



JOHN CLEESE

So, Anyway...



Contents

About the Book

About the Author

Title Page

Dedication

Acknowledgements

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Picture Section

Index

Picture Acknowledgements

Copyright

About the Book

Candid and brilliantly funny, this is the story of how a tall, shy youth from Weston-super-Mare went on to become a self-confessed legend. En route, John Cleese describes his nerve-racking first public appearance, at St Peter's Preparatory School at the age of eight and five-sixths; his endlessly peripatetic home life with parents who seemed incapable of staying in any house for longer than six months; his first experiences in the world of work as a teacher who knew nothing about the subjects he was expected to teach; his hamster-owning days at Cambridge; and his first encounter with the man who would be his writing partner for over two decades, Graham Chapman. And so on to his dizzying ascent via scriptwriting for Peter Sellers, David Frost, Marty Feldman and others to the heights of *Monty Python*.

Punctuated from time to time with John Cleese's thoughts on topics as diverse as the nature of comedy, the relative merits of cricket and waterskiing, and the importance of knowing the dates of all the kings and queens of England, this is a masterly performance by a former schoolmaster.

About the Author

John Marwood Cleese was born in Weston-super-Mare in 1939 and educated at Clifton College and at Cambridge. He achieved his first big success in the West End and as a scriptwriter and performer on *The Frost Report*. He went on to co-found the legendary Monty Python comedy troupe, writing and performing in the TV series and in films that include *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* and *Life of Brian*. In the mid-1970s, John Cleese and his first wife, Connie Booth, co-wrote and starred in the now-classic sitcom *Fawlty Towers*. Later, he wrote and co-starred in *A Fish Called Wanda* and *Fierce Creatures*. He has appeared in many other films, from *James Bond* to *Harry Potter* to *Shrek*, and has guest-starred in TV shows that have included *Cheers*, *3rd Rock from the Sun*, *Will & Grace* and *Entourage*. He lives in London.

So, Anyway . . .

John Cleese



To Dad and Fish

Acknowledgements

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I'd like to thank all the people who have been part of my life, and who have therefore helped me to write this book. I don't want to name them all, because there are quite a lot, and if I miss two out they will be very upset and never want to speak to me again, and I don't want to risk that.

Finally, a word of warning about my editor, Nigel 'Spats' Wilcockson, who will try to take sole credit for this book when he only deserves three-quarters of it.

And . . . three cats and a Fish, who put up with me while I was, etc., etc.

Chapter 1

I MADE MY first public appearance on the stairs up to the school nurse's room, at St Peter's Preparatory School, Weston-super-Mare, Somerset, England, on 13 September 1948. I was eight and five-sixths. My audience was a pack of nine-year-olds, who were jeering at me and baying, 'Chee-eeese! Chee-eeese!' I kept climbing the steps, despite the feelings of humiliation and fear. But above all, I was bewildered. How had I managed to attract so much attention? What had I done to provoke this aggression? And . . . how on earth did they know that my family surname had once been Cheese?

As Matron 'Fishy' Findlater gave me the customary new-boy physical examination, I tried to gather my thoughts. My parents had always warned me to keep away from 'nasty rough boys'. What, then, were they doing at a nice school like St Peter's? And how was I supposed to avoid them?

Much of my predicament was that I was not just a little boy, but a very tall little boy. I was five foot three, and would pass the six-foot mark before I was twelve. So it was hard to fade away into the background, as I often wished to - particularly later when I'd become taller than any of the masters. It didn't help that one of them, Mr Bartlett, always referred to me as 'a prominent citizen'.

In addition, as a result of my excessive height, I had 'outgrown my strength', and my physical weakness meant that I was uncoordinated and awkward; so much so that a few years later my PE teacher, Captain Lancaster, was to describe me as 'six foot of chewed string'. Add to that the fact that I had had no previous experience of the feral

nature of gangs of young boys, and you will understand why my face bore the expression of an authentic coward as 'Fishy' opened the door and coaxed me out towards my second public appearance.

'Don't worry, it's only teasing,' she said. What consolation was that? You could have said the same at Nuremberg. But at least the chanting had stopped, and now there was an expectant silence as I forced myself down the stairs. Then . . .

'Are you a Roundhead or a Cavalier?'

'What?'

Faces were thrust at me, each one of them demanding, 'Roundhead or Cavalier?' What were they talking about?

Had I understood the question, I would almost certainly have fainted, such a delicate little flower was I. (And perhaps I should explain to the more delicately nurtured that I was not being asked to offer my considered views on the relative merits of the opposing forces in the English Civil War, but to reveal whether or not I had been circumcised.) However, my first day at prep school was not a total failure. By the time I got home I had learned the meaning of two new words - 'pathetic' and 'wet' - though I had to find Dad's dictionary to look up 'sissy'.

Why was I so . . . ineffectual? Well, let's begin at my beginning. I was born on 27 October 1939, in Uphill, a little village south of Weston-super-Mare, and separated from it by the mere width of a road which led inland from the Weston seafront. My first memory, though, is not of Uphill but of a tree in the village of Brent Knoll, a few miles away, under whose shade I recall lying, while I looked through its branches to the bright blue sky above. The sunlight is catching the leaves at different angles, so that my eye flickers from one patch of colour to the next, the verdant foliage displaying a host of verdant hues. (I thought I would try to get 'verdant', 'hues' and 'foliage' into this paragraph, as my English teachers always believed that they were signs

of creative talent. Though I probably shouldn't have used 'verdant' twice.)

Of course, I'm not *sure* it is my first memory; I'm sure I used to *think* it was; and I *like* to think it was, too, because it would make sense, baby me lying in a pram, contentedly watching the interplay of the glinting verdant foliage and its beautiful hues.

One thing I do know for certain, though, is that shortly before this incident with the tree, the Germans bombed Weston-super-Mare. I'll just repeat that . . .

On 14 August 1940, German planes bombed Weston-super-Mare. This is verifiable: it was in all the papers. Especially the *Weston Mercury*. Most Westonians were confident the raid had been a mistake. The Germans were a people famous for their efficiency, so why would they drop perfectly good bombs on Weston-super-Mare, when there was nothing in Weston that a bomb could destroy that could possibly be as valuable as the bomb that destroyed it? That would mean that every explosion would make a tiny dent in the German economy.

The Germans did return, however, and several times, which mystified everyone. Nevertheless I can't help thinking that Westonians actually quite liked being bombed: it gave them a sense of significance that was otherwise lacking from their lives. But that still leaves the question *why* would the Hun have bothered? Was it just Teutonic *joie de vivre*? Did the Luftwaffe pilots mistake the Weston seafront for the Western Front? I have heard it quite seriously put forward by older Westonians that it was done at the behest of William Joyce, the infamous 'Lord Haw-Haw', who was hanged as a traitor in 1946 by the British for making Nazi propaganda radio broadcasts to Britain during the war. When I asked these amateur historians why a man of Irish descent who was born in Brooklyn would have such an animus against Weston that he would buttonhole Hitler on the matter, they fell silent. I prefer to believe that it was because of a grudge

held by Reichsmarschall Hermann Goering on account of an unsavoury incident on Weston pier in the 1920s, probably involving Noël Coward and Terence Rattigan.

My father's explanation, however, makes the most sense: he said the Germans bombed Weston to show that they really do have a sense of humour.

Whatever the truth of the matter, two days after that first raid we had moved to a quaint little Somerset village called Brent Knoll. Dad had had quite enough of big bangs during his four years in the trenches in France, and since he was up to nothing in Weston that was vital to the war effort, he spent the day after the bombing driving around the countryside near Weston until he found a small farmhouse, owned by a Mr and Mrs Raffle, who agreed to take the Cleese family on as paying guests. I love the fact that he didn't *mess around*. We were out of there! And it was typically smart of him to find a farm, where, at a time of strict rationing, an egg or a chicken or even a small pig could go missing without attracting too much attention.

Mother told me once that some Westonians privately criticised Dad for retreating so soon. They apparently felt it would have been more dignified to have waited a week or so before running away. I think this view misses the essential point of running away, which is to do it the moment the idea has occurred to you. Only an obsessional procrastinator would cry, 'Let's run for our lives, but not till Wednesday afternoon.'

Back to the tree. I revisited the farm many years later, and, just as I thought I remembered, there was a huge chestnut tree in the middle of the front lawn, under which I might easily have lain in a pram. In 1940 the farmhouse had been one of a row of houses of medium size strung along a road, with fields opposite; it didn't look very farm-like from the front, but when you walked up the drive and got to the back of the house you saw there was a proper farmyard,

with mud and chickens and rusty farm equipment and ferrets in cages and rabbits in wooden hutches.

And it was this location that provides my second memory. (It must come after the first because in it I am now standing up.) I was bitten by a rabbit.

Or rather, I was nibbled by a rabbit, but, because I was such a weedy, namby-pamby little pansy, I reacted as though I'd lost a limb. It was the sheer unfairness of it all that so upset me. One minute, I was saying, 'Hello, Mr Bunny!' and smiling at its sweet little face and funny floppy ears. The next, the fucker savaged me. It seemed so gratuitous. What, I asked myself, had I done to the rabbit to deserve this psychotic response?

The more pertinent question, though, is: why was I such a *wuss*? And the obvious answer is that it's because I was the only child of older, over-protective parents. I have a memory (No. 3) to support this. I'm now about three and am in the Red Cow Inn, the hub and beating heart of Brent Knoll. Somehow I bang my hand, and just before I burst into tears, I hold it up to my father and howl, 'Daddy, look! I've hurt my precious thumb!' This, to my astonishment, gets a big laugh. Is my thumb *not* precious, I wonder? Dad certainly thinks it is. When the occasion demands, he always says, 'Oh, you've hurt your precious -- [fill in applicable body part].'

I hesitate to criticise Dad because what sanity I have I owe to his loving kindness. But there's no doubt that he did pamper me, and such early coddling was one of the reasons I embarked on a wussy lifestyle. Throughout my schoolboy days I never felt very manly, or strong, or virile, or vigorous, or healthily aggressive. At school I avoided playground 'gangs', because I didn't understand why anyone would want to behave like that. I loved ball games, but was always appalled at how rough, for example, rugby looked, even at the safe distance I kept while pretending to play it. When I was seventeen, my assistant Clifton College housemaster,

Alec MacDonald, finally took me to task for funking tackles. Describing my efforts as 'dancing around like a disabled fairy', he ordered me to watch while he gave a demonstration of how to tackle properly. He asked a member of the first XV, Tony Rogers, to run at him. He closed in on Rogers, and then went in hard, just as Rogers tried to sidestep him. The result was that the top of Mr MacDonald's head came into sharp contact with Rogers' right hip. Mr MacDonald was unavailable for teaching later that afternoon; indeed he did not reappear for forty-eight hours. When he did, I was too cowardly to remind him that he had specifically told me that 'if you go in hard, you never get hurt'. So when I see international rugby teams lumbering out at Twickenham, I look at them with awe, but also with a sense of being genetically disconnected from them. I was not born to be butch, and I have accepted my innate unmanliness without complaint. Besides, it seems to me that cowards very seldom cause trouble, which is probably why there is a history of them being shot by people who do.[fn1](#)

None of this, incidentally, is to say that my infant wussiness was in any way admirable. But while I was undeniably a gutless little weed there was an upside: at least I didn't display the habitual mindless aggression of some young males. Better a wuss than a psycho, I say, and I am proud that I have never been able to force myself to watch cage fighting.

If part of my weedy outlook on life came from my father's pampering, a fair proportion was down to my complicated relationship with my mother. And in this context another early memory comes to mind. I am lying in bed, falling asleep, when a noise causes me to turn and see shadows moving on the half-open door of my bedroom. They are shadows of my parents fighting. Dad has been coming into my room and Mum has started attacking him, pummelling him with a flurry of blows which he is trying to fend off.

There is no sound – I sense they are both trying not to wake me – and the memory has no emotion attached, although it is very clear. Just the shadows which last a few seconds and then . . . silence. As I write this, my throat tightens a little. The level of violence I’m describing is low: there are no shillelaghs or chainsaws here, just lower-middle-class fisticuffs, with no prospect of Grievous Bodily Harm, as English law calls it. Nevertheless, my beloved dad, a kind and decent person, is being attacked by this unknowable creature who is widely rumoured to be my mother.

Young children have so little life experience that they inevitably assume that what happens around and to them is the norm. I remember that when my daughter Cynthia was very young she was surprised to discover that some of her friends’ fathers did not work in television. So it would have been hard for me to describe my relationship with my mother as problematic because I had no idea what the word ‘motherly’ conveyed to most people. Dad once described to me how, during the First World War, he had witnessed a wounded soldier lying in a trench and crying out for his mother. ‘Why on earth would he cry for her?’ I wondered. When, over the years, I began to hear friends tell me that their mother was their best friend, someone with whom they routinely discussed their daily life, and to whom they looked for emotional support, I simply thought, ‘How wonderful that must be . . .’



Mother (left) and me.

Please do not think that I am loftily labelling her a 'bad mother'. In many ways she was a good mother; sometimes a very good mother. In all day-to-day matters she was extremely diligent: preparing good meals, making sure I was properly clothed and shod and warm and dry, keeping the house neat and clean, and fiercely protective of me. Under light hypnosis, I once recalled a German air raid, with the sound of the bombers not far away, and Mother throwing herself on top of me, under a big kitchen table. If it was a false memory, it's still what she would have done.

From a practical point of view, then, she was impeccable. But she was also self-obsessed and anxious, and that could make life with her very uncomfortable indeed.

A clue to her self-obsession, I always felt, was her extraordinary lack of general knowledge. On one of her visits to London in the late 80s, a salad was prepared for lunch which contained quails' eggs. She asked what kind of eggs they were and I explained that they were moles' eggs, and that when we wanted them, we would go up to

Hampstead Heath very early in the morning, as moles laid them at the entrance to their burrows during the night, collect the eggs and make sure we ate them the same day before they had time to hatch. She listened with great attention, as my family's jaws sagged, and said she thought them 'delicious'. Later that day she caught a mention of Mary, Queen of Scots. She recognised the name and asked me who this was. With my family listening, I pushed the envelope a little, telling her that Mary was a champion Glaswegian darts player who had been killed in the Blitz. 'What a shame,' she said.

I was being a bit naughty, of course, but I also wanted to prove to my family the truth of a comment I had made earlier about Mother, which they had not accepted on first hearing. I had told them that *she had no information about anything that was not going to affect her life directly in the immediate future*; and that consequently she possessed no general knowledge – and when I said no general knowledge, I didn't mean very, very little. Naturally they had thought I was exaggerating.

And the reason for this was not that she was unintelligent, but that she lived her life in such a constant state of high anxiety, bordering on incipient panic, that she could focus only on the things that might *directly affect* her. So it goes without saying that she suffered from all the usual phobias, along with a few special ones (like albinos and people wearing eye patches). But she also cast her net wider. In fact, I used to joke that she suffered from omniphobia – you name it, she had a morbid dread of it. It's true that I never saw her alarmed by a loaf of bread or a cardigan or even a chair, but anything above medium size that could move around a bit was a hazard, and any reasonably loud sound startled her beyond reason. I once compiled a list of events that frightened her, and it was quite comprehensive: very loud snoring; low-flying aircraft; church bells; fire engines; trains; buses and lorries; thunder; shouting; large cars; most

medium-sized cars; noisy small cars; burglar alarms; fireworks, especially crackers; loud radios; barking dogs; whinnying horses; nearby silent horses; cows in general; megaphones; sheep; corks coming out of sparkling wine bottles; motorcycles, even very small ones; balloons being popped; vacuum cleaners (not being used by her); things being dropped; dinner gongs; parrot houses; whoopee cushions; chiming doorbells; hammering; bombs; hooters; old-fashioned alarm clocks; pneumatic drills; and hairdryers (even those used by her).

In a nutshell, Mother experienced the cosmos as a vast, limitless booby trap.

Consequently, it was never possible for her really to relax, except perhaps for the times when she sat on the sofa knitting while Dad and I watched television. But even then she was active, knitting away against time. I noticed years ago that when people (myself definitely included) are anxious they tend to busy themselves with irrelevant activities, because these distract from and therefore reduce their actual experience of anxiety. To stay perfectly still is to feel the fear at its maximum intensity, so instead you scuttle around doing things as though you are, in some mysterious way, short of time. But although Mother kept herself busy in countless and pointless ways, it did not alleviate her worrying: her pervading sense that she was keeping nameless disasters at bay only by incessantly anticipating them, and that one moment's lapse in this vigilance would bring them hurtling towards her. I once proposed to Dad that we should purchase a large hamster wheel for her, so that she would find it easy to remain active all day, instead of having continually to invent non-essential activities like polishing cans of peas, or stacking cups, or sewing borders on handkerchiefs, or boiling knitting needles, or weeding the carpet.

Her own approach was to write her worries down on a piece of paper, so that there was no chance she would

forget one, thus unleashing it. After Dad died, I would drive down to Weston to visit her and she would greet me with a cup of coffee and a very long list of worries which she had been compiling during the previous weeks, and we would sit down and discuss each worry in turn at some length: what it was about, and why it mattered, and how likely it was to happen, and what she could do to forestall it, and what we could do if it did actually happen, and whether we would know what to do if it didn't . . . and after we'd processed six or so, she'd make me another cup of coffee and we would continue working till bedtime. And if we hadn't got through them all by then, we'd leave the rest for breakfast. It took me decades to realise that it was not the analysing of her worries that eased them; it was the continuous contact with another person that gradually calmed her.

Why Mother should have been quite so anxious I simply don't know, but the net effect was to make her difficult. Actually 'difficult' is not quite fair. There was only one thing that she wanted. Just one. But that one thing was her own way. And if she didn't get it, that upset her. And she was prettily easily upset; in fact I think it's fair to say she had a real facility for it; and when something did upset her – and there was a *very* limited supply of things that, in the final analysis, didn't – she would throw a tantrum, or several tantrums, of such inconceivable volume and activity that there must have been times when Dad yearned for the relative tranquillity of the trenches in France.

But Mother would never have seen herself as a tyrant: her trick was to rule through weakness. Whereas Dad might *prefer* to sleep with a window open, Mother *had* to have it shut, because she *just couldn't cope* with the alternative. Sadly, there was no choice, so negotiation was never an option, although Dad once confided to me that she had been much more flexible before they'd got married.

It was only in later years that I began to see just how alarmed Dad really was by the tantrums. While he talked

occasionally about the need 'to keep the little woman on an even keel', his faux-amused casualness was intended to conceal his fear, for when Mother lost her temper, she really lost it: her rage filled her skin until there was no room left for the rest of her personality, which had to move over till things calmed down a bit. The phrase 'beside oneself with anger' could have been coined in Weston-super-Mare.

Mother could be quite charming and bright and amusing, but that was when we had visitors. Once they had gone, her sociability began to fade. This meant that there was nearly always tension in the Cleese household because when mother was not actually angry it was only because she was not angry *yet*. Dad and I knew that the slightest thing – almost anything – would set her off, so constant placatory behaviour was the name of the game.

It cannot be coincidence that I spent such a large part of my life in some form of therapy, and that the vast majority of the problems I was dealing with involved relationships with women. And my ingrained habit of walking on eggshells when coping with my mother dominated my romantic liaisons for many years. Until it began to fade, women found me very dull. My own unique cocktail of over-politeness, unending solicitude and the fear of stirring controversy rendered me utterly unsexy. Very, very nice men are no fun. I once wrote a sketch based on my younger self (for the 1968 show *How to Irritate People*), in which I tried to show just how infuriating this desire to be inoffensive can be:

John Cleese: I'm afraid I'm not very good company tonight.

Connie Booth: No, it's me. I'm on edge.

JC: No, no, no, you are marvellous, really super! It's me.

CB: Look, let's forget it.

JC: I'm not good company.

CB: You are.

JC: I'm not. I've been fussing you.

CB: It's all right.

JC: I have been fussing you. It's my own fault, you told me last time about fussing you too much.

CB: Please!

JC: Look, am I fussing you too much?

CB: A bit.

Although there was little real emotional communication between us, my mother and I had our moments of closeness, almost all of them when we laughed together. She had quite a sharp sense of humour – and as I got older I discovered to my surprise that she also laughed at jokes that were rather dark, if not quite black. I remember on one occasion listening to her as she methodically itemised all the reasons why she didn't want to go on living, while I experienced my usual sense of glum failure at my powerlessness to help. Then I heard myself say, 'Mother, I have an idea.'

'Oh? What's that?'

'I know a little man who lives in Fulham, and if you're still feeling this way next week, I could have a word with him if you like – but only if you like – and he can come down to Weston and kill you.'

Silence.

'Oh God, I've gone too far,' I thought. And then she cackled with laughter. I don't think I ever loved her as much as I did at that moment.

So, anyway . . . there we were in the Raffles' house, pretty safe from German bombs, with a ringside view of a Somerset farmer's life, milking cows and fattening pigs and executing chickens. It was a very small farm, and the only surprising thing was that Mr and Mrs Raffle didn't speak English. I don't mean that they spoke another language; they didn't speak anything that could be recognised as a language. They clearly understood each other's noises, though, and we sensed that while they didn't like each other

much, their limited vocabularies precluded unnecessary disagreements. How Dad negotiated our rent with Mr Raffle I don't know. He probably used pebbles, although it's possible that the Raffles' young son, who was picking up some English at kindergarten, acted as interpreter.

Mr Raffle owned two sheepdogs, so it was a bit of a surprise when we discovered that he had no sheep. Dad thought he kept the dogs so that people would think he owned sheep; Mother thought they might be cowdogs. I liked them - they were friendlier than the rabbits, although they did spend a lot of time staring into the rabbit hutches. As for the rabbits, I've never worked out why the Raffles actually bothered to keep any, since they had ferrets to catch them in the wild. I can only assume that, having caught them, they liked to keep them fresh and close by until a quick snack beckoned. That could explain why my attacker sank its fangs into me: it was not going to go quietly.

Sadly, just as I was beginning to name all the animals, and to get to know the little village of Brent Knoll, the Cleese family moved to Devon, to a little cottage in Totnes. Then, for no apparent reason, we moved back to the Raffles', then back to Devon (to Horrabridge, where I saw a spider so big I could hear its footsteps), then back to Brent Knoll, and then, immediately after VE Day, to Burnham-on-Sea, where we lived in three different houses in three years, before arriving in Weston-super-Mare (again) in 1948 so that I could attend St Peter's Preparatory School. In all, we moved eight times in my first eight years.

I was too young to be part of a discussion on the subject, so I can only guess why we moved so often. From a practical point of view, constant relocation caused few problems because it never involved Dad having to change jobs. As an agent (or salesman) with the Guardian Assurance Company, he had been assigned a territory in the West Country which he drove around, selling mainly life insurance, but also a lot

of Storm and Tempest cover to farmers. Because he was known to be such a decent chap, a lot of the life insurance came to him via personal recommendations from Somerset bank managers and solicitors: they knew he was competent and honest, and would not try to sell their clients more cover than they needed. This meant he always sold more life insurance than any of the other Guardian agents, but in a rather leisurely way, never driving off before 9.30 a.m., nor returning after 4.30 p.m. His secret was that, because of his contacts, he never needed to make 'cold calls'; and provided he lived in the middle of Somerset, it didn't much matter where, as the distances were so small.

If the demands of Dad's job don't explain the constant moves, his worries about money might. As an insurance agent, his earnings peaked at £30 a week in the early 50s. Given that miners and most footballers got £10, it was not a bad salary and I certainly never sensed that we lacked for anything. Moreover the Cleese family never contemplated buying 'expensive things'. They weren't on our radar. For example, it literally never occurred to me that we might go abroad for our holidays; or that we might buy a car that was new; or that we would have anything for our Christmas lunch other than chicken.

Nevertheless such outlandish thoughts must have occurred to my father, who was kind and generous and would have loved to have provided us with a more gracious lifestyle of the kind he had enjoyed while working in India, Hong Kong and China in the early 20s. £1,500 per annum, however, didn't stretch very far, and although he hid his financial anxieties very well, I did begin to notice that, now and then, he'd go out of his way to save money on a purchase. Mother noticed, too, and we would look at each other as he extolled 'surprisingly inexpensive' stylish Yugoslavian sports jackets, or top-class Libyan shoes, or premier quality Albanian ham that he had bought knowing full well that they would soon lose shape, or prove

unwearable, or taste very odd indeed. It's not unreasonable to assume, therefore, that most of our moves were motivated by the hallucination that they would help cut costs.



Father (right) with small child.

But they may also have had an unintended side effect. Research has shown that constant relocation in childhood is often associated with creativity. It seems that the creative impulse is sparked by the need to reconcile contrasting views of the world. If you move home, you start living a slightly different life, so you compare it with your previous life, note the divergences and the similarities, see what you like better and what you miss, and as you do so, your mind becomes more flexible and capable of combining thoughts and ideas in new and fresh ways. There's also another way creativity can develop: if important people in your life, especially parents, have different ways of viewing the world, you find yourself trying to understand what they have in common, and how they contrast, in an attempt to make sense of their conflicting views. On the other hand, if your

parents have a harmonious relationship and you grow up in one place where people share the same attitudes as those around them, you are unlikely to be innovative, or even to want to be. I doubt whether there's a special creativity faculty at Iowa State University.

So, creatively, I was doubly blessed: constant relocation *and* parental disharmony. Add to these two gifts the well-established fact that many of the world's greatest geniuses, both artistic and scientific, have been the product of serious maternal deprivation, and I am forced to the conclusion that if only my mother had been just a little more emotionally inadequate, I could have been HUGE. I could have been musically gifted, and talented in the visual arts, and an outstanding dancer, and an inventor, and a published poet, instead of being good, within very limited parameters, at writing and acting comedy. Oh well.

Despite these early years spent charging around the West Country, I have only a few scattered memories other than the Raffles' farm and the Horrabridge spider. I remember, for example, being out on a walk with Dad, and hearing a rumbling sound, and looking up and seeing the sky fill with large planes, flying towards the Continent. This was one of our daytime raids, Dad explained. We were winning the war so we didn't have to fly at night any more. Once, Dad and I talked to a nice young American airman who let me get up into his Jeep, where I scraped my precious ankle. On another occasion Dad drove us to the hills behind Weston, where we looked at a German plane that had crashed in a field. It was smaller than I expected. There were lots of sightseers, but they were very quiet.

Best of all were the Sundays when Dad would take me to Brent Knoll railway station. Here we were allowed up into the signal box, and the signalman would let me move the big levers that changed the points. Then we would go down on to the platform where there would be a huge wickerwork hamper full of racing pigeons, and the stationmaster would

let me open the lid wide, and the pigeons would fly up and away, in a tightly knit flock, high into the sky, where they would circle round and round three times – always three times – before heading north to their homes in Widnes and Warrington and Wigan. It was the most exciting and beautiful experience.

The only direct effect the war had on our lives came when my parents received news that our furniture had been destroyed. The day we first moved to the Raffles', my parents had moved it into storage in a warehouse owned by Lalonde's, the well-known Westonian auctioneers, and now an incendiary bomb had overcooked it. It wasn't very posh furniture, of course, and in a way the Bosch did us a favour, because now we could move house with much greater ease, passing between various kinds of furnished accommodation unencumbered by very much in the way of belongings.

I notice that a lot of my early memories are connected with the war, but this is simply because such moments stood out so starkly from my normal, everyday experience. Months passed in the Somerset and Devon countryside without my being even vaguely aware of the conflict. In fact, I now realise how glad I am that I grew up in small West Country villages, surrounded by verdant foliage and emerald hues. I associate all this with a kind of quiet contentment, of effortless, calm mindfulness that I can seldom recapture in cities. Reading years ago what the psychologist Abraham Maslow had to say about 'peak experiences', I recognised that these moments nearly always occur in repose, and in my case are never connected with work. Wordsworth wrote of his favourite flowers:

For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills

And dances with the chrysanthemums.

When I recall moments of perfect, timeless happiness they include: sitting in a deckchair in the garden of my house in Holland Park, gazing at two Burmese kittens doing cabaret; looking at Vermeer's painting of Delft in The Hague, and allowing it to affect me; playing with a baby kangaroo in Sydney; listening to John Williams playing the guitar; cruising down the middle Rhine, sipping Moselle; eating fish and chips with my wife at Geales two nights ago; or lying on the grass in the sun, and having my 'inward' eye conjure up images of Dick Cheney being waterboarded. Again, none of them seem to be connected with work or, indeed, any kind of striving. Explain that to Terry Gilliam.

[fn1](#) The most perceptive definition of a coward is Ambrose Bierce's: 'One who in a perilous emergency thinks with his legs.' This trait seems to me such a wise response to danger that it explains why generals want cowards dead; if they weren't, the concept of just plain running away would catch on so fast that the top brass would be out of a job overnight – or, at least, would have to do some fighting themselves, which is not part of their job description.

Chapter 2

MY LAST RECOLLECTION of the Brent Knoll era is of being visited by a rather short, quiet and elderly man called John Cheese. He was my dad's dad, and enjoyed a reputation for being the white sheep of his family: apparently he had disapproved so strongly of his father and brothers that he had left home as soon as he was able, and moved miles away to Bristol to dissociate himself from them. Quite what his family got up to was never spoken of. I believe they were bakers, but that may have been a cover story they used to allow them to be up all hours of the night.

My grandfather must have been in his seventies when I first met him. In those days that was a considerable age and I remember him walking rather slowly with the aid of a stick as he, Mother and I made our way along the Somerset lanes. He was a very formal man – restrained and careful and sedate – though he exuded a kind and gentle air. In fact he looked just like Doctor Dolittle and although I liked being around him, and recall how courteous he and Dad were to each other, I don't remember having much actual fun with him. He had one little joke in his repertoire: he would tell of a pet peacock that flew over the wall into a neighbour's garden and laid an egg. Did the egg belong to the peacock's owner or the neighbour? When we'd guessed he would remind us that *peacocks* didn't lay eggs. This was not exactly end-of-the-pier, knockabout stuff, and so it did not really surprise me when I learned later that he had passed his whole working life as a clerk in a legal firm.

Grandpa was my only surviving grandparent. My mum's mother had died many years before. Judging from

photographs of her she was an elderly, rather ethereal version of Virginia Woolf. Her husband, Marwood Cross, on the other hand, was about as wraithlike as a warthog: a squat, short-tempered, assertive, graceless little man who in his time was, apparently, one of the most celebrated auctioneers in Weston-super-Mare. (Westonians habitually used inflated language to describe each other: doctors' names were spoken with a hushed reverence; surgeons and architects were invariably 'eminent'; lawyers 'distinguished'; businessmen 'influential'; firms 'prestigious'; schoolmasters 'respected'; and tobacconists 'renowned'.) Well, there were half a dozen auctioneers in Weston, and they were all prominent, notable and self-impressed. When my parents chose my Christian names, they took John from Grandpa, and Marwood from this other oaf. Mother told me that in the future when people asked my name, and I said, 'John Marwood Cleese', they would look surprised and say, 'Oh! Are you by any chance related to Marwood Cross, the auctioneer?' Here's a multiple choice question for you, dear reader: how many times has this actually happened to me during my seven-plus decades on the planet? a) 5,000 times, b) Twice, c) Never.

Marwood Cross was a celebrated, red-faced bully who ran a tight ship. When the table was laid for meals, a cane was placed by his cutlery, so that he could swat any of his children if their table manners faltered. He was also an eminent coward: when a burglar was once diagnosed in the basement, he appeared on the balcony outside his second-floor bedroom, ringing a handbell, and ordering his children and the maid to go and investigate. His main form of entertainment was writing poison-pen letters, which he would get my father to post from unlikely Somerset villages which he happened to pass through in the course of his quest to sell insurance policies. Marwood was also a past master of the art of auctioneering. If he fancied the look of anything he'd been asked to auction, he'd knock it down

quickly to an imaginary buyer before the bidding got going, snaffling his prey at a cut-throat price while maintaining his reputation as a pillar of the community. I'd like to apologise publicly for the fact that some of his genes are present in my body. They will be hunted down when the technology is available.



Marwood Cross, eminent auctioneer.

The final missing grandparent was my dad's mother. She had died in the early 20s, and I know almost nothing about her. This, I now realise, is because her death upset Dad so much that even many years later he never talked about her. I discovered this quite by chance. When I was about fourteen or so, I was rummaging through a tiny, ancient suitcase that contained all his old family papers, and I found a letter that she had written to him just before she died. When I showed it to Dad, a strange look flashed across his face, and he told me he had not read it again since he had

first received it. He opened it and after a few seconds started to sob. It was the only time I saw Dad cry. Later he told me that his tears were not just for her loss, but because he had always felt a terrible guilt that he had been away in India and the Far East during the last four years of her life. Communication and travel were so slow in those days that he wasn't able to get back in time to say goodbye. He believed that he had let her down; that, in some strange way, she might have felt abandoned by him. He showed me the last page of this, her final letter to him, and how her signature trailed away towards the bottom of the page, a long, thin straggly line, which he interpreted as her 'giving up'. I was able, even at that young age, to realise that he had been carrying this sorrow inside him for nearly thirty years, and that this was the reason he and Mother never mentioned my grandmother's name.

