Has Anyone Seen The Kids?

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Overview

How does it feel when parents who didn't take good care of their children come, in old age, to need those same children for care and support?

This memoir is the story of two stages of my family's life. The first is when myself, my two brothers, and our parents lived as part of the alternative community of Dartington Hall in the 1960's and 70s. The second is of the most recent decade, when my parents were elderly and beset by failing health.

My artistic, anti-authoritarian parents sought freedom and self-expression in their work, love and sex lives. My brothers and I grew up amid escalating financial, practical and emotional chaos. We were raised with a light touch which would now be regarded as neglect. In 1980, when we were 16, 19, and 21, our artist mother left home. A fragile marriage collapsed completely, and we each went our independent ways.

The memoir's narrative moves between two perspectives. One is my developing child's eye view of my parents' relationship, told through particular scenes and experiences, including ways that the wild spaces of Dartmoor and the Devon coast provided me with both excitement and comfort.

The other is in my contemporary reflections as a grown-up daughter, who has become a Child Psychotherapist with a deep professional interest in how childhood trauma expresses itself through a child's behaviour and relationships, and does so differently for different children.

My elderly parents came to need my support in the context of a fractured care system, and an emotional landscape in which the lines of who was responsible for whom turned out to be still in a terrible tangle. To my surprise, though, these later years also offered up unexpected opportunities for new understanding, love, and a healing of past hurts.

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In 1972, when I was 11, I starved a mouse to death. It took a week. The mouse, a female called Caramac, because she was the colour of my favourite chocolate bar, lived in a wire cage in my bedroom.

Nearly fifty years on, here in my Dad's bedroom, kneeling on a filthy carpet, wiping black dust off piles of his books, I am suddenly back at that cage. I am remembering the urine-tang of the sawdust, how it caught at my throat.

Involuntarily, my fingers stiffen at the thought of the metal hook that opened the cage door. Now, as then, the vision of the mouse's body - its flat black eyes, dulled fur, its utter stillness - has the blood rushing in my ears.

My thoughts are running: *Did I* decide *to stop feeding her*? I think so. Each day, I looked at her through the bars of the cage and I *chose* not fill the small stoneground bowl with the mix of bran, sunflower seeds and yellow mouse cornflakes. I recall how for the first two unfed days there was little discernible change: I heard her scuffling as usual. After that, I checked in on her occasionally. On Day Six she was in one place, trembling as if her feet were stuck to piece of vibrating tape. By the evening of Day Seven, she was on her side, dead.

Why remember it now? In the midst of this stressful clear out of Dad's house? Because among Dad's books I have come across an A5 printed card. It is the service card for the funeral of Dad's friend, Meg.

There is a photo of Meg on the front: her warm, handsome face and curly grey hair. I remember her solid, strong presence. I recall Dad telling me about her funeral, a few years previously. It had been a great gathering in Totnes and he'd enjoyed the

coming together of faces from earlier, livelier times. Meg was an artist and some of her work had been set out at her Wake. In accordance with her wishes, mourners had been invited to take a picture home. Dad had showed me the print he'd chosen, a lino cut of a leaf in brown ink, it's skeleton finely wrought. Ever the champion re-gifter, Dad had passed the print to me as a Christmas present in 2018. I'd propped it up on the piano for a while, but it never made it up on the wall. If anyone had asked why, I'd have said I found it a bit gloomy.

I remember Meg well from my childhood. She was a good friend of both my parents. I don't remember a husband or partner, but she had several sons, the youngest of whom was in my year at school. I liked him. Meg and her children kept and bred mice and sold them on, for small amounts of money, as pets. It was in Meg's house that my mouse began her short life.

I remember going into the kitchen to tell Mum, 'I think my mouse is dead.'

She came to look and said, 'I think maybe you didn't feed her.'

I recall the feeling of her words: tired; no anger; a kind of blankness.

The chronology is confused now, but I also remember a childhood conversation with Meg. Mum is with me. We are asking if we can have another mouse.

Meg is saying, no, firmly but politely, 'I'm sorry, but I think not. The mice that we give you seem to die too often.'

I remember my shame. The cold of it.

My childhood mouse wasn't the only family pet to die prematurely due to neglect. But my starving of it was an act of my commission. Only a wicked, horrible person would do such a thing. At the time, I knew that's what I was. Though not why. I

understand it better now, but, even as my mind remembers, here in Dad's dirty bedroom, I am wincing at the thought of the dead mouse. And also at how, over decades, I said 'No' to my own children's repeated requests for a pet. Until finally agreeing to a hamster.

I picture my, then eight year-old, daughter bringing that hamster home from the pet shop in its little cardboard box. She carried it tenderly, over the threshold of our house. As we carefully transferred this sweet honey-coloured creature into its fancy new cage, my hands trembled, my heart raced and fluttered. I breathed deeply. In the moment, I was sure, that in my care, Harry the Hamster would die immediately.

I force my mind back to the present. Dad is now living in a Care Home in Totnes. We - my husband Andrew, my brothers Dom and Ricky and Ricky's wife Louise - have three days to clear this house so that it is ready for the next tenant. I turn back to the apparent infinity of books. I am sorting them into piles, labelled in my head, *Chuck/Donate/Sell/Store/Take to Dad.*

Though the effects of a serious stroke in 2017 have unravelled much of Dad's fearsome capacity for cataloguing, his books are still mostly organised by genre or subject. I am working my way through an antique, glass-fronted bookcase full of Poetry and Classic Literature. Thomas Hardy, as both poet and novelist, is especially well-represented. Dad loved Hardy. He was a Dorchester man himself; the son of a dairymaid and a brewery worker. And having won a scholarship to University College, London in the early 1950's, he, like Hardy, sometimes struggled to reconcile his working-class roots with the apparently middle-class life that followed.

The bookcase is tricky to access. Dad has placed it parallel to his single sofa bed. The fragile doors open on to the edge of the thin mattress which will shortly follow his

ruined bedding to the tip. There is a strip of floor, grubbily carpeted, maybe 12” wide which I must navigate, angling my body round the bookcase doors in order to take the books down, handful by handful.

In addition to Hardy, there is an extensive collection of poetry in the original High German. There are Liverpool poets, Shakespeare, Goethe and Mann. The spines of these books faced Dad as he slept.

Most of the books are old, their covers fading, their pages browning. I find a copy of *Far From the Madding Crowd,* which carries an inscription in Mum’s untidy handwriting,

To my love, for the first Christmas we spent in our own home. December 1956.

I am stilled again. This time by the far-off, turned-to-dust romance of it. I’m conjuring an image of bright-eyed, 21 year-old Mum, her thick fair hair in a waist-length ponytail, the profile - rounded nose and slightly sticky-out front teeth - that I’ve seen traces of in my own face, and that of my daughters, and granddaughter in turn.

My hand hovers. I create a new pile - *Keep for Me* – and add the book to it. Then the rest of the Hardy collection. One Complete Works should stay intact, I decide. Oxfam can have the duplicates.

Dad was also a keen amateur naturalist, and another bookcase is stuffed with guides to birds, moths, beetles, fungi and flowers. Walking in woods or along lanes, Dad never failed to set an upturned oil beetle back on its feet.

Around the room, there are several small, trip-hazard towers of glossy coffee-table books. These overweight atlases and artist guides gleam amid the ageing, crumbling majority. As Dad grew frailer, he ordered shiny remaindered books, by mail order, apparently compulsively. Many are still partly in their packaging. As I sort, I have to

weave in and out of these, my hands full. One - an enormous, high-spec life and works of Paul Cezanne - catches my eye. I think, *Mum would love this*. And I remember how, when she left our home, in 1980, for Bristol, to be with her new partner, Mike, she said,

'I'm only taking my easel, paints and my art books. I don't need anything else.'

Mum has dementia now. Since Mike, died in 2013, she has lived alone, struggling, in a different Devon village, seven miles from Dad.

I sit back on my heels, stretch both my arms above my head, circle my shoulders. I smoulder with frustration: I would rather be anywhere else than here. This four-roomed council bungalow on the outskirts of a Devon village has never been my home. I've never stayed the night here, or even eaten a hot meal at the small, cluttered table in the kitchen. Yet it is, apparently, a charged place which might, at any moment, spit out a hot spark of my past. I'm finding it hard to be methodical, business-like and practical amid the grimy chaos.

My work is as haphazard as my thoughts: *Dad's not even dead/ I'm freezing/ This Guide to British Birds is pristine/ weighs a fucking ton/ How do I decide which ones matter?/ I've* never *known what's going on in his head!*

I can't ask Dad directly because Covid has him locked down in the Care Home, and he's too deaf to hear my voice on the phone.

I look out of the grubby bedroom window, onto the tangle of winter weeds that have taken possession of the front garden. I think longingly of my own warm, well-enough ordered semi in London's eastern suburbs.

Dad's home is part of a post-war estate. It sits elevated above the narrow road out

of the village. On the far side of the road is the river Harbourne, its fast winter rush a white-noise accompaniment to our labours. We have set aside three days for this draining, high-intensity clear out. We are already exhausted and we are very cold because Dad has turned down repeated offers from the council to update his heating system.

In the kitchen, tiny black flies cloud around the cracked plastic food waste bin, which is heaped with rotting fruit. Dad has always been a keen composter. There are eighty-two empty jam jars, lined up on a bookcase. Dozens of empty margarine cartons – not all of them washed – are piled on the cooker top. Aside from the kitchen and bathroom, which present their own extensive hygiene hazards, each room holds as many books as are in the bedroom.

Dad's living room is dedicated to music. There are shelves and boxes full of LPs. One wall is covered, floor to ceiling, with more than a thousand CDs, set out on racks. The majority are Jazz, but there's also a large classical section and plenty of early Bob Dylan. On shelves at the back of the room is a library of books about Jazz.

The living room also holds a large cupboard and Welsh dresser which are home to thousands of pages of sheet music, mined from second-hand shops in London, Berlin and elsewhere. Dad's beloved upright Steinway piano is nestled in the corner. Two other pianos are in the hall. One of them is a Street Piano, which, up until he was 80, Dad would load into the back of his battered van, and drive many miles to perform at local carnivals and community festivals.

The only concession to conventional living room furniture is an antique chaise longue, laid parallel to the window. The cover fabric is worn and torn. Dad had clearly been sleeping here at times. There is a dirty scrunched-up blanket, and a thin, case-less grey pillow lies flat against the curve of its headrest.

On a shelf above the door is Dad's collection of hand-held percussion instruments from around the world. His battered trombone, unplayable since the stroke, stands upright in the corner.

'I'll have that,' my brother, Dom says.

It will travel back to London, to become part of one of his sculptures.

Shortly before his marriage ended, Dad had left his job as in-house journalist at the Dartington Hall Trust. A keen and gifted piano player since childhood, he had decided, aged 46, to take up a music degree at Dartington College of Arts. He went on to forge a new career as a musician, performing in various bands as well as solo, and becoming a specialist in the classic jazz of the 1920s and '30s. He became a respected and popular teacher of the piano, to adults and children. He lived off his gig and teaching income. He was often fed at the restaurants and hotels where he performed, or at the homes of his students. He traversed the county in a beaten–up van, or walking at speed from place to place. With his long white hair in a ponytail, a shabby rucksack on his back, heavy with sheet music, tuning forks, mics and amp leads, he cut a distinctive and well-known figure in his locality. Whether on foot or in a vehicle, he always took the back roads. Since Mum left, he had lived alone.

But the 2017 stroke had laid waste to Dad's precious, determined, eccentric independence. His mighty brain remained full of knowledge, cut-glass memories, political conviction and analysis. The French and German he learned at university were as fluent as ever. He still read like most people breathe. But after the stroke Dad could not reliably wash himself, put on his socks, catch a bus, or keep his trousers up. He had regular stomach upsets because he refused to throw away out-

of- date food. Always a slim man, he became painfully thin, white- faced, his pale blue eyes intensely shadowed. His hair had not been cut for years and was sticky with grease.

Dad's greatest unhappiness was that he could no longer play the piano as he used to - his fingers unable to follow what his eyes and ears knew about the music.

After the stroke, Dad said a fierce *No* to any help from outside the family. He had tolerated the rehab team that came into the house in the early post-stroke weeks, and quickly deduced what he needed to be able to do (heat a ready meal, use the toilet independently, wash himself, turn a tap on and off, take his medication, summon help) in order to be 'signed off' their lists. That he could complete these tasks at best, only intermittently, became clear almost immediately. But Dad was adamant, and angry,

'I'm not having *those women* back in here. They look at me and judge. They make me feel ashamed, like an *idiot*.'

His door remained shut to whatever practical help may have been available. Dad was equally clear that there were many things that we, his children, may not do for him, such as clear out the fridge or switch on the heaters. As he forgot how to be online, and his deafness made phone calls with bureaucracies next to impossible, we tiptoed warily into Dad's finance and admin. This enraged him and he became paranoid and suspicious of us – especially Ricky who spent so many hours on hold on his behalf.

On my visits from London, I drove Dad to the wholefood shop in Totnes for his grains and pulses, as instructed. Or took him to *Aldi* in Paignton for specific German biscuits. He was always keen to discuss his plans for resuming his musical career, or the latest political news and the books he'd read recently. But when I tried to talk to

him about a practical detail, he blanked me, carrying on talking as though I hadn't spoken at all.

When we were children, Dad had often been absent - at work, playing gigs, or with women other than our mother. I guess, all those decades later, for me and my brothers, to be unheeded was deeply familiar. Challenging him had always made me anxious. These powerful, embedded family dynamics were proving to be made of highly durable material.

As Dad's health and safety deteriorated, I turned to social services for advice and support.

'Your father has Capacity,' a social worker insisted. 'He is living as he chooses. There's nothing we can do if he declines our help.'

This was undeniable. And morally right, of course. But still I wanted to scream, 'What if I am *at* capacity?!'