

Mum and Dad
Part 1(cut)

They fuck you up, your Mum And Dad.
They may not mean to, but they do.
They fill you with the faults they had
And add some extra, just for you.
Philip Larkin (1974)

I was just eighteen when, for the first time, I left home and headed off for the London School Economics (here after the LSE) and London. I had very little experience of the world other than what I had gained through the lens of family life and school. Even at the end of my time at the LSE the sense I had of those around me was a matter of differences in personalities, not those of class. My family life had generated none of the muscular anecdotes that were shared when we met in the local pub. There, stories of familial chaos, marital upheavals and wild parental eccentricities were met with nods of approval. There were occasions when the absence of ‘interesting’ events in my family lead me to invent amusing stories to gain some degree of social credit. Later, I realised that these fictional flights featuring ‘interesting families’ hadn’t needed to be anchored in reality. After all, I had found it easy to invent fictional versions of my own family life replete with unconventional parents. (I never knew how many of the others were conjuring up similar colourful lives.) It wasn’t as if this disparagement of family life and one’s parents was confined to just our undergraduate circle. Wherever you looked, in music, literature, film and on, and on, our parent’s generation and what they stood for, was under attack. By this time reality was barely discernible from myth.

What became evident was the similarity between the threads running through these stories of familial turmoil. The storytellers almost always identified with those characters responsible for the disruptions. They rarely placed themselves on the side of ‘normal’ family life. (A happy family life was rarely mentioned.) In these stories the preferred family life was one where, at some point, a transgression of what was thought to be ordinary and routine, was sure to take place. Energetic upheavals were a far better state to be in than a family life whose equilibrium simply rested on the weight of habit. Parents,

who themselves could become embroiled in these family disturbances, were considered more authentic than parents who chose a family life that was calm and uneventful. Individualism was valued over allegiance to the group. Boundaries were there to be breached and to break through them was a good thing because the pursuit of personal desires would confer authenticity on the individual brave enough to remain 'true to oneself'. Strong emotion, often at the expense of the family, was preferred to a life of repressed stability. Unsurprisingly, the main targets of these anecdotes were those parents who were thought to lack 'colour' and it was not long before I became one more of the pub malcontents. But not entirely.

In amongst these colourful stories of marital infidelities, criminal siblings and celebrity fathers, was a sort of alternative family life, a kind of negative ghost, made up of all the undesirable qualities that had been rejected as dull, uninteresting or repressive. It was a version of family life that made no mention of the affection that had been at the heart of my upbringing. Looking back, I am puzzled by the ease with which I, too, came to regard life with my parents as colourless and uninteresting. It's at this point that class needs to be brought into the picture.

Class was certainly at work in those pub gatherings with their repeated dismissal of normal family life. Class can throw some light on the puzzle of how (and why) I could invent such stories that were so critical of my parents, stories that were complete fabrications. What I can see now is that we were all in the grip of a species of avant-gardism where authenticity could be gained by going beyond familial restraints we had all experienced in one form or another. Breaking boundaries. (This avant-gardism was just one part of a larger map showing where authenticity lay and indicating the ways it could be acquired. Gaining authenticity meant gaining freedom.) This was a form of middle class rebellion. Its attraction was that it enabled an individual to feel they had lifted themselves out of their class of origin. However, these notions of rebellion did not cut them off completely from where they had come from. This rebellion within their class of origin was such that they would eventually be able to return and enjoy the advantages they had initially scorned. To get to the bottom of the supposed 'colourlessness' of my parents, and my family life, I

would have to discover what it was that I had tried to hide by inventing such fanciful stories about my family life.

The most important thing to know about my parents and myself was that we were lower middle class. I was part of the cohort of young, lower middle class men and women who gained entry into the British universities, institutions that up till then had been heavily middle class. We knew that our position in the class system was not the result of a romantic struggle against adversity, a favourite narrative told of working class life but neither was there little in common between our lower middle class life and that of the middle class above us. The two most important things differentiating us from the middle class were their greater incomes and their having a higher education. Greater incomes enabled more inventiveness in family life such as food, drink and foreign travel, whilst higher education gave access to the professions. Of the two it was probably the absence of higher education that gave rise to the accusations that our way of life was dull and boring. There was no literature dealing with lower middle class life. But this dismissal of the lower middle class lives failed to register what was an important aspect of our lives and that was the gradual decline of any sort of religious allegiance. It was religion that had historically provided 'interest' to lower middle class life. Both my sets of grandparents were fervently religious but it never took root with my parents, despite a number of feint-hearted attempts.

As I mentioned earlier, I arrived at LSE with no knowledge, or so I thought, of where I was situated in the grand scheme of things. It wasn't long before I started to feel that I was, in some way, inferior to the world around me. My lower-middle class upbringing had provided me with, little or no resources, to match the linguistic confidence, the intellectual sophistication, even the manner of dress on display by the people I had to deal with every day. My response to this was shame and, as we have seen, the occasional invention of colourful fibs. I was quick to blame the unhappiness I was sliding into on my parents. Was my family life, and by association myself, dull, boring, and flat? However would it be possible to write about a way of life that had no contours? None of my indistinct, lower middle class experience had the sharp edged, self-possession that I saw all around me? What strikes me now is that the

characterisations made of my family, and of people like my parents, were a form of *middle class* snobbery and was a means by which the critics marked out what they were not. It followed that the way to write about my parents (and myself) would have to lie beyond these perpetual 'put-downs' of their lower middle class life.

What follows is my attempt to present my parents stripped of any of the versions of family life that I acquired in my years at the LSE. Of course, I cannot absent myself totally from this *picture* of my life with my parents. The form I have decided to adopt comes from the memories of my stamp album. I will try and write as if each parental scene resembled stamps in the album. Turn the page and a new stamp appears.

Stamps

Mum

I think Mum is in the kitchen but her figure is being obscured by the sunlight streaming through the glass of the conservatory. It looks as if she is standing at a cooker getting a meal ready for Dad and myself. This was the first house my parents owned and so I'm not sure if the early pleasures of house ownership preceded her lifetime dislike of cooking, or whether it descended on her realisation it was a lifetime sentence. Standing at a cooker would be the place she disliked the most. She was about five years into her marriage and, by now, as she stood in front the cooker a lifetime of preparing meals must have rolled out in front of her. We were always well fed but her cooking hardly ever changed. Both the ingredients and techniques she used came from what she had learned by the side of her working class mother. Both Mum and Dad lived through a time when there were a number of radical changes in the eating habits of the English, none of which seemed to have touched Mum. No garlic, pasta (eventually) and certainly, no olive oil. Eating out presented her with the difficulty of ordering food that she was not already familiar with. So, if in doubt Mum would always order an omelette. Mum and Dad held different political

allegiances that which were often played out over food. What to eat, when to eat and where, rarely found them in agreement. There was a certain bending of the rules when Dad insisted the family occasionally eat takeaways, but the only takeaway that existed for the first half of their marriage, was fish and chips, so it was always the arrival of fish and chips that relieved Mum of cooking duties. Dad's love affair with curry (a banned food.) was part of his desire to live a more cosmopolitan life as part of his left wing politics. Mum's refusal to eat curry on the grounds of taste was part of the suspicion she held towards anything whose origins were unknown. This culinary burden would only lift when there was finally nobody left to cook for.

Through the sunlight, and over her shoulder, I could make out some familiar wall tiles. They were in an Art Deco style. Cream coloured with narrow bands of green and black running along the top. A lifetime later, I saw tiles with the same bands of black and green in a pub I used to visit in Sydney. Seeing those tiles always sent me back to Mum in the kitchen and my first memory of living in a family.

Two lifetimes. One stretching forward to the countless hours I would spend in pubs and the other, Mum, in her Art Deco kitchen, at the beginning of her married life, maybe struggling to understand why she didn't like cooking.

Gosport: UK: Early 1950's.

Dad

Dad was in the Royal Navy from the age of 16 until he was 'demobbed' in 1951. This meant that, after leaving home under a cloud not of his making, he grew up in the navy, but his maturity as an adult was delayed until he began his life as a civilian. Before then, he served right through the war, about which he rarely spoke. Almost 25 years is a long time and there's little doubt that those years profoundly shaped him, but equally, not all of the debts he owed to his life as a sailor were welcome. He struggled to throw off those naval years, and to some extent was successful, but in other ways many of the influences of the navy, and in particular that time he served in the war followed him all his life.

Although I must have seen Dad in uniform many times I have no 'direct' memory of him wearing it, but there is a photograph of a naval ceremony of some kind. The ratings are lined up across the parade ground and Dad is positioned at the end of one of these lines. The difference between his uniform to that of the ratings signified that he was of a higher rank to the rest of his column. Apart from a studio portrait of him in his first uniform, all he had when his naval life was over was a pair of 'genuine' desert boots.

We lived near the seaside, at a place called Southsea, so Mum and I set off one day to see him at work, and give him some support in his first civilian job. I had no idea what Dad was up to but I knew it would be fun. It was a beautiful day. Sunshine, blue sky and a few clouds to make things interesting for an artist. We were walking along the promenade amongst all the holidaymakers. (Southsea was popular holiday spot before the arrival cheap air travel. It was summer, so the promenade was crowded with holidaymakers enjoying the good weather.) We turned a corner and could see Dad at work. At first he hadn't seen us, he was talking to a couple I had never seen before. Mum waved and he eventually saw us. He broke off talking to the two people but not before he handed them a piece of paper. Mum must have already known what he was doing in his new job. I only made sense of it when it was explained to me later. He would approach the 'promenaders' and ask them if they would like to have their photograph taken. If they agreed, Dad would take their picture and then give them a ticket together with the nearby address and the time their photographs would be ready. How he earned any money doing this I never understood but

the job played into two of his strengths. During his naval years he had acquired a considerable knowledge of photography as well as the ability to talk to, and charm, anyone he came across.

My reaction to seeing him accost people and get them to agree to have their picture taken was one of confusion. Like many people, but especially children, to see the world of adults, that is to see them at work, could be a source of pride, but also of shame. Again, like children I was proud of my father, especially to have a father who wore a uniform and who 'worked' on a ship nearby in Portsmouth harbour. So work can confirm to a child that their parent has a valued position in the adult world, but there was something about what Dad was doing on the promenade that made me ashamed. Suddenly, I was confronted with a new world, a non-naval world and a father who no longer wore a uniform. I struggled to understand what he was doing. Was this work? Work for money? Did he realise that he was under an obligation that would stretch out for most of the remainder of his life. Stopping people on the Southsea promenade was just the beginning.

Southsea and Gosport: 1951

Optional Note

Dad's Dress.

Although Dad's naval uniform must have had a lasting presence in the family any memories I have of him wearing it are very few. What I can remember are versions of his civvies. (Shorthand for the clothes he wore immediately he was out of uniform-Civvy Street.) All naval ranks, when they were demobbed, were given clothes thought appropriate to there, soon to be, civilian life. Two things I do remember about Dad's reaction to his demob wardrobe. He never wore any of the garments that might have been due to his residual fashion sense. The prize item in the demob wardrobe was a suit in a pre-war style, a style that had long since disappeared. There was also a hat, which by that time was something disappearing from the male head. When he put it on we all fell about laughing.

When Mum and I went to visit him at work on the promenade, he was wearing clothes that were suited to both the place and the weather. It was a warm summer's day and he was on the promenade, a place where male holidaymakers could wear their clothes in a less formal manner. Dad had taken off his jacket, his tie and had rolled up his shirtsleeves. This was all the adjustments he was able to make to the warm weather. In later years, I suspect he wore versions of the jacket, shirt and tie and flannel trousers combination until he started to teach photography at Leeds School of Art. It was there that he picked up a more casual way of dressing. For instance, he abandoned wearing a shirt and tie. Apart from attending the more elevated occasions requiring a suit and tie, he dressed in this casual manner for the rest of his life.

There is one photograph I have of Dad when he was a student in the late 1950's. After working in commercial photographic studios Mum and Dad decided that it would be a good move for him to get formally qualified. He was accepted by Nottingham Design School for a three year Diploma course in Photography. The photograph I have of him is of three figures dressed up in clown costumes. Despite the make-up, the red noses and clown dress I can still recognise which of the figures is Dad. He is blowing a kazoo, it's rag week and I can tell he is having a wonderful time. Perhaps becoming a student in his late thirties let him go back and replay his life as a young man how he would have liked it, something denied him when he rashly signed up for the navy, and war, as a teenager. Those three years broadened his outlook on the world and contributed to his decision to aim for a teaching position.

Nottingham Design School: Rag Week. Late 1950's

Patsy

This stamp is a difficult one for me to write. I have to break the taboo on children knowing, or being concerned with, the sexuality of one's parents. Just to think about it can give rise to complicated feelings, part shame, and part horror. Surely our parents had never indulged in the act of intercourse, but they must have done otherwise we wouldn't be here.

I can remember Dad taking me aside to tell me that Mum would be away for a few days. She was ill and needed to go to hospital to get better but it was not something serious. I must have been 5 or 6 and had just begun Infants school when this interlude in Mum's presence happened. I had no idea why she had gone to hospital just that she came home intact.

Some time after Mum's visit to hospital she and I went to a peculiar building near the sea. I had no idea what this place was other than I started to play with the children whose home it seemed to be, whilst Mum went into an office where she in conversation with a group of women. Soon, after a number of these visits, a young girl of my age came to stay with us over the weekend. Her name was Patsy and I was pleased I had another playmate to add to my friend who lived on the other side of the street. Patsy visited us for a number of weeks and then suddenly her visits stopped. I can't ever remember anyone explaining why I no longer had my playmate. Patsy.

The chain of events begins with the visit Mum made to hospital. Why she went into hospital is something disputed within the family. My later understanding was when that she had had a miscarriage and/or a dangerous pregnancy that had to be terminated. The 'official' reason that came to light towards the end of her life when she confided in our daughter-in-law, Nikka, that it was because of the damage she had suffered giving birth to me and had required a hysterectomy. No matter what the truth, Mum and Dad were not able to have any more biological additions to the family. Enter Patsy. It's clear that for a time they had considered adopting a child, and Patsy was the one who they thought might be suited to the family. As they have never talked about what happened to convince them not to persist with adoption, and so stop Patsy staying with us at the weekends, is not clear. All I have are some dimmed

memories that, for a while, I had been playing with a little girl whose name I can still remember, a lifetime later.

One other thing, I suspect, happened to Mum as a result of her operation was a loss of libido, and not just a loss, but also distaste for matters sexual. She no longer had any desire for sex not tied to fertility, but that was no longer available. I'm guessing at this, but throughout his lifetime, especially when he was drunk, Dad would try to tell me about how dreadful it was that Mum, etc., etc. He never referred to it directly, but I'm fairly sure that Mum and Dad spent their lives together running along two different sexual tracks. Mum, a person who had lost all interest sex and Dad who must have retained his libido until age finally closed it down.

Elson: 1951

Our Common Affliction

I know I promised in the Introduction I would try and extract myself, as much as possible, from the actions of my parents but what happens in this stamp deserves inclusion as evidence of Mum's care and affection from a person who normally kept her emotional life covered up.

Soon after starting infant school I was pulled out, and brought home by Mum. The reason for my abrupt return home was that the teacher had spotted a small lump of faeces near me on the floor. What must have happened was that the laxatives I had been taking suddenly took effect. In the next scene I am seated on the toilet and I know that this is not going to be a short visit. I would often stay perched on the toilet, sometimes for an hour with no result. My legs dangled down but were still too short to reach the floor. On my right, sitting on a chair, would be Mum encouraging my efforts and reading favourite books to me. Even at this distance, Mum's affection still overwhelms me. Both of us had a lifetime of this affliction, constipation. Her difficulties about keeping 'regular' were an important thread all her life. Even when, she finally went into a Care Home, she would implore visitors to smuggle in her laxative of choice, senna, something banned by those in charge of the home.

Elson. 1952.

Dad and the Radio

One of the most appealing characteristics of Dad was his ability to engage with those he came into contact and draw them into conversation. It was this ability, when later he got his first job teaching in an art school, that made him such an effective teacher, and later, a respected local historian. He remained close to me until I left home for university in a way Mum never had. He presented me with what were invitations to read books, make models of trains, aircraft and boats. Between us there grew up a shared feeling of 'let's go there' or 'let's see what makes that work'. It was a relationship of making and listening and that is where the radio comes in.

Before television, it was the radio that provided a family with news and entertainment. Radio was important and every home had one. My grandfather drove every one in the house mad by insisting that he listen to every news bulletin from morning to evening. In much of the advertising promoting radios a family would be pictured sitting in a circle listening to the radio. Between 5.00 pm and 8.00 pm Dad and I would could be found together, listening to our favourite programmes. He had the knack of knowing which ones would interest me. It began with Children's Hour. The evening meal. Then one of the programmes aimed at a broader audience. Our all-time favourite was 'Journey into Space', a programme that had a huge audience and one that I supplemented with the popular Eagle comic with Dan Dare, *The Pilot of the Future*. Dad was expert in finding English language broadcasts located on the more obscure regions of the dial, especially the American forces network broadcast across Europe. We would occasionally stop twiddling the dial and Dad would explain where the strange places that appeared on the illuminated dial were.

A later memory I have of him is of standing in the rain, cheering on my school rugby team that I was playing in. The journey home after the match would be taken up with a detailed analysis of the game. On very special occasions we would meet up in London – how this was done I can't remember- and set off for the White City to watch the athletics contests between England and an East European team.

I realise I have fallen into the same mistake I warned against in the Introduction. Dad had the best bits and Mum carried on with the housekeeping, without which these exciting adventures would not have been possible. But Dad was not always a wholly reliable friend. There were unpleasant occasions when, without Mum's reassurance, I would have been very upset. I'm referring to Dad's drinking and the effects it would have on him, effects he seemed to need for all of his life. His drinking bouts, at least those I was familiar with, lasted for only a couple of days at a time. He was never violent. If anything drink would exaggerate his already cheerful personality. The alcohol seemed to generate a desire for Mum and myself join him in his partying mood. But for a child, your father drunk was a frightening figure. He had become a stranger. Even so, there was one occasion I remember, that in retrospect was very funny. One evening he came home drunk and Mum must have had a go at him. He then started telling a story about why he was late. It was because he had bumped into a world famous archaeologist and had started to tell her about my, current, interest in digging up history. Even when he was lying he wanted to include me in his drunken fibs. This sharing relationship lasted until I left home for University and so the opportunities for doing things together were few. One of my greatest pleasures after the move to Australia was to take him to the Sydney Cricket Ground. But most of all, I treasured the time he and Sam sat in on one my seminars. They only stayed for a short time but once again it was a moment of sharing. Mum never seemed that interested in my professional life. I think it was too remote for her to appreciate what it was that I did other than being able to say that her son was a lecturer who worked in Sydney University. That pleased her.

Gosport-Luton- Sydney 1951-2014

Mum's Secrecy

When I see clips on television of local estate agents making mention of how wonderful was the space that the house they are spruiking is for *entertaining*. Entertaining was something that, like higher education, was missing from our lives and that of our neighbours. Exceptions were family gatherings and, once television became a common fixture, a small group of friends might gather for a Saturday, or Sunday, evening's viewing.

I want to open this stamp with a memory of one occasion when Mum and Dad did try their hand at entertaining. A colleague of Dad, and his wife, were invited to lunch. As this was a very rare event the household was on high alert, trying to make sure nothing could go wrong. All seemed to be going smoothly. We were all sitting at the table in the, rarely used, front room. What must have happened, was that the conversation had drifted onto religion. All of a sudden, Mum launched into the traditional Methodist hammering of Catholicism. The one outburst I can remember was 'I have no time for people who can go to confession and do what they for the rest of the week'. Silence. The woman waited for a moment and then said 'I'm a catholic'. Mum tried to apologise but it was too late. Even I could understand that their hospitality, and so their attempt at entertaining, was in ruins.

This lunchtime outburst about religion was, apart from the occasional comment on what she saw on television, the only time I can't recall Mum making any extended recital of what she made of the world and its ways. Was it that the dreadful embarrassment caused by her anti-Catholic outburst made her shut down any judgements she might want to make forever? Whatever it was, Mum seemed to be covered in a general passivity, where she was untouched by ideas, or maybe it was simply her acquisition of the social codes of female deferment to male authority? Whatever it was, a blanket fell over what was going on in her mind and whatever it was remained secret and her concern alone.

There was a sharp contrast between Mum and Dad when it came to politics. Dad was an ardent Labour supporter. Always eager to talk to anybody, anywhere, about the current political landscape and would keep up a non-stop

commentary when the TV news was on. He was an active member of the local branch of the Labour Party, a group he would finally quit because he believed it was not socialist enough. Mum would remain silent on politics, as on everything else. Come election time, she would head off to vote with no indication of which party she would support. But this was not a secret. Dad always knew she would vote for the liberal candidate, and why. But they never engaged in political conversation other than Mum raising her eyebrows when Dad's left wing outbursts were more than she could stand.

.

There is one thing that may throw into doubt my claim that Mum was 'cowering' inside of a chronic passivity and that her secrecy was a form of fear, brought on by a kind of repression. But these are external judgements made about Mum and they overlook what *her* view of the world might have been. She was far from being empty headed. Yes, there was a reticence that governed much of her doings but her attitudes were not just the result of external pressures. Perhaps like all of us, it was possible for her to experience two things at the same time. There were the pleasures to be had from knowing but not telling. I'm sure that she might hold an opinion, but preferred to elaborate it mentally rather than opening it up for a shared consideration. There were occasions when this reticence could be broken. She had a well-developed sense of humour and would laugh unreservedly when her favourite comedians appeared on television. At the far end of Mum's emotional spectrum were those occasions when there were tears. One of those occasions that I witnessed, was when she was in despair over Dad's drinking. Under pressure from Mum he retired and they were able at last to get it under control. Her tears flowed when I boarded the train for London and University. She probably sensed that I would no longer live with them in the family home.

Mum's Secrecy and Dad's Drinking

A few years after his death Mum asked me-with no preliminaries- 'Do you think your father was an alcoholic?' An enormous amount of pressure must have built up for her to ask me such a question. To ask me this about Dad would mean opening up about their life together, something she rarely ever spoke about. By asking about his drinking, from all of their time together, made me think she was letting me know that it had been an important part of their life together.

My reply to Mum's question, as well as I can remember, was 'yes, now and then'. I knew of two times when his drinking got on top of him.

Before he had left the navy he got into trouble coming home on a bus drunk. What he did during his bus ride I don't know other than he was arrested and found guilty of disturbing the peace. There was a side effect of this trouble. The night he was drunk was the day before his promotion exams were held. The result was he was never able to gain a promotion for the remainder of his time in the navy.

Much later his drinking became so serious that the Principal of the College where he worked contacted Mum. He told her that if Dad's drinking didn't stop he would be sacked. Resignation would be the honourable way out. This time his drinking was dangerous. It was a short walk from home to where he worked and it was sometime before they discovered that he was stuffing bottles in the hedgerows to keep him going on the journey home. At this point I would have answered Mum's question with a 'Yes'. So he resigned and some control was finally placed on his drinking. But he was never able to give up alcohol completely. He was never a social drinker and when he did drink it would only last for a day. As he always had, when drunk he would try to convince us all that he was sober, or that he had taken too much of his many medicines. I always thought that he only used drink as a means, not an end. That end lay beyond the jovial behaviour he would assume when drunk. The end he was seeking was unconsciousness. When he was younger, he would swallow codeine tablets as well as drink. Without wanting to be pretentious, I think he didn't want to exist for a short while. Was it the war, or the abusive treatment he received as a child, that lead him seek oblivion? I don't know

what it was he wanted relief from? Whatever it was, it was a need that followed him for a lifetime.

His drinking must have been a constant presence in their life together, and at times, Mum must have felt as if she were on a volcano waiting for the next eruption. But at the same time they had plenty of good times together. Holidays abroad to places they would have hardly been able to imagine back on that sunny promenade. Dad's move into teaching, and a pension, meant that they had a comfortable life when he retired. In the end, they fell over the finishing line still together.

Ravenshead. 1980's

Last Stamp: Dad's Death

I had to make a sudden the trip to the UK after a phone call from Mum warned me that Dad was not well. When I first saw him his whole presence looked shrivelled, both physically and mentally. His poor health was pulling his body inwards to a point that we all hoped was someway off.

In the morning we set off to do, what we always did when I was visiting, and that was to visit our favourite, local building, Southwell Minster. Dad stayed in the car –by now he was too weak to walk very far- whilst Mum and I went to look at Minster's beautiful Chapter House. Dad was sitting in the back seat looking puzzled as to why he wasn't in the driving seat and sad that he couldn't join us in the Minster. Our outing had only increased the isolation brought on by his illness. He looked so sad. Mum and I walked round to the high street to our favourite butchers and bought some of the sausages that we all enjoyed.

Back home and the first thing to do was cook the sausages. I was sitting next to Dad, watching television and eating lunch. There was a thump as he slid off his chair on to the carpet. Straightaway, I knew he had died but I thought I should administer CPR. At this point I really had no idea what to do other than follow what I had seen happen on TV dramas. But, I soon gave up. For a while I could taste the sausages we had bought earlier that day. Perhaps his final act of sharing.

Southwell. 1990's

Last Stamp: Mum's Death

This is what Sam read at Mum's funeral service. I was ill and could not travel to the UK. It was important because at the very end of her life I stumbled across what was perhaps her most profound concern-adoption.

Thank you all for coming today to say goodbye to Mum. Jenni and I are sad that we can't be with you but medical matters have made it impossible for me to travel any distance.

Those of you who were close to Mum might have known that she had been adopted when only a baby. This was no secret but she never spoke of this in any detail. I knew nothing more about the circumstances surrounding her adoption until one day, during one of our visits; she quietly sat down next to me. She was holding an envelope out of which she took some letters that she asked me to read to her. They were letters from her biological mother to her adoptive mother and all of them were similar expressions of concern for the health and welfare of her baby, Mum. What shone through them all was the distress her original mother felt about having to give mum up. After reading four or five of the letters she stopped me reading any more. She gathered them up, placed them back in the envelope and never said another word about what had been revealed in the letters.

It wasn't until the following day that I realised what had happened. She had the letters all her adult life but had never read them. The day she decided to see what was in them was the moment she decided to find out if her original mother had loved her. The letters made it clear that she had.

When I look back on that day I am filled with love for the strength Mum displayed all her adult life in living with, perhaps, the most important question we all need an answer for, 'Am I loved?' unanswered. She finally decided to settle matters by sharing her love for me and asking me to read her letters.

Goodbye Mum. Jenni, Sam, Nikka, Theo, Winnie and I hope you have a safe journey to wherever it is you are going.