HALF-TRUTHS & WHITE LIES

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TRANSWORLD
BOOKS

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About the Book

When Tom Fellows proclaims that a Venn diagram is a far better way of illustrating modern family ties than a traditional family tree, his young daughter Andrea has no idea that he is referring to their own situation. It is only when she loses both her parents in a shocking car accident that she takes an interest in her own genealogy and begins to realize that her perfect upbringing was not all that it seemed . . .

Half-truths & White Lies is a beautifully crafted, thought-provoking novel that questions the influence of the people who are missing from our lives. It examines the thin line between love and friendship, looking at our complex emotioinal needs. It also explores how one woman's life can be dictated by her desire for children, whilst another's is shaped by her decision not to have them.

Half-Truths & White Lies

Jane Davis

For Maureen, whose story telling was an inspiration.
See you on the other side.

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‘I never saw any good that came out of telling the truth.’

John Dryden

‘Three may keep a secret, if two of them are dead.’

Benjamin Franklin

Part One

Andrea’s Story

Chapter One

IS IT POSSIBLE to tell the difference between a dream and a premonition? Or is a premonition just a dream that life later adds meaning to, so that we convince ourselves that we have the power to see into the future?

My family lived with my mother's mother who, it was whispered, could change the course of history with the use of a simple phrase, so concepts such as these do not seem so very extraordinary to me. Although she was oblivious to the extent of her powers, Nana's sentences that began 'Mark my words' were the kiss of death. She thought that she just had the uncanny knack of always being right.

'Mark my words! That boy will never amount to anything.' She would cast her opinions carelessly, and a future of misfortune and underachievement would now be a certainty for her poor victim rather than a vague possibility.

When she aimed her comments at one of us, we were quick to cross our fingers for luck, the traditional family method of preventing her from sealing our fates.

'Mark my words, Andrea, you're going to regret having seconds later,' she scolded when I insisted on another spoonful of shepherd's pie. 'You won't have any room for rice pudding.' As I had to sit and watch the others eat my favourite dessert, she couldn't resist raising her eyebrows and saying, 'What did I tell you?'

As a child, I had a recurring dream. In that dream I was falling in a rolling motion, gathering momentum all the way. The green of the grass, the brown of the earth and the blue of the sky became blurred, but provided clues of which way

was up and which was down. Eventually, I would have to close my eyes when dizzying nausea overtook me.

I associated that dream with a heady feeling of excitement and anticipation in the pit of my stomach. The point where the familiar meets the unfamiliar; the solid ground of the gentle slope giving way to the sheer drop.

I felt drawn to activities that induced that feeling. Somersaults, cartwheels, spinning in circles; being blindfolded at the start of a party game; rolling down grassy, daisy-speckled banks, arms folded over my chest. Sliding down slopes on tea-trays in the fresh snow; riding the big wheel when the fair came to town. Handstands on the side of the swimming pool, legs hovering aloft, waiting for the moment when the water reaches up to swallow you. I would jump into my father's arms from a height, safe in the knowledge that he was there to catch me. The pause at the top of the slide before letting go translated into the hesitation at the top of the ski slope before digging in the poles and pushing off. On my first holiday alone, I tried bungee jumping from a suspension bridge.

'That girl has no inbuilt sense of fear,' was Nana's reaction. 'She doesn't know when to stop. Mark my words, she'll come a cropper.'

'Weren't you scared of falling?' My mother, a vertigo sufferer, asked with genuine wonderment when I showed her the photos.

'It's the feeling of falling I enjoy,' I tried to explain. 'It's the only thing that makes you feel free.'

'Oh, I couldn't.' She shuddered. 'I'd be the one standing at the top refusing to jump.'

'It's not the fall you want to worry about, love,' my father joked. 'It's landing that'll kill you.'

'Oh, Tom!' Nana tutted, convinced that others were capable of bringing bad luck into the house.

It seemed to me that my parents had always played it safe. Semi-detached in suburbia, room enough for me and,

because she couldn’t cope on her own, for Nana. Nine to five. Fish-and-chip takeaway on a Friday. Sunday roast. Ford Escort. Two weeks’ holiday in the same hotel in Spain every summer. God knows they deserved it. The truth is that I had long since outgrown the safety of the semi but, like so many of my generation, I lacked the means to buy a property of my own and the inclination to rough it in the sort of bed-sit that my wages would have afforded. I led a charmed life, although I would have taken great offence at anyone who suggested as much.

Our very average family was illustrated by a family tree that I had drawn as part of a school project at the age of eleven. It hung in the hall among family photographs, something that I passed several times every day and took little notice of, but I would have been embarrassed to admit that it was my handiwork. I can remember being criticized very harshly by my teacher for failing to make an entry for my paternal grandfather.

‘But my daddy didn’t have a father,’ I protested, repeating what he had told me over the years. (I enjoyed this small piece of information – as I grew older it was the only thing that made me think that there might be a story behind my family that was actually worth hearing.)

‘Of course he had a father,’ the teacher insisted. ‘Everybody has a father.’

When I asked my father about this, he told me that my diagram was one hundred per cent accurate and that he was more than happy with it.

‘Who does she think she is?’ he asked with genuine annoyance. ‘You would think that I would know if I had a father or not.’ I knew better than to push him any further on the subject. I could twist him around my little finger, but there were certain subjects that were simply not up for discussion. ‘My mother loved me enough for two,’ was all he would say. This did not prevent him discussing the matter with my teacher. I was humiliated to learn that he had paid

a visit to the school and told her that neither he nor his family would be forced to fit into whatever outgrown idea of a family they had in mind.

‘But what did you say?’ I asked miserably, trying to prepare myself for whatever sarcastic comments might pass my way.

‘Nothing for you to worry about. I simply told her that I may not want to be a tree and that I can be a twig, a bush or a herbaceous border if I chose.’

‘You didn’t!’ I squealed.

‘Now I come to think of it, I shouldn’t have stopped there. I might like to be a family triangle, or a family rhomboid or a family flow chart. Or even a family Venn diagram.’

‘A Venn diagram?’ I was horrified.

He sketched a series of three interlinking circles for me. ‘Yes, that works just fine. That’s Mummy, that’s you and that’s me. You can tell Miss Whateverhernameis that from now on we will be a Venn diagram.’

‘Andrea, don’t listen to him, love,’ my mother sighed. ‘Tom, she’s just trying to teach them about where they have come from. This isn’t personal.’

‘They should be trying to teach children to think, not to stick ridiculous labels on people.’

You can guess who won that debate by the fact that the family tree found its way into a frame and on to the wall.

‘This is nice, isn’t it?’ my mother would habitually say as we settled round the dining-room table for Sunday lunch. The question was serious enough, and she looked around the table searching, almost as if she expected someone else to appear, sometimes challenging us to disagree, checking that we were all satisfied with our individual lots. Occasionally, I felt that she was trying to convince herself that this was what she worked so hard for every week. The chance to have her family around the table and share a home-cooked meal. It seemed such a small reward. I knew

that I could never be satisfied with the life that she had settled for.

‘Smashing, love,’ my father replied as he carved. ‘You’ve done us proud again.’

‘Oh, yes,’ Nana would agree, frowning at the pink centre of the meat and the crispness of the vegetables, which were not to her taste. Steamed, for goodness’ sake! ‘The roasties look marvellous. Done to a “t”.’

My mother beamed at this, the ultimate compliment. ‘You must have taught me well, Mum.’

It was the same routines that I found so tedious at times that made us feel safe, made it possible for us to go out into the world, to be who we were and do our own things. Without those routines, for that one meal of the week when the television was turned off, we didn’t always have enough to say to each other. My father would comment, ‘It must be good, love, it’s all gone quiet. You could hear a pin drop in here.’ It was in the silences that my mother would take the time to look at us in turn and smile. ‘This is nice, isn’t it?’

And then it all changed. All the routines were taken away, and I can hardly believe that I miss them the most.

To celebrate my parents’ twenty-fifth wedding anniversary, my father surprised my mother by arranging a weekend away. He had let me in on the secret, of course. I was needed to stay at home to look after Nana, otherwise he wouldn’t have put it past my mother to refuse to go. Or to want to take Nana with them. But he had planned for that.

He kept one surprise even from me. That Friday evening he arrived home from work in an open-topped Austin-Healey 3000, sleek in black and chrome with red leather seats. Only two red leather seats. It had been a dream of his to own one, a dream which had been whittled away gradually and demoted to a dream to drive one. Even so, the grin on his face told me that it was not a disappointment, although the

luggage I had so carefully planned had to be downsized to fit in the boot.

‘One hundred and fifty brake horse power.’ He rubbed his hands together.

My mother became a teenager again when she saw the car. Any reservations that she might have dreamt up at the thought of being whisked off at a moment’s notice were quelled. Normally, she wouldn’t have even contemplated the idea of a weekend away before completing a full inventory of the freezer to ensure that there were enough single-sized portions of homemade cottage pie to feed Nana and me for a good few weeks.

‘I wonder . . .’ She paused outside, tapping a finger against the side of her mouth and narrowing her eyes. Then she turned and ran into the house.

‘Laura!’ My father called after her. ‘We’ve got to get going. The traffic on the motorway is going to be chocka. Oh, it’s no good.’ He looked momentarily deflated. ‘Once she’s got an idea in her head . . .’

‘Ta-da!’ She appeared wearing a pair of red sling-backs that looked as if they had seen far better days under her jeans and clutching a red dress, which she was trying unsuccessfully to fit into her handbag.

It seems that those shoes had much the same effect on my father as the car had done on my mother, and he looked ten years younger as he opened the car door for her. ‘Your lucky shoes! Now you’re talking.’

I stood at the end of the path to watch my parents disappear down the road, their eyes aglow, hands touching thighs and laps, feeling that I was intruding. Feeling strangely parental. Shouting, ‘Keep your eyes on the road!’

Nana knocked that out of me quickly enough by commenting, ‘Mark my words, that thing looks like a death trap.’

The news came about four hours later, delivered by two policemen who arrived on the doorstep just as I was about

to go to bed. It was without any outward sign of emotion that I heard that my parents had been driving in the middle lane of the M6 when a foreign lorry driver had pulled out and clipped the edge of their car, sending it into a spin. In all likelihood, the car would have been too low on the road for the lorry driver to see in his mirrors. My mother had been at the wheel. She tried to correct the unfamiliar vehicle but veered to the left at speed, crashing through the barrier before the car rolled down the bank. There was talk that her red sling-backs had become caught in the pedals, causing her to lose control. At that point, there was quite a steep drop and the car would have bounced before rolling several times, giving alternate views of steel, lights and sky. Steel, lights and sky. My mother wouldn't have seen much of the blurred view or felt the nauseous feeling of anticipation in her stomach for long. She was decapitated, possibly as early as the first roll of the car, her body thrown clear of the wreckage, fuelling speculation that she hadn't been wearing a seatbelt. My father's neck was broken, but witnesses say he was still alive in his position trapped upside down under the vehicle, facing my mother's head, where it had come to rest in the ditch.

'Oh, my love,' he was heard to say, 'I always said it's not the fall that'll kill you.'

Chapter Two

EVERY CHILD HAS an adult in their lives that they call ‘uncle’ even though he is not a relative. A man who hides his loose change down the back of the sofa for you to find. A man who lets you ride on his back around the living room and tickle him relentlessly. A man who brings your father home late smelling of beer. A man who pretends to steal your nose and hides it in his clenched fist. Who makes you count his fingers forwards and backwards to see if he still has the full set. A man who seems to keep the pockets of his work suit full of sweets. Mine was Uncle Pete, my father’s best friend, a crumpled, lovable mess of a man.

It was Uncle Pete I called the morning after that terrible news. Before I had the courage to tell Nana, who had been fast asleep throughout, I needed to experiment saying the words out loud. Killed in a car crash. Shoes caught in the pedals. Both killed. No seatbelt. Staring at her head. Hit by a decapitated lorry. Dead red sling-backs.

For a long time I stared at the phone, hoping it would ring, willing it to be him. Car rolled down the bank. ‘Dial,’ I instructed my hand. ‘Dial now.’ Rolled several times. Falling makes you feel free. I made a couple of false starts, hanging up before he answered. M6. Still alive when they found him. The time before last, I ended the call as soon as he picked up the receiver, unable to speak. Lost control. Rolled over and over. Ended up in a foreign ditch. It’s not the fall that’ll kill you, love. Red lorry, yellow lorry. Red lorry, yellow lorry.

I took a deep breath and rang again. *Answer! Why don’t you answer?*

‘Look, who is this?’ he answered gruffly. ‘This is the fifth time. I haven’t got time for your games. This had better be good. ‘

‘Uncle Pete, it’s me. Andrea. I don’t know how to tell you this, but there’s been an accident. It’s Mum and Dad. They’re both . . .’

I was prepared for many things, but not for him to hang up on me. I didn’t recognize the noise that escaped me as my own.

‘Andrea!’ Nana was calling loudly. ‘Is that you? Run down the road and get us a paper. There’s a love. Money’s in the tin on the fridge. Have you seen my glasses?’

Escape seemed as good a plan as any. Anywhere other than the cheerful kitchen and its yellow walls and framed prints of rare breeds of pigs, bought as a set from Woolies.

On automatic pilot, I turned in the direction of the paper shop, hands in pockets, head down. As long as no one speaks to me. As long as I don’t see anyone I know. I walked fast. Faster than usual. I felt myself breaking into a run. I hadn’t run in years. Run for the sheer hell of it. My legs carried me further than I imagined possible before my breathing shortened to panting and I struggled to catch my breath. I ran through the pain, not looking or caring where I was going. I didn’t see what made me fall, but I fell quite spectacularly, or so I hear, without putting out my hands to stop me. My chin hit the pavement and I tasted blood. That’s when I stopped. Climbing frames, ski slopes and bungee jumps had not defeated me. An ordinary pavement less than a mile from home broke my jaw but saved me from the horrors of breaking the news to Nana and of formally identifying my parents’ bodies. And my mother’s head.

Chapter Three

I COULDN'T BE angry with Uncle Pete when he came to visit me in hospital. Even if I'd been fuming, it would have been difficult to tell him so with very limited jaw movement, so he was completely safe.

Whenever my mother referred to Uncle Pete, she had always commented that what he needed was the love of a good woman. When I was very young, I loved him so much that I imagined that woman might one day be me. I had long since been of the opinion that what he actually needed was to lose a couple of stone, learn to iron and for a good friend to tell him to shave what little was left of his black, wiry hair into a number one (or to cut it for him when he was asleep on the sofa after one of his legendary 'working lunches'). My mother described him as an attractive young man who would have been a very good catch. I doubted that anyone who was unable to take care of himself would make a great partner, regardless of how much money he earned. Unless, of course, you were capable of winning an Oscar, partially sighted, aspiring towards sainthood or prepared for a life of domestic slavery.

That day, instead of his normal, confident amble, he shuffled into the ward, timidly asking the starched nurse for directions. His eyes seemed to have shrunk beneath puffy lids and dark circles, and at first they couldn't meet my own. His unshaven double chins were exaggerated three-fold under a bowed head.

'I didn't realize you'd been in the accident as well!' He looked shocked at my bandaged head. I found myself looking back at him, aware that I was mirroring his

expression. He didn't need to explain what my parents' deaths meant to him. His face said it all.

'Fell,' I tried to explain with difficulty through my wired jaw. 'Tipped over.' I shook my head, unable to form the words I wanted to say. Two at a time was as much as I could manage. No 'r's. On an ordinary day, we would have made a joke out of that.

'Andrea's not herself today. She's got no "r"s.'

'What on earth is she going to sit on?'

As it was, I would have to build up to a sentence, let alone a conversation.

He looked confused by the sequence of events, but I could only point to my jaw, motion downwards with a hand to suggest a fall, and shrug.

'Don't try to talk. Look, I'm so sorry I let you down,' he stumbled. 'I thought you were going to tell me you had been arrested or that you are on drugs or pregnant or something. I could have coped with any of those . . .'

There was silence between us for a while, then he sighed, closed his eyes and shuddered. 'I'm going to make it up to you. The red sling-backs. I don't suppose your mother ever told you the story of her lucky shoes?'

I raised my eyebrows and shook my sorry head. The sling-backs did not conjure up any happy memories for me. They only represented one thing; they had been instrumental in the crash that killed both of my parents. Uncle Pete must have known this. He wanted to tell me what they had meant to my mother.

'Then she didn't tell you the story of how she and your father met.'

I racked my brains and then thought this very strange.

'No? I expect they were being kind.' He reached out and covered one of my small, pale hands completely with one of his own bear-sized paws. 'You probably don't realize that I went to school with Laura,' he began. 'She was the prettiest girl in the school by far. No one came near her. And she was

nice to go with it. Never underestimate the importance of being nice. Most of the girls would just ignore the boys who weren't popular or in the sports teams, but your mother would always say "hello" in the lunch queue or shout after me to wait for her if she was walking home alone. I was always secretly in love with her, but she was so far out of my league that it wasn't even worth worrying about. Your mother was a goddess.

'We lost touch for a while when she left school at sixteen. I took my A levels and went to university, while your mother went out to work. On the odd occasion I saw her, she looked so sophisticated. Those of us who stayed on at school had the chance to grow up much more slowly. I felt like a child compared with her.

'After I qualified, my first job was at Atkins and Company on the local High Street, where your mother was already working as a secretary. How do you like that for a coincidence?'

Pennies were falling into place, although I had had no idea that Uncle Pete had known my mother first; he had always been my father's friend.

'It was so good to see a friendly face. And what a face! We chatted about the people we had kept in contact with from school, what they were doing, who they were going out with. She always was easy to talk to. Good company should make you feel relaxed, and she had the knack. She was dating an older fellow – can't remember his name for the life of me – but he was an electrician or something like that. He was paid cash in hand at the end of the week and I can tell you that it was better money than a trainee solicitor earned in those days. He could afford to look the part, had a car, could take her out to dinner and buy her all the things she wanted. I met him once or twice when he picked her up from work. He was a bit too flashy for my liking, but you couldn't ignore the attraction.

‘When they split up, it was my shoulder she cried on. He’d been cheating on her with some other girl, the fool. It was after that that we got very close. If we were a couple of girls you’d have called us best friends, I suppose. She always told me how much she valued our friendship, which wasn’t exactly what I wanted to hear. I have to admit that I hoped it would turn into something more. And it might have done if she hadn’t met your father.

‘One day, we were sitting in her favourite café. It had a bar by the window that faced out on to the High Street, where your mother liked to sit on a high stool and watch the world go by. She was dressed in a fitted red dress and her red sling-backs, which were new. It wasn’t an outfit that just anyone could have got away with. They were her going-out clothes – not like today when young people have the money for a whole wardrobe full. You had your work clothes and, if you were lucky, you had another outfit for best. The shoes must have had a good three-inch stiletto heel on them, which she had hooked over the metal bar on the stool. She couldn’t resist a glance at them every now and then. And I was aware of other people looking at her as well.

‘Suddenly, your mother grabbed my arm, and pointed to a young man with shoulder-length hair, wearing a leather jacket with a picture of an eagle on the back. He was sauntering past, cool as anything. “Isn’t that Tommy Fellows from the Spearheads?” she said. They were a local rock band who were just getting some recognition, and he was their lead singer. I was so desperate to impress her that I stupidly told her I knew him. “I’d love to meet him,” she said, and there was nothing else for it.

‘Without any idea of what I was going to say, I ran after him, caught him up – panting away – and told him that my girlfriend (yes, I actually called her my girlfriend) was dying to meet him and could he please pretend that he knew me. He looked at me like I was a madman, then he glanced over his shoulder towards the window of the café where your

mother was sitting, waving at us. And that was all it took. When he saw her, his expression changed completely, “Your girlfriend, you said?” He frowned. I don’t think he could move for a good minute.

‘I nodded enthusiastically. “Laura Albury.”

‘As we reached the door of the café, he turned to me and said, “You’d better tell me your name.”

‘“It’s Pete. Peter Churcher.”

‘So he ushered me through the door, patting me on the back and saying, “It’s good to see you, mate. It must be . . . what?”

‘“Two years.”

‘“Two years! And don’t tell me,” – he held out a hand to your mother – “you must be Laura. Pete, for once, you didn’t exaggerate.”

‘And it was at the moment I saw them exchange looks that I realized what a stupid mistake I had made. What chance did I stand against the Tom Fellowses of this world? But it was more than that. It was obvious from the start that Tom and your mother were made for each other. And he wasn’t just an idiot in a band who was happy to steal some other bloke’s girlfriend. When I tried to make my excuses and leave, he followed me outside, we exchanged telephone numbers and he invited me for a beer.

‘“Look,” he said, “I feel weird about this,” meaning the fact that I had left him alone with your mother.

‘“Make sure you see her home,” I said. “Her mother always makes me promise I’ll see her home.” I knew that the only thing that I could do was walk away.

‘“I’ll do that, Pete,” and he gave me as warm a handshake as I’ve ever been given from someone I’ve just met, with Laura nodding and smiling from her bar stool. After that, she always called the red sling-backs her lucky shoes. Turns out they weren’t quite as lucky as she thought.’

His eyes filled and he blew his nose noisily on a cotton handkerchief. ‘Love at first sight.’ He tried to smile. ‘People

talk about it, but I've experienced it and I've seen it. That was the effect your mother had on people. She could light up a room. And you know, as far as I know Tom never did give the game away that we didn't know each other before that day at the café. When we met up, we padded out our history a little more each time. That was how we became such great friends. We were co-conspirators even when there was no longer a cause. It was some time before I realized that Tom Fellows, even with his hair and his leathers and his front-man image, felt the need to impress Laura Albury as much as I did. It was an unspoken thing between us that he realized how much I cared for her. If he caught me looking at her for too long occasionally, he would just smile. He remembered how it felt when he couldn't take his eyes off her the first day he saw her sitting in the café window.'

Uncle Pete didn't bring chocolates or grapes as a gift. He brought me an old photograph album, leather-bound with black card pages and photo corners.

'This is for you now.' He choked, patting the cover, as if he didn't really want to let it go. 'You think your parents were middle-aged and boring. Don't try to tell me you don't. But I can assure you that they were, quite simply, magnificent. There,' he said as if talking to someone other than himself, 'I've told her now.'

Then he broke down. The hand that had trailed on the photograph album half waved, half gestured that I was not to say anything, and he left without another word. His shoulders were so hunched that I was left with the image of a headless man walking away from me.

Chapter Four

I WAS TWENTY-FOUR when I lost both of my parents, but I discovered the people that they had been for the first time as I recovered in St Theresa's Hospital thumbing through Uncle Pete's photograph album. In that volume I saw them larking about and exchanging tender glances as lovers. They became more real to me than they ever had been, people starting out on their lives with hopes, dreams and ambitions, rather than just members of that strange species called parents. Uncle Pete had catalogued those early years so religiously, so honestly that the photos conveyed more than the words that we dared not speak. Each photo was dated and captioned in white ink. No one but a casual observer could have ignored the role that he played in their history, and I could only draw the conclusion that it wasn't just my mother he loved. The photographs of my father betrayed an amateur photographer who had spent many hours studying the lines of my father's jaw and the fall of his hair. Tom Fellows, as I discovered to my surprise, had been a very beautiful young man.

Of course I had seen photographs of my parents before. Their official wedding photographs, stiff and formal. My first birthday. Family holidays. I could track their gradual transformation through the seventies and eighties. My father's changing facial hair and collars. My mother's changing hemlines and hair colour. And at the centre of most of the family photos, me, gap-toothed and grinning, the rather surprising product of such a beautiful couple.

Although Uncle Pete's photo album showed me faces that I already knew, his photos portrayed real, living people.

Nineteen seventy-four. My mother watching my father's band play in a smoke-filled room, eyes transfixed, the light from the stage catching her face. Close-ups of my father holding the mic and singing, eyes closed, strands of hair glued to his face, beads of sweat clinging to his forehead. A photo of them both at the same venue, my father in leather, arms wrapped about my mother from behind. My mother posing coyly, one hip jutting out, bottom lip pouting, every inch the rock chick. Then, off guard, she is coiling a curl of hair around her index finger, lips slightly parted, looking abandoned in the crowd. Her guard is down and she looks more vulnerable than I have ever seen her.

Nineteen seventy-five. A trip to the seaside. My father and Uncle Pete skimming stones, a blur of movement. My mother and father paddling in the sea, silhouettes holding hands. My father splashing my mother while she tries to run away. A sequence of photos with my mother in a bikini. Deliberately hiding her face with her hands as she sees the camera. Lying on a striped towel, her face half hidden by a wide-brimmed sun hat, legs crossed. Arms wrapped around her knees, looking thoughtful. Asleep with her head resting on my father's chest. The caption is 'Laura snoring in tune'. The two of them on a bench eating fish and chips from a newspaper, a seagull perched perilously close by. Another shot of the seagull eating the abandoned bag of chips with my father, arms outstretched, about to wring the bird's neck.

Nineteen seventy-six. My mother and father arm in arm in a park, my mother in heels that were clearly not designed with walking in mind. A picnic with strawberries and champagne, my mother raises a champagne glass to the camera, my father a beer can. Heads back, laughing at a joke. Both of them sheltering under a tree, hair wet, the picnic blanket around their shoulders. My father whispering in my mother's ear, a look of surprise on her face. Both of

them wet through, clothes like a second skin, wrapped around each other, kissing, the photographer forgotten.

My mother showing off an engagement ring, pointing to it, holding it up to the camera. My father's hair is noticeably shorter, but not short by any means. He has swapped his trademark T-shirt and leather jacket for a shirt.

My mother sitting in the window of a café. Is it *the* café window? Is this the outfit that she was wearing when she met my father?

My father's stag night. Too much beer, too few clothes. Another woman perched on his lap. Uncle Pete and my father with arms around each others' shoulders. My father trying to flag down a cab wearing his leather jacket, underwear, socks and boots. Lying on a bed, eyes closed but grinning madly, in his pants, socks and boots. Skinny ankles, hairy legs, big boots.

Colour photos! A picture of my mother being made up for her wedding day, eyes closed, face raised. A picture of her in her wedding dress wearing the red sling-backs with the caption, 'Laura's choice of shoes'. A picture of her in her wedding dress and white sandals with the caption, 'Mrs Albury's choice of shoes'. A photograph of my mother and a formidable-looking Nana, although she could only have been in her late forties. A photo of Uncle Pete pretending to catch the bouquet. A picture of my mother, her veil lifted, on Uncle Pete's arm. I already knew that Uncle Pete had given my mother away, her father having died very shortly beforehand. I have heard it said that it is a miracle they got married at all, but the wedding had been paid for in advance and money was sufficiently tight that cancelling wasn't an option.

A picture of my father looking pale outside the church, suited and booted, a cigarette in hand. A picture of him frowning at his watch. A picture of him leaning on a wall for support. Leaning on Uncle Pete for support.

A picture of an Austin-Healey 3000 with tin cans attached to the back, the significance of his final choice of car made clear.

Nineteen eighty. I had to check that a photo of a toddler shown with my mother, obviously pregnant, was me.

‘She had a stillborn child,’ Uncle Pete explained, clearly distraught. ‘It broke her heart. I meant to take that photo out of the album, but it must have slipped my mind.’ I could tell that he wanted the photograph back, so I gently removed it from the photo corners. Immediately, he covered it protectively with both hands and, as soon as he thought that I wasn’t looking, he stowed it in the inside pocket of his suit.

I looked at him, frowning, for an explanation.

‘She wouldn’t talk about it. Never. Not to anyone.’ I could tell that he was uncomfortable with the subject, turning his face away. ‘*Couldn’t* talk about it. It was just too painful.’

I might have had a brother or a sister. My thoughts were racing.

‘He would have been your brother. The son that your father was so desperate for.’ He sighed heavily. ‘Didn’t you ever wonder why you had to spend your Saturdays polishing his car and learning the basics of mechanics?’

‘Keep me quiet?’ I tried to contribute through a mouth that would not yet move.

‘He could have taken you to play on the swings and slides like the other dads. But then you wouldn’t know when you are getting ripped off by a garage. Or the year that the Austin-Healey 3000 was launched.’

I flicked backwards through the pages to the photograph of the wedding car.

‘I know what you’re going to ask.’ He almost allowed himself a laugh. In retrospect I should have noticed that it was tinged with bitterness. ‘And yes. It was the very same car. He managed to track down the one they hired on their wedding day.’

‘Romantic.’ I struggled with the three syllables.

‘Well, it turns out it wasn’t one of Tom’s better ideas!’ he blurted out, his face turning red, taking me by surprise. ‘The two people I loved the most in this world wiped out in an instant.’

As my eyes filled, he pawed for my hand. ‘I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I wasn’t thinking.’