How to Avoid a Happy Life

A Memoir

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PROLOGUE: THE PARTY COFFIN

There is a photo of my mother in a coffin.

Her eyes are closed but her glasses are still on, indicating that she is, in fact, alive. She's clutching a bouquet of fake red roses and is surrounded by bunches of fake flowers in real (although empty) beer bottles. She's managing not to smile.

The coffin belonged to one of my mother's ex-boyfriends. I think his name was John, but it might have been Allan, or Steve, or Mike. It was a great prop to bring to a Halloween party in 1990, and much hilarity no doubt ensued as people climbed in and out of it, pretending to be dead.

My mother, Gwen, no longer has to pretend to be dead. Just before she reached that inevitable state, we were discussing funeral arrangements.

'Hey Mum,' I said. 'Do you remember that boyfriend of yours – the undertaker?'

'John?' she said (or Allan/Steve/Mike).

'Yeah,' I said. 'Could he do your funeral?'

'No, he's dead,' she said.

And then we laughed and laughed, until the cancer in her kidney gave her a pain in the stomach and she was reduced to wincing and giggling.

It was a moment of levity, taking place for her in the midst of three weeks of surprise suffering, belated and incomplete taking stock, and indignities; and for me, in the midst of surprise anguish, attempted and ineffectual resolution-finding, followed by a years-long eruption of feelings of abandonment hitherto under- if not unfelt.

My mother had been threatening to die since I was seventeen. Then, she'd been diagnosed with emphysema but continued smoking and living until a series of strokes at the age of fifty-six put paid completely to the former, and curtailed the style in which she'd been doing the latter. For eighteen years she'd been a hemiplegic, sustained primarily by a diet of

ham sandwiches and pies, increasingly confined to her loungeroom chair, her legs and feet distended with retained fluid. She criticised everyone and everything from this vantage point, softened only by offerings of stuffed or porcelain meerkats, or by beating her husband in the daily cryptic crossword.

Every time someone famous or heroic died, she'd say, 'Here I am sitting on my fat arse, useless as tits on a bull.'

She was regularly taken by ambulance to hospital after falls, unexplained drops in iron levels, twisted bowels, or cysts. After each phone call, on my way to the hospital, I'd wonder if this really was the beginning of the very drawn-out end.

'They reckon there's nothing wrong with me,' she'd say, sounding irritated. 'But what would they know.'

She hated her doctor but would not go to a different one. Her husband was constantly going to specialists and doctors. When I inquired why, she said, 'How would I bloody know? He doesn't tell me anything.' When I pointed out she could, as a concerned wife, ask him, she looked at me as if it was a stupid comment, requiring no response.

After Gwen's actual funeral, I found language to be inadequate to explain to colleagues how I was feeling, or the nature of my relationship with my mother. Instead, I propped the picture of Gwen-in-a-party-coffin on my desk to indicate that I was having a hard day.

When I was crying next to her bedside, close to the end, she said, 'Remember the good times.'

You can't remember the good times unless you've reconciled with The Rest Of It. The Rest Of It is never simple, linear, or confined to one's own experiences. Grief, if you had a childhood resembling mine in any way, dumps The Rest Of It unceremoniously on you. First, you've got to dig your way out of it. Then you've got to sort it – this lump here, that lump there – until you've got piles you can Marie Kondo, and only then, beneath all the rubble, can you find the things that give you joy. Or, if not joy, a sense of satisfaction that The Rest Of It is in the past, and you, by some combination of luck, love, and sheer bloody-mindedness, are here.

GET YOURSELF BORN INTO INTERGENERATIONAL MISERY

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I was born into the hushed suburbs of Perth, Western Australia, not long after the first televised moon landing. In the late 1960s and the 70s, Perth suburbs were hushed because there was no need, yet, for two cars per household in the sprawled public-transport-deficient city whose centre was still called a town by its inhabitants. The United Kingdom, from which the majority of Perth's settler population still hailed, fitted into Western Australia ten times over. Perth was known as the most isolated capital city in the world; whether this was true or not, even blue-collar families like ours had houses set on quarter-acre blocks of sandy soil. You might not have had much by way of furniture or education, but you had a sky that was blue all through the long summer months, and either a river to swim in or an ocean's edge within driving distance to cool you. The smell of eucalyptus leaves was so constant you only noticed it after being at the beach, as the scent rushed in with the air warm from the black bitumen on which you were driven home, arriving hotter than when you'd left.

According to Gwen's family, I was an overly sensitive, fussy, and/or whingeing child. I was compared to my boisterous, fearless male cousin in the first instance, and my sweet-natured younger girl cousins in the second, and found wanting. Although I was told my family loved me, my predominant memories of adult relatives are coloured by their mild impatience with me, their shared frowns and headshaking, which occasionally erupted into outright irritation.

A range of behaviours was produced in evidence of the ways in which I was difficult. To wit:

I was fussy with food. I did not like eating vegetables, eggs, or meat. I choked on sausage skin and was taken to hospital to check for a swallowing disorder; I vomited eggs; the smell of cooking mince made me feel faint. I would only eat the icing off cake after smooshing the un-icing part into a wodge in my hand. If I was not able to eat toast and Vegemite at someone's

house, I was liable to collapse into an inconsolable heap and require taking home.

I had a series of anxieties and phobias. Each night I packed a small bag my mother had made me with my favourite teddy and nightie and slept with it at the foot of my bed, in case there was a fire. I went through a long phase in which I refused to wear anything other than pyjamas, and a longer phase where I would not go anywhere without my mini dictionary, yellow covered with a blue L on its front. If anybody gave me a present I didn't like, the object would induce a terror in me to the extent that the giver needed to remove it from the house. I was convinced there was a redback under every toilet seat, like the song, and would not sit on a toilet unless I'd checked.

I did not much like other children, unless they were my cousins, and I found adults even more alien, expecting behaviours of me that I did not understand. I clung to my mother, who pushed me away, which made me cling more. Gwen had an extended family who lived in the south-west corner of the state, and we often visited their houses or farms. I liked dairies and cats but hated being in the strange-smelling houses of great-aunties and uncles. I went to kindergarten for a few days, was horrified by the boisterousness of the other children, and refused to go back. My mother tried peeling my fingers from where I gripped them, as I hid behind the white vinyl armchair, but as soon as she peeled one hand off, I'd reattach the other.

My unfitness to be a regular child was deemed to be chiefly my mother's fault for not using corporal punishment, or, in the alternative, for failing to produce additional offspring so that I would not have been An Only Child. In the 70s everybody knew that Only Children were bossy, selfish, strange, barely human, pitiable creatures who, if their numbers increased, could well be responsible for the downfall of society. The other fault was mine, for being born shy, sensitive, and anxious, when I was not being bossy and selfish etc.

When compulsory schooling began, I wept every morning before school until I was in Year Three. The terror began building as we approached the school and I saw children milling outside; the prospect of getting out and walking among them caused me to panic. Gwen would sometimes comfort me, sometimes snap at me, and other times try to reason with me to stop snivelling and go to class. One time, she was so frustrated she opened the car

door, placed her 70s wedge heel against my hip and booted me out. This was witnessed by my classmate April, who was indignant at the maltreatment I'd endured and marched me up to her older sister saying, 'You won't *believe* what Julie's mum just did!'

All I wanted to do was to be with my mother, to play in my paddling pool, or to lie in the back yard on a blanket, clutching my teddy bear, watching the clouds drift along. 'You'd do it for hours,' Gwen would later tell me with mild disapproval. 'I used to wonder what you were thinking.'

One day I cried at school, in Year Three, not because Gwen had booted me out of the car but because I was mortified to discover that I'd left on my summer pyjama bloomers instead of putting on knickers. I was so distressed I couldn't stop crying and had to go sit outside. My teacher, Mrs James, squatted down before me and told me it didn't matter one bit, and nobody would know. As she squatted, I got sight of her white cottontails in the small gap between her substantial thighs, perhaps proving that even sight of a knicker need not cause a person to dissemble. Gwen was not called; I survived the day in pyjama pants and never forgot my proper knickers again.

Mrs James was a fearsome woman, terrifying even the toughest of the boys. But not long after the knicker incident, I was having another fit of paralysing shyness and weeping before school: my best friend Nobbly wasn't there, and I was inconsolable. Gwen, in a state of irritation and despair, delivered me to the classroom and muttered something to Mrs James.

Mrs James had noticed that the one time I openly showed enthusiasm in class was during reading of any variety. I loved silent reading, the fifteen minutes after lunchtime where everyone had to read material of their choice to themselves. I loved going to the library and choosing new books – I cared little for their topic or genre; I only wanted new words to read, as I had so few books at home, I was forced to read the same titles over and over again. And when we had to take turns reading aloud, I shot my hand up to be picked, hoping I would get the longest paragraph with the most difficult words. I cringed at the slowness with which some of my classmates stumbled over sentences, how blankly they intoned the syllables which swung and sang when I read them to myself. The pleasing rhythm of 'The Tale of the Custard

Dragon' was enough to create waves of wonder, paroxysms of pleasure: how did mere humans write such marvels? Surely God (the nice God of Sunday school, as opposed to the fierce God of church) must be helping them.

'I have something special for you, Julie,' Mrs James said.

I thought this might be a ruse to get me into my seat, but not long after the day began, Mrs James handed out a play to a select group of students, which included me. I don't recall what the play was about, or anything about my role, but before recess the players assembled at the front of the classroom to perform our piece. It was all the fun of reading aloud, the delight of reading to and with others, and of adding little flourishes as I went. I remember appreciative laughter, surprise applause, and the happy flush that came over me as I returned to my seat.

'Julie was a star,' Mrs James reported to Gwen later that afternoon.

I understood that I had, inadvertently, been taught a trick. You did not have to show your raw self to others; you could coat it with a veneer of confidence, and nobody would know the difference. I could feel terrified, sure, but I didn't have to show it. I could play a version of myself as a role, and my real self could remain tucked away, observing, hidden.

It was excellent preparation for any life, and most particularly, the life that was to come.