

PROLOGUE

Shakespeare calls memory “the warder of the brain” and despite the fact that it is Lady Macbeth who brings up this idea while bulldozing her husband into murdering their current house guest, I find it very comforting.

The notion that my increasingly spotty reminiscences of tumbling through life will somehow protect me, like a cerebral condom, from repeating old, negative patterns or embarking on perilous new ones that my gung ho, adolescent brain would otherwise have dived straight into has, for me, coloured the Bard’s fiend-like queen with an Oprah-like hue.

It makes sense that what we have experienced in the past, and how we have analysed and grown from it enables, or at least helps us, to have better judgement. Right? That’s what we call the benefit of hindsight. But what if your memory isn’t so accurate? What if the stuff supposedly protecting your brain is actually deluding you into making the same mistakes again and again? Even a cerebral condom can break, right? I know I have, on several occasions throughout my life, repeated the exact same patterns of behaviour that previously made me unhappy to the point of despair. So much for the warder of the brain, huh?!

Every day more experiences and lessons are poured into our

memory banks, rearranging and augmenting our views and actions. And if we accept that sometimes we simply choose to ignore our memory's lessons, then we must also agree that memory itself, not just our relationship to it, is ever shifting.

Have you ever wondered if you remember an incident from your childhood because you actually recall it or merely because you've heard others talk about it, or seen a photograph of it? My first memory is of a leaf falling down from a tree and landing beside me in my pram. I do genuinely remember seeing that happen but did it really?! Do I perhaps remember it because my mum once mentioned something about a leaf landing in my pram, or I remember seeing an old photo of me sitting in my pram beneath a tree on an autumn day? But did what I recall actually happen? Did my mum really once talk of it? Was there ever such a photo? Truly, how reliable can any of our memories be?

One single memory can never be a true touchstone, and perhaps even a collection of remembrances of the same event—both ours and others', as faulty and varied as they all may be—is not the true function of memory, either. Rather it is what we do with those memories, how we let them accumulate then process through our minds so we can learn from them. Isn't that really what memory is, or should be? Not just for recall but for growth? The repetition of memory is wisdom, but how we act upon that wisdom is the making or undoing of a good life.

Nowadays I see memory differently: it's not something to be dragged out of the past and dropped at my feet like some subconscious carcass. Now I look forward to meeting up with people I haven't seen in decades and reminiscing, for I know that they will unlock doors in my mind, and I will relive moments we had together that I otherwise might never have accessed again. I have learned that memory is collective and now memories are a gift awaiting me in the future, not the past. Each time a new one is coaxed into the light from the uncharted mists of my mind, I am buoyed and fascinated. Even the

bad ones are another piece of the jigsaw of the life I inhabit. I welcome them all.

Here's how I think about memory today: picture some spaghetti cooking in a pot of boiling water and imagine the entire contents of that pot are my life experiences. Now picture the spaghetti being drained through a colander, and that colander is my brain. What is left, the drained spaghetti, is my memory.

Yes, huge swaths of what we've lived just drain away, but I like to think they're the boring bits, the routine, the day-to-day minutiae or the stuff we just didn't register all that much at the time. What's left—the spaghetti—are the remarkable bits, the bits that arrested us. And what makes life interesting is that we all get arrested for different reasons, by different things.

This gratuitous culinary metaphor also functions as a disclaimer to remind you that perhaps not every detail of what I am about to tell you will be completely and utterly accurate. But how could it be? My head's full of spaghetti!

elementary

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Whenever anyone asks me how I am, I always reply, “Still alive!”

Each day is a prize for me. Not a gift, mind you. A gift is given but a prize must be won.

There is absolutely no logical reason why I am here—in this life, in this house, in this country, writing this book, having been *asked* to write this book. None. The life trajectory my nationality, class, and circumstances portended for me was not even remotely close to the one I now navigate. But logic is a science and living is an art.

For years people would tell me I was brave or courageous, thank me for having inspired them or making them felt heard or seen. What they meant was that by living an open life as a queer man—and a famous one—I was somehow empowering them. I felt fraudulent being so vaunted for merely enjoying living my life, but I began to comprehend the utter thirst so many have to feel represented, especially when they do not have the option to express their true selves. And I could relate, for I too had a secret.

My first memoir was written without guile and out of utter need to tell my tale, to be heard, to be seen. I wrote of my experiences as a little boy dealing with a very disturbed and dangerous adult man whose splintered psyche rained down such physical and emotional violence it startled even me as I recounted its horror on the page. That

man was my father. But the title of the book, *Not My Father's Son*, was a gesture of succour, an assurance that I had not only managed to transcend those early days but indeed, in spite of them, bloom.

Writing compounded my healing and learning. Setting experiences down meant I had to analyse and quantify them. It was the ultimate breaking of a cycle, for in sharing the breaking of mine, I have empowered others to shatter theirs: every single day still, so many years later, I hear from people that my words galvanised them—to confront their abusers, to confront their memories, to reveal and reckon with what had been their shame. I learned the power of my words. I was reminded of the absolute duty of authenticity. That in telling my story, by being fully and openly me in all areas of my life, I could empower so many was initially frightening, like a wildfire I had started but could not control. But if the utter liberation I felt in telling my truth could be manifested in others' lives, I felt at peace. I felt, in fact, I had found my calling.

However, there was one gnawing downside to the wave of positivity that washed over me, and one I hope this book will help redress. After the publication of my memoir, everywhere I turned I saw myself held up as an example of having triumphed. I had overcome my demons. The nervous breakdown was long behind me. I had beaten back the tide of childhood despair. I had conquered my father and he was gone, never to return, like some banished ogre in my fairy-tale life.

Nothing could be further from the truth. I may have transcended and bloomed, but I have not won. There is no prize there.

I had thought, foolishly perhaps, that writing about my abusive father would somehow conclude and resolve the troubled legacy he left me. By discussing him I found peace, but not closure. Instead, he was brought crashing back into my life and is now much more present than at any time since those dark days of my childhood. And that is as it should be. He is my father, after all. He is half the reason I exist. He will forever be a looming tower in my psyche, but now he merely provides shade, or is the occasional storm cloud in the clear sky I look up to.

The difference is he is here now on my terms, not his.

I dream of him often. One particular dream centres on the sawmill yard that lay behind the house I grew up in, on the country estate where my father was head forester. The sawmill is surrounded by great stacks of tree trunks awaiting their slicing, and pallets of posts and other cut lumber. There are store sheds full of chain saws and strange tools hanging from the rafters and other buildings housing tractors and machinery. In the centre of it all is the Celcure plant.

Celcure is a compound of copper and other chemicals that, when saturated into wood, makes it impervious to fungus, insects, and the vagaries of weather, and thereby destined for a longer, stronger life. The Celcure plant is a sparkling new addition to the yard and—unlike me, permeable and weak me—is my father's pride and joy.

The Celcure plant is a large open-ended cylinder in the middle of the yard with little railway-like tracks leading into it, on which a series of trolleys are packed with posts and other cut wood, locked in place with metal chains. The whole caravan is pushed by a forklift into the depths of the cylinder, the door is closed, and vacuum sealed by pulling down a huge lever. Then all the air is sucked from the cylinder, the green coppery liquid fills the chamber, the pressure inside is increased, and the Celcure pervades the wood.

In my dream, though, something has gone wrong. I see the lever of the pressure lock being pulled open by one of the men who works for my father, but the forklift cannot pull out the carriages packed with the dripping green wood because some of the posts inside the cylinder have slipped their chains and fallen off the carts, causing a blockage. Another worker is called over who tries to reach along inside the green, slimy dripping side of the cylinder but the offending posts are out of his reach. My father is summoned. I see him walking up the yard towards us, a charismatic figure, the tacks in the soles of his work boots clacking on the tarmac. He spits without breaking his stride. The men tell him what has happened, and I see him bridling his annoyance. He shines a flashlight down inside the dank tube and surveys the damage. And then he turns to me.

I realise my father needs me. I am suddenly and unusually valuable to him. I am small, the smallest boy, always, and it is now my job to crawl along the space between the edge of the cylinder and the wood and pass out the posts that have slid out from their stack. My father is kind to me. Kind in that he treats me like one of his workers, explaining to me what I have to do but without anger or telling me I am worthless, as is his norm. I feel bathed in his approval and I want to perform well for him.

The space I have to crawl along is very small. On one side there is the curved wall of the cylinder, with its cold brown-and-green sludge. On the other, to my right, the stacked wood is wet, and the smell of the chemicals stings my eyes. I am scared and I ask if I really have to go inside this dark tunnel. My father tells me not to be scared and yes, I have to as I am the only one who can save the situation. He makes me feel special.

Just as I begin to clamber along the cramped sliver of the cylinder, I think of something. I strain my head back to look at my father and ask him to please promise not to close the huge vacuum-sealed door on me. I have had nightmares about him doing so, switching on the Celcure plant machine and then I die a gruesome death: the air sucked from my body before being drowned in a sea of toxic green. But I do not tell him about the nightmares, as I know he will mock me. He scoffs and assures me he will not shut the door. I believe him and continue propelling my little body into the wet dark. All the time my father's flashlight is weaving across the tunnel and I hear his shouts of encouragement as though he were cheering me on from the sidelines at a school football match.

The copper-green sludge gets in my hair and my mouth, but I persevere. I will perform this task with aplomb, and he will never hit me again. I reach the fallen posts, but they are jammed too tightly, and I am too weak to move them. My father's tone changes. He begins to sound like his old self. He calls me a sissy.

I realise what is going to happen and I start to slither manically backwards towards the opening of the cylinder, but it is useless. The

daylight is already starting to ebb and then everything goes dark and deathly quiet, except for some dull faint laughter that I recognise as my father's. He is joking with the other men about having broken his promise and closed the door of the Celcure plant on me. He is disposing of his useless son once and for all. And then I wake up.

The thing about this dream is that it actually happened.

He opened the door again, of course, after just long enough to ensure I became hysterical with panic. The sting of his words, "Do you not know how to take a joke?" was followed quickly by the stinging of my ear and head as his hand made contact, and through the dizziness that followed I heard my orders barked over his shoulder as he walked away.

I spent the rest of the day taking every single post off the carts by hand, hunching over as I progressed farther inside the cylinder, darting a look fearfully behind me every time in case he appeared and shut the door on me once more.

No one ever fully recovers from their past. There is no cure for it. You just learn to manage and prioritise it. I believe the second you feel you have triumphed or *overcome* something, anything—an abuse, an injury to the body or the mind, an addiction, a character flaw, a habit, a person—you have merely decided to stop being vigilant and embraced denial as your *modus operandi*.

And that is what this book is about, and for: to remind you not to buy in to the Hollywood ending. At some of my greatest career highs I have been my most unhappy and confused. At my most celebrated I have felt the lowest self-esteem. I am a survivor, but I am not cured. And as much as I espouse and propagate the notion that *anything could happen* as a mischievous and exciting mantra to live by, I also accept that it therefore must follow that anything could happen *again*. I could go under. My life could fall apart. That is why I see each day as a prize.

In the chapters that follow I will share with you the shape my life has taken as I've learned to live with my baggage. This is a book

about my career, my struggles with mental health, my many forays into love and sexuality and everything in between. Ultimately it is a story between two marriages and how I've navigated and found peace with the journey life has taken me on.

But like the proverbial onion, there are many more layers beneath, years of unravelling the detritus of a prescribed life. I may have broken the cycle, I may have stopped taking my prescription, but I still have some residual virus in my system. And the best way to heal it is to admit it will always be there. I have great access to darkness, but I choose to stand in the light. Life is pain management and a slow march towards death, but here's to having fun while we're marching! Talking of which . . .

I have been coupled, consciously, for the majority of my adult life. I've been engaged, domestic partnered, I've worn rings and even been tattooed to represent the pledgings of my troth. And every time I thought it would be forever, at the time, for a time.

I've also been married twice, and those unions are the bookends of this tome: the collapse of my first, the ascension to my second. But despite the proliferation of alliances in these pages, I don't look back at any of my previous relationships as failures—though some of them were nothing short of disastrous and caused lasting damage that was hard to measure. Some, though, have evolved into beautiful, life-long friendships. Indeed, even some of my *very* short-term dalliances have gone that way. But we shouldn't be surprised if a one-night stand should yield a lifelong intimate friendship, for what is a dalliance but an alliance that begins with a big *D*?!

No, I choose to see this proliferation as a sign of optimism and hope. Even after being beaten down lower than I thought possible, I always bounced back. I still looked for love again.

I am a completely different person in the opening pages of this book to the one when the story closes, and more different today as I write it all down. One of the great things about getting older is recognising patterns: in circumstances, in your behaviour and choices, and in those of others. It's all just the same show with different costumes

but the great thing is you get to change parts. You even get to change the ending. Unlike Cleopatra, age may have slightly withered me, but like Jacques in *As You Like It*, I have gained my experience.

And ultimately—something that Hollywood did get right—it is all about love, actually. Just make sure you find the right kind for you, with the right rules. And make sure they're kind. Above all, make sure you're heard, and seen. And be vigilant: nothing is forever, so enjoy it while you can.