Overture

'If I get this right, Tess Rampling will definitely want to have sex with me.' The idea slouches through my fifteen-year-old brain and disappears before I've had time to ask it exactly why a sixth-former of Rampling's cosmic beauty would want to have sex with a GCSE pit-sniffer like me.

I take Rick Astley's 'Never Gonna Give You Up' out of its paper bag and gaze at his pink face. 'Oh dear, Rick Astley, you're not "gonna" like this. You really have no idea what's about to happen to you.' Gently, I lift the lid of Great-Auntie Trudy's wooden gramophone to reveal the record turntable within.

The gramophone used to be in Trudy's bedroom, and when I was chin-high to its wooden lid (about four years old) we would happily listen to Terry Wogan on Radio 2 while she brushed her hair and 'put her face on'. Or sometimes, she'd play a favourite LP like the soundtrack to *The King and I*. The first track of that record was called 'Overture' and seemed to be a non-singing medley of some of the other songs. I liked the 'Overture': a friendly invitation and a promise of what was to come. Some of the best tunes were missing, but I guessed that was to keep them as a surprise.

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It's not big, my room. The gramophone is among the wooden hand-me-downs that sprout from the walls and nearly meet in the middle. Here's a chest of drawers and a little bookshelf that Mum gave me recently. Here's the wardrobe that never yielded to Narnia no matter how faithfully I reached for the cold air.

The bedroom walls are pale green: pock-marked with Blu-Tack scars from sci-fi posters now replaced with Van Gogh prints from Woolworths. They have 'Vincent' written under them in swirly writing. Recently, and with great solemnity, I took down the huge *Empire Strikes Back* poster – the picture of Darth Vader offering his hand to Luke. 'Come with me,' he says to his defeated son.

There's a Greenpeace picture of a boat cleaning a polluted sea by magically drawing a rainbow in its wake. I get the point it's trying to make, but even I can see the thing has all the truth and beauty of Lester Piggott narrating his tax return. Anyway, it's there to show that I mind about the ozone layer or something. Similarly, there's a line drawing of a defiant-looking African boy against a horizontal tricolour which I vaguely associate with the ANC. In the impossible event that Tess Rampling ever sets foot in this room, she will instantly see that a) I disapprove of apartheid; b) I disapprove of pollution; and c) I now prefer post-impressionists to *Star Wars*. The first two parts are even true.

We live next door to RAF Coningsby. They've finally supplied us with double glazing to make up for the familiar scream of the Tornados. The condensation I used to draw pictures in now occurs between the panes rather than on the inside, like an itch you can't scratch. Thanks, lads. Still, the room retains its own unique and homely smell which I really like. It will be many years before someone points out that this smell has a name: 'damp'. Occasionally my

step-dad Derek loses an argument about turning on the central heating and the smell turns into what I would call the equally comforting 'grilled dust'.

Here, in 1987, it feels wrong to be using the gramophone in an enterprise even vaguely connected with sex, like trying to make erotic art out of Fuzzy-Felt. But then, extreme measures are sometimes necessary when it comes to the sublime person of Tess Rampling. Apart from being the Most Beautiful Girl Who Ever Smiled and Frowned at the Same Time and Tossed Her Auburn Hair Out of Her All-Forgiving, World-Comprehending Eyes, Tess is also two years above me at school and therefore a figure of demoralising maturity. I see her walking between classes, having intellectual-sounding conversations with male teachers who look very pleased to be able to help. I want to help her too. My God, I want to help her brains out. I want to help her like we just invented helping.

I take the shiny record from its sleeve and savour the smell of the vinyl even though I dislike this song with some energy. There was a nervous moment in Woolworths when I picked it up for the first time to check the back of the sleeve: 'Please let the B-side be just an instrumental. Surely it's just an instrumental!' And lo – Stock, Aitken & Waterman did not let me down. I impale 'Never Gonna Give You Up' on the central upright of the record player and the B-side wobbles down onto the turntable. This is sweet. Tess Rampling is surely going to want to have sex with me when she sees the way I stick it to Rick Astley.

What I'm doing here in my teenage bedroom is planning an end-of-term, school-hall sketch show. My form teacher, Mrs Slater, says that the correct term is 'revue', but I don't much like the word: it sounds square and not something

you would see on the telly. I can't imagine Rik Mayall saying 'revue'. At a pinch, Stephen Fry might say it, but there are limits to how much I get to copy Stephen Fry without attracting peer group ridicule. Bad enough that I've started to pronounce 'grass' to rhyme like a southern 'arse' rather than a native Lincolnshire 'lass'. No, it's a sketch show. I write a dozen sketches, cast myself in all the best parts, with friends taking up the feed-line slack, and then put on a show in the main hall at lunchtime. The ostensible value of this is to encourage team-spiritedness and raise money for charity. The actual reason, of course, is to get Tess Rampling to want to have sex with me.

The sketches this time include 'The Price is Slight' (TV game-show parody), 'Glue Peter' (children's TV show parody), 'The GAY-Team' (parody of children's TV action drama, also apparently watched by American adults) and, of course, my lethal take on 'Never Gonna Give You Up' in which I will mock Rick Astley's dancing while lip-synching to rewritten lyrics of the song which I'm about to pre-record over the instrumental.

Some of these sketches are less than fully formed, both technically and morally. 'The GAY-Team', for example, is currently no more than the desire for four of us to jump out in front of the curtain in Hawaiian shirts, brandishing hairdryers. What happens after that is currently anyone's guess, but I'm pretty sure I'm going to draw the line at doing 'the gay voice'. I suspect the other boys in the team will want to do 'the gay voice', but in my sophisticated opinion, doing 'the gay voice' has no place in the comedy of 1987, even in Lincolnshire where literally no one is meant to be gay.

Obviously I will get Matthew Finney to 'black up' to play B. A. Baracus. That's different. Finney is very short and even weedier than me. So he really only has to stand there wearing

dark-brown make-up and say 'Murdoch, you crazy fool' or possibly 'Murdoch, you crazy homosexual' and we're on to a winner. I see no reason why this might cause offence: although it's possible that there are gay people in Lincolnshire, it is not possible that anyone is black. Apart from my brother's friend, 'black Steve'. (I mean, there are a lot of Steves so what *on earth* else could they call him?) And black Steve won't be watching, so obviously there's no problem.

I look out of the bedroom window and think about Matthew Finney. I foresee that Finney will resist the make-up for some reason. Probably because he's a shocking little racist who didn't even go on the Drama trip to see *Woza Albert!* Yes, that's it. I turn from the window and start to punch an invisible Finney in the face for being such a racist. 'No, you don't like that, do you, Finney? You can dish it out but you can't take it!' I get into quite an involved fight with Finney, who is surprisingly agile and keeps head-butting me in the ear which is really annoying. He throws me to the ground and grabs me by the throat. Desperate for breath, I seize an old Rubik's Cube from under the bed and gash Finney in the eye with an unsolved corner. He reels back and –

Mum knocks on the door and pops her head round. 'Everything all right?'

It's good that she's started knocking, but she hasn't yet got into the habit of waiting for an answer.

I look at her from the floor, panting and slightly aglow. 'Yeah, fine thanks.'

'I heard . . . choking sounds.'

'Yeah, Matthew Finney was trying to strangle me.'

'Righto.' She adopts a relaxed smile and it takes her half a second to scan the room for evidence of actual danger as opposed to 'Robert doing that thing he does'. She has a word for it.

'Pretending?'

'Yup.'

She nods and makes to leave, and then: 'Fish fingers!'

'Brill.'

She glances at the Rubik's Cube I'm still holding and then goes, closing the door slightly too casually.

Buoyed by the thought of fish fingers for tea and grateful that this was a mere 'pretending-intrusion' rather than a full-scale 'wank-intrusion', I get up and turn back to the gramophone.

It can't be easy for Mum, I think. Pretending is not Normal. Normal boys have real fights, not pretend fights. Nor are they virgins at fifteen. Nor do they write comedy sketches or keep a diary. And if they did keep a diary, they probably wouldn't write things like:

> Slater said in MS today [Media Studies] that Wogan is going to be on 3 nights a week instead of 1. I said 'he must be feeling under-exposed'. She really laughed but no one else did. They think I'm just up her arse. Tess didn't hear it, obviously. Thing is – if he does it 3 nights a week he might be bored of it by the time I'm famous so I get to be interviewed by Anneka fucking Rice or something. I'm joking but it's a real worry.
>
> Massive weird thing. Last night Mum was going out and coz I was going to be left alone with Derek, everything was suddenly horrible. She asked me why I looked all massively sad and I said 'nothing' for a bit and then completely lost it and cried my eyes out like a baby. Like a fucking BABY. We went in here and she gave me a cuddle, rocking me sort of from side to side and it was boring but also good really. She asked me again and I just said

> I didn't want her to go and Derek would just be watching his nature programmes about clubbing baby seals to death and that it was stupid of me and not to worry and all that jazz. She went out anyway but Christ knows why I went so mental.

I load a portable tape recorder with a blank cassette and press 'Play', waiting for the leading hiss to turn into the regular hiss, then 'Stop'. If I'm honest, I can't be sure if the recording quality of a boy singing in his bedroom over the instrumental version of a single played through a 1960s gramophone into the tiny external microphone of a cheap tape recorder and then eventually played through the speakers of a cuboid school hall is going to be – pristine. Neither, if I gave it a moment's thought, am I necessarily as good a singer as the international recording star Rick Astley, especially with my zero interest in singing and my recently broken voice which I still can't get the hang of. Why does it have to be so fucking *deep*? Dad's fault. Still, what I lack in technical expertise will, I feel sure, be more than made up for by stupid dancing. Everyone likes my stupid dancing. And then there's the new lyrics which have an undeniable verve, if not sophistication. I look at the chorus:

First I'm gonna swing my hands
Then I'm gonna twist my feet
Then I'm gonna turn around:
I'm quiff-ey!

Then I'm gonna burst my zits
Then I'm gonna shake my bits
Like I've got the shits:
I'm getting a stiff-ey.

I frown at these last two lines. I mean, it's brilliant – obviously it's all brilliant – but I just worry a little that the logic of having the shits and getting a stiffy doesn't really follow. Am I saying that Rick Astley is aroused by diarrhoea? Is that *really* what I want to say? But no, surely it's the way that he shakes his 'bits' that makes him look like he's 'got the shits' and his 'stiffy' is the effect produced by the whole performance. That's fine then. I press 'Pause' and then 'Play' and 'Record' on the cassette player. There again, 'shits' is going to be quite difficult to get past Mrs Slater. What could Rick Astley have, if not the shits? Wits, mits, fits, pits – PITS! 'Then I'm gonna smell my pits'. There's definitely a move he does in the video involving one arm being raised above his head in a sort of half-hearted circle that I could easily turn into a pit-sniff. 'Then I'm gonna sniff my pits.' Excellent. And that should become the second line, moving 'bits' down to line three so that it's the shaking of his bits that gives him the stiffy. Perfect.

I shove a can of Insignia up my INXS T-shirt and spray my own pits. Looking in the mirror, I wonder how long it will be before I need the brand-matching shaving foam and aftershave. Does Tess Rampling approve of Insignia? She surely doesn't approve of Rick Astley, but what if she doesn't like the way I smell? If she ever gets close enough to smell me. What if she sees the show and thinks it's crap? What if she doesn't even come? The appalling possibility sinks in. I look carefully in the mirror to see what happens to my face when an appalling possibility sinks in. Oh, it does that.

It's fine. There's the funny dance. When in doubt, do a funny dance. I already feel sorry for Mum who's going to have to listen to 'Never Gonna Give You Up' coming from behind this door about seventy-four times as I practise the dance. First, the words. I clear my throat, set the

record turning and release the Pause button on the tape. This needs to be good. This needs to be better than it needs to be.

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The dance isn't perfect, but I get through it just fine. Despite all the practice, this is the first time I've done it from start to finish without stopping. Moments before I went out on stage, someone in the wings had said, 'We reckon about seven million viewers.' I see. I wonder if Tess Rampling is one of them. The year is 2009 and this is *Let's Dance for Comic Relief*. I've just done my version of the audition scene from the eighties movie *Flashdance*.

Tall, Welsh and handsome, the presenter Steve Jones beckons me over and says, 'I'm almost speechless, what the hell just happened?'

'Something,' I say, trying to catch my breath, 'very intense.' Co-presenter Claudia Winkleman randomly says, 'I actually love you.' The audience are still making a huge racket. Right . . . so it went better than I thought. Be cool. Steve Jones turns to the judges. Anton Du Beke says, 'It's a complete thing of beauty.' Baby Spice Emma Bunton says she thinks I must be a trained dancer. That leaves Michael McIntyre, whom for some reason I identify as a threat. Naturally, I lean an elbow on Steve Jones's shoulder and glare at McIntyre as if I'm about to kill him. I imagine this looks like Han Solo leaning against Chewie, except this is Han Solo in a black leotard with a massive curly wig. Michael blinks and then starts saying something about how he used to have a French girlfriend. The audience likes this, so I soften up and try to give him a sweet smile. I cross my hands over my crotch: now that the dance is over and I've dropped the lunatic aggression, I'm suddenly just a

bloke dressed as a woman. Even if Tess Rampling isn't watching, I know that Dad is.

McIntyre has been listening to the audience too and senses that he's under-doing it. He ends with a shower of compliments and I nod gratefully to him, even though part of me still wants to head-butt him in the ear à la Matthew Finney. This is, after all, a charity event. So it's no time to be 'minty'. I had a 'minty moment' earlier which I now regret.

The term 'minty' is used for that precious moment in the life of an actor where he or she is in possession of a complaint about the way they feel they're being treated but haven't yet expressed that complaint. Try it now: keep your mouth closed while running your tongue over your front teeth – savouring that *minty* freshness – while rolling your eyes at the ceiling with long-suffering patience. It's safe to try this at home, but I wouldn't recommend doing it in public or you may be mistaken for Trevor Eve.

I was as frightened before the dance as I feel shy now. Michael gets cartoon super-aggression; the make-up artist just got passive-aggression. Either way, the solution, apparently, was aggression.

Earlier, in the make-up room, Roxy had driven another hairpin through the curly wig and the sensation was like a Smurf ice-skating on my scalp. She might as well have been using a staple-gun. 'I think it's probably quite well fixed on now,' I say as I try to relax my grip on the arms of the make-up chair, 'you can probably stop now, if you like.'

'No, darling, just need a few more,' she says. I've known Roxy, the TV make-up lady, for about eight minutes and this isn't going well. Young, distracted and phenomenally good-looking, she's the kind of girl who wouldn't have

given me the time of day at school. She doesn't look like Tess, but she has a Tess-like aura. I try not to hold this against her, despite the fact that she keeps stabbing me in the head. She's blithely reaching for another kirby grip and I suddenly know what it's going to be like when we have androids for dentists.

'It's just – it's on so tight already that I've got a massive headache. I'm a bit worried that if my head hurts this much I won't be able to remember the dance.' Roxy is only half listening. In the next chair along, Les Dennis is discussing the terms of his mortgage in bitter detail. Another pin makes a forced landing into the back of my neck, strafing three layers of skin on the way. The room judders. 'The thing is, Rocky –'

'Roxy.'

'Yeah, the thing is, I know it's a big wig, but I'm really, really sure that you can give it a rest with the pins now.'

Ooh, that came out a bit minty.

The tone I'm aiming for is suave and avuncular, a professional gravitas which may or may not be undermined by the fact that I am currently wearing a sparkly leotard and a padded bra. I've also attracted some attention. Les Dennis has broken off from his mortgage monologue and sips his coffee in the mirror with studied nonchalance.

Roxy hesitates. 'If it falls off during the dance, I'll get the sack.'

'I promise you it won't fall off. Even if it did, I will make sure that everyone knows that it was my fault and I promise you won't get the sack.'

The fear, the adrenaline, the headache, the thing the bra is doing to my chest and the thing the 'dancer's support garment' is doing to my testicles all contribute to the following: 'I promise it won't fall off. I swear *on the grave of my dead mother* that it won't fall off.'

I say it with enough emphasis to make half a joke of it, but I know that this is a low move. In any argument, the 'dead mum' card is the one you play as a last resort. It doesn't change anyone's mind, but it usually embarrasses them into a more receptive mood. This is cheap. I want the dance to go well, but it's always important to remember that there's a very fine line between being a perfectionist and being a minty fuckwit.

I cross one bare leg over the other. Roxy obviously thinks I'm nuts. 'OK, Robert, I won't put any more in and I'll take a couple of the top ones out.' She says this loudly and slowly, as if to an old geezer in a care home who just complained about the exact number of baked beans on his toast. An old geezer in a leotard. 'That would be great, thanks.' I look across at Les Dennis. He gives me a smile and a wink, which is nice of him but now I feel even worse.

Not long after, I'm in the back seat of a car on the way home from Ealing Studios. I didn't forget the *Flashdance* routine. And twenty-two years earlier, I didn't forget the Rick Astley one either.

I check my phone: on Twitter, a man who used to be very important to me has said something kind. And I have a voicemail from another man who is even more important who has been even kinder. These two messages will change things, and my reaction to them informs this book. But the journey will be a slow one. That night, I'll get back to the flat to find a bunch of friends who came round to watch the show with my wife Abigail, who is pregnant with our first daughter. And after everyone has left and Abbie has gone to bed, I'll sit in our little garden and drink another two bottles of red wine and smoke about thirty Marlboro Lights. Tomorrow I'll do something similar – but in the pub in the middle of the day. This behaviour won't change when

our daughter is born, and the moment will come when Abbie will tell me about these months and say as she looks at me steadily: 'You let me down.'

I don't know what I'm doing. I haven't got the first clue what I'm doing. In the car, the London streetlights liquefy as I cry all the way home. I think of my fifteen-year-old self in his bedroom practising that other dance in what feels like that other lifetime.

15: Bit self-indulgent, isn't it?
43: What?
15: This. You, talking to yourself.
43: You were expecting to grow out of it?
15: I wasn't 'expecting' anything. Christ.
(*Pause*)
43: Can you please stop that?
15: Stop what?
43: Looking at my hair. It happens.
15: Sorry. Just a bit of a shock. I mean, what the fuck –
43: It just fell out, OK?
15: Right.
43: Look, there's good news, all right? I came to give you the good news.
15: Like Jesus?
43: If you like.
15: Like Jesus with a massive bald patch?
43: Mate, get over it. I have.
15: Really?
43: No, not really. But look, I'm a TV star!
15: Oh my God.
43: Good, isn't it?
15: No, I mean 'Oh my God – what a penis'.
43: Well –

15: Hark at cunty. 'My name's Robert Webb and I'm a TV star!' Is that how you talk?
43: Look, if you're just going to be horrible –
15: How big?
43: What?
15: How big a star?
43: Erm, well, I don't really think about it in those terms.
15: Like fuck you don't. Bigger than John Cleese?
43: No.
15: Bigger than Rik Mayall?
43: Er, no, not really.
15: Well, it doesn't sound very fucking –
43: Nigel Planer.
15: What?
43: I'm about as famous as Nigel Planer, if you must.
15: (*Considers this*) Right. Well, I suppose that's –
43: Actually, Rik Mayall didn't have a sketch show, so –
15: Yes he did! He was in *A Kick Up the Eighties*.
43: Oh yeah, I forgot that.
15: You FORGOT *A Kick Up the Eighties*!?
43: Look, a lot's happened, all right? A lot of good things. I'm married with two children.
15: Oh, OK.
43: You pleased?
15: Yeah, course I'm pleased. I mean, I get to have sex at least twice, right?
43: Well, yes, that's one way of looking at it.
15: Oh, Mr Mature, Mr Fucking VICTOR MATURE isn't bothered about all the sex. I suppose you have sex all the time.

43: No, not really. I suppose 21 might turn up later; he's at it constantly.
15: I like the sound of 21.
43: I think he's a bit of a wanker.
15: Sounds like he does less wanking than you.
43: Right, I'm going.
15: No, sorry, hang on. Sorry.
(*Pause*)
15: I like your accent.
43: My accent?
15: You sound quite posh.
43: Ah yes. Well, that was your idea. You want to sound like Stephen Fry, don't you?
15: What's wrong with that?
43: Nothing. I mean it's a bit –
15: Look, I just don't want to sound like fucking Dad, all right? I want to be the opposite of Dad.
43: You've just said two different things and the second one is impossible.
15: Worth a try.
43: Waste of time. Close your eyes and don't think of a pink elephant.
15: What?
43: Close your eyes and don't think of a pink elephant.
15: OK . . . (*Closes eyes*)
43: What are you thinking of?
15: A pink elephant.
43: You've got – you can open your eyes now – you've got this idea of Dad as an abrasive northern male with an over-developed sense of adventure who takes women for granted and drinks too much. And you're about to spend twenty-five years trying to be 'not that'.

15: So?
43: So you're screwed.
15: So I should just give in and be a macho bullshit arsehole like other blokes.
43: Other blokes aren't all like that. Listen, a few years ago, I did this charity dance thing on TV and it went really well. Lots of people said kind things but there were two messages that really mattered. One was from Stephen Fry and the other was from Dad. It was the one from Dad that was the most important by a long way. You want his approval and you're much more like him than you th –
15: What did Mum say?
43: What?
15: This dance thing. What did Mum say?
43: Mum, she . . .
15: She liked it too, right?
(*Pause*)
43: Yes.
(*15 looks at 43*)
15: What's the matter?

A year or so before *Let's Dance*, I'm driving a car for the first time since getting married. It's a smart navy-blue Audi A3, given to Abigail by her dad. I'm alone but in a mysteriously good mood. What, I wonder, has gone so right? Is it the free car? The free car certainly helps. Abbie's dad had just retired and says he doesn't need it any more. Yes, the free car is a bit of all right; an absurdly big engine for a little car and much sportier than the second-hand Datsun Cherry ('Chesney') that I blew my inheritance on when I was seventeen. But no, it isn't that. What is it? What's that noise?

Tap. Aaah . . . there you are. Abbie and I have been married for a while but this is the first time I've driven a car whilst wearing a wedding ring. Every time I change gear I hear the tap of the ring on the gearstick. And suddenly I'm seven again and sitting on the back seat, and Mum is driving us between the golf club where my grandparents (and Auntie Trudy) work in the kitchen and our new bungalow in the next village. It's a journey we make many times a week and that *tap* is one of the happiest sounds of childhood. It means that I'm alone with Mum.

'Quiet boy', 'painfully shy', 'you never know he's there': these are some of the phrases I catch grown-ups using when they talk about me. But not here, not in the car with Mum. And definitely not when 'Sailing' by Rod Stewart comes crackling over the MW radio. The gusto of our sing-a-long is matched only by the cheerful lousiness of my mother's driving.

'We are SAAAAILING' (tap, second gear), 'we are SAAAAILING' (tap, into third), 'cross the WAAAATER, tooo the SEEEA' (tap, stall, as she tries to take a left turn), 'we are sail –' (tap, handbrake, ignition), 'we are s –' (tap, ignition, choke, window-wipers), 'to be NEEEAR you' (triumphant re-start, cancel window-wipers, tap, crunch into first), 'to be FREEE!'.

I like it here. There are no men, and there are no other boys. I don't seem to be very good at being a boy and I'm afraid of men.

One man in particular.

'Hello, boy, only Dad. You're probably already in the pub. I watched y'dance on the box. Your, erm Comic Relief . . . spectacular. Huh! Bloody well done, mate. Bloody well done. I saw you being interviewed and worrying what I'd think. Dressed like that. Cobblers, mate! You looked *good*! You looked bloody marvellous, on that stage. I couldn't

stop laughing. I'm proud of you, boy. I probably don't say it enough. You know me, silly old sod, I go me own way and I'll probably die on me own. Haha. [*brief pause*] Proud of you, Rob. [*another pause*] I'm sorry I wasn't much of a family man when you was a little boy. Couldn't help it, mate; couldn't help it. [*voice cracking*] All right, boy, I'll let you go. Have a pint for me. You know how I feel about you. Cheerio, boy. Cheerio.'

I didn't call him back. When I first heard that message, I didn't know what to do.

I know what to do now. Come with me.

ACT ONE

1
Boys Can't Get Enough of Dad

> 'What is a history teacher? He's someone who teaches mistakes.'
>
> Graham Swift, *Waterland*

'Pass it to Webb!' shouts Pete Garvey, 'Webb hasn't had a kick yet!' It's 1984 and this is the first Games lesson at grammar school. Pete has known me for nearly a week and although it was kind of him to say 'pass it to Webb', he cannot know that he is making me, at best, a complicated offer.

He doesn't know what happens when someone tries to pass me a football or what happens when I try to kick one. He comes from a different primary school and so wasn't there when I was consistently the second-to-last boy to be picked for any team; the last being Mark Sharpe, who had cerebral palsy. No, Pete (or rather 'Garvey' because at this school girls keep their given names while boys won't hear theirs again for years) is a kindly Top Male who wants to help. I wish he didn't.

'Why, you'll be charging about like Bryan Robson!' Auntie Trudy had said once she'd finished sewing 'Webb' labels into my new kit. The severity of the 'Webb' was at odds with the loving neatness of her stitches. Bryan Robson, I think. Yes, I've heard of that one. And Luther Blissett: that's another one. What teams do they play for? England.

I'll just say they play for England and pretend I'm making a joke. And this top – blue with a white collar – what team is that? Definitely not England. Everton, then? Newcastle Rovers? Denmark?

As it happens, I'm not even wearing the top. It's a warm afternoon in early September and the Games teacher, Mr Leighton, has divided us into 'shirts' and 'skins'; i.e. the boys on the skins team are topless. Great. What happened to coloured armbands? What happened to those coloured sash things that you wore over one shoulder at junior school to show what team you were on? No, just shorts and boots now, apparently. It's all a bit fucking Hitler Youth if you ask me. I'm running around with my arms weirdly by my sides so that my ribs don't stick out so much. Aged eleven, my body makes an average garden rake look like it just had a great Christmas and could do with a nap.

It's a long pass and I welcome the sight of the ball arching towards me in the same way that a quadriplegic nudist covered in jam welcomes the sight of a hornet. The ball is going to take a horribly long time to arrive because I have 'found a space'. This is the football skill at which I excel. Oh, I can 'find a space' all right. Show me an empty patch of games field and I'll stand in it. Or rather, I'll hop around in it, looking desperately alert. My alertness is based on the knowledge that, at any moment, the empty patch could suddenly close up and fill with other players; that I might be made to come into contact with a football. I usually manage to avoid this. When the empty patch moves, I move.

But today my negative-space triangulation has gone wrong and I've found not just a 'space' but a 'great space'. The ball is over halfway towards me and I note wretchedly that it's an excellent pass. The bloody thing is going to drop at my feet like a gatepost swinging onto a latch. I have just enough time to look left and right as if checking

for an interception from an opposing player. Actually, I'm looking left and right in the *frantic hope* of an interception from an opposing player. But no. No one is near enough. It's just me, the ball, the good faith of Pete Garvey, and everyone watching.

Most of my concentration goes into fighting the urge to put my arms up to protect my nipples. Simultaneously, I extend my right foot up and forward in an attempt to trap the ball, which of course bounces straight under it and goes off the pitch. To complete the demonstration, I lose my balance and fall on my arse.

The consolation of this is that while getting up I can make sure I get muddy knees like the other boys. This will save me the usual bit of admin where I fall onto them deliberately when no one is looking. The general laughter isn't especially cruel and Garvey yells, 'Football isn't really your game, is it, Webby?' I muster the Wildean response 'Not really!' and notice the sound came through my nose. It's his kindness that makes me nearly cry. Obviously I do nothing of the sort. That would be like showing an interest in poetry or getting a stiffy in the showers.

Communal showering is a fresh hell that concludes every Games lesson the way an awkward exchange of details concludes a car crash. At home, the bathroom door is always locked and, 'bath night' aside, I never change the top half and bottom half of me at the same time. I am, in short, a never-nude. In the changing room, I just about get from the bench to the shower without having a heart attack, watching my bare feet step daintily over the stud-punctured turf clods on the tiled floor. I also manage not to physically flinch at the echoed shouts from my fellow eleven-year-olds and the acrid smell of Ralgex and Right Guard which some of them are optimistically wafting about. I'm very proud of the fine sprinkling of pubic hairs I've managed to grow,

although that area in general looks like the head of a ninety-year-old woman recently returned from a perm too many at the hairdresser's. The hairs keep a discrete distance from each other and the essential baldness beneath catches the light. We are all, of course, surreptitiously checking each other out. I'm relieved to find that I have neither a small penis nor an unsettlingly large one. But in general I'm hopelessly skinny and I'm still recovering from the No. 2 hit that year, 'So Macho!', in which Sinitta made her feelings about what was required very clear: 'I don't want no seven stone weakling / Or a boy who thinks he's a girl . . .'

On the field, following another mortifying screw-up, Mr Leighton had approached for a bit of referee/Games coach banter: 'Good gracious me, Webb. Did your mother drop you on your head when you were a small child?' He delivers this with the well-practised air of a teacher's catchphrase and his good humour beams out of him. It's actually the friendliest thing I've heard all week. I smile back.

'But then, if she did, you probably wouldn't remember!' he adds, supplying the punchline which I will spend the next hour wishing I'd thought of.

As it happens, Mr Leighton, I do remember. Nobody dropped me on my head, but I did fall down a flight of stairs. As earliest childhood memories go, this is satisfyingly dramatic. My mother was there at the bottom and so was my father, your ex-pupil, Paul – the other Webb. The one who was very good at football, as well as all the other sports you taught him.

Not that Dad ever boasted about that kind of thing. One of the good things I can say about him is that he was no show-off. And there are plenty of other good things to say about Paul Webb at his best. But first, dear reader, I think it's about time we had a look at the place I've so far

managed to avoid, the place where we find Paul Webb, to put it mildly, not at his best. Time to go to the beginning.

'Purple,' I thought, as I bounced down the last few steps. It's unlikely that I actually *said* 'purple' – that would have been madly precocious for a two-year-old. And anyway, I wouldn't have had time to say 'purple' because I was otherwise occupied screaming the house down. It's the stairs that were purple, you see: hard, steep, and with a fraying carpet of purple. On the way down I'd had a pretty good look at them, as well as a pretty good feel of them as they made contact in rapid succession with my knees, elbows and head. They fanned round in segments at the bottom, dropping me neatly into the living room where Mum instantly materialised to scoop me up. Consoling, checking for cuts or breaks, she was making the kind of sympathetic noises I would make if my own two-year-old fell down a flight of stairs. I was soon aware of another noise, though, the noise Dad was making. He was laughing. 'Poor old boy,' he said, chortling through his moustache, 'poor old boy, ha ha ha.'

Seventeen years later, I put a suitcase down in the same room and notice the stairs have been re-carpeted: they're now a kind of old-folks-home blue. Delia, the woman that Dad painfully refers to as his 'lady-friend', catches my look.

'I suppose coming back here must bring back some memories,' she says carefully. I don't mind Delia. Dad had various 'lady-friends' while still married to my mum, but Delia wasn't one of them. That didn't stop my mother constantly referring to her as 'Delilah' and noting she was always getting lipstick on her teeth.

'I remember falling down those stairs when I was two,' I say.

'Oh dear,' says Delia, alarmed. And then, 'How do you know you were two?'

'I must have asked Mum about it.'

The mention of my mother is unfair. It's like reminding Gok Wan that I used to hang out with Prince. Delia inspects her shoes for a second, but then looks up with a kind smile.

Dad bustles through and has been listening. 'I don't remember the stairs, boy,' he says cheerfully.

'No.'

'I was probably pissed!'

'Yes.'

'Ha ha ha. Well, you're 'ome again now, mate.'

Delia isn't sure if this last remark is the diplomatic success Dad seems to think it is. She smiles again. I try not to look at her teeth.

'Yeah,' I say.

The house was called Slieve Moyne and was my first home as a staircase-bopping toddler, and then my third home as an oh-so-watchful young man in his late teens. What happened in between is a happy story with a sad ending, or, from where I'm typing, a sad middle with a happy present. But let's not get ahead of ourselves.

Lincolnshire is a large and largely ignored county on the east coast of England, sufficiently far north to be considered Northern, but somehow not Professionally Northern in the manner of, say, Yorkshire or Tyneside. From where I grew up, it takes about an hour to get to a major road, the A1 – also known as 'the Lincolnshire bypass' – and it's this sense of isolation that gives the place some of its character and beauty, as well as some of its problems.

Slieve Moyne was in the village of Woodhall Spa. Growing up, I was given the impression that Woodhall was one of the 'nicer' villages in the area. Certainly the

Conservative Club, the Golf Club, the Tea House in the Woods and the Dower House Hotel – a stately procession of mock-Tudor buildings with horse-brassy fireplaces – lend the place an impregnable air of Tory respectability. In my first few years, I thought this was not just desirable but typical. England was the most normal part of Britain, Lincs the most normal part of England and Woodhall the most normal part of Lincs. In a few years, I would think of the place as Tatooine, the planet Luke Skywalker imagines to be furthest from the bright centre of the universe. But for now, it *was* the universe and one with which I was perfectly content. There was just one problem. When we first meet Luke on Tatooine, he has an issue with his mysteriously absent father. My father, on the other hand, was all too present. And his name might as well have been Darth Vader. Actually it was Paul. It's a silly comparison of course. Dark Lords of the Sith aren't constantly wasted.

'You shouldn'ta come back, Obi-Man! [*hic*] When last we met, I wuz just an old boy [*belch*] Now I'm the master and you're a fucky old bastard. Oh bollocks, I just cut me thumb off. Bloody light sabre needs a new fuse.'

Here we go then. It's the mid 1970s and I live with Mum, Darth and my two older brothers Mark and Andrew.

Imagine a child's drawing of a house. This one would show three bedrooms upstairs, the little one with Rupert the Bear wallpaper for me, the middle one for the grown-ups and the one at the other end containing Mark and Andrew wearing denim waistcoats and walloping each other with skateboards (because that's what Big Brothers do). There is smoke coming out of the chimney, as it should in all drawings of this kind; in this case provided by Darth holding double pages of the *Daily Mail* against the fireplace to encourage the flames. Sometimes he gets distracted while

doing this because he's shouting at James Callaghan on TV, and the paper catches fire. He has to throw the lot into the fireplace, which of course sets fire to the chimney.

He has laid the fire using the logs and sticks that he chopped up with the chainsaw left leaning against the back door, the one he uses for his job as a woodsman on the local estate (my Daddy is a woodcutter). The Mummy will be in the tiny kitchen, standing over an electric hob (because that's what Mummies do) and stirring Burdall's Gravy Salt into a saucepan of brown liquid.

It's a static picture, of course, so we can't see that the Mummy's hands are shaking because she knows that the Daddy has spent all afternoon in the pub and has come home in one of his 'tempers' (because that's what Daddies do). If, during tea, one of the Big Brothers speaks with his mouth full or puts his elbows on the table, the Daddy has been known to knock him clean off his chair. The Mummy will start shouting at the Daddy about this, but of course she can't shout as loud as the Daddy. No one can shout as loud as the Daddy or is as strong as the Daddy which is why the Daddy is in charge. The Little Brother will start crying at this point and will most likely be told to shut up by the Big Brothers who are themselves trying not to cry because that's another thing that they've learned doesn't go down well with the Daddy.

On the rare occasions the subject of Dad's behaviour came up over the following years, the fixed view was that 'Robert got away with it' and that Mark and Andrew (six and five years older than me respectively) were mainly the ones in harm's way when Dad ran out of words. This in turn was held up to be some kind of hippy crèche compared to the treatment Dad received from his own father, Ron.

So I was lucky. Still, I remember the summer's day when I was watching the Six Million Dollar Man battling with

Sasquatch and the following moment I was being lifted an impossible number of feet into the air and thrashed several times around the legs with a pair of my own shorts that had been found conveniently nearby. Dropped back on the settee, I looked at those navy-blue shorts with a baffled sense of betrayal. They were *my* shorts. My navy-blue shorts with the picture of Woody Woodpecker on the pocket. And he's just hit me with them. Maybe in the seconds before I was watching Steve Austin, I'd spilt something or broken something. Maybe I'd got too close to the fire or the chainsaw. Who knows? Actually telling a child why he was being physically punished was somehow beneath the dignity of Paul's parenting style.

There are happy early memories from Slieve Moyne too, of course. Singing along with Mum whenever her beloved Berni Flint appeared on *Opportunity Knocks*; the thrilling day the household acquired its first Continental Quilt (a duvet), which my brothers and I immediately used as a fabric toboggan to slide down the purple stairs; playing in the snow, playing in the garden – all the sunlit childhood fun you'd expect from times when Dad was out.

And, to be fair, there were moments when he was affectionate. For example, if he was in a good mood he might crouch down in front of me, put his massive fist under my nose and say in a joke-threatening way, 'Smell that and tremble, boy!' For years I wasn't quite sure what this phrase meant – 'smellthatandtremble' – it was just a friendly noise that my dad made when he was trying to make me laugh. Oh, and I laughed all right. I mean, you would, wouldn't you?

But in general, I'm afraid my memories of those first five years in that house tend towards the nature of a bad dream. To avoid *real* bad dreams, the trick was to make sure there was a gap in my bedroom curtains. If those brown curtains

opposite my bed were closed shut, then the Curtain People appeared. They were the silhouettes of four or five grown-ups who would materialise in the curtains to have silent conversations about what kind of bad dream I was going to have that night. Leaving a gap deterred them for some reason, and some of the worst nightmares could be avoided. But the real problem was not avoiding the night-time imaginings but the daytime reality. Not the Phantom, but the Menace. And he was unavoidable.

A classic of this sci-fi/horror genre was the episode called 'Do an eight, do a two'. This family favourite has me, aged five, sat in the living room with a pencil and paper, being yelled at by Dad to 'DO AN EIGHT! DO A TWO!' It had come to his attention that I wasn't doing very well in my first year at primary school and that, in particular, I was unable to write the numbers '8' or '2'. Actually, I could write an '8', but I did it by drawing two circles, a habit which Mrs Morse of St Andrew's Church of England Primary School found to be lacking calligraphic rigour. Anyway, the rough transcript of 'Do an eight, do a two' goes like this.

Dad: DO AN EIGHT! DO A TWO!
Mum: He's trying! There's no point shouting!
Dad: JUST DO AN EIGHT!
(*Five-year-old, sobbing, does an eight with two circles*)
Dad: NOT LIKE THAT! DO A PROPER ONE!
(*Five-year-old dribbles snot onto the paper and does some kind of weird triangle*)
Dad: WHAT'S THAT MEANT TO BE? DO AN EIGHT!
Mark: Or a two!
(*Eleven-year-old Mark, desperate for any rare sign of approval from Dad, has joined in*)

Dad: WHY CAN'T YOU DO ONE? JUST DO AN EIGHT!

Mark: Or a two if you like, Robbie! Why not do a two, probably?

(*Mum takes five-year-old on her lap. Five-year-old thinks it's over*)

(*Comedy pause, titters from the studio audience*)

Mum: Try and do a two, darling.

(*Five-year-old freaks out. Then somehow manages a wobbly two*)

Dad: DO A TWO!

Mum: HE'S DONE A BLOODY TWO!

Dad: DO ANOTHER ONE!

Mark: Or an eight!

Next week on *At Home with the Pillocks*, Daddy Pillock cuts his own thumb off by going out to work with a chainsaw following an afternoon session in the pub. He gets most of it sewn back on. Mind that light sabre, Darth!

Where Andrew was during this fun-packed interlude, I don't know. Probably upstairs listening to Abba. I don't blame either Mum or Mark, by the way. You might be thinking 'this is *nothing*' compared to your own experiences with a domestic hard-case. Or maybe you're wondering how my mother put up with it for an instant. The truth is, we were all terribly afraid of him. In any case, Mum was probably just biding her time at that point. She had already made her plans. Before the end of that first school year, she divorced him and he moved out.

Hell hath no fury like an angry son with a book deal. Actually, I'm trying to be fair. I come not to bury Darth, but to understand him. If this account of my father's mistakes is starting to look sadistic, then I suppose the

make-over had better begin with my saying that Paul was no sadist. He laughed when I fell down the stairs because he was trying to teach me to treat pain lightly. It's a hard world and what you do with pain – if you're a man like Paul – is shrug it off. He was trying – ineptly and far too early – to 'toughen me up'. At a stretch I could even say that he was trying to protect me.

Poor old Dad: there he is with his three small boys and his insufficiently compliant wife; with his dangerous job and his lonely role as breadwinner (a role he insists on, is expected to insist on) and his drink problem which, by the standards of the day, is no problem at all. He is doing what he's supposed to do. He works hard, he drinks like it's going out of fashion (he has a point) and he keeps his boys in line. He can't quite keep his wife in line: when he puts up a Conservative election poster in their bedroom window in 1974, Mum puts a Labour one in the window of the room next door (my bedroom).

What a disappointment. Did she not promise in that church to 'obey' him? It's not a promise she can keep. Especially when he's broken a few promises of his own.

'It would be in the seventies, I'd say. And I told him I was going to Woodhall Spa and the bloke said, "Well, if you're going to Woodhall, look up Paul Webb. You won't find anyone better for drinking, fucking and fighting."'

This is said to me in 1992, when I'm nineteen and living with Dad again; when I've put my suitcase down and the purple stairs have turned blue. I'm in a local pub and I've been chatting to a random bloke of Dad's age who is pleased to tell me about Paul's reputation in the seventies. The man knows I'm Paul's son – everyone knows I'm Paul's son – and he doesn't seem to mind that Paul's 'reputation' signals to me a world of terrible shit. I listen, nodding. He offers

to buy me a drink: 'Anything for the son of Paul Webb!' I accept. And nod, and listen.

Dad's reputation for living the pub life in the *high style* was one with which I'd been acquainted for years before I met this guy. It was – at the risk of tabloid overkill – 'legendary'. And even the most dubious legends are seductive (see 'religion'). Listening to this idiot in the pub, drinking his booze, I feel strangely proud of Dad. At least he's famous. Famous for being a brawl-magnet, tit-prospector and piss-artist, but, y'know, at least he's . . . well, he's really made that his own, hasn't he? I mean, that's what all his friends and contemporaries were licensed to do, that's what many of them tried to do, but my dad did it best! So that, I suppose to myself, aged nineteen – four pints down, looking for a connection with my living parent – is sort of good, really, isn't it?

It's April. She died two years ago this week.

Dad was in a different pub tonight. I guess I'll mention this bloke to him as a funny story when I have another lager in front of the telly. As I wobble home, I find that I'm quite looking forward to that. And then, as I get closer to Slieve Moyne, I start to wonder. I don't wonder about telling him what I heard. I wonder about whether this is really going to be the father–son bonding exercise that I'm looking for. There's no doubt that he'll like it. We get on best when we're both drunk. Why wouldn't he like it? That was his whole fucking thing, wasn't it? Starting (and finishing) fights, cheating on Mum . . . Ooh, mind that drain in the pavement, it sticks out a bit. Hic. Here comes another car in the dark; oh, he's dipped his lights because he didn't want to dazzle a pedestrian. People are nice, really, aren't they? Some people. Wobble.

And there he is when I get in, watching the boxing on the TV.

'All right, Rob? Just watching a bit of boxing on the box. D'you 'ave a good night?'

'Yes thanks, mate!' I say this loudly and confidently: you have to be loud because years spent cutting down trees with no ear protection has rendered him half deaf. I say it confidently because that's how he wants me to be. It's how I want to be, too. Especially tonight.

'Who d'you see in the pub, boy?'

I help myself to a beer from his fridge and come into the living room, the 'do an eight, do a two' room, the Woody Woodpecker room. This is the room where Mum tried to protect us from him; the room where we weren't big enough to protect her from him. Our lovely Mum . . . it seems now that I'm moving quite slowly and deliberately. Vaguely, I wonder why this might be. And why is my heart thumping so hard? Probably the walk home.

He sits with one leg crossed over the other on one of the straight-backed dining-room chairs, an elbow resting on the table where we eat. (I see you've got your elbows on the table; didn't you used to have quite strong views about elbows and tables?) I move round him, looking at the neatly combed brown hair on his head, and take a seat opposite. He's forty-eight and still strong. Wiry and fast. But not as fast as he was. I look at him steadily while he watches the TV.

I say, 'Yeah, just the usuals – Will, Dave. Oh, and some bloke. He was talking about your reputation, back in the day.'

Dad keeps his eye on the fight. 'Who's this, boy?'

'Didn't catch a name. Sorry. He said that you used to be the most fun for drinking, fighting and fucking women. I suppose that would be around the time you were married to Mum.'

I feel the blood in every vein. His attention darts from the TV to my face. His body doesn't tense. Even if it did,

it would be hard to tell – his body is already a rusting corkscrew of guilt and anxiety. But, like all tough guys – or once-tough guys – he has an acute sense of another man coming to a simmer. He checks my expression. Yes, Robert is thinking about having a go. The boy doesn't quite know it, but he's about ready to kick off. Just like his brothers. Good old boy: typical Webb.

'No, no, no, mate,' he says, slowly uncrossing his leg, stubbing his fag out, 'I don't know about that.' He's embarrassed. Or he has the grace to look embarrassed. Or he has the sense to look embarrassed because he intuits correctly that if he shows the first sign of pride in this description, in his 'reputation', I'm going to climb across the table and try to kill him. I wait, looking at him still. I've never been in a fight in my life, but if I'm going to have one, it'll be this one. The Freudian Counterfuck, the Return of the Jedi, the Attack of the Implacable Hiccupping Teenager. It's a stupid idea but I'm hammered.

He turns back to the boxing. After a moment he says, 'Y'mum and me had some hard times, son . . .' I break my stare and follow his gaze to the boxing now. The pissed-up rage drains away in an instant. 'Hard times' is not just a blanket phrase; I know he's using it as a euphemism for something very particular. In fact, for a particular person. 'But we had some bloody good times too.' His eyes redden; I won't say that they 'well up' because he won't allow them to get that far. He sniffs his snot up and passes the back of a hand – the one with the sewn-on thumb – across his nose and briefly across his eyes. I see the heavy pulse in his throat, the throat that I just imagined being able to strangle. And I notice that I love him. And that Mum once loved him. I could reach across the table and touch his arm. I could say, 'Dad, I'm sorry about Martin.' But I don't. I don't mention Martin.

Darth on the deck, his mask off for a second, and neither of us can really bear it. I watch the boxing with him for what I think is a decent interval and then I say, 'Night, Dad' and he replies 'Night, boy' and that's that.

You see, the childhood drawing of Slieve Moyne, the one with the two grown-ups and the three boys, the one we started with – that picture is incomplete. It's the house that I remember, but if I showed that drawing to Mum, Dad, Mark or Andrew, they would look at it for a long time. They would see that someone is missing.

In Auntie Trudy's bedroom, at one end of the gramophone, is a picture box. It's a Perspex cube holding six photographs. The one that she keeps facing upwards, so that she can always see it, is of a cherubic boy with light brown hair, wearing his St Andrew's School uniform. This is Martin John Webb, my eldest brother, who died of meningitis when he was six years old.

One way of imagining life is that it's a competition between love and death. Death always wins, of course, but love is there to make its victory a hollow one. That's what love is for. When the worst came for Mum and Dad in 1971, there was nothing they could do to soften the blow. But they had enough remaining love to make a reply. I can't help liking their reply.

My brother died and I was born ten months later.

*

If something terrible happens to you, and you're lucky enough to have supportive friends, there will be a period when you hear a version of this several times a week: 'And if you need to talk, I'm right here. I mean, just talk. Because I'm here. For a talk. And if you don't want to talk, maybe think about talking. Talk.'

There are times when we're all grateful to hear this, and other times when we experience it as pressure. And although I've no doubt that there are many women and girls who have that second reaction, I think it's men and boys in particular who get into trouble here. We feel grateful for the kindness, but helpless and frustrated. 'Talk about what? What's to talk about? Talking won't *change* anything, will it?' Suddenly we're surrounded by well-meaning people encouraging us to talk about our feelings. The problem is, talking about our feelings is something we've been specifically trained not to do.

What are we saying to a boy when we tell him to 'man up' or to 'act like a man'?

At its most benign, we might just be saying: do the thing that needs doing even if you don't want to do it.

But more often, when we tell a boy to 'act like a man', we're effectively saying, 'Stop expressing those feelings.' And if the boy hears that often enough, it actually starts to sound uncannily like, 'Stop *feeling* those feelings.'

It sounds like this: 'Pain, guilt, grief, fear, anxiety: these are not appropriate emotions for a boy because they will be unacceptable emotions for a man. The skills you need to be your own emotional detective – being able to name a feeling and work out why you're feeling it – you don't need to develop those skills. You won't need them.'

It sounds like a good deal. The great thing about refusing to feel feelings is that, once you've denied them, you don't have to take responsibility for them. Your feelings will be someone else's problem – your mother's problem, your girlfriend's problem, your wife's problem. If it has to come out at all, let it come out as anger. You're allowed to be angry. It's boyish and man-like to be angry.

I do it. I notice it more often these days, but I still do

it. I express anger when what I'm actually feeling is shame. Or I get angry when I'm afraid; angry when I'm feeling uncertain or anxious; angry when I'm in grief. I bet you can think of men who even get angry when they fall in love. And probably have angry sex.

And yes, women do it too – of course they do. The difference is that they haven't been encouraged since childhood to wear a total lack of self-awareness as a badge of pride. On the contrary, the message they've been getting is that they are 'intuitive'. They are 'nurturers' and 'good listeners'. They're there to intuitively tell men to go to the doctor and to nurturingly sort out the laundry. Luckily, they can also 'multi-task', so they can do both at the same time, as well as booking their kids' dental appointments and making a lasagne. Sadly, men can't 'multi-task' apparently, which must be the reason we tend to take a step back from all that.

And yet, when people saw Dad walking down the street in Woodhall Spa, they did not think: 'Ah, there goes Paul Webb, a walking powder-keg of repressed grief.' Paul's public face was beloved by more or less the entire village. Generous with his time, charismatic, cheeky, cajoling and straightforwardly kind, he didn't so much live in that village as *host* it. He would walk into a pub and I would watch the whole room subtly adjust itself in his direction and settle itself in for a treat. They adored him. But then, they didn't have to live with him.

Mum did. She had been through the same loss and put up with Dad's domestic reaction until she couldn't put up with it any longer. Her name, by the way, was Pat (she hated 'Patricia') and if kicking Dad out of the house was brave, what she did next was heroic.