, both are rampant here, as they are universal at the Scrubs. I am a rare exception in not indulging in drugs and only, on occasions, in alcohol. I do not want my sentence to go on a day longer than necessary. At Ford, we are all expected to work, which was not the case at the Scrubs. Many prisoners work in carpentry, decorating or engineering at the prison. A few others are attached to community placements. The lucky ones are paid a small amount.

As you would expect, the prisoners are a motley crowd. There

would seem to be a high proportion of middle-class fraudsters here — very different from the Scrubs. But there are others like me who have been committed for manslaughter or murder, or other violent crimes, like bank robbery. There are some very well-known people here, including the MP who hit the headlines recently for stealing £65,000 from the Labour Party.

The other day in the library, I came across, of all things, Albert Camus' *L'Étranger*, which I have been rereading. You know the novel with the famous opening sentence: "Aujourd'hui, maman est morte". Meursault kills an Arab, a crime that appears completely irrational and incomprehensible. However, his greatest sin in the eyes of society perhaps was to show no emotions or grief after his mother died.

My original crime is different from Meursault's in that, at the time, I was able to rationalise it. It made perfect sense to me then; now it confuses me. My crime was planned meticulously although it was pure chance (or was it?) that gave me the opportunity. The gravity of that dreadful crime all those years ago, particularly given the position I was in, has weighed increasingly heavily. And my crime led me to something even worse . . . and that is the part which I cannot truly comprehend. It hurts too much. I lost everything that I had always held dear.

The sun had been high in the sky that day. The swallows had been swooping down on the water to catch flies. A lone buzzard patrolled above. It was a perfect day.

And then it happened . . .

In a few moments of madness my life turned somersault. Everything I had worked for throughout a successful career, albeit one that contained a dark secret, was ruined. More importantly, my family relationships came crashing down.

Life is so fragile, so cruel, so unpredictable, and so random. We are each the victims of our backgrounds and our circumstances. Despite what self-regarding right-wing politicians maintain, we cannot always control the forces at work that rule our destiny. As Gloucester says in *King Lear*, "As flies to wanton boys are we to th' gods, They kill us for their sport." If there is a

God, he must be a heartless one.

This sounds self-pitying, but honestly it isn't. Despite the circumstances I find myself in, I do not feel sorry for myself. And prison life does have its compensations and its security.

However, I am deeply sorry that a chain of events involving me from my early years and, reinforced by my dysfunctional family, created both the determination to succeed and the circumstances that led to my destruction.

Let me start my story. In telling it, my aim is to come to terms with the dreadful thing I did. Above all, I hope, this story will provide the first faltering steps for Julie, whom I have always loved, to find it in her heart to forgive me as well. I did a very bad and wicked thing, but I don't think I am a bad man.



PART ONE

SOMERSET 1954–1970



## CHAPTER 1

### *Do not go gentle into that good night*

(Dylan Thomas, poem title and first line, 1951)

The walk from Ivy Cottage, in the Somerset village of Ravington where my family lived, to the river Blue took less than fifteen minutes. I was six years old and about to embark on a journey that would change my life, although I didn't know it then.

Our cottage was on a corner where a lane met a main road. On the opposite side of the main road was a pub called The Angel. Across the lane was the end of a row council houses and between them and the main road ran a path which led into a field of cowslips and buttercups, next to a small wood overlooking the river.

As always, Ivy Cottage was full of noise and tension on that May day in 1954. My mother, Hannah Roberts, was trying to cope with the demands of my two siblings and me. Sarah was eight, two years older than me. My younger brother, Charles, was five. My mother was an academic and writer or had been in her previous "incarnation". Living this poverty-stricken life in this isolated pocket of rural England in the frugal fifties was certainly not how my mother imagined her life panning out.

We had recently moved down from the north to our rented cottage and things were not going well. My father, Martin, was trying unsuccessfully to start an engineering business. That particular day he had returned home frustrated that he had been unable to convince any farmers to buy any of his products. Furthermore, he was unable to account for five pounds, a huge amount in those days, which had gone missing. My father was now sitting in the corner of the small living room looking miserable, frenetically rubbing his hands to try and relieve the anxiety from which he was always suffering. He was incapable of

speech.

Sarah was a friendly fair-haired extroverted child who wanted everyone, her parents most of all, to be happy. By contrast, Charles was an introverted boy of average height for his age, with piercing blue eyes. He enjoyed more of his mother's attention, inadequate though this was, perhaps because he was the youngest but, also because she saw in him something that was missing in Sarah and me. He was clearly destined to be the bright one.

I was lean and tall with brown eyes. The shambling family life, particularly my father's emotional volatility, always made me anxious. Even at that early stage, I hated being in the same room as my father. I never had very much to do with Sarah in those days, but I always felt curiously protective about Charles.

It was about quarter past six in the evening when I left the house. I knew that neither of my parents would notice my absence because they were so wrapped up in their own troubles. Nevertheless, I can recall quietly shutting the door of the cottage and crossing the lane. I had made a habit of taking a walk at this time because I couldn't stand the atmosphere in the house, which made me feel unwanted and lonely.

I can remember passing the council houses opposite our cottage. Keith, who lived with his family in one of them, was playing outside with a rubber ball, a scruffy mongrel dog by his side. He was two years older than me and he inquired: "Where be ye off to, Simon? You're not rabbiting are ye?"

Of all the boys in the village, Keith was the only one in whose company I felt comfortable, the only one who didn't threaten me in some way. Most of the hundred-and-fifty villagers had found the arrival of our family inconvenient and even unsettling. I nodded to Keith and hurried on.

As a family, we could not be easily pigeon-holed. My mother was bookish and even bohemian, but her remote, intellectual demeanour was not endearing to many of the villagers. They preferred my father, despite his eccentricity. Maybe this was because he originally came from the small town of Crompton, only three miles away. My father was middle-class compared to

the majority of the people in Ravington, but he had the advantage of coming from the area and, to that extent, was considered one of them.

I must have opened the small wicket gate that led into a large field decked in the yellow of wild flowers. Further ahead was another field where there were some thirty Friesian cows grazing near to a large gate, swishing their tails, waiting expectantly to be milked. I couldn't help thinking that normally they should already have been collected by Farmer Butcher by now and taken to the milking parlour of the farm, which was three hundred yards away. Why the delay?

It had been a warm early summer day but now the heat had gone and in a couple of hours sunset would descend. I loved being by myself at this time. While I always felt frightened inside the house because of my father's volatility, and scared when I encountered other older boys from the village, I felt calm by myself in the open.

A flock of crows circled overhead as I took the path from the field into the wood of ash and oak trees. I enjoyed hearing the crunching sounds under my feet as I descended through the fields.

The river was now in full view. It was not a large river but I loved wandering along the bank looking out for trout and eels. On the opposite side I caught sight of a vole or water rat — I wasn't sure which — peering out of a hole in the bank. The day before, when I had come here a little earlier, I had been transfixed by the blue flash of a kingfisher, the first time I had ever spotted this bird.

I was caught up in my own imagination as I wandered by the riverbank, taking in all the sights and sounds. I wondered what it would be like to be a fish. They looked to be so much at peace as they circled in the water — a contrast to the turmoil that was part of my daily life at Ivy Cottage.

It was about seven o'clock when I came to my favourite spot. Carved into the bank was a clearing where I often liked to sit and reflect. Clouds were gathering and I thought I shouldn't linger too much longer. Bedtime was always irregular and chaotic, but I

should get back soon to avoid any arguments.

I sat down on a low branch of a tree in the clearing as I gathered my thoughts. It had been a long day. I hated the village school, where I was the butt of jokes from many of the other thirty or so pupils at the school. The head teacher, Miss Glough, was vicious and horrid.

Suddenly my calm was disturbed by the presence of a man at my side. I hadn't heard him coming and I knew he must have been very stealthy. I recognised him immediately. It was Vince Richardson, the twenty-one-year-old son of Martha, who worked for my mother as a cleaner. He lived with his mother — his father was never to be seen — in one of the council houses which I had just passed. He had a troubling reputation.

Vince was a diabetic and had had frequent spells in mental hospitals. There was a rumour that he had been jailed for causing a train to crash, thankfully without harm to passengers, when he put a wheelbarrow across the tracks. Because he spent so much time in institutions, he was rarely in the village, but when he was, the more cautious villagers ensured their children stayed inside the safety of their houses.

Immediately my heart started to race and fear engulfed me. Vince approached me, his eyes shifting in all directions, a demonic smile on his face. Sensing danger, I stood up and as soon as I had done so he punched me hard in the midriff with his right hand. I fell to the ground clutching my stomach.

“Get up, you faggot,” he shouted, before lashing out again. Then Vince slowly and deliberately unbuttoned his trousers.

What happened to me on the riverbank is still something of a blur. Nor have I any memory of walking the short distance back to Ivy Cottage, although my mind and clothes were in a state of disarray. But I do recall that my mother was reading to Charles when I arrived home, in what must have been an agitated state.

I was tearful. I don't know what I told my parents about what had happened, the full horror. My looks would have betrayed me because I became aware of angry conversations between my parents, my father blaming my mother for allowing me to roam

free.

At some stage during the evening my father left the house, slamming the door as he announced: “I’m off to see Vince and Martha.”

Trapped in her own private world, my mother seemed oblivious to all the drama and distress. Looking back, I badly needed a hug, some loving support and reassurance from my mother, but none was forthcoming. My mother was never “touchy feely” and I can only remember kissing her once, a brief peck on her cheek, a few weeks before she died, aged ninety-five.

An hour later my father returned in a surprisingly calm state of mind. He cleared his throat and announced: “I don’t think this is anything to get too het up about. It was a case of rough and tumble and it’s not worth going to the police.”

And that was that. The incident was locked away for good, never to be referred to again. Life returned to normal, or as near to normal as possible, although I remained inwardly traumatised by the abuse I suffered at Vince’s hands.

Confused and anxious, lonely and betrayed, I knew something dreadful had taken place, which had, initially, upset my parents. However, in my six-year-old mind, I was unable to place the incident in any context that made sense to me. It was only much later, in early adulthood, that I felt able to tell anyone about it. The incident became part of my secret life, isolating me from other people.

Soon afterwards Vince disappeared from the village. No one knew or cared where he had gone. And it was to be another 13 years before Vince unexpectedly reappeared in my life and then in very surreal circumstances . . .

Looking back today on this horrendous abuse, I find it hard to see it as a single pivotal turning point in a life which eventually self-destructed. What would have been the outcome had my parents felt able to talk to me about it? What if the police had been informed? Or if I had received some counselling?

Had my parents exercised proper care, had they not been so absorbed in their own worries, with my father on the brink of

financial ruin and bankruptcy, or had my family circumstances not been so dysfunctional, this incident would never have occurred and my life would have taken a different turn.

As I write this, sitting upright in my bunk bed, Roddy doing his endless Sudokus, I am obsessed not only by how chance circumstances affect a life, but by the background noise which plays its part as well.

However, I digress, so let's return to the narrative . . .

My father's decision to move back from the north to Somerset to start a small engineering business, selling posts and erecting sheds for farmers, was an impulsive decision for which he wasn't properly prepared. He had no money. He had a profound fear of borrowing and was temperamentally unsuited to the highs and lows of business. He was constantly stressed.

At first, he rented offices and a yard in Crompton, initially taking on one employee. However, his business worries intruded on all aspects of our lives as we were growing up. We lived more or less on the poverty line. There was never quite enough food in the house and we children were always hungry. Tea was drunk out of jam jars to save on cost. We had few toys, and presents were a luxury, reserved only for birthdays and Christmas and even then much more meagre than the ones received by the children in the council houses opposite. These were tough times for everyone, but the villagers found it incomprehensible that a middle-class, educated family should be in such dire straits.

In addition to the daily grind of poverty, my father's unpredictable nature and moods created an atmosphere of exhaustion and panic. Before he returned from work every day at five o'clock, my mother would start fretting. My father always wanted to eat his supper on his lap alone and we were ordered not to talk to him. "Daddy will be very tired," my mother would say as she hustled us from the living room into the kitchen, the only other downstairs room in the cottage. Too much noise and my father would erupt into a terrifying rage.

In those early days, misfortune seemed to follow me around. At about the same time as my abuse, there was another, potentially

fatal disaster. My father had recently invested in a second-hand lorry, which was essential for his business. He would sometimes drive Charles and me around, allowing us to play in the back. However, there was no rear protection barrier. On one occasion, as the lorry turned a sharp corner, I was thrown into the road and was lucky to emerge with only minor scrapes and bruises.

It was one of the few occasions when my mother was furious with my father, screaming to him about his irresponsibility in allowing small, vulnerable boys to play in the back of an unprotected lorry.

Then, a few days afterwards, my brother Charles, and I, with another boy called Bennett, were in the fields collecting birds' eggs. Encouraged by my mother, I had developed a close interest in birds and wildlife. I loved sitting by the ancient village pond, watching nesting moorhens and waddling ducks from the nearby farm.

I was also loved roaming the fields by myself or with others: there were so few rules. In hindsight, I believe my mother was depressed and found it impossible to cope with the demands of three young children.

On this particular day I was keen to look for a wren, whose beautiful song I could hear coming from a hedge. Wrens have always fascinated me, such exquisite birds, but so small that they are difficult to find. The three of us were searching in the hedge when older boys approached us. One of them, clutching an air rifle, shouted: "Line up against that tree, you little buggers." They shoved the three of us into position and then retreated. The boy with the air rifle took aim and pulled the trigger, the pellet rocketing into my right leg.

I collapsed as much from shock as from pain. These foolish teenagers were immediately contrite, realising that their callous stupidity could easily have resulted in an even more serious accident. "Don't tell your parents," one of them whimpered, "we'll give you a packet of crisps if you don't snitch on us." Even then I couldn't help thinking of the absurdity of this proposition.

Usually a desperately slow driver, my mother raced me to the

GP, a distance of seven miles, in our old blue Austin Seven. The doctor prodded and probed for several minutes but failed to locate the pellet. He pronounced: “If the pellet is there, I don’t think it’s doing much harm. I can either send you for a hospital X-ray, or you can just let sleeping dogs lie.” Sleeping dogs it was to be.

Not long afterwards, I was knocked down by a car in the road just outside our house.

I had been playing outside after supper while the rest of the family remained indoors. Bennett wanted me to play with him in the fields across the road and was beckoning me to join him.

I was about to do so when I spotted the very same boys, who only a week or so before had shot me. I froze. The last thing I wanted was to face them again, but Bennett was persistent, and I didn’t want to lose face and let him down.

Counting to three, I then rushed across the road, but straight into the path of an oncoming car, driven by a horrified middle-aged woman. I collapsed, blood pouring from a deep gash in the same leg which had only partially recovered from the shooting.

My mother saw the accident from an upstairs window and ran to my side, while my father called an ambulance. My leg was operated on in Yeovil hospital, thirteen miles away, and the rifle pellet was also located. However, the doctors thought it too complicated to remove, so there the pellet remains to this day.

Again, I was fortunate. Although the accident resulted in the permanent scarring of my leg, no serious damage was done.

There was no room in the children’s ward, so I spent three weeks, surrounded by adults who treated me with extraordinary kindness and concern. My mother visited me once a week.

I was desperately unhappy at the local village primary school and cannot remember one positive thing I learned there. I intensely disliked Miss Glough, the head teacher. She was a small, squat woman with her hair scrunched into a tight bun. She was a hateful figure, prowling round the school, barking out orders. “Don’t run, you stupid boy!”

The other teacher was Miss Thompson. She was a tall, slight

woman with an insipid personality; one of those people who slips through life without making any impression at all.

My hatred of Miss Glough came to a head one day. I had been playing a skipping game in the outside playground with a girl called Sally, and we started talking about the teachers. “Miss Thompson’s a dimwit,” pronounced Sally. “I prefer her to Miss Glough,” I replied, “she stinks.”

Sally immediately rushed off to tell the headmistress exactly what I had said. When I returned from the playground, Miss Glough was waiting for me. Without giving me a chance to speak, she spat: “You nasty little boy. I’m going to make you pay for what you have just said about me.”

She rounded up the entire school, summoning all thirty pupils to one of the two classrooms. Then she clutched me by the neck and picked up a ruler.

The other children looked bewildered as Miss Glough’s gimlet eyes bored into me. “This horrid boy has been saying some very unpleasant things about me. I want this to be a lesson to him and to all of you. You can’t make such remarks about your head teacher.”

Miss Glough instructed me to hold out my hand, crashing the ruler down on my open palm five times. The physical pain I experienced was nothing compared to the feelings of shame and hatred I felt in equal measure. I have never forgiven Miss Glough and this is the primary reason why I have never believed in corporal punishment.

However, slowly but surely, matters started to improve when my father had a stroke of good luck. He inherited from an aunt a farm and a small fortune, with which he bought Great Gables, a four bedroomed Edwardian detached house in Crompton, to which the family now moved.

Does a house mould its inhabitants or is it the other way round? Certainly, Great Gables had a shambolic appearance that seemed to fit the characteristics of the family. It was situated close to a main road but the south facing rear of the house looked onto a large, attractive and private garden.

My father's business started to thrive in its own modest way, thanks to the money he was now able to inject into it. He moved into bigger premises and took on three workmen. The company had gained a good reputation amongst farmers, whom my father always considered to be "the salt of the earth", a phrase he repeated constantly.

My parents always placed education at the centre of their world. After their piece of good luck, they removed first me and then Charles from Ravington village school and sent us as day boys to a small nearby prep school called Oakside. I was nine then. My sister was sent to a girls' private school in a nearby village where she remained till she was eighteen.

In the new environment of Oakside I started to thrive. I was not outstandingly clever, but I was bright enough to end up in the top quarter of my class. I took my lead from my mother in being good at history, but I also enjoyed Latin and English. I always struggled with maths, though — again like my mother, who was never good at that subject. I reached the dizzy heights of the top set in my last year at prep school, although I was the only pupil out of the six of us in the class not to try for a scholarship to a public school.

I excelled at sport, playing in the first teams for rugby, hockey and cricket. I developed a passion for cricket, which I took far too seriously, modelling my batting on my Yorkshire boyhood hero, Len Hutton. My interest in cricket came from my grandfather on my mother's side, Malcolm Robinson, who taught me how to hold a bat and instilled in me a lifelong interest in the Yorkshire County Cricket Club — Yorkshire being the county in which I was born.

I was a good but erratic opening batsman. On my best days I triumphed and made some of the highest innings the school had ever seen. In my last year at Oakside I won the "cricket bat" for having the best average.

At thirteen, having passed my common entrance, I was sent as a boarder to Stourwater in Dorset. My mother, in particular, was adamant that I would not go to Oakside's senior school, which was a traditional and very minor public school, neither academic,

nor sporty, nor arty. Being a keen liberal, she was determined that I would go to Stourwater, which had a progressive reputation. There was no corporal punishment or “fagging”, which were commonplace at public schools in those days. There was less class teaching than in other schools with pupils encouraged to work on their own. The school was a complete contrast to Oakside and I never felt entirely at ease there.

I welcomed the opportunity to escape the tensions of home and I was even looking forward to the new horizons of Stourwater, having done well at Oakside. However, within a few weeks my morale plunged to new depths. To my surprise and horror, I was placed in the lower of the two entry streams, which was not what I had expected. My mother also showed her disappointment, believing that such a lowly start would be fatal for any aspirations I might have to go to Oxford — as far as she was concerned the only university to aspire to.

After only three weeks, I complained to my personal tutor. “I would eventually like to go to Oxford. My mother tells me that, in order to do so, I should be in the higher stream. Is that possible?” My tutor looked astonished and replied curtly: “Roberts, there’s no chance whatsoever of you going to Oxford or probably to any other university, for that matter. You will need to lower your sights to something achievable. Perhaps you should consider being a prison warden?”

If that was a considerable blow, worse was to follow. The school employed a psychiatrist who gave a lecture every year about sex to new boys entering the school. His name was Dr Matthews. His lecture was primarily intended as educational information about how babies were produced. However, his strictures about masturbation — “Don’t do it!” — and homosexuality could not be clearer.

“Most of you,” Dr Matthews opined, “will be going through puberty, which is a dangerous time for a boy. You may experience many temptations to experiment with another boy. On no account do so. If you have had any homosexual experiences of whatever kind, there’s a real chance of you becoming a habitual

homosexual. Being a homosexual, sodomising another man, is about the most pernicious thing that you can do. Not only is homosexuality unlawful, it is evil; it is a dreadful, unnatural act. I hope none of you have gone, or will go down that terrible path.”

I rushed from the lecture in complete and utter panic. I hadn’t told a soul about the abuse and sex act Vince had performed on me when I was six, but now it was obvious. I must be a homosexual, which, according to Dr Matthews, was about the most awful thing you could be!

For the next few months, I found sleeping — always a problem for me throughout my life — impossible. I lost my appetite and I was unable to focus on work for more than a few minutes at a time. During lessons, my concentration would wane and my mind would become a complete fog, making it hard for me to retain information.

My work went steadily downhill and with it any motivation to go to university. Simply surviving in this artificial environment was all I could cope with. My problems were exacerbated as a result of the system of education at Stourwater, which I found confusing.

Coming from my disorganised home background, I needed routine in my life, particularly at this time when I was feeling very vulnerable, so a school with less structure, heightened my stress levels. I fell more and more behind with my “prep”, creating a downward spiral from which I couldn’t escape.

Without my mother at hand to help me, as she had with my “homework”, I developed exam phobia. When exams were impending, I barely slept more than two or three hours a night. Most nights I would lie awake counting the hours till morning, feeling utterly alone in my private hell. Dr Matthews had insinuated that, because of my dreadful experience, the chances of becoming a homosexual were real, a condition so loathsome that I couldn’t envisage a life with any hope.

I became a regular smoker. I would sneak away to the woods in the school grounds to puff away at a Woodbine or a Craven A. On one occasion I was caught and was suitably punished. For

“crimes” that were considered serious, like smoking and drinking, the punishment consisted of regular detention and long runs in free time.

The only consolation, which brought me some respite from my misery, was that I continued to be good at sport. Again, I played in the first team at each age level. It was through sport that I was able to forget about my troubles.

In the holidays my relationship with my father steadily deteriorated. There were frequent angry exchanges, which occasionally led to my father lashing out at me violently.

When at school, he would write a letter to me every three weeks in his large looping, childlike handwriting. In his excruciating way, my father was trying to communicate with me. Each letter contained a “lecture”, which I found simply intolerable.

The letters were simplistic and bizarre. One might be about the differences between men and women when it came to gardening: my father believed that men should take care of the vegetables, whilst women looked after the flowers. Another would focus on Hindu philosophy, which my father had taken a shine to. It was not unusual for him to give a lecture about sex, something he never talked about face-to-face with me. Eventually, I stopped reading my father’s homilies.

Re-reading these letters in my prison cell, I believe I judged my father far too harshly. They were well meaning and some of his observations were telling and not unintelligent.

At Stourwater, I was in despair and my father’s letters made me even more miserable. However, I managed to put on a brave face. The teachers and other pupils would not have been able to reconcile this seemingly extroverted, happy boy, with the reality of my inner world.

It did not help that my brother Charles joined the school a year after me. We were never close, but I always felt responsible for him. Charles, who was even more disorganised and gauche than me and certainly much more introverted, cut a lonely figure. He had few friends. To my discredit, I felt rather ashamed of him and

believed too great an association with him would have a negative impact on my own fragile wellbeing.

In the last two years of my school life, matters improved. I had made some friends, in particular Brian Pudloe, who became head boy. Brian was always calm, loyal and level-headed. After gaining a place to read Land Economy at Cambridge, Brian subsequently went into farm management before becoming a tenant farmer in Devon. Typically, Brian was one of the only people to visit me in Wormwood Scrubs, when I was at my very lowest ebb.

However, I am grateful to Stourwater for expanding my horizons. When I arrived, my interests were very narrow, mainly devoted to cricket. The school's arts' ambience fostered in me an interest in literature and music. In my last year at school, I started a poetry magazine with contributions from pupils at the school, an initiative that won me many plaudits.

My interests in the arts, particularly music and poetry, were nurtured and reinforced by my lifelong friend, Raymond Fox, from Crompton, who had become an early fan of Elvis Presley, and who later became very knowledgeable about the blues. In the school holidays we would discuss literature and music and we were each starting to write poetry.

Raymond was a constant presence in my life from eight to eighteen. Not only did we share a mutual interest in music and literature, but girls loomed large in our teenage and young adult lives. Invariably, we were attracted to the same girls but, although Raymond was shyer than me, he gradually became more confident, and his ability to play blues guitar, albeit to a modest standard, provided him with increasing street cred as far as the fairer sex were concerned.

My great friend was something of a contradiction, a would-be wild man, trying and not always succeeding to escape the hold his conventional family had over him. As we were growing up, he was immensely conservative in dress and manner and yet he was greatly influenced by Elvis Presley and then by a succession of rock and blues singers. He loved nothing better than to strum his guitar and sing the blues, of which he had an extensive knowledge.

Whilst I was fighting my own demons, Raymond was caught in the grips of his conundrum: a nervous and chronically shy mother; a kind and formidable grandmother, who lived in the same house; a father who had his own women's lingerie business and was only at home during the weekends; and an outgoing but anti-intellectual older brother, as different from Raymond as town is from country.

I recall with embarrassment an occasion when we were about fourteen or fifteen, a time when sex workers could be seen everywhere in the streets in Soho. We'd decided we wanted a taste of the bright lights, so we'd travelled to London by train and were staying for the weekend at the YMCA. In my case, I was probably trying to put to bed any lingering doubts that I might be gay. We were two unsophisticated country boys let loose in the Big City. On the Saturday night we ventured to Greek Street, walking up and down, not knowing quite what to do. I don't know what we were expecting, but nothing happened. So, we had a coffee and decided that the nefarious goings-on in Soho were a myth. Then, as we were walking from the coffee bar, we were approached by two glitzy women, who proceeded to put their arms around us. "You boys looking for a bit of fun?" one said, to which I replied: "Sure. Is there a party?" The street worker looked at me askance: "It's two pound for an hour, five pound for the night." Then the penny dropped and we beat a hasty retreat.

When we were eighteen our lives — Raymond's and mine — took different turns. I eschewed university in favour of mental health nursing. Raymond, who was always bright and curious, won a place to read English at Cambridge. While he was there, he engineered a real coup, persuading the American blues singer, Howlin' Wolf, who was in England at the time, to perform a composition that Raymond had crafted himself. To this day, Raymond still has the tape to prove it.

Although we remained close, lifelong friends, I never told Raymond then, or anyone else for that matter, about the abuse I had suffered at the hands of Vince. I felt too ashamed to do so. On one occasion, when we were teenagers, Raymond was talking

about a little-known rock guitarist called Vince Martell, whom he had just discovered. Without thinking, I reacted vehemently: “Don’t talk to me about anyone with the name of Vince.”

Raymond was dumfounded: “What’s wrong with the name of Vince? You have always admired the work of Vincent Van Gogh.”

“His name is Vincent, not Vince. And one day I will tell you why I have a horror of the name of Vince.”

Inside my muddled brain I was still at sea. I finally realised that I was certainly not homosexual. Girls became my focus. I developed a largely platonic relationship with a girl at Stourwater’s sister school. The realisation that I was heterosexual came as a considerable relief to me and it was now only a matter of time before I felt ready to talk about the abuse which had plagued my life. I vowed then that I would not allow the incident with Vince to destroy me: I was determined use this experience positively in showing a greater empathy towards people.

However, exam phobia again reared its head with A Levels which I took in English, History and French. I was in a total panic and I was in too much of a spin to revise effectively. The night before my first examination I didn’t sleep a wink. At breakfast a fellow pupil gave me a pill to keep me awake. Stupidly, I swallowed it and the effect was calamitous. I became far too agitated to focus properly on the examination questions.

After this exam, I went to see the school’s nurse. She sent me to the school’s sanatorium, where I slept every night until my exams were over.

My school career ended on a sour note. I had become a prefect and, despite the previous negative attitudes of my tutor, my mother persuaded me to stay an extra term to take Oxbridge entrance examinations. I was also destined to become the head of my “house” and I would be playing my second season with the school’s rugby First XV. I was going to share a study with Brian Pudloe who, in addition to being head boy, was also was to become captain of rugby.

On the last day of term, the headmaster, whom I had always detested, after witnessing his arrogant behaviour whilst on a

walking holiday with him and other boys in the Lake District, called a meeting for the new heads of houses.

“There are too many rotters in this school,” the headmaster began pompously, “boys who smoke and drink. We need to root them out. I want all of you as heads of houses to swear an oath of allegiance that, on my say-so, you will go into the woods to catch those smokers.”

The seven other newly appointed heads of houses all individually agreed. I was seething with anger as the head alighted on me. “Roberts, do I have your agreement?”

I didn’t hesitate. “No, Sir. You do not. This is supposed to be a liberal, progressive school. Witch-hunts like this go against the culture of this school. I will not do it.”

The headmaster was furious. “Very well, Roberts. In that case, you certainly cannot become a head of house and not even a prefect. You may even like to consider your future at the school.”

“Don’t worry, Sir, I’ve made up my mind. I’m leaving the school immediately.”

I stormed off and found my mother waiting to pick me up in her car. To her incomprehension, I explained that I had left school. Clearly, university no longer seemed an option: I would help people and become a psychiatric nurse instead.



## CHAPTER 2

### *They fuck you up your mum and dad*

(Philip Larkin, "This be the verse", *Collected Poems*, 2001)

In her previous existence, my mother would never have believed that she would find herself in her current predicament. It had never occurred to her as a scholar at Somerville College Oxford, that she would end up in a small and isolated village in the depth of Somerset with a frighteningly volatile husband and three demanding young children. In many respects, my mother was an extraordinary woman, but she found her life at Ivy Cottage, both demoralising and humiliating.

As she sipped tea from a chipped cup (she refused to drink from the jam jars my father insisted upon) she reflected on her life and her family. She was, rightly, proud of her academic achievements since she came from a relatively modest background. Her father, Malcolm Robinson, was from Sheffield. Leaving school at 14, he had joined the local newspaper, first becoming an apprentice printer and then a reporter. An intelligent man, he studied in the evenings, obtaining sufficient qualifications to take a theology degree at Manchester University.

Malcolm then embarked on a career change and studied for the priesthood, eventually becoming a Unitarian minister, first in Belfast and then in Birmingham, where members of the famous political dynasty, the Chamberlain family, frequented his church. Joseph, Austen and Neville Chamberlain had each made a significant mark on the landscape of municipal life in Birmingham before they went on to straddle the national stage.

My mother had met the Chamberlains in her youth but had a somewhat ambivalent attitude towards them, believing that on one occasion she, or one of her brothers, had been slighted at a party to which they had been invited by them. She never

elaborated further.

Her mother, Bridget, was from more middle-class stock, the daughter of a Midlands bank manager. My mother's parents disapproved of Malcolm because of his inferior working-class roots, but came to respect him more and more as his success grew.

Belfast was a paradise for my mother, a period she looked back upon with nostalgia. Although the Irish problems had not disappeared since the division of Ireland in the 1920s, the Troubles did not directly impinge on the Robinson family, who lived in a semi-detached house off Queen's Road. Malcolm was highly respected by his congregation.

The couple had four clever children, with my mother and her elder brother Gerard the real stars. When my mother was thirteen she was sent across the sea to board at Channing School in north London.

While at Channing, my mother won a scholarship to Somerville College to read history. Gerard was already at Oxford, a scholar at University College. Anne and Adrian, my mother's younger siblings, also went to Oxford, although they were not as academically accomplished as their elder brother and sister. My mother adored Anne, and Adrian even more, but was wary of Gerard, with whom she had a competitive relationship. Sadly, Adrian died during the Second World War, serving as an aircraft pilot. My mother's grief remained with her for the rest of her life.

A beautiful young woman, with long flowing hair and dark brown eyes, my mother was feted at Oxford. She was both intelligent and attractive and the whole world seemed to be before her. Yet surprisingly, she failed to obtain the history degree all her hard work deserved and on which she had set her heart — a 2:1, rather than a First, was hardly a disgrace but this remained a bitter disappointment to her, particularly as Malcolm obtained a First. This was a turning point for my mother. From that moment on, her life failed to live up to its early promise.

My mother also carried a secret that only Martin and a few very close friends knew about and which I only discovered by chance when I was considerably older. This carefully concealed secret was

the reason my mother had married my father, as opposite to her in character as two people could be.

The private inner world of my mother would have been hugely disrupted when I returned home in a very agitated state, telling her in tears that something involving Vince had happened on the riverbank, which I was not really able to articulate.

She would have found this all deeply upsetting and confusing. I was in no state to describe exactly what had happened — and, in many respects, it was probably better not to know too much about such a ghastly incident. It was not clear, but she deduced that Vince had got out his ‘thing’ and something traumatic had happened.

Sex was something of a conundrum to my mother. To a large extent, it had been her undoing, as it was to many of the politicians she had admired. Her attitudes were liberal and non-judgmental, her great historical hero being Gladstone, a massive political figure but with suspect morals. Did he not have his own creepy fascination with street walkers?

Her thoughts turned to Lloyd George, whom she regarded as the founder of the welfare state; but then he had an insatiable sex drive and a score of illicit lovers. Sex was such a messy business. Better not go there.

This whole unpleasant business with Vince, my mother rationalised, was deeply regrettable but there was a danger of exaggerating the significance of such an isolated incident. History was littered with prominent men who had been molested at school and it did not seem to make a lasting impression on them. And, anyway, what to do about it? That was the question to which my mother could provide no satisfactory answer. She thought it best to let matters rest.

My mother considered the police unimaginative and cloddish. If she and Martin had decided to report Vince, there was a danger that it would make matters even worse. Who would believe a six-year-old anyway? Furthermore, it would mean betraying Vince’s mother, Martha, who had been an enormous help to them — cleaning for them at Ivy Cottage after they had moved to Somerset

from Yorkshire.

The incident with Vince was bad enough but it is likely my mother convinced herself that this was potentially less damaging than the effect on me of being shot in the leg and knocked down by the car. And how bloody stupid of my father to allow Charles and me to run amok on his lorry!

My mother was by no means a heartless person: indeed, she was immensely kind, but she lacked the emotional intelligence and energy to respond appropriately to the turmoil which was already occurring in my life. She lived in a world of books and imagination and had embarked on writing a novel. I do not blame her for wanting to return to that world as a means of coping with the present stresses. However, providing sufficient comfort to a traumatised boy in these dreadful circumstances proved beyond her.

How exactly had my mother come to marry my father? Disappointed by the results of her finals, my mother lost something of her confidence. Clearly, a career as an Oxford don was not really realistic without a first-class degree. What to do? In this confused state of mind, she made a disastrous mistake: she married the brother of one of her closest Oxford friends.

Adam Cohen was a clever and ambitious man from a Jewish background who, subsequently, became a distinguished and wealthy lawyer. Unbeknown to my mother, he was also a practising homosexual.

In common with so many of her contemporaries in the 1930s, my mother was sexually naïve and failed to understand the reasons behind her great friend's intense pressure for her to marry her brother Adam.

My mother's whole life had been focused on academic achievement and, although she was a strikingly beautiful young woman, she had had no previous serious boyfriend. She was devoted to her clergyman father and had been brought up on the Unitarian principles of duty and service. The Robinson household was never full of laughter or idle chatter and matters of a sexual nature were never discussed.

It was only on her honeymoon, travelling through France, that the bitter reality became all too apparent. Adam admired Hannah for her intellectual ability and her serious nature. He could see that she was interesting and attractive, but when it came to the sexual act, he was utterly unable to perform.

Exactly what was going through Adam's mind when he proposed to my mother is hard to imagine. However, it was not uncommon then for men to cloak their homosexuality in the respectability of married life. After all, homosexual acts were illegal. It was also at that time a popular misconception that homosexuality was a disease which could be cured and perhaps Adam thought Hannah's charms would do the trick.

This was not to be. The revelation that Adam was a homosexual came as a devastating blow to my mother and her family. She cut short her honeymoon and fled to London and to the comforting arms of her friends.

Everyone rallied round and acted with commendable speed. Her marriage had not been consummated so a divorce, a humiliating concept for a minister's daughter, was swiftly arranged. My mother had fallen from a great height, her morale was at rock bottom, but her friends came to her rescue.

My mother's friends were a strange and motley bunch of women, all exceedingly loyal. One of the most extraordinary was Linda Jackman, who probably would have liked to have taken her friendship with my mother to a deeper level. Linda was a manly-looking Russian who escaped from the communist regime in the late 1920s by becoming an air stewardess and getting on one of the first Aeroflot flights out of Moscow. Arriving in London, she managed to give her guards the slip and escaped to the relative safety of the city's underbelly.

She subsequently became a well-known psychotherapist who penned an autobiography detailing her colourful life in which she told the story of my mother's traumatic honeymoon and unconsummated marriage. It was when I read this book in middle age that I realised, for the very first time, that in one sense I was not alone: like me, my mother had a secret past about which she

never spoke.

Linda stayed with us in Ravington and, subsequently, after we moved to Crompton, came to stay at least once or twice a year. The relationship between my mother and her seemed to me, even at the time, curiously conspiratorial. They would frequently disappear on long walks together. Linda had little to do with the rest of the family and was clearly only interested in my mother. She rarely engaged in conversation with us children and her thick Russian accent and forceful personality grated on me. So I can't say that I cared for her, but I admired her for her strength of character and the fact that she must have shown extraordinary ingenuity and resilience in escaping from communist Russia.

Another close friend was a woman who was always known as Michael, someone for whom I had real affection. Michael was extraordinary: a warm-hearted bohemian who had two children by different men. Subsequently, she had an arranged marriage with a German Jew, Arnos, one of the few Jews to survive Auschwitz. Although a dentist by profession, when he arrived in London it was to stack shelves at Selfridges in Oxford Street. This menial task did not seem to perturb him: he felt lucky to be alive. Michael and Amos shared a house together, but not a bed. Their lives rarely converged.

Naomi Reading was another frequent and engaging visitor whom my mother and father had got to know in Wakefield before moving to Somerset. I adored her. She was an accomplished violinist who had played with the Halle Orchestra and was a friend of such luminaries as Yehudi Menuhin and Sir Thomas Armstrong.

She was Jewish and she recounted stories of shopkeepers after the war refusing to serve her because of their prejudice. I loved the way she made her violin come alive and, on several occasions, she performed at Oakside. I also stayed with her and her much older and fastidious husband Gerry in their Bloomsbury house. Naomi would rarely go to bed until three in the morning and, before she did so, she would read practically every word of the latest edition of *The Times*.

These three friends — and several others besides — all shared my mother's secret and came to her rescue at a crucial, devastating time in her life. The same could also be said of my father, whom Hannah met at a Fabian Society event, soon after her divorce. My father was kind and supportive throughout this traumatic period in Hannah's life. Deeply traumatised, my mother was grateful to Martin for his concern and consideration, which is why she, a vicar's daughter, rushed into another hasty and unsuitable marriage. My father was not remotely academic. He was much more practical than her and yet, in some ways, more of a creative thinker. He had a greater appreciation of music than my mother, who was partially deaf much of her life.

My father would have considered it something of a failure moving down to Ravington from Wakefield, where he had been employed by the Ministry of Transport, in order to start a business. He liked Yorkshire people, who were direct and to the point, but he disliked his job there and felt unfulfilled.

Certainly, though, he had hated being a civil servant. The bureaucracy and the regulations drove him mad. Although living in the north was not exactly what my parents wanted, since they were both southerners, life had been quite agreeable, until children with all their complications came along.

My father never talked very much about the War because he felt guilty that he had not served as a soldier. He justified this by saying he had been too old to serve. This was partly true, although people older than him had been called up. He claimed that by helping to maintain the country's transport system he was making an invaluable contribution to the war effort. However, the real reason why my father never served in the armed forces was, I believe, because he was psychologically unsuited to it.

Returning to his native Somerset satisfied his need for security. He was fed up with his job and, in his usual impulsive way, he told my mother one night that he was going to start his own business, without thinking through all the implications of doing so. My mother had pleaded with him not to go ahead. She had begun to understand her second husband and realised that, although being

an entrepreneur would appeal to his mercurial personality, he was temperamentally unsuited to such a stressful life-style. However, my father refused to be dissuaded and on a bleak and rainy day the couple and their three subdued young children drove in a hired van to Ravington and their new rented home, Ivy Cottage.

My father's own background was more outwardly solid than Hannah's. He came from a reasonably prosperous West Country family of farmers and cheese-makers. Good middle-class stock. However, Martin's father had died when he was only four and this had a traumatic effect on the family. His mother, Esther, a strong and formidable character, was left to raise both Martin and, his older sibling, Rosemary. Throughout their lives, Rosemary and Martin were bound by a mutual dislike and she did not care for my mother either. Rosemary thought Martin a confused fool and Hannah, a rather untidy, slovenly woman. By the same token, my father considered Rosemary an unhappy and bitter spinster, as indeed she was.

Rosemary's dislike for my father stemmed in part from early jealousy. Such were the times then that, because he was a boy, my grandmother ensured that Martin received much more favourable treatment than his sister. With generous financial support from Esther's extended family, Martin was packed off to public school at Sherborne, where he was bullied and was miserable. Further family funds enabled him to go to St John's College, Cambridge, where he was a little happier. He emerged with a poor degree in engineering.

Academically, my father, unlike my mother, was always in the slow lane, although more adept at maths and the sciences than she was. He rowed for his college and took up the trumpet, but he made few life-long friends. Even then he was considered awkward.

After Cambridge my father joined the colonial service and worked in Nigeria as an engineer. Unfortunately, after three years, he picked up a serious infection and was forced to return to England, where he made a full recovery. Back in London he was then offered a job with the Ministry of Transport.

My father's political affiliations were complex and muddled. He was a great admirer of Winston Churchill whom he thought had 'guts', but he was too idiosyncratic to have firm allegiances. Later in life, influenced by Charles who had become a Maoist, my father avowed socialist leanings. It was, as I mentioned, at a Fabian Society event that he and my mother met. And, after a lightning courtship, the couple married shortly before my father was posted to Wakefield.

The lack of a father figure had a profound and enduring effect on Martin. He always felt the need to assert his masculinity as a result of deep-seated fears about his own sexuality. Although a strong and heavily built man, my father suffered from feelings of inadequacy. He tried to compensate by pronouncing strong, simplistic and overbearing opinions.

Martin had many redeeming qualities, but he was always awkward, and difficult company. His thinking could be more creative and original than my mother's academic and traditional approach. He was not at all materialistic and he hardly spent anything on himself, although this was true of Hannah as well. Any money that they had was spent, not on themselves or their house, which always remained in a ramshackle condition, but on the education of their children.

The weight of responsibility was crushing my father, resulting in an anxiety level close to madness. Any unexpected intrusion, any loud noise, could cause him to lose his temper, over which he had little control.

My father loved his children in his own particular way, but he simply could not cope with their demands. He thought it necessary to exert himself, to look angry (even if sometimes he was not quite as angry as his fearsome expressions conveyed) so that the children would leave him alone when he wanted peace and quiet. He needed to dominate.

My father's reaction to my abuse was complicated. He lacked the emotional capacity to focus on it to any meaningful extent. Of course, he felt empathy for me when he had seen me so traumatised. He was angry that this event should have occurred,

which he partly blamed on my mother for being so lax in allowing us to behave like feral children, wandering the fields and roads almost at will. I am sure he would have given her grief over it.

He reasoned that, while Vince's behaviour was totally unacceptable, these unseemly incidents happened all the time in inward-looking villages such as Ravington, where cases of incest and sexual experimentation were not uncommon. He would sort out Martha and Vince — and that would be that. He had enough worries as it was with the business.

When he confronted him, Vince told him a pack of lies, which partly satisfied my father, who wanted to put the matter to bed as quickly as possible. Nothing of any consequence had taken place on the riverbank, Vince assured him. Vince told my father that I had been having a piss when he had arrived by pure chance. They had larked round for a bit and then I had insisted on showing Vince my willy. "I told the little bugger to put it away and not be so bloody silly. He then started crying and rushed off. I think he was getting scared of the dark."

Then Martha had said in a telling and ominous way, "No good will come of it, Mr Roberts, if you go to the police, that's for sure." And Martin had simply replied, "Don't worry, Martha. It's a closed book as far as I'm concerned. But make damn sure that Vince is never to be seen again."

At that Martin stomped off back to Ivy Cottage, feeling proud of the way in which he had dealt with a difficult issue. Job done. Time to move on.

Life for my parents improved markedly after they moved to Crompton. Not only were their financial circumstances considerably healthier, following the inheritance my father received, but the couple had settled into a way of life, which was not disagreeable.

My father's business was now making small profits, even though he priced his products so competitively it was difficult to see how he made any money.

However, he maintained margins by having very low costs. He employed no secretary, typing his own letters slowly and

somewhat scruffily on an old Remington typewriter. My mother manned his office one or two mornings a week, mainly fielding calls, when he was out erecting a concrete shed.

He was certainly inventive, devising an ingenious pulley system from his lorry as a practical device to haul up the concrete pillars and roofing. He was at his best finding practical solutions to problems that would have defeated many others and he was at his happiest working alongside his men.

My father was not an easy boss, though. His own erratic temperament made it difficult for others always to interpret his moods. He would be intolerant of anyone who did not give the job one-hundred-per-cent commitment. I can remember him sacking on the spot one of his men who refused to work when it was pouring with rain. The workman then pleaded for his job back, but my father refused: there was no coming back if you crossed that line.

However, he was generally kind and solicitous towards his men, so long as they pulled their weight, and he took a keen interest in their home lives. His strong puritan views and homespun philosophy governed his thinking.

Having ‘guts’ was a defining line for my father. If he considered a person had ‘guts’ they were ‘in’; if not, they were consigned to outer darkness. Farmers had ‘guts’ in abundance; estate agents and antique dealers — his two main *bêtes noires* — were totally lacking in any moral fibre.

My father would look at a photograph of a cricket or rugby team and pass an instant judgment. He would pick out one of the boys in the picture and pronounce: “That boy’s going to go far. You can tell he’s got lots of guts.” Or he would point to another boy: “I don’t like the look of him. He’s spineless. You can tell by his weak chin.” Often this would be the boy who had just saved the day against all the odds with an unbeaten innings against hostile bowling! I always found such opinions crass and excruciating.

He never advertised his business. For some curious reason, he thought advertising completely immoral; in this respect his views

might be considered left-wing. All his business came by word-of-mouth personal endorsements. And, borrowing money either for personal or business use, was utterly abhorrent to him. As a result, expanding the business in any meaningful way, was never going to happen, despite occasional indications that he might do it.

In truth, my father was a very odd man, an eccentric, who to his credit, cared not a jot what he looked like, although at the time I found his appearance embarrassing. He would normally walk around town dressed in the same coarse and stained brown trousers and ragged jacket that he wore to work. Many of the locals found this strange but endearing. “Morning, Mr Roberts,” they would say in their Somerset drawl as they raised their hats, “how be gettin’ on, Sir?” Once or twice, people who did not know him mistook him for a tramp.

My father would make a bit more effort on special occasions, for example school events, but then he would invariably be captured with his mouth wide open, while the pudding he was eating made its way onto his clothes.

Our house became increasingly neglected, but my father would only fork out on the bare necessities to the increasing irritation of my mother who wanted to have a warmer, more comfortable home.

Although dissatisfied by the way her life had turned out, my mother was happier in Crompton than in Ravington. She was making the most of living in the country and had taken a close interest in the different birds that flocked to her bird table in the garden.

After her unhappy first marriage, Hannah had briefly joined the civil service before turning her hand to teaching. She now returned part-time to this profession, teaching history, first at a girl’s private school where, to her delight, she taught the granddaughter of a famous artist, and then at a technical college in the nearby town of Frome.

Our family had an extremely intelligent female mongrel dog, a cross between a spaniel and a terrier. Every morning Brownie, without a lead, would accompany my mother to the station in

Crompton, a distance of nearly a mile, where Hannah would catch her train and Brownie would walk back alone to the house. At half-past-four every afternoon, Brownie would be waiting at the station when my mother returned from school.

I cared for Brownie a great deal, often taking her to bed with me at night, a habit that was probably not hygienic, but we were not that kind of family.

Although my mother was, I'm sure, an able teacher, teaching was never a passion for my mother, who had always dreamt of being an academic or a writer. Through much of her life, my mother harboured literary ambitions. Nearly every evening, after the three children and her husband were in bed, she would write long into the night. It was rare that my mother went to bed before two.

I was never allowed to see anything that my mother had written. She was very protective and private about all aspects of her life, including her writing. I once sneaked a look at a manuscript that was left around and I was disappointed. I don't know what I was expecting, but it struck me as being rather ordinary. My mother wrote several detective stories but, frustratingly for her and the rest of the family who were willing her to succeed, none of them found favour with publishers.

Rejection letter would follow rejection letter, although on one occasion she came tantalisingly close to having one of her novels published. It must have been a considerable disappointment for my mother — who had never failed an exam in her life — not to make the grade as a writer.

Outside her work and her writing, my mother developed other interests. She campaigned for the local Liberal Party candidate, a man she admired who lived on a large private estate and who came from a famous political dynasty. When he was about eleven or twelve, she would take Charles with her on the campaign trail. It was ironic that Charles, who later developed strong revolutionary views, started life as an aspiring young liberal.

My mother followed local issues closely. She hated many of the new housing estates that were springing up all over the town,

including one at the bottom of the garden, which she felt were inappropriate and ugly. And she took an interest in local history, researching both the Roberts and Robinson families' genealogy. The pieces she wrote were never intended for publication, but useful *aides-memoires* for the family and she enjoyed doing the research.

The Quakers were another interest and she started attending their meetings. The simplicity of the meetings appealed to her and the Quaker ethos chimed with her father's Unitarianism.

It was always difficult to ascertain the religious perspective of my parents. My father professed to believe in Jesus as an inspirational leader, but he was more attracted to Eastern religions, particularly Hindu spiritualism. My mother had no firm religious views and was probably agnostic.

There was only one occasion in the year when my father insisted, for some reason, that the whole family went to church and that was at Christmas. Why it was so important to my father that the family made its annual pilgrimage to the local church was difficult to say. With Martin, there was always a disconnection between what was expected of him as the head of his family and his underlying desire to break free of the psychological restraints that his domineering mother had imposed on him.

One Christmas particularly stands out. The vicar tended to preach the same sermon every year about "greenflies devouring the good things in the garden". As we made our way to church that year, Charles announced that if the vicar were to repeat the same sermon, he would do something drastic.

Sure enough the vicar began with the same allegory. "All of us as Christians on this auspicious day, the day of the birth of the baby Jesus, need to ensure that we serve the Lord. We need to tend to our own pastoral gardens with care and devotion. We need to watch for the greenflies that will try to destroy the good things in our gardens. We need to be honest with our Maker. There are no secrets before God." This was all too much for Charles who let out an enormous wail, much to the consternation of other churchgoers who looked round in abject horror. They were not

amused by the eccentricities and bad behaviour of the Roberts family.

Increasingly, Charles became the elephant in the room. My mother's feelings towards him fluctuated between immense pride and concern. He was always an intense child who had few close friends. He was not as good at sport as me and far less gregarious. The fact that there was less than a year in age difference made for a complicated relationship. We were never close, but I could always recognise his vulnerability and I constantly worried about him. His academic career seemed to be heading in the same direction as mine: in a word, 'unremarkable'.

Then, in the first year of his sixth form, everything changed. Charles decided to opt for economics as one of his three 'A' level subjects. He submitted a paper on Keynesian economic theory, which his economics teacher thought showed great powers of analysis. The teacher said he had never seen such a remarkable essay by any pupil. After having been considered a very 'average' student one moment, the next Charles was feted as a boy of outstanding academic and intellectual ability. The world was at his beckoning.

Charles was encouraged to lift his sights. If he continued to show the same dedication and interest, a scholarship to Cambridge was within reach. My mother was absolutely thrilled by this welcome development. Academic success meant everything to her and, in truth, Charles had always been her favourite child.

However, Charles' health started to cause anxiety. His housemaster at Stourwater phoned my mother one day to say that Charles had developed a duodenal ulcer and he would need to go into hospital for three weeks for surgery, rest and recuperation.

At home from school, Charles converted an attic for his rooms, distancing himself from the family while reading copious economic and political tracts. He would emerge for meals before disappearing again. He had no friends in Crompton and would occasionally latch on to mine, but he always arrived dishevelled and late at the pub where we were meeting. Charles was generally

very serious-minded, although he also had a quick wit and he could often be amusing. However, I always felt uneasy about our relationship and the feeling was probably mutual, fuelled no doubt by sibling jealousies.

The duodenal ulcer episode seemed a minor blip. Charles recovered and focused on his A levels. He achieved very good grades, in particular gaining brilliant marks in his economics papers. A term later he sat the entrance exams to Cambridge and won an exhibition to Peterhouse.

For what was almost certainly the first and only time, my father rushed off to buy a bottle of champagne to celebrate. The whole family stood round toasting Charles' extraordinary success and his forthcoming journey to Israel, where he planned to spend most of the remaining part of his gap year working on a kibbutz.

I remained concerned about Charles, who always seemed a tortured soul. I implored my parents to understand that Charles needed psychiatric help, but they wouldn't hear of it, claiming that Charles' great achievement in winning an exhibition to Cambridge had made me envious. For my mother, Charles was already the intellectual success that she longed for in a son.

If she had missed the boat on an academic career, my mother would find vicarious satisfaction in Charles' accomplishments. True, his behaviour was a bit strange at times, but this was an eccentric family. As my father put it: "Charles is a late developer emotionally, but he'll catch up and it'll all be fine in the end, you mark my words." My parents were in complete denial and I felt angry that two supposedly intelligent people failed to see the looming danger signs. In any case, maybe it was already too late.

To begin with, Charles' time at Cambridge was eventful and creative and seemed to prove my parents right. Charles wrote regularly for the university magazine, *Varsity*, as well as the prestigious, London-based social policy magazine, *New Society*, which had recently been launched. One of Charles' "scoops" was an interview with some of the actors who appeared in *The Archers*. He also wrote a convoluted play about a group of political activists that was directed by a fellow student at his college and performed

at the Cambridge Playhouse to good reviews.

However, beneath the surface all was not well. Charles' life was becoming more and more chaotic. He was feeling immense stress and was sleeping appallingly badly. His handwriting was almost impossible to read, the letters small and veering in all directions. His writing was so bad that the university made the rare exception of allowing him to type his exam answers.

Before his Part Two Tripos, Charles had a breakdown, which led to a stay in the local psychiatric hospital. It was within this grim environment that he took his exams. Despite this set back, he did well, gaining a 2:1 degree that, but for his breakdown, might well have been a First.

Charles was contemplating an academic career at Cambridge, but this all changed suddenly, when he left a film script he had written on a train. He had made no copy of the script and was utterly distraught. Months of work had been lost. Being such a sensitive person, he felt deeply that he had let down colleagues who had become excited at the prospect of turning the script into a film. He felt so desolate that instead of staying on at Cambridge undertaking research, he changed course, going to Sussex University to start a PhD on the sociology of the media. He never completed it.

Charles had become very active in left-wing politics, going on frequent marches protesting about the Vietnam War and a variety of national and local causes that pricked his conscience. He joined what became The Revolutionary Communist Party of Britain (Marxist Leninist), one of the very few political parties throughout the world that continued to support Stalin. Charles became a staunch member of its cultural committee.

Gradually Charles' fantasies about plotting revolution became his reality: he was spiralling into schizophrenia. There is little doubt that given the causes that Charles espoused and the activities he was engaged in, he would have been under the watchful eyes of Special Branch. However, when Charles visited me once and stressed that he needed to change the lock on the room because the police were in hot pursuit, I recognised the

warning signs of paranoia. Charles' inexorable descent into mental illness had begun. It became a long and dreadful journey.

What do I make of my parents as I reflect after all these years? For most of my life I have felt angry with my father, for whom I never developed any sort of attachment, but much more forgiving of my mother on whom I was far too dependent while I was growing up. However, she was never a warm and tactile mother. Despite being an untidy person, my mother preferred to take on the household chores herself, rather than provide a more disciplined structure in which we would have been required to do our share. This is ironic given her intellectual ability.

My father was far too absorbed in his own anxieties to provide any real time for his children. You never knew when the next volcano would erupt and what might trigger it. We never went on any outings just with him. He never threw a ball with us or took us fishing. Although he had a practical mindset, he never found time to pass on his skills to his children, which is why we are all hopelessly impractical. Whilst my mother always insisted on short holidays — normally in Cornwall — there is only one occasion I can recall when my father came with us and then only for a couple of days. He never liked being outside the comfort zone of his own home.

Today I take a more nuanced view of my parents. They were victims of the impoverished, post-war period, in which we grew up, and of their own backgrounds and circumstances. I am sure that they were trying to do the best they could. There was a certain unworldly eccentricity about them, which was admirable.

After years of reflection in prison, I have now come to believe that my parents were good people, but they were not good parents and they were responsible for my emotional insecurity, which has been a major part of my life, but which has also provided me with a drive and determination to succeed, as well as being the trigger for my self-destruction.

My parents would be deeply upset to see me here in prison today but, in their own inimitable way, they would accept it.