

After Twenty Thousand Nights

by

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It was early - far too early - for Harry to be awake. But, truth be told, there had been too much on his mind for him to expect to sleep soundly. He fidgeted all night, alternating between one side and the other and being comfortable in neither position. Sometimes he felt the room was too hot, at other times too cold. He had glanced at the alarm clock what seemed like every five minutes, though barely able to tell the time through the clock face, which was cracked like a spider's web after he had knocked it off the table clambering out of bed in a race to reach the toilet. Miriam had teased him about how his clumsiness was increasing in inverse proportion to his ability to control his bladder. She had offered to buy him a new clock, but he had always resisted; it might be smashed but the clock still worked. It was a kind of metaphor for himself; it didn't need replacing with a newer model.

"We've also got the odd crack or two showing," he had told her, "but we're still okay, aren't we? Imagine if your dodgy hip and my dodgy knee persuaded our Linda to replace one of us. How would we feel then?"

"Clocks don't have feelings," she sighed. "You're a sentimental old fool, Harry Hopwood."

"But that's why you've loved me all these years."

"Well, I don't suppose I'm about to change you now even if I wanted to!"

He tried to sleep, kept his eyes closed, consciously tried to relax himself, breathing in through his mouth, holding for a moment and then out through his nose, but still thoughts hurried around his head like cars around a racetrack and prevented him from succumbing. Instead, he lay on top of the duvet listening to Miriam's rhythmic breathing in the darkness, tracing the outline of her body as it rose and fell against the light from the streetlamps that had squeezed in through gaps in the bedroom curtains. He had lost count of how many times in their long and mostly happy marriage he had done this, but it would have certainly reached into the hundreds. Fifty-six years together as man and wife

was something in the order of twenty thousand nights so, yes, he was certain it would have ranked in the hundreds, and that wasn't counting any of the nights before they were married; not that they talked about those much anymore. Over those twenty thousand days and nights their bodies had changed as age and surgery had distorted them. He could still see the beauty in Miriam, despite the lines and the scars, and the changes to the texture of her skin and the tone of her complexion, though she hated what she saw as the ravages of time.

Deep sleep relaxed her body and calmed any visible evidence of pain and stress. Harry looked at her face and recalled the young girl with whom he had first fallen in love in 1956. He had been twenty-four years old and, as Miriam would tell anyone who would listen, he had been particularly handsome – a 'head turner', she called him - with his short dark hair, swept back with a comb full of Brylcreem and always smartly dressed in a collar and tie and freshly polished brogues. Appearance had always mattered to Harry. The more Miriam mentioned it, as they got older, the more he reproached her for bias. Having completed his National Service with a spell in Cyprus, which Miriam had found exotic having never left the country herself, Harry found work as a milkman, getting up with the lark to deliver directly to people's front doors. Whenever he saw them, Harry would try to explain to their four grandchildren, each of whom seemed to believe that milk only came in cartons from supermarkets the size of a football pitch, how much people had relied on him to deliver the milk they needed for their essential first cup of tea of the day. The milk, he would explain, wasn't refrigerated and had to be used quickly as many of the houses to which he delivered didn't have a 'fridge. They found the concept of houses not having a refrigerator ridiculous and were never completely sure whether to believe him or whether it was just another one of Granddad's stories.

They courted for four years, reveling in a shared love of music and dance. At only twenty-one, Miriam found it all glamorous and enticing. He would take her to the Tottenham Royal or occasionally the Ilford Palais, where he first introduced her to the music of Artie Shaw, Jimmy Dorsey, Woody Herman and Benny Goodman and, of course, the great Count Basie and Duke Ellington; music they still listened to in their neat and tidy two bedroom flat today. Their party piece had always been dancing to Glenn Miller's In The Mood and they never missed an opportunity to indulge themselves, whether in company or on their own, if the record just happened to come on the wireless.

But what Miriam loved most about Harry was the way he wanted her to follow her own dreams rather than merely share in his own. At a time when

most of her friends were going off to work in shops or become secretaries, he encouraged her to pursue her ambition of becoming a hairdresser. Nobody was prouder of Miriam than Harry when she secured a place to train with the legendary Vidal Sassoon. She would scoff and become embarrassed when he would tell people he was going to marry a ‘hairdresser to the stars’, and even more so when he would call himself ‘the milkman to the hairdresser to the stars’. He even stood up for her in the face of her own father, who professed to neither understand nor approve of this changing post-war world in which young people not only aspired to do particular jobs but actually took affirmative action to ensure that it happened. Her father was part of the generation that believed, first and foremost, that a woman’s role was as the homemaker and, whilst Harry, if he was honest, wanted that too, he wanted her to fulfil her potential more and for him to be able to show her off for doing so.

“Pops,” he would say, “the world is changing. We have a new, young Queen on the throne; we’ve got Grace Kelly, Marilyn Monroe and Jayne Mansfield, who all of the world idolise. They wouldn’t put up with being told to stay at home and make the dinner so why shouldn’t girls like Miriam dream big as well?”

“Spare me the lecture, Harry,” her father would say, becoming exasperated primarily because he knew he was fighting a losing battle. “You won’t be so open minded when you come home from work and your dinner isn’t on the table.”

Harry would laugh and smile and tease but in a way that neither upset nor offended Miriam’s father. Occasionally her mother would give him a smile and a knowing look to suggest that she agreed with what he was saying and loved him for supporting their daughter but couldn’t let her husband see that she did.

Miriam and Harry were engaged in May 1958. He went down on one knee outside the Coliseum Cinema in Green Lanes and proposed, much to the excitement of a small group of fellow moviegoers who had gathered to watch. They had been to see South Pacific and when Harry started serenading her with Some Enchanted Evening, she began to laugh the uncontrollable laugh caused by euphoria and embarrassment. It was a damp evening and by the time he finally got back to his feet, a large round wet patch had formed over the knee of his navy-blue pinstripe trousers.

Other girls emerged from the cinema boring their husbands and boyfriends by talking constantly about the handsome Rossano Brazzi, but in this moment

Miriam only had thoughts for Harry. He, on the other hand, try as he might, couldn't completely banish Mitzi Gaynor from his mind.

Even now, all these years later, lying on the bed, he could still picture Mitzi, with her perfect blonde hair and her deep hazel eyes, and yet, even in their ninth decade, he still had only ever really loved the old lady lying next to him. It was a funny thing, Harry thought, how your mind could convince you somehow that you were still in your twenties or thirties, and then something happens to remind you that you are not. That might be something as simple as realising that the children you spent your life being so protective of, were now adults with children of their own. Other times it can be something more profound and tragic that reminds you of your own mortality.

For Harry, that moment came in 1984 not long before his fifty-second birthday. It was Friday October 12th. In the early hours of that morning the IRA had attempted to murder the Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, and all of her cabinet by bombing the Grand Hotel in Brighton. It was all anyone was talking about: in offices, on the buses, in the pubs and in the supermarkets. The prevailing mood was one of shock and defiance. Like her or loathe her – and people seemed to do both in equal measure – nobody approved of an attempt to murder the democratically elected Prime Minister. But it wasn't this that prompted Harry to reassess his own priorities. After finishing his round, returning his milk float to the depot and then returning home for some coffee and toast, he slept fitfully for two or three hours before getting up, showering and deciding to head into town to surprise Miriam and take her out for lunch.

The bus journey was like any other. He joked with the driver as he got on, receiving a smile and a handshake for his trouble, and like normal tried to make conversation with some of the other passengers to pass the time along the way. He had never understood the unspoken convention on public transport that people shouldn't speak to each other. Conversation, he had always said, was one of the things that makes the world go round. Most people smiled politely and busied themselves with nothing in particular, digging into bags or turning to look out of the window to pretend they hadn't heard. Occasionally somebody – usually a woman around his own age or a small child – would indulge him and chat for a minute or two until the bus arrived at their own stop. Today, though, it would be slightly different. A woman in front of him and to his left sat reading the Daily Express, which carried the news of events in Brighton in dramatic fashion. The bus took its usual turn left onto the road where the salon at which Miriam worked was located. He was asked later for his

recollection of events; all he could be sure of was that the brakes had been applied so fast and hard that he had been thrown out of his seat to the left, colliding with the woman reading the *Daily Express* and hitting his shoulder forcefully against one of the upright metal struts that joined the frame of the seats. He remembered seeing the driver, jump out of his seat, pressing repeatedly for the door to open whilst shouting something Harry couldn't quite make out. Passengers strained their necks to see what had taken place but because all activity was directly in front of the bus, few could see much. He remembered the silence. Rumours started to permeate back through the vehicle and, once sirens and blue flashing lights began to obliterate any other sights and sounds, few, if any of the passengers, believed it was anything other than something dreadful. Harry caught sight of the driver through the window, ashen-faced and crying, his head bent into the upturned palms of his hands. A police officer had placed a hand on one of his shoulders as a paramedic tried to lead him away. Shortly afterwards, the police opened the rear doors of the bus and escorted the passengers off one by one, ensuring everyone's name, address and telephone number had been recorded before they departed. Tape blocked the passage from the front doors of the bus forward forcing everyone to double back and walk away from the scene.

It was nearly four hours before Harry found out exactly what had occurred. A 21-year old local man, Joel Porter, had left his desk at a town centre accountancy practice to go and buy some lunch. He had headphones covering his ears, listening to music on one of those new Sony Walkman things. The moment Harry had first seen one, he had told Miriam he thought they were dangerous. She called him a stick in the mud. Joel Porter had emerged from between two parked cars, whilst looking down at the Walkman in his hands. Although the bus wasn't travelling fast, something to which Harry could testify, there was nothing the driver could have done to avoid hitting Joel Porter. He fell and his legs were caught and crushed beneath the front wheels of the bus. There had been initial, genuine concern that he wouldn't survive, given the evident loss of blood and especially when the doctors attending at the scene began discussing among themselves whether there would be any option but to amputate both of his legs. Joel was cold and clammy; his pulse was weak but rapid. His body was going into shock and the need to move him quickly but delicately to hospital was paramount. It was still touch and go but if they could get him into an operating theatre before he lost much more blood, there was a still a chance.

The incident affected Harry deeply. It would have anyone who had been present that day but Harry couldn't get it out of his mind. The brutality with which this young man's life had changed irrevocably, when he had been doing nothing more dramatic than going to buy a sandwich, shook him. He retreated into himself until Miriam would often find him crying, his thoughts in a different time and place.

"The accident taught me that we live on shifting sands," he had said, his voice cracking. "The things we regard as a constant one day, even something so fundamental like our ability to walk, can be gone without warning the next. Life can be a cruel mistress."

"She can also be a beautiful one, a wonderful one too," Miriam whispered, running her hand through his hair. "Don't forget that."

He climbed off of the bed and stretched his arms as far as his advancing age would allow. He couldn't quite lift them above the height of his shoulders anymore. Miriam hadn't moved. She remained still, not noticing him lifting his body off of the mattress. He moved quietly to the wardrobe, tiptoeing to the point of exaggeration, opened the door and removed the black suit he had prepared the previous day. The trousers rested neatly over the hanger, a crisp white shirt over them, the black suit jacket on top of the white shirt and a neat black tie draped nonchalantly around the hook of the hanger itself. He placed it over the top of the door and brushed a few imaginary hairs or pieces of fluff from the front of the jacket. He looked at it again and sighed, stepping back towards the bed, just avoiding falling into a seated position. He shook his head before creeping quietly towards the bathroom to take a shower. He had always been one of those people who preferred a bath to a shower, but arthritis had removed that as a realistic option some years previously. Now, at least, thanks to the addition of one of those handrails for elderly people, he had come to enjoy a shower too. He could stand, face up towards the shower head, his eyes closed, allowing the hot water to cascade down over his face and he could pretend to be anywhere in the world. More importantly, he could also pretend that everything was okay, even though the minute he stepped out and began to pat dry his ageing skin, he would know that it was not. He wrapped himself in towels, put on a white bathrobe that was just a little too tight and stood before the mirror to shave. Harry was a creature of habit. He had no time for spray foam or shaving

gel and razors. He was as happy to today with his brush, block and styptic pencil as he had been a half a century before. His hand trembled a little as he held the pencil close to his skin, anticipating that momentary sting when it touched to seal the tiny cuts.

He crept back into the bedroom. Miriam slept on. He could hear the sound of neighbours in the street engaging with the new day as darkness began to give way to light; car doors being opened, children being hurried to clutch book bags and lunchboxes to get to school on time, car ignitions being turned and engines bursting into life. He would miss this. He slipped on some clean underwear and then, lowering himself as gently as he could onto the stool in front of Miriam's dressing table, he carefully placed a clean, black sock first onto his left foot and then onto his right. It took him longer than he thought it should do, longer than it always used to, and left him a little breathless. He resented the fact that he wasn't as supple as once he had been. Growing old had not been an enjoyable experience, but what alternative had there been. He stood again, felt the strain in his lower back and began to slide the shirt onto his arms. The cotton felt cold against his skin, causing a tiny, involuntary shiver. He looked at himself in the full-length mirror fixed to the inside of the wooden wardrobe door as he buttoned the front of the shirt, starting at the top and working down, but leaving the top button undone for the moment. He had followed the same routine with every shirt he had ever put on. He fixed the cuffs together with the silver links that Miriam had given him for their fortieth wedding anniversary. They were engraved with his initials. She loved it when he looked smart and he loved it when she loved it. He drew the trousers up over his hips, carefully tucking in the shirt, before zipping the fly, fastening the trousers at the front and slipping a black leather belt through the loops and buckling tightly. He lifted the collar on the shirt, fastened the top button and fixed the plain tie in a half-Windsor knot.

He removed the jacket from its hanger, brushed it down with the back of his hand, and pulled it gingerly over his shoulders. He wanted to lean across the bed and kiss Miriam on the back of her head, but resisted. Instead, he crept out of the bedroom and sat himself in his favourite chair. After such a restless night, he put his hands together as if in prayer, fingertips touching, and closed his eyes.

There was genuine excitement, though no real surprise, when Miriam and Harry announced that they wanted to marry in the summer of 1959. Miriam had

worried about the first time their parents would meet but Harry had brushed away her concerns.

“They’ll get on like a house on fire,” he had declared. “What’s not to like? They both love us and they’ve got a wedding to celebrate. There’s nothing like a party to bring people together, just you see.”

“They’re just so different,” Miriam would repeat.

And she was right, they were. Her parents were traditional, working-class, born and brought up in Edmonton, North London. Both of them were among the thousands who worked at the Gestetner duplicator factory on Broad Lane; her father David on the production line, her mother Patricia as a bookkeeper in the offices. David had long been an active member of the Edmonton Labour Party, inspired by the transformation under Clement Attlee’s post-war government and had become a fierce advocate for workers’ rights and the merits of the National Health Service. He had spent countless evenings and weekends pounding the streets during successive election campaigns, knocking on doors, handing out leaflets and making the case for a Labour government under Clem and subsequently, to little effect, under Hugh Gaitskell as well as doing his best for the sitting MP, Austen Albu. David was a big man, with hairy, once muscular arms bearing tattoos that were testament to his wartime service in the Royal Navy. He smoked at least a pack of Senior Service every day and never left the house without having a strong cup of tea laced with a tot of rum. Patricia, in contrast, was similar in stature to Miriam, slight, with blonde hair styled in a brush under bob that David would sometimes remark made her look like Grace Kelly. As her husband would hold forth on the issues of the day from the safety of his armchair. Patricia would nod encouragingly as she knitted or crocheted in the corner of the room. Miriam was their only child.

Sure, they had wanted more but as Patricia would often say, they had been blessed with Miriam and she was enough of a blessing for any couple. Growing up, David had been something of a stern father but the depth of his love always exceeded his demands of his daughter. Their small terraced house was decorated with countless photographs of Miriam, and David always carried a small photograph of Patricia and Miriam together tucked into the back of his wallet. Pride and love was something to have rather than something necessarily to be demonstrated.

Harry’s parents were quite different. During the war, once Harry and his older brother Tommy had been evacuated to the comparative safety of

Aston Clinton, a village in the Buckinghamshire countryside, his mother Dorothy helped with the evacuation of other children as part of her role with the Women's Voluntary Service. First and foremost, she was a nurse and so, when in late 1940, London came under the bombardment of the Blitz she found herself in especially high demand. This was in part because she could drive and more so because she possessed a steely determination to go out on the streets as bombs were falling to bring casualties back for treatment, even when others seemed more reticent to do so. Where the experience may have scarred some, it gave Dorothy a confidence, optimism and an independence that she carried with her after the war was over. These were qualities that any casual observer could see had rubbed off on her sons. She continued to work as a nurse at the London Hospital in Whitechapel after Bevan ushered in the National Health Service. She could have found a hospital job closer to home but the experience of the Blitz had given her an affinity with the East End and its people that she was unable to shake. She would take Harry and Tommy back to the East End after the War to give them some kind of understanding of the extent of what had happened while they were away. They would start in Stepney and walk up towards Whitechapel, stopping for fish and chips, liberally covered with salt and vinegar, and eaten out of newspaper. They visited the same café every time, owned by a husband and wife, the former thin and wiry, the wife a woman of fulsome figure and generous bust. Tommy had worked out early that if the wife served you, you could get at least an extra dozen chips when she scooped them into the newspaper clutched close to her chest. He'd even once had a kiss off of her, resolutely refusing to wipe the scarlet lipstick from his cheek until he'd returned home to show his father.

Harry's father, Frank, had served as an officer in the Eighth Army under Montgomery at El Alamein. He was quieter than Dorothy; bookish and with as much a love for Dickens and Hardy as he had for Sinatra and Crosby. Like others who had served, he showed a marked reluctance to talk about what he had experienced and had come to regard books and the cinema as the favoured escape routes from the images that lurked in the further reaches of his imagination. He particularly hated it when others called him a hero. There's nothing heroic in surviving, he would say. He thought it an insult to those who hadn't come back. Harry would study his father carefully when he sat in his chair by the fire, his left leg folded over his right knee, tie fixed in place and metal armbands on the sleeves of his shirt regardless of what time of day it was, thin spectacles balanced precariously towards the lower half of his nose, staring intently down at an open copy of *Hard Times*.

But, as the saying goes, opposites attract and the one thing both couples had in common was their love for their children. When Frank and Dorothy first visited Patricia and David for a Sunday roast lunch complete with trimmings, the atmosphere was so easy and natural, you could have been forgiven for thinking they had been friends for life.

Harry smiled as he watched Miriam walk tentatively out of the bedroom, barefoot and wrapped tightly in a pale blue winceyette dressing gown. She looked towards him in the chair and smiled wistfully, before turning into the kitchen. He heard her shuffling around taking a cup from a cupboard, filling the kettle from the tap and flicking the switch. A drawer opened and closed as she helped herself to a teaspoon before the almost industrial noise of the boiling kettle obliterated all other sounds. Harry glanced to the slightly scratched mahogany sideboard to his right. Like himself, it was showing signs of age. Having been with them in almost every home in which they had lived since they had married it had become more than just a piece of furniture, it was a keeper of memories. He lifted the silver-framed wedding photograph that had been positioned at an angle on the sideboard's farthest corner. He brought it down into his lap, held it firmly with one hand clasped to each side of the frame and studied the faces of the two young people in the photograph. It was as if it were both yesterday and yet a lifetime ago all at the same time. These were faces that reflected the excitement and anticipation of new life starting, full of optimism and hope and a sense that now they were together, anything would be possible. But it was also a bittersweet experience looking not only at who they once had been but also what the tolls of time had made them become. He couldn't pinpoint the moment when the feeling of being invincible had met the reality that their bodies were going to be physically unable to keep pace with what their minds wanted their bodies to be able to do. He wondered if everybody experienced looking in a mirror and believing for a split second that it was their grandparent staring back at them. Did everyone remember the first time they realised that other people saw them as old?

What advice would he give to their younger selves if he could travel back to 1960? Probably just to enjoy the moment; to stop fretting about the destination and pay greater attention to the journey because, as he was finding out now, the ultimate destination was overrated.

His memories of their wedding day were affecting. He could still summon up the sense of disbelief that this beautiful girl had agreed to let him share her life. He could still close his eyes and see the pride on their parents' faces and the sensation that, as much as this was their day, his and Miriam's, that they had also been responsible for bringing pleasure into the lives of those most important to them; those that had given them life. That was not just something very special, but something, for which he had also always been grateful. He sighed, wiped away an embryonic tear from the corner of his eye with the back of his hand and returned the frame to its place on the sideboard.

Miriam had emerged from the kitchen now and had sat herself in the armchair opposite, sipping from a floral mug of tea and holding a small piece of over-browned toast that, try as she might, she couldn't bring herself to eat.

It was not an overstatement to say that their first few years of marriage were blissful. They didn't have much but, as Harry would always say when reminiscing in later years, they hadn't wanted for much either. It had been a simpler time without the present obsession with the material that he neither understood nor approved of. They always cut their cloth according to their means, holidaying each year in Margate rather than Marbella, but never complaining and always enjoying the simple pleasures of the cool sea running over their toes as they walked along the beach, of eating ice cream on the seafront or dining on fish and chips with too much vinegar spread across them. And little changed after two became four. Harry would paddle with their twins, Linda and Tim, while Miriam watched from a stripy deck chair on the sand, sipping ginger beer from a plastic cup. In the evenings, they would dress in their smart clothes and, after supper, would take one of the children each onto the bumper cars at Dreamland.

The twins were born in April 1963. It was a moment of conflicting emotions: exhilaration, joy, anxiety and poignancy. Mother and babies were all well, but Miriam's own mother was not. Patricia had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer six weeks before the births. As two new lives were beginning, another was coming to an end. There was a symmetry that was not lost on Harry and he felt as if, to his mother-in-law, in desperate pain and growing weaker by the day, holding on for the arrival of her first grandchildren would be the final act of kindness that she could perform for her daughter. Two days after they were born, Harry managed to put Miriam in a wheelchair and escort her to her mother's bedside. They took a photograph of Patricia, tubes carefully moved aside, holding the new babies, one in each arm, smiling as if

she hadn't a care left in the world. What the photograph didn't show were the nurses on either side of her bed, imploring Harry to take the babies away to allow Patricia to rest. She was having none of it; 'I'll have all the time I need to rest once this wretched disease takes me' she whispered, clutching Harry's wrist as tightly as she could muster. She slipped into a coma the following afternoon, her breathing becoming shallow and fitful before passing peacefully in the early hours of the next morning. As he looked out of the hospital window as the new day dawned, he struggled to reconcile how everyone he could see was going about their day as normal when, for them, the day was as far removed from normal as you could be.

Behind the brave face, he could see the agony in Miriam's eyes at a time that was meant to be among the happiest. To be unable to take that pain away made him feel helpless. Miriam's first act on returning home with their new-born children was not to invite friends over or to push them in a pram around the local park, but to leave them with a babysitter while she attended her mother's funeral. The photograph of Patricia, for the record, had been placed in a matching silver frame and stood at the opposite end of the sideboard to the wedding picture.

For some the inevitable maelstrom of emotions caused by such a combination of events would have challenged the foundations of their relationship. With Harry and Miriam, it simply brought them closer. There was nothing of greater importance to either of them than to provide a home for their children that radiated love and laughter, kindness and support. At times, it seemed as if they were so protected as a unit of four that they found themselves unaware of what was happening in the world outside. In the years that followed he would frequently say that the children were his greatest and possibly only achievement. As for the children, they grew to become the definitive Daddy's girl and Mummy's boy. Walking with them to the local park every Sunday, weather permitting; taking the scraps of bread from the end of the loaf to feed the ducks on the lake would become the highlight of Harry's week. As weeks turned into months and months into years, and pushchairs gave way to toddlers toddling, Harry would stand at a slight distance, watching Miriam help the children with the feeding, and think to himself that there couldn't be another man in London as happy and content as he.

He was sure it wasn't just with hindsight that it felt as if those early years with the kids passed as quickly as it now seemed. They were juggling the combined demands of work and raising twins, money was tight and sometimes

they were so exhausted one or other of them would fall asleep fully clothed in the front room, waking up in the middle of the night and only climbing into bed for what seemed like an hour or two. And yet, in the rose-tinted rear-view mirror on his life, they seemed like the happiest of times.

Miriam took her time to climb out of the chair, gripping the arms to support herself and provide additional leverage. She muttered something about the need to ‘get going’. She carried the plate at a precarious angle, the uneaten piece of toast just about staying on board, as she shuffled back towards the kitchen. She glanced over her shoulder towards Harry. He smiled and blew a kiss. She sighed as she left the room.

There’s something about the transition through the different phases of your life, he reflected as he watched her leave, which you only begin to appreciate when you get there. It’s not that you lose the optimism that you have when you’re young, or certainly it hadn’t been in Harry’s case, but that your optimism becomes tempered by what you come to believe may actually be possible. You may dream in your teens or your twenties of being famous, or rich, or successful in one field or another but by the time you reach your forties, you realise that the things you once regarded as a birthright, are generally the destiny of others. Perhaps it’s that, he thought, or maybe just that your definition of what success is changes over time. Maybe the ambitions you once had for yourself become those you wish to see realised by your children. For him, success was embodied in his marriage to Miriam, in watching his children grow into adults and have children of their own.

Harry may not have accumulated financial riches, but he could look back on a wealth of moments that, even now, made him feel like one of the luckiest men who had lived. These were moments like the scorching summer of 1976, when he had surprised the family with a new car, a Mark Three Ford Cortina in Venetian Red with a black vinyl roof. He had parked it proudly outside their compact two up, two down and, much to Miriam’s faux displeasure, announced that they should pack their bags and prepare for a holiday road trip to Devon. The children were thirteen years old at that point and their different personalities were becoming even more apparent. Linda, who looked a little like his mother, was the more gregarious. She had a large circle of friends who, much to Tim’s irritation, she insisted on inviting round to the house at every opportunity. Linda loved music and dancing, monopolising the car’s cassette player and forcing them to listen to ABBA, T-Rex and Sweet the whole way down the A38 and the M5. Tim was more reserved. He was

obsessive about sport and could switch seamlessly between cricket and football dependent on the season. When Linda tired of Dancing Queen and fell asleep in the back of the Cortina, Tim would engage Harry in conversation over which player - if you could only pick one - you would have in your team. With football, the debate always boiled down to a choice between West Ham's Brooking or Tottenham's Chivers. When it came to cricket, Harry would make the case for the solid and dependable Boycott knowing that Tim would stick to his guns and argue for the fiery Australian fast bowler Dennis Lillee.

The little boy grew up, as they have a tendency to do. In 1991, Tim's decision to move to Los Angeles to live and work felt like a bereavement. It was difficult for Harry to properly articulate the sense of loss he felt; to do so would seem as if he was putting his own feelings ahead of what he knew was in Tim's best interests. He knew deep down that, no matter how hard they both tried – and he knew they both would try - the relationship that he had nurtured with Tim over the previous twenty-eight years could never again be as close or as strong as it had been. This wasn't because neither of them wanted it to be so, but because distance has a tendency to loosen the bonds between people. The strength of the attachment that proximity brings should never be overestimated. It was the first time that Harry really appreciated one of his main responsibilities as a parent: to let his children go. All that he had given them up to that point had been part of that duty but neither did that give him any claim over their affection or their time. It was another one of life's salutary lessons and the second clear occasion on which Harry had begun to feel as if his own time might be slowly ebbing away.

The other had been ten years previously when, without apparent warning, his father had sustained a massive stroke. He had spent nearly a week beside his hospital bed, watching the man that had always been his hero diminished. Ultimately his passing had been mercifully peaceful; he had never regained consciousness. Harry felt the warm embrace of family and friends and understood that Frank's had been a life well-lived. It didn't ease the pain but made it easier to keep the hurt concealed. He stood beside the grave at the funeral and watched charcoal clouds blowing cool and dirty drizzle across the mourners. He looked at those there to support him in his grief and sensed the shuddering realisation that his would be the next generation to die. This sense of his own transience neither upset him nor worried him, but it gave him an appreciation of time, of the need to have something to leave behind; not material or tangible but, if you will, a protective embrace around the generations that followed that perhaps they would only come to recognise

when, in time, they came face to face with their own mortality, when their time came.

Miriam was dressed now. He still found her beautiful in her simple navy dress with matching, low-heeled court shoes. Her white hair was brushed into form and, he suspected, held in place with copious amounts of Elnett spray. He had once joked she needed to be careful in case somebody tried to hold her almost solely responsible for the hole in the ozone layer. Today, she had chosen to wear no make-up. Despite the strain evident on her face, it couldn't suppress the soft, natural beauty with which he had fallen in love, nor dull the sapphire blue eyes that had always had him captured. Too often we suppress something beautiful when we believe we are enhancing it. Miriam paced around the flat; walking in and out of each room, as if on a journey without knowing the destination. She was agitated, he could see that, looking out of the window, unhearing of his protestations to sit down and breathe and relax. It'll be fine, he whispered to her. You'll get through it. *You'll* be fine.

The key turned in the lock and he instantly recognised Linda's cheery call; the cheeriness a bit more forced than normal. Miriam climbed out of the seat and fell into their daughter's arms, resting her head against her chest and sobbing to the point that made breathing difficult. It was a role reversal. The younger woman lifted her mother off and taking a white handkerchief tenderly dabbed away the tears from around her puffy, red eyes. She kissed her once on the forehead and placed one arm on each of her shoulders in an unspoken attempt to transfer strength. Miriam inhaled deeply.

"We should go, Mum. Tim's waiting in the car."

How sad, Harry thought, that the demands on his son's time had always been too great to enable them to spend time together but not so great that he couldn't afford to be here now he was gone.

Miriam nodded, picking up a small handbag with nothing in it. She clicked it open and picked up the small wedding photograph from the corner of the sideboard. It had been six whole days since Harry's death. They had said it had been a heart attack in his sleep. When she asked herself how she could have lay next to him for all those hours without knowing what was happening, he wanted to tell her he hadn't felt a thing. She had tried to wake him, but he was cold and still and his skin was tinged with blue. She had cradled him for a while before calling for help, struggling to catch her own breath and now, here they were, leaving for the final farewell. How could anyone believe she was ready

after these few days given all of the days that had gone before? Linda squeezed her mother's bony hand, feeling the papery skin fold a little in her grasp and gestured towards the door. Miriam smiled as she looked at the photograph. Her Harry, so handsome, so full of all that was good and now, gone in the time it takes to fall asleep. She brought the photograph up close to her face. After twenty thousand nights, one last kiss goodbye.
