

# **The Incredibly True History of Tracy Lycett**

**by**

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Every time I'm asked is this *really* your incredibly true history, I lie.

A little.

That's not to say that this isn't my autobiography – just that it might not be incredibly true. But on the whole these episodes add up to a kind of truth. Maybe not the whole truth, but something like the truth.

## Tourists

***: one who travels on a tour; one who visits a place for interest and pleasure.***

I grew up in the kind of small town where, if you walked around alone after midnight, the police thought you were a prostitute. The problem was, no one else did. There was never any danger of anyone asking you for sex – it was always for directions. Not that we were a town of lost souls, but for ten months of every year tourists came to play. We charted the seasons through our guests – the first day of spring was the first day a Japanese tourist asked where the church was. Summer was truly said to have arrived when Germans clogged up the tea shops. These annual events bore no relation to the weather, in fact, quite the opposite. Germans were notorious for demanding ice cream in February, something we found both irritating and faintly ridiculous. The Japanese came any time they felt like it and wore the same outfits regardless. Americans were year round – we didn't bother inventing seasons for them. But we liked them because they spent big money and didn't mind what they ate.

At home we didn't waste much time talking about tourists. At breakfast, for a family of five, we were quiet – only the occasional request for marmalade or cornflakes broke the silence. But at dinner we more than made up for it. I was the youngest and the only one with a passion for athletics. But you wouldn't have known that, even my PE teacher didn't know that. My brother Ray, on the other hand, was obsessed with music. Every Sunday, because I was the youngest, I helped him write down the Top Twenty in blue school exercise books. I wrote down the bands, he did the song titles – that way we covered most of it. Sunday night dinner conversation

was always full of who'd gone up and who'd gone down. We made my sister and my parents try and guess who was the highest new entry from the selection of names we gave them. My parents, as bright as they were, didn't have a clue about who was coming and going in the music world. On other nights dinner was full of information about what had happened during the day, who'd said what to whom and what homework we were supposed to be doing. This all stopped when I became pregnant – probably because I was only thirteen at the time. I always felt bad that somehow I'd amputated the conversation, severed us from all that was good and easy and plunged us into a world of discussion about adoption and abortion and anger.

By the time I was fifteen, I worked part-time in a café mainly frequented by tourists. I wore a clammy, bright blue shirt, which I peeled off at the end of each shift, and a short navy skirt. My hair was long and, for hygiene purposes, I coiled it around my scalp and nailed it down with grips. I spent a lot of time in the toilets staring at my reflection in the mirror, wondering who I looked like. In between, I served up plates of potato salad, coleslaw and chicken breasts to queues of people who spoke in languages I didn't understand. At the end of a shift, we would carry the trays of unwanted breasts, cold and unlovely, down to the fridges in the basement. We cling-filmed them so that the following day we could serve them up, good as new. I loved my job because, despite the clamminess of the shirt, I was comfortable. I liked the cigarette breaks and the black coffee and the unlimited plates of cottage cheese. I liked all of it because, even at that age, I was into renovation – my thighs were too big and my breasts were too soft – but it was nothing a diet of cigarettes and coffee couldn't sort out.

Eventually I did lose weight and, for a short time, I had a relationship with a tourist. The fact that I couldn't understand a word he said made it all the more romantic but, eventually, he got bored with it and for the final week of his holiday went out with my best friend Jo. She liked him so much that she took a degree in Russian.

Tourists weren't the only drawback I faced as I grew up. Anyone who comes from a family of five knows it's really a family of four plus one. As a self-obsessed person (who else writes their autobiography aged twenty six apart from Twiggy?) I felt like I was the plus one in the Poole family. Ray and Tina, my brother and sister, often had conversations that didn't involve me. Sometimes, after school, I'd try and make them talk to me.

'What's Ed Moses' real name?' I'd ask as we munched our way through bowls of cornflakes.

'Is he the really tall guy?' Tina replied once.

'Long jump,' I said.

'Don't know, why?'

That was Tina all over – answering every question with a question of her own. Ray, on the other hand, was more forthcoming.

'Athletics is never going to be more than a hobby for you – you should get into something more practical.'

'Like what?'

'I don't know.'

Another thing about being an accessory in your own home was that you often found that everyone else used the same language over and over. 'Don't know'

cropped up a lot, as did 'I know a hundred people who think you're the ugliest person in the world.' (This is the first piece of information that's not necessarily *incredibly* true, it was said – but only once – and I took it as a kind of affectionate sibling type comment, not as something to go into therapy about).

My parents, Barbara and Cameron (he was Scottish, with his own piece of tartan) didn't plan for me to be the plus one – but given that I turned up seven years after Tina and five years after Ray - I don't think planning was high on their list of priorities. An American tourist, who Barbara turned into her best friend, once asked her what went wrong, why the gap? Barbara shrugged and said 'Nature's choice.' Later, though, I saw her crying as she watched the news on TV. The tourist lived in Washington, which seemed exciting by comparison to our small town, but when she talked about how many murders there were and how bad the housing was I thought, maybe this is better. Barbara spent years promising to visit but, when the trouble with me started, she said it would be too dangerous to leave now.

Barbara and Cameron (everyone called him by his middle name Pete, but I like the sense of place about 'Cameron') were what my grandmother called 'happy arguers'. At the time I took this at face value, but now I'm not so sure. Cameron was tall and morose and full of love for us. Sometimes he was able to express it, but mostly we took it on trust - of course he loved us, we were his children. Barbara was different, effusive and generous – she sprayed her emotions around family and friends indiscriminately and mostly we were drenched by them.

The happy arguing began when the American tourist first visited our town. We were used to the tourists, as I've already explained. They were like wallpaper, concealing the unsightly, yet strangely invisible to the naked eye. So when Barbara

bought one into the house we were all a little shocked. The fact that she was a perfectly pleasant twenty five year old didn't help matters at all. My mother did not normally befriend young women – even if they had lost their shoes.

'There are four shoe shops in this town – she's not capable of walking into one of them?' my father shouted at her. Sometimes, when he was annoyed, the Scots went right out of him and he had a propensity to sound almost Jewish.

'I can't believe you begrudge a guest a pair of shoes that aren't even yours!'

My mother, on the other hand, remained resolutely middle-England - whatever the pressure.

'We don't even *know* her,' hissed my father.

'How very small-minded of you, how very *parochial!*' she replied.

That was it in a nutshell. We *were* all parochial. We were insular, unsophisticated and suspicious of anyone that wasn't. Of course we pretended we weren't – Tina had a French pen pal, Ray was saving up for a Volkswagen Beetle and even I dreamt of having sex with someone who didn't live here. But when 'Miss America', as Cameron called her, arrived in our lives we were about as ready to receive a beautiful stranger as we were planning on becoming Hindus.

In bed one night, Tina and I discussed Barbara's passion for 'Miss America'. It was unusual for us to be in bed together – we didn't even share a room – but it gives you some idea of the sense of crisis that was engulfing the family.

'She doesn't even look like an architect,' Tina said dismissively.

'That's because we think all architects look like Mr Morgan,' I was anxious that we didn't divert from the real meat of the conversation – what was going on between my mother and 'Miss America'.

‘And she lied about not having any shoes,’ Tina yawned.

‘Why would she do that?’

‘She’s a tourist!’

‘But why does Mum like her so much?’

Tina rolled over and kissed my forehead.

‘You don’t need to know that, you’re only ten.’

But that wasn’t really the point, was it? Age has nothing to do with curiosity, anymore than designing buildings has to do with seducing women. The truth is, the *incredible* truth is, we never got to the bottom of ‘Miss America’ and after a while we just never mentioned it again. The happy arguing continued and when it got really bad Tina moved out, leaving Ray and I to turn the music up and stumble through the silences at dinner. And even though we had shrunk into a family of four, I still felt like the plus one.

You probably think my getting pregnant at an early age is connected with a tourist – it wasn’t the case. The problem was, when I was thirteen I looked eleven, and no tourist wanted a romance with an eleven year old. They wanted girls who didn’t have to produce ID to get into bars and who didn’t remind them of their baby sisters. Tourists were a popular option for the teenage girls in our town for two reasons – money and looks. Tina was an exception to this generalisation because she had been going out with Alan, our next door neighbour, since she was fourteen. He was two years older than her, but you wouldn’t know it. He was squashy and blond and reminded me of a pillow – but each to their own. Tina loved him. She drew hearts and arrows all over her school books and used a red pen for her name and a blue one for Alan’s.

‘Blue is the colour of love,’ she told me one day.

I didn’t believe her. I preferred Ray’s definition of love – he didn’t have one.

Tina’s friends said the problem with tourists was that they were usually married. It wasn’t often you spotted a single one visiting our small town; generally they came in bundles – husbands, wives and several children. Although this didn’t always preclude a romance, it didn’t make life easy. Even when the husbands managed to get away, the time was so short it wasn’t always worth it. Occasionally it was traumatic, like the time one of Tina’s friends found a tourist who was interested in her. They had some lovely, snatched moments and then, out of the blue, he told her he loved his wife more than he’d ever love her and she was crushed. When Tina told me this I didn’t say anything but, I thought to myself, her friend obviously wasn’t very bright – but then neither was the tourist for stating the obvious. In another world two such like-minded people might have made a go of it, but it wasn’t to be.

Just to round the whole thing up – we did actually have two tourist free months, eight weeks where it was residents only. The older I got, the faster those eight weeks went until by the time I reached my sixteenth birthday – I couldn’t tell a tourist from a non tourist. In fact, by the time I was legal, I couldn’t tell day from night either, but I’ll tell you about that later.

## Buildings

*: work of a builder; what is built, edifice.*

Buildings, whether or not your mother is involved with an American architect, are a big part of every child's life. I was no exception. The first building I had happy memories of was the shop on the corner of our road. It wasn't because it was a place of beauty – there was certainly no resemblance to a building like the Chrysler in New York – on the other hand it did have a certain charm. The owner wasn't a nice person so, thinking back, it must have been the contents of the shop that I was so drawn to. When I see old black and white films where the women go nuts about jewellery shops like Tiffany's, I think I know how they felt. The way their eyes shimmered when they looked at some huge diamond is exactly the way my eyes went when I cast them around the counter of our corner shop. Spanish Tobacco was probably my most favourite item. It came in a waxy red coloured packet with gold writing on it and reminded me of mutinies on the high seas in some other century. It tasted great as well – but only if you liked coconut. Ray hated coconut, he said it was pointless. Even as an adult he couldn't get into Bounty Bars, never mind Thai curries, because of the coconut content. Talking of Ray, he was the only other person in my family who would set foot in the corner shop. Barbara, Cameron and Tina all boycotted it because of the unpleasantness of the owner. I say that, but I never really understood it. He just seemed like a quiet kind of person to me. Of course he shouted now and then – but that was only because we stole from him and who wouldn't shout under those circumstances? Later of course, everything was different, but at the time this was a typical exchange.

‘Hi’, I said, as I walked right up to the counter. I always spent a long time choosing my sweets – but only because it was an agonising choice. Sometimes I didn’t even know if I was in the mood for liquorice or not, so how the hell was I going to decide whether to put a couple of red and black bootlaces into my mix? Anyway, after a while he would lose patience with my dawdling (he doesn’t have a name by the way – although I could call him ‘Nameless’ for convenience sake) and he’d get stroppy.

‘Make your mind up will you, I haven’t got all day,’ Nameless would snap.

Which was, of course, a big fat lie. He was a shopkeeper – he did indeed have *all* day. The problem was, he treated me like a child – which I was, no question, but he didn’t have to be so obvious about it. Anyway, I didn’t let that put me off. I’d just take my time and when I’d filled up the paper bag, I’d hand over my money and be out of there. I think I went in that shop every single day (except for Christmas day when Nameless went to his sister’s for lunch) for the first twelve years of my life. Not counting the bit I can’t remember before I was five. But I’m sure if you asked Barbara she’d tell you I probably toddled over there as soon as my legs would carry me.

All good things come to an end, everyone knows that, and I set foot in the corner shop for the last time two months after my twelfth birthday. Unfortunately, I can’t remember what I bought on that particular day as so many things have happened since, but I’m pretty sure I enjoyed it. There was not one bad tasting item in the whole shop as far as I was concerned – okay, I’ll qualify that – not one bad tasting item on the *counter*.

Another building I was fond of was the library. You probably think that’s a really obvious choice with me writing my autobiography – but it’s not as black and

white as it first appears. The library was a Saturday place for me. In my memory it's up there with TV Comic and Spaghetti Bolognese – all Saturday events in my childhood. Saturday was always a great day because it didn't involve school. Not that I was a big school hater – not like some of my friends – but I was definitely indifferent to it. School and I were strange bedfellows, as the man once said. I think I was probably allergic to it, but, as with so many other things, doctors aren't really open to discussion on that one.

Saturdays began like this in our house.

'Tracy? Tracy!' Barbara would call and I'd lie there loving the sound of her calling my name. That was probably a bit strange of me – but not harmful surely? Possibly sweet even?

'Time to get up.'

That was my cue to get out of bed. I didn't mess around after that. Straight into the bathroom, straight out again and straight down the stairs to the breakfast table. Cameron laid in on a Saturday so we didn't usually see him, but Ray would be there reading the cornflake packet, sometimes with a bit of sheet fluff in his hair. Tina took her time getting ready at the weekend, for Alan's benefit, and, anyway, once she got into her teens she skipped breakfast at weekends to try and loose weight. All these factors meant that I was chattier than usual on Saturday. If I ran out of things to say I'd invent a dream I hadn't had; one I remember vaguely involved Shakespeare and me doing something or other together.

By the time ten o'clock came we'd be ready to set off for the library and by ten fifteen we were usually on our way up the steps and into the building (that's another great thing about growing up in a small town – it takes no time at all to get

anywhere). I'm trying to remember what the library smelt like – in my head it's a nougat type of smell – but that can't be right. I think it must have smelt of books, but not second-hand books. Perhaps the plastic cover they sealed the books with gave off a scent. Anyway, I'm digressing, what a building smells like is not the most important thing about it. To my mind, it's the way you feel when you bend your neck back and look at the ceiling that's important. If you get a butterfly in the pit of your stomach and you keep your neck that way for so long it aches – then you know you're in a great building. Of course, in a library, books are bound to be a bonus – but if you're lucky enough to spend time in a building that makes you feel those kind of sensations – words don't really matter. That's what I meant when I said my love for the library isn't as black and white as it first appears – and I'm convinced that there's very little connection between me writing this book and the books that I borrowed all those years ago. In fact I remember studiously avoiding biographies of any shape or form in favour of fiction, so it wasn't like my destiny was set back then on those perfect Saturday mornings.

The other building that sticks in my head isn't really a building at all – it's a roof. It belonged to the parents of my close friend Jo. At other times in my life (and sometimes in this book) I've referred to Jo as my best friend but, ever since she romanced the Russian tourist knowing that I liked him very much, I've demoted her in my memory to 'close friend'. However, there's no getting away from the fact that we spent as much time as you would spend with your best friend up on her parent's roof. We were not daredevil girls – the roof I'm talking about was on top of a small, bust up shed in their back garden. Barbara donated an old pink blanket that had

belonged to her mother, for us to sit on and occasionally we borrowed the pillow from Jo's spare bedroom.

Our favourite time to be up on the roof was four o'clock on a summer holiday afternoon. The roof would be warm as toast against our backs and the sky bluer than blue velvet. On the hottest days we took slices of lemon up with us and, in the glaring sunlight, our eyes would stream with tears with the bitterness of it all. Sometimes Jo's dad would garden beneath us – something I found interesting to watch as I'd never seen Cameron do it. He was old though in those days, not that you'd know by his shape. It was the top of his head that gave the game away.

Jo and I used to talk non-stop, the way that friends do. I was three months older than her – something that was occasionally a bone of contention between us.

'Of course I'm entitled to the last slice of lemon, I'm the oldest.' I'd say sliding my sticky fingers towards the plate.

'But they're my mum's lemons.' Jo would respond indignantly.

'And I'm the guest!' I'd say snatching the slice.

Jo would usually sulk for a while as I lay, sunning myself and sucking blissfully on the lemon. Then she would retaliate.

'At least I've got a mum!' she said once, spitefully.

At the time I remember blinking at her because I didn't understand what she meant. In fact, I distinctly remember thinking she was stupid because – quite obviously – everyone had a mother. It was a biological necessity. Even I knew that and I hated science. Now, of course, I know exactly what she was getting at and I still think it was a spiteful thing to say. But then Jo was an only child and very jealous of the fact I had a brother and a sister. I probably made things worse for her by

pretending that me, Ray and Tina were really close – but that’s what best friends do, isn’t it?

It’s all history now anyway. Two years ago Jo boarded a plane that blew up before it took off. Something to do with the tyres, I think. She was killed instantly and her husband – the Russian tourist – died three days later from his internal injuries. They didn’t have any children.

## Food

***: nourishment for animal or plant; solid edible substance (not a drink); a processed or patent kind of food which sustains or stimulates thought, feelings etc.***

In my book, no book is complete without a section on food. Some of the best books in the world are cookery ones, not the fancy gourmet travelogues that are so popular these days, but a proper old fashioned book full of recipes. It's hard to know where this passion of mine comes from – but more of that later.

When I was pregnant my big thing was cake mixture. This was a bit awkward but, let's face it, it could have been worse. I could have developed an obsession with lobsters or some other really expensive food. I think Cameron (he paid the food bills in our house) got off pretty lightly in that sense. The problem with the cake mixture was that it wasn't very good for me. Not that I put on much weight – in fact most people didn't even realise I was pregnant – it was more a question of vitamins. But, on reflection, perhaps that wasn't my biggest problem, although it felt like it at the time.

A food I've grown to love in more recent times are avocados. The silkiness reminds me of sex. In fact every time I eat an avocado a memory of a body or a sensation of some sort hits me and I stop for a moment. What's weird about that is, in all the years I had sex, I never ate an avocado – but I find life is like that sometimes – inexplicable. I first came across avocados in the starter section of a cookery book. Starters aren't really my cup of tea – I'm more of a main course person. In our house we never had a starter course so I'm probably just not used to them. If I had grown up in a different type of house, which in retrospect I realise could easily have happened, perhaps I'd be more comfortable around them. But that's one of the

things that's not worth worrying about anymore. The road less trodden (or whatever that old saying is) and all that.

Food was the only thing that made school bearable for me. I know this goes against conventional wisdom – God knows every time you turn the radio on these days there's some second-rate comedian making jokes about his school dinners. 'Hello!' I feel like snarling 'I think we've heard it all before'. The fact is that for most of us, our entire relationship with food is founded upon that decade and more that we turned our stomachs over to the Education authorities. To this day I can't look at a beetroot without getting a flutter at the back of my throat – and I'm fond of beetroot!

But that's not really my point – it wasn't so much the *food* that made school bearable – it was the hour in the canteen. An hour that wasn't spent in the classroom. Or the playground. An hour where everyone was so transfixed by 'seconds' or who'd nicked the water jug that *they left me alone*. Now that sounds completely melodramatic and I've probably given you the impression that I was bullied or perhaps just not that popular – which was not the case at all. The fact is, I was too popular. I was possibly the most liked girl in the school and after I'd had the baby... but more of that later. You probably think I'm being ridiculous – how can anyone be too popular – but my brother Ray knew what I meant. Ray was the most popular boy in his school and, somehow, having this in common gave us a particular bond. We didn't talk about it much – in fact it never, ever came up in conversation, but I knew that he knew and that he knew that I knew that he knew. Which sounds confusing, but isn't really. I know that some of my own popularity stemmed from the fact that I was Ray's sister – but I didn't mind that. It was hard to explain to someone

like Jo, who's dead now but was nonetheless not that bright, what it was like to belong to the Poole family. 'Belong' is probably the wrong word – I was a *member* of the family. I was Barbara and Cameron's youngest daughter and, like many families, I had relatives I never saw. We lived in a small town, you know all this so I won't bore you again with the details, but suffice to say we were busy. We were wrapped up in our lives – in the clubs that we belonged to and in the life of the town. I went to the library every Saturday – I couldn't have done that if I'd been away visiting relatives.

Anyway, I think you get my point, those sixty minutes in the dining room, where all I had to think about was food, was like winning the Lottery every day. I didn't care whether I couldn't swallow the jam roly poly or whether the chips were cold or the gravy lumpy – I was happy just to be there, away from all my friends.

You might be wondering where on earth this is all going to end and I don't blame you. I, too, have spent many hours trying to second guess my fate – but the food section is probably not the appropriate place for speculation. When Barbara was trying to forgive me she used to come out with proverbs like 'many a truer word'. One that's stayed with me for some reason is 'horses for courses'. The last time I saw Tina she said it as well – so perhaps it was some kind of contagious family adage. Except that I've never said it in my entire life – but then I'm not *family* am I? Not really.

## Love

**: warm affection, strong emotional attachment; sexual passion or desire; charity, benevolence; self-sacrificing goodwill; devotion to whom or that which one loves; attractive person or thing; terms of endearment; no score.**

‘Love, love will tear us apart.’ was never one of my favourite tunes – although I did go through a bit of an Ian Curtis phase when I was a teenager.

‘Love *will* tear us apart.’ I think a tourist once said to me. But we’d had a few drinks and probably some sex and I’m sure I thought he was joking. The truth is, the *incredible* truth is, that I’m not that great with the love thing. I’m just not sure about it at all. In a small town you have to be so careful and not just because the walls are thin. Everyone knows everyone, which means that everyone knows *everything*. Nothing is private and if there’s one thing I do know about love, it’s that it won’t survive unless it’s secret. I know that people get married and there’s a big fuss and usually some nice clothes – but you tell me what love’s got to do with it? Will someone please tell me what the connection is because I really don’t know!

Tina and Barbara once spent an entire afternoon trying to explain it to me. I think it must have been soon after I arrived (see, I’m letting my guard down, now you’re getting to know the whole story). I remember asking lots of questions like:

‘If you die, where does all the love go?’

Tina and Barbara exchanged looks at this point. They were probably thinking why is a five year old asking us this. What they actually said was.

‘Love, real love, can never die.’

Which I knew was a lie. Probably the first lie they ever told me.

‘We’ll never stop loving you.’ Barbara said and took me in her arms.

Which is a nice thing to say. Probably the nicest thing they ever said to me.

Anyway, enough of all that for now. There's something about sex and love I'd like to get off my chest. When I was nine I kissed a girl for the first time. She wasn't a friend, so I knew it wasn't just a friendly kiss. But it was nice and then I forgot about it for years. When I was sixteen, and about to go into my phase of not knowing night from day, I remembered it. The girl was long gone by then, so I found a different one. Would you believe that, despite everything I've said about them, she was a tourist! I know this means that, by definition, she was casual (although a close friend I once had, Jo, went on to marry her tourist). But maybe casual was what I needed at that point in my life. She was called Pauline and we met through work.

After spending some time at the café with the potato salad and the chicken breasts I decided to branch out. Barbara and Cameron were very supportive of this idea - despite everything that had happened they still wanted the best for me. Tina, of course, had only one wish and that was for me to leave our town – but that was understandable given the Alan episode. Ray, the other member of my family, was so far into his music by then that I don't think he cared whether I worked in the café or fed the pigeons in Trafalgar Square, as long as I was happy. So, after leaving school with not many qualifications, I felt that if the world wasn't quite my oyster – it was up to me to make what I could of my life. I was lucky. The first door I knocked on was opened to me. Once I had explained myself and my circumstances to Mr Morgan, the man in charge of the tourist office, he was willing to give me an opportunity. The job wasn't necessarily one Einstein would have been happy doing, but it suited me. My duties were to keep the leaflets on all the attractions throughout the county neat and clean and to be helpful to the tourists.

Mr Morgan also stressed the importance of 'Making it Happen'. Of course, having been occupied with other things since I was thirteen, I hadn't really been following our town's efforts to develop into a more popular resort. I knew that Barbara and Cameron had been to a few meetings where people had started shouting and I once signed a petition because someone gave me the pen – but that, unfortunately, was the extent of my knowledge. I had been as excited as the next person when the tourist office opened – but I think we were all just hoping it might take the pressure off us regarding directions.

'Making it Happen' was something that all the Morgan's had become involved in. They were a famously civic-minded family; the entire clan had jobs as architects, doctors or solicitors. My employer was known as 'Self-made Morgan' – he started lots of businesses and had lived a pretty good life apart from a brief affair with his daughter's Nanny. That had affected his marriage, but it didn't ruin it and it certainly had no bearing on his ability to make money. He had personally invested thousands and thousands of pounds in to making the tourist office happen. The great thing about that for me was that he was so busy with his other work that he left me to run the office by myself on the understanding he could appear unannounced at any time. But he never did. Well, almost never.

I think I've mentioned before that the tourists usually arrived in what we called 'bundles' – a husband, his wife and a few children. Lone tourists were unusual, I should qualify that, lone heterosexual tourists were unusual and, let's face it, were usually snapped up within hours of arriving. The Russian tourist, who I had a brief romance with before he married my friend, had only been in our town for ten minutes before he came into the café for a cold drink. I think it was less than an hour

after that that I began to kiss him in the area near the kitchen. Which makes us sound almost voracious, but you'd really have to live in a small town to understand what it was like. In fact, those of you out there who are feeling judgemental – trying moving to a place with nine hundred residents, live there for ten years or more and see how you end up behaving!

Lone gay tourists were not just unusual; they were unheard of – not that we had a problem with them. There might not have been any gay residents in our town but I certainly knew of boys who'd kissed boys and girls who'd kissed other girls (I'm using myself as an example here). We might have been a small town, but we weren't a prejudiced town. We were big enough to realise that people lived different lives beyond our borders and we were happy for them to do so. Nameless, the man who ran the sweetshop, had a sister who lived in a much bigger town and she had all kinds of neighbours. In fact that's where Nameless had come from – something we often forgot as he'd lived in our town for so long and was a very quiet person.

The point I'm trying to make is, Pauline was an exceptional tourist. I knew that as soon as she walked into the office. In fact, I knew it even though I had my back to her. I sensed it. Maybe it was her perfume. Whatever caused it, my reaction came as quite a shock. Something caught me in the pit of my stomach when I looked at her. It felt like a cross between a punch and nausea – which makes it sound like a horrible feeling – but it wasn't. It was a feeling I became addicted to; perhaps it's what some people call love. I didn't have a word for it, just a sensation.

Unfortunately the addiction caused me all sorts of problems over quite a long period of time, but I'm okay now, and I wouldn't want you to think there wasn't a lot of happiness resulting from my addiction – because there was.

At first I didn't realise that Pauline had had the same punch/nausea feeling as me. I thought she just wanted directions, so I waited for her to ask. After a while I remembered that I was being paid to 'Make it Happen' so I broke the silence.

'Can I help you?'

'I'm looking for something,' she said in a low kind of voice.

'Is it to do with tourism?'

'I'm not sure.'

I loved her for saying that, for expressing her uncertainty.

'We've have bottled water over there if you'd like to take some time to think about it?'

Mr Morgan was obsessed with bottled water. I didn't really get it myself – and the weirdest thing is that some people actually drink it when they're out socialising – when they could be ordering *alcohol*. I know that I'm a big alcohol fan, so perhaps I'm biased, but really! Anyway, I remember thinking that Pauline was definitely my sort of person because she declined the water offer. She did want some time to think though, because she sat down. Then one thing led to another and she offered me a cigarette and I couldn't say no because I really wanted one - but it left me with a big problem. Mr Morgan had very controversially declared the tourist office a no-smoking zone. Our town went into uproar when they heard about it. You have to understand that *everybody* smoked. It was so natural to us we didn't even think about it. It was a part of us. We generally picked up the habit at around the age of ten and not many ever gave it up. In fact I can probably, to this day, count the amount of people who've given up smoking on the fingers of one hand. It just doesn't happen. Everyone smokes. In our family the one thing we all shared was a

cigarette – obviously we usually had our own packets – but once in a while, if someone had run out, we'd share.

So this was my dilemma. Of course normally whenever I wanted a cigarette I'd nip out of the back door and stand next to the dustbins. But Pauline was a tourist and they were not allowed to see that side of our lives. I swear to you that concern was uppermost in my mind, although you don't have to believe me. There was only one solution – the leaflet cupboard. It had a skylight in it so I knew I'd be able to remove the aroma afterwards in case Mr Morgan called round. But then again, he never did. He trusted me.

'I'd love a cigarette, but we have a no-smoking policy in here so would you mind coming into the back?' I remember saying to her.

Pauline just smiled and followed me. The cupboard, of course, was a real mess. Although I was happy to go to work, there were some parts of the job I found boring – such as tidying the leaflet cupboard. There was a theory that I subscribed to –you should always be stimulated by your environment – hence the mess! Inside the cupboard, which was roomier than you'd think once the door was shut, we lit up. I still had that feeling in my stomach, in fact if anything it was getting worse by the moment. A part of me wondered if it was desire, like the feeling I would get when I was with the men, but I couldn't be sure. That's probably why I didn't act upon it. God knows when I feel like that I'm usually the first one to be kissing and pulling my clothes off and his clothes off and getting on with it. But this was different; it was more like stomach-ache than desire. Now I know that it's actually heartache mingled with the craving, a foretaste of the pain around the corner – but that's all hindsight – the most useless thought process in the whole world.

I found out later that Pauline was more experienced than me, that's why she started off by sliding her tongue around the edge of my face. Funnily enough it reminded me of eating the cake mixture when I was pregnant. The pleasure in that wasn't the sweetness, although I didn't mind that at all, it was the licking of the bowl. The softness of my tongue against the smooth, cool, china bowl. Makes me shiver to think of it now, all these years later.

One thing clearly led to another, there's no doubt about that, and it seemed like no time at all before I was pressed up against the closed cupboard door. And, of course, at first I thought the whole thing was just the overwhelming sensations I was feeling. It was only when they slowed down a bit, and I came around a little, that I realised I was still getting a feeling in the bottom of my back. Don't ask me how, but in an instant it all came together - the noises, the sensations and all I could think about was the cigarettes. I thought on my feet in those days, so I acted quickly – I kissed Pauline, pulled on my skirt and buttoned up my blouse. That's just left the cigarette packet to dispose of – I stuffed that into my bra and opened the door.

Of course Mr Morgan wasn't happy about me deserting my post (I think there was a touch of the military man about him) and he was certainly annoyed that he'd been banging on the door for a full ten minutes before I opened it. It was also a shame that I lost my job. On the other hand, I think I mentioned that I found looking after the leaflets quite boring and apart from Pauline the only tourists that I'd come into contact with had been the bundles, so I wasn't completely sorry to say goodbye. Barbara and Cameron were annoyed, or perhaps that's not the right word. At first I thought their anger was directed against Mr Morgan for the silly no-smoking rule and his prejudice against Pauline, but halfway through the conversation I realised it

was me they weren't pleased with. Sometimes they say it's the straws that break the camel's backs, but in this case it was my having sex with Pauline that seemed to do the trick. And, of course, all the old problems were dragged up again – my pregnancy, Nameless, Alan, the Russian tourist, Jo's suicide attempt (which was blamed on me because she thought I'd had a romance with her father. Which I might have done, but she never knew for sure and to slash herself with the scissors was just typical of her attention seeking behaviour) and Ray. Everything in our house eventually always came back to the blue-eyed boy and how I had ruined him.

Anyway, I refuse to dwell on the bad times in this, my chapter about love, suffice to say that the incident in the leaflet cupboard was not a one-off and Barbara, Cameron and I had a few more things to discuss before I was prepared to walk out of their lives forever.

## Alcohol

***: intoxicating product of fermentation in wine, beer, spirits etc; drink containing this; class of organic compounds derived from the hydrocarbons.***

It might surprise you to hear about some of the alcohol related episodes in my life, but not all of them are relevant – so I'll try and be disciplined about it.

My father, Cameron, was a Scotsman but he must have been an unusual one, judging by what you read in the papers, because he didn't drink. I'll qualify that – he didn't drink alcohol - he did consume vast quantities of Tizer. During the years of my childhood I came to regard Tizer as a pretty revolting option in the liquid area. Not because it made Cameron bad tempered or maudlin or sentimental; it was more to do with the colour. As a child I swear that my nightmares were full of that scary orange colour and the taste of it - oh my God! All I know is that to this day I'd rather swallow any amount of Dr. Morgan's medicine than have one sip of Tizer.

Despite Cameron's indifference to alcohol, our house was full of it. Of course, there was no way of me knowing at the time that Tina was a secret drinker, although nothing I hear about that girl these days surprises me. Just yesterday someone told me she'd been back up to the solicitors badgering poor old Mr Morgan about this and that, as if he didn't have enough on his plate. I hate to say it about my own sister – but she has no dignity! I don't know whether she was destined to behave like that, or if being a teenage alcoholic paved the way – we'll probably never know is the answer to that one. Either way, there's no denying the fact that alcohol led to some quite spectacular fireworks in our house.

The biggest drinkers, and I have to say that at least we were open about it, were Ray and me. I used to think he drank heavily because his popularity got on top

of him sometimes, but I'm not sure that was the whole reason. My excuse was that I was keeping him company. Sometimes, even as I write this, I imagine you all sitting out there shaking your heads in disbelief. All I ask is that you don't judge me until you've heard the whole story. I know it doesn't look good, what with the tourist stories and my unplanned pregnancy, but it's early days yet. There's a lot more muck under the carpet, as they say. Another thing they say is 'Don't drink alone!' and I guess that's pretty much how I felt about Ray. Sometimes I'd just get this feeling, I don't know where the hell it came from, but I'd know he was going to start. I suppose I made it a bit of a mission to do what I could to save him – in those days I thought if I poured him a couple of little drinks we could socialise together and that might stop one of his descents in the middle of the night. I'm still not convinced it was the wrong thing to do, although God knows Barbara told me enough times! But then she didn't know everything. In fact, in the great scheme of things, she knew fuck all. Barbara's trouble her whole life was that she couldn't see what was under her nose because she was so busy looking into the middle distance. That's not a nice thing to say about your own mother – but it's not as if I haven't said it to her face once or twice.

Ray's favourite drink of all time was rum. You probably thought he was a Stella kind of guy, but the one thing Ray wasn't was predictable. He only drank beer on family occasions, in fact we'd have a good laugh about it sometimes at Christmas - there was Cameron on pints of Tizer and Ray on the hard stuff. Obviously he was about fifteen by then, we weren't a completely warped kind of family, even if we did smoke our heads off.

My favourite drink of all time was, and still is, Noilly Pratt. See, I'm not that predictable either. It's not the sort of drink most small town girls consume and let's face it; I couldn't even pronounce it correctly until I'd been drinking it for about five years (and I'm not even going to tell you how old I was then!). But I loved the taste of it and, even more than the taste, I loved the way it made me feel after I'd had a couple. I suppose what I'm saying is that I've always used alcohol as a form of anaesthetic – not because bad things have happened to me, I'm not one of the blotting out brigade – but because I like the idea of being half in and half out of this world.

Unfortunately alcohol, while usually giving me nothing but a good time has, on occasion, caused an argument. For instance, I was often warned by Barbara and Cameron about the dangers of drinking too much. These conversations all took place before I was twelve so I suppose what they were doing was laying good foundations for my adult behaviour. I didn't drink before I was twelve and they knew that – so it was all along the lines of a cautionary note. What caused an argument some time down the line was the fact that after I became pregnant the warnings stopped. It was as if they thought the damage was done and I was a lost cause. One night I got annoyed about that and threw one of Cameron's bottles of Tizer across the living room. Unfortunately the top wasn't on – but as I hadn't deliberately intended to spray sticky orange liquid across the furniture and the TV, I thought his reaction was excessive. In fact, when Ray had pulled him off me I told him myself.

'You want to get your priorities sorted,' I said defiantly.

'Priorities?' he breathed into my face.

I wasn't scared. I was more angry than scared.

'You're more bothered about your cushions turning orange than you are about me!' I said and retreated behind Ray.

'Is that right?' he said to the space I was standing in.

'You never tell me not to drink now, not since the baby.' I whispered.

'And d'you know why that is?'

'Why?'

'Because I don't fucking care anymore!' he yelled.

Sometimes I dread to think how he would have behaved on anything stronger than Tizer. The fact is – they didn't care – but that's because they'd got it all wrong about my pregnancy. Somehow, this was a comfort to me at the time. I knew if only they'd known the truth they would have still been fond of me. Unfortunately, when they finally learned the truth, they found it too incredible to believe. Which didn't really add up for me – but there we are, you'll have to make your own mind up on that one.

One of my happiest alcohol memories is a roof story. By the time I was fifteen I'd managed to get Jo hooked on Noilly Pratt as well and one night we climbed up on to the roof with our blanket and pillow and slept under the stars. Of course, without the bottle of Noilly inside us we probably would have woken up and got scared – as it was we slept until ten the following morning and then Jo's father helped us down. It was a memorable night, not least because it was only a matter of weeks before the Russian tourist came between us. It was one of our last nights of pure friendship together. I'd lost most of my weight, Jo had put highlights in her hair for the first time and we'd just discovered French cigarettes and were smoking them instead of the manky old Dunhill's we were used to. We were on top of the world.

## Truth

***: quality or state of being true; that which is true; conformity to fact; honesty, sincerity; genuineness; accuracy; principle, doctrine, law etc accepted by many as truth.***

The thing about the position I now find myself in is that everyone wants a piece of me. I don't mean that I'm popular, not like when I was at school, but I am of interest to certain people. That's the only reason I've written all these things down. If it had been up to me they would have stayed inside my head – as it is I'm having to filter my thoughts so as not to bring further heartache to those who know and love me. Nevertheless I think if you cross-referenced what I've written with everyone I've written about, the way academics do when they're researching something, I think you'd find a striking resemblance to the truth.

The problem with truth is that it's in the eye of the beholder, which is not necessarily the safest place for it. All those old fashioned sayings like 'Honesty is the best policy' and 'Truth will out' and 'Never a truer word' and 'Truth hurts' are, to put it politely, a load of rubbish. Truth is just opinion dressed up as morality. Well that's my opinion, for what it's worth, anyway.

I think I might have mentioned before that I was twenty six. Well, for starters, that's not entirely true (you see what I mean?). I'm actually twenty one – today in fact. But I think I could pass for twenty six if I needed to. I'm afraid it was just a number I plucked out of nowhere – for no good reason at all. Now you probably don't believe it's my birthday today, but there's not much I can do about that. The only thing that's upset me on this, my special day, is that I haven't got a card from Ray. I know there's a really good reason for this – how *can* a dead man send a

birthday card! But that doesn't make the disappointment any lesser. At least I was able to send him a twenty first birthday card – even though I was descending downhill pretty fast at that time. On the whole, although I'm obviously trying to regard this as a special day to keep my spirits up, I'm not that keen on birthdays. Throughout my life, call it coincidence if you like, bad news has tended to be delivered on my birthday. But that's not something I necessarily need to dwell on today. I've only really got one goal today and that's to finish writing my (*incredibly*) true story.

Once upon a time I opened a letter. It wasn't addressed to me and I would never do anything like that again, ever – boy have I learnt my lesson there! The thing is, it wasn't that I made a mistake, I did see Barbara's name on the envelope – it's just that I was drawn to this letter. It was almost a craving – like my craving for sex or my love addiction for Pauline. I had to open it, I couldn't have lived for another moment if I hadn't opened it. My hands shook and I had a strange buzzing in my head as I ripped the envelope apart and then, as I read it, everything stopped. I mean that quite literally. My whole world slowed to a standstill and, in some ways, despite all the things that have happened to me, I'm still standing there in our kitchen with the sunlight streaking across my face and my family sleeping upstairs. The letter, written by my mother, contained a poem written by a poet. This is the only bit I can still remember, all the other verses have been wiped away with time.

We shared a dream beneath a dream-beneath-a-dream.  
Our tears became a storm that washed away our names  
and our voices blended with the rain's.  
Whatever does the singing sang about, and then away,

the pain of having been  
one creature torn in two.

Being the kind of person I was in those days I put the letter behind the bread bin and got on with my twelfth birthday celebrations. It was only later, when the house was quiet and we were quiet that I asked about it.

‘I found a poem in a letter this morning.’ I said as we stared at the TV.

‘What letter darling?’

Some of the time, not all of the time Barbara would call me darling and my throat would contract at the sound of it. But on that night, nothing happened.

‘The letter from my mother.’

Now when I look back on it I think I was mean to tell her like that. These days I can’t get that look in her eyes out of my brain. A mixture of horror and love. She never, ever looked at me like that again.

‘Show me the letter,’ she said carefully.

And I did, and she cried when she read it and said it was a beautiful poem.

The other problem I have with the truth is how it distorts everything. Ray, Tina and I had a real problem after the truth came out about me being adopted. Or at least I thought we did. I would lay awake at night and think about the re-imagining of our relationship. I’d wonder how we’d cope with this new information, whether Ray would still want me to help him with the Top Ten on a Sunday night and how Tina would introduce me to her friends now. It took a while for me to understand that, for them, nothing had changed. They had known all along that I wasn’t born into my family – because they were ten and twelve when I arrived. And then slowly

(because perhaps I wasn't really that bright) I realised that everyone in our town knew because - it's a small town. Nine hundred inhabitants, thin walls, short streets and a few policemen who think you're a prostitute if you go out by yourself after dark (only, of course, I didn't know that then, I didn't know that until I started going out after dark, meeting tourists – married or not, acquiring a reputation and becoming unpopular).

What I couldn't quite get a grip on was how my truth was so very different from anyone else I'd ever met. I believed and lived my life like I was Barbara and Cameron's daughter and everyone else knew that I wasn't. Under the circumstances, being only twelve and all that comes with that particular age, I think it was entirely understandable that I went to my favourite building and tried to talk to the only other outsider in the whole town. You probably don't see it that way, you probably think what was the big deal – it wasn't as if I wasn't loved!

Nameless felt pretty much the same way so we didn't do a lot of talking the first night I turned up. In later years I always wondered whether the justice was particularly poetic that night – with me falling pregnant. The truth about that is that none of us has an answer. Nameless has told it every which way since. Ray broke his heart over it and I lost Tina on account of her believing Alan was the father. As for Barbara and Cameron, their good deed had suddenly gone horribly wrong and I know for a fact that they often wished that when Miss America had come looking for me that they had handed me back.

## Trouble

**: difficulty; that which causes worry, distress or annoyance; effort, painstaking work; chronic ailment, disease; danger, risk; unrest, disturbance, upheaval; disagreement, discord.**

You probably think you know the whole story now, you've had the denouement and you can picture the way the next nine years unfold. You're wrong. In some ways this is where my *incredibly* true history begins.

Nameless was an odd choice for my first boyfriend; he wasn't particularly good-looking – certainly not compared to someone like Ray – he was very involved in running the sweet shop and he didn't really like me at all. I was particularly bothered by the not liking, I had after all gone from the girl who took a hundred years to choose her twenty pence mix to a strange creature who laid in his bed and watched TV until three in the morning. A real problem which surfaced early in the relationship was not enjoying the same TV programmes. Obviously I had my twelve year old tastes and he had a thirty two year olds. The compromise was that he went to sleep, I watched what I liked and promised to leave before he woke up. Occasionally, at the beginning, we'd have sex and I don't really know what to tell you about that. It just happened, sometimes. It wasn't at all like the sex I had later on in my life with the tourists and what have you. It just was – and to be honest with you I can't even remember what it felt like. I've had *momentous* feelings in my life – but not with Nameless.

Maybe we would have gone along like that for some time, years even. Maybe when I was sixteen we would have got engaged and legitimised everything – but I don't think so. If you don't like someone, that doesn't ever really change and no

matter how hard I tried I could never get Nameless to like me. Obviously, despite my age, I was bright enough to realise that most people wouldn't understand our relationship. They would have an opinion based on right and wrong and morality and all those things that cause such a lot of trouble all over the world. Worst of all – they would impose that opinion on me. I'm not trying to defend Nameless, maybe on that first night he should have just handed me a packet of Spanish Tobacco and marched me back to Barbara and Cameron's house. But he didn't. Maybe he couldn't be bothered or maybe, *incredible* as it may sound, he had a tiny bit of feeling for my situation. He didn't have to like me, but any fool could see that on that particular night I felt like I'd had my family and my town ripped right out of me.

Anyway, as it happened, despite our efforts to keep our relationship hidden – trouble turned up one night in the shape of Ray. Perhaps, in order for you to understand what happened next, you need to know a little more about Ray. In our small town Ray was perceived as a mix of Marlon Brando, Johnny Depp and James Dean and that's no exaggeration! No other boy was like him – that's probably why all the teenage girls got so unsteady about the tourists. I know for a fact that Tina longed to be Ray and, when she looked in the mirror, regularly cursed the way the looks had been handed out in her family. Not that she wasn't pretty – she certainly was – but Ray had a kind of star quality that she couldn't get close to. All of this, of course, I only came to realise later. At this point in my life – the point at which everything exploded for the second time – he was just my older brother, irritating, faintly amusing and notorious for spending too much time in the bathroom. To the rest of our town, however, Ray was going places – a lot of people had invested a lot of time in Ray in the expectation that he would one day make us all proud of him. Of

course this was never spelled out, but I'm sure Ray carried the burden of this anticipation wherever he went. His real problem was that he didn't shine in any particular area, except music. His 'aura' was supposedly going to be enough to get him through.

That's all history now anyway, because Ray's demise began the night he saw me kissing Nameless. It's easy to see now how a life can unravel, where one misstep can set off a train of seemingly unrelated events until such time that the final stumble seems inevitable. The night Ray broke into the corner shop, we did a deal – Nameless wouldn't call the police as long as Ray didn't mention what he'd seen us getting up to. We sealed the deal over some rum (funny how Nameless drank the same drink as Ray!) and Ray also went home with the cigarettes he'd come for in the first place. He was a happy guy that night, although everyone denies that now. I think, regarding my unconventional relationship with Nameless, which I told him all about – he took a live and let live attitude. Which was another thing that came back to haunt us.

Life went on in what had become its own peculiar way. I still went to the library on Saturday mornings with Barbara, but by the time the final scores were on TV in the afternoon I was usually sprawling across Nameless' bed. And so it might have gone on until I found a tourist to love except that I thought I was pregnant. When some kind of thunderbolt descends from your sky you can do one of two things – run and hide or stand and swear at it. I took the second option, probably because by then – for obvious reasons, I had a problem with secrets.

I had lost count of the number of times I'd had sex with Nameless by the time I'd missed two periods. In those days, in our small town, if you suspected you

were pregnant you either make an appointment with Dr. Morgan to have a test. Or you go to the chemist and buy a pregnancy testing kit from Dr. Morgan's wife, Mrs Morgan. By the time I was wondering which of these paths to go down I had started with the craving for cake mixture. I also have to tell you that for the first time in my life I was really scared. Not scared like you get when you watch a horror film, but deep down, trembling, sweating scared. Like something you have a phobia about is going to eat you alive. It was horrible; to this day it still makes me feel faint to remember how terrified I was. But I didn't tell anyone – not even when Barbara took me up to the doctors to check out why I started to look so bad. Of course, my family put it down to a reaction to the shock of finding out I was adopted. To be perfectly honest I have to say I enjoyed the attention. It was nice to feel like I was the baby of the house again after my feelings of displacement. Ray was particularly sweet to me; he'd come into my room and play me the songs I really liked and he was forever telling Barbara he didn't think I was up to going to school that day. In fact, when I look back on it now I'd say those brief weeks were amongst the happiest in my life. But I knew it was temporary, I knew I'd have to tell Nameless so we could make a decision about what to do with the baby.

To be honest with you, for all my worry about how he was going to react, he took it pretty well. I waited until we were almost engrossed in some kind of comedy show that wasn't very funny and then just blurted it out.

'There's something I have to tell you,' I said, wrapping his arm around my stomach.

'Mmmm?' Nameless quite liked comedy shows; he had to concentrate to understand the jokes, but I think he liked that after a mindless day selling sweets in the shop.

'I'm pregnant...'

He turned toward me then. He stared at me, but I didn't look at him. I was embarrassed, it seemed such a personal thing to be saying – far more personal than taking my clothes off in front of him or letting him kiss me all over.

'Are you sure?' It seemed to take ages for him to say that. A lifetime of silence and staring and weighing up the situation. For all of that time I didn't know what he was thinking, whether he was happy or sad about it. Over the past couple of months I'd convinced myself that maybe it wasn't going to be all bad. Obviously the age difference was a problem – but only for other people - we were okay about it.

I know of all the things I've told you, you probably think this is the most dangerous. Of course I sound naïve, but I'm not telling you how I would feel about the situation now, I'm as unhappy as the next person about young girls and older men. But I'm trying to tell you how I felt then. Then, in my twelfth year I was looking for someone to belong to, a family I could call my own and know that that was the truth. And I didn't know. How could I know what he was going to do?

'Yes.' I looked at him then. I didn't even know that I was crying until he kissed my tears.

'Don't worry,' he whispered into my hair, 'Don't worry.'

In that moment my terror went. He wiped it away. I slept then for a couple of hours, warm and wrapped up in his sheets and his arms and his bed. When I woke up, he was asleep. He was curled up away from me facing the wall. However hard I

looked I couldn't see him breathing, so I turned him over and listened to his heart.

Then I left.

The thing about trouble is it's combustible. All you need is for a spark to fly and you're off again trying to put out the fire that rages around you. Most people think I'm the spark, I'm the one igniting the world around me. But that's not the way I see it. Not at all.

## Miss America (n)

**: *belonging to the continent of America; belonging to the United States.***

It's true that Miss America wasn't an architect; she wasn't even particularly interested in buildings – so I didn't get that from her. She did live in Washington DC and no wonder she could chat the hind legs off about the bad housing over there – that was first hand experience talking. But one day she got a lucky break. Everyone needs a lucky break once in a while. When she was eighteen, and working all hours in a cheap coffee shop, she met an English woman who was on a recruiting drive. Don't ask me how legal it all was, green cards, red cards, tax, insurance – who knows what scam that woman was playing. Who cares now? It got my mother out of a hole – literally.

By all accounts the English woman was very persuasive and within forty eight hours Miss America was stepping off a plane at Heathrow believing the world was at her feet. I like to think I would have known better at her age, but by the time I'd made it to her age, I didn't know much at all. She settled in Dalston, a shared room in a shared house and found out within the next forty eight hours that all her papers and permits were forged. She had paid the English woman one thousand pounds (more, obviously in American dollars, but I'm not sure of the exchange rate back then) which she'd borrowed from the owner of the coffee shop. She was in a mess. Big time! But she had spirit, if that's the right word – I'm not great with words I find it hard to find one which *really* expresses what I mean. But never mind about that now.

My mother's 'spirit' took her all the way to the American Embassy in Grosvenor Square. It was closed. But on the steps of the Embassy she met Bill Wyman. The only other time I told someone this story they thought I meant Bill Wyman, the Rolling Stone. Our entire conversation was based upon her believing that. She made me feel like it was the most exciting story I'd ever told anyone – and then I realised why! So, in case you've made the same mistake, let me tell you the Bill Wyman my mother met on the steps of the American Embassy was actually Bill Wyman Jnr. He told her he was originally from Washington DC as well – but then he told her a lot of things. He said he worked at the Embassy – believe that if you will! And he offered her a way out of her dilemma.

Some people in our town were prejudiced about the American tourists – went on about how they were stupid and only knew about sport (not like us!). I've always been of the opinion that you can't generalise about a whole country – was Miss America stupid? That would have to depend on your point of view, if you have one. She took Bill up on his offer and went and met another English woman. This one was less charming than the first which gave my mother hope. The deal was – work as a live-in Nanny for a small weekly wage (after she'd taken her cut) and no one would ever ask any questions. What kind of choice is no choice?

Miss America found herself on a train to Salisbury the same afternoon. She changed twice – each time she felt like Alice in Wonderland – the trains grew smaller and the countryside bigger. Finally, five hours after leaving London, she arrived in our small town. Mrs Morgan was waiting in the station car park in a large vehicle with bull-bars across the bumper. Back at the house she was introduced to Sally

Morgan – quite the most unappetising child I’ve ever laid eyes on – but my mother found her sweet enough.

‘Self-made’ Morgan was away on business at the time. He returned two weeks later. Miss America told Barbara that she held him off for six months before she gave in – in the end it was easier to have sex with him than not have sex with him, so she did. She had the baby on her twentieth birthday, I suppose that’s why birthdays have always been a little strange for me, and called her Tracy (after the Tracy Lord character in her favourite film of all time). Lycett was the name of the midwife.

She lived in the same area of the same town as Nameless’ sister for the first five years of my life – but I don’t remember that at all. It’s strange to think that while he was ploughing his way through turkey and cranberry sauce, I was a crying baby a few streets away – but then life *is* funny like that. And then Bill Wyman Jnr came back into her life and offered her a way out.

She took less than a day to decide, she was impulsive in that way, but it’s what she did next that was unforgivable. She accepted Bill Wyman Jnr’s offer of three thousand pounds and offered it to Barbara if she would agree to adopting me. Don’t ask me why or how any mother could do that. She swore later, that it was a temporary arrangement and sure enough when Bill Wyman Jnr made big money back home in Washington – she came over to buy me back. Barbara turned her down. Miss America went to ‘Self-made’ Morgan and threatened him with all sorts if he didn’t persuade Barbara to hand me over. He did try and then Cameron got wind of it and told him he’d blow the whistle on everything including the dodgy planning deals if he pursued it.

So Miss America returned to Washington empty handed. The only concession she got out of Barbara was the agreement that she could write (to Barbara) every year on my birthday – and so she did. The IVF treatment Barbara bought with her three thousand pounds didn't work.

That's my Miss America story. It was told to me bit by bit over the years. Sometimes the same bit over and over, sometimes some new piece to fit into the jigsaw. But however many times I asked I never got answers to my questions – how did my mother know Barbara in the first place. Why did they adopt me knowing 'Self-made' Morgan was my dad and lived in our small town and why did Ray always swear to me, on Jim Morrison's grave, that the whole story was a pack of lies? If I wanted the real story of who I was and where I came from, Ray said, I should look a little closer to home.

## Lon(e)don

: *solitary; isolated, lonely; unfrequented.*

I might have given you the impression that having sex with Pauline was the straw that broke my family's back – but, if I'm honest, that's not the whole truth. What finally got me driven from the only home I had ever known and straight into a series of ruinous relationships was actually Alan. Alan, Al, was my sister Tina's steady boyfriend, the only man I've ever met who really did resemble a pillow. The reason I had sex with him was not because I found the pillow aspect attractive – quite the opposite in fact – he was way too squashy for my tastes. Nor did I sleep with him in order to exact some terrible revenge on my sister – although, as you might of guessed, I'm not over fond. I don't actually know why I had sex with him, except to say it was one of those things that has occurred many times in my life – he was just *there*.

I'm sure all you psychiatrists out there will read all sorts of deepness into my behaviour but I'm really not a complex person, I swear I'm not! There may have been something in the fact that everyone in my family assumed it had already happened and no matter how many times I denied it, they didn't believe me. But I think that's finding a reason for reasons sake not because it was *the* reason. Basically, in my experience, people in general have an unnecessarily complicated attitude to sex.

Nobody goes into paroxysms of guilt over any other basic function like sleep or food, so why pick on sex? If we took all the possessiveness and blame out of sex and treated it as a simple necessity, we'd all be a lot happier. Crazy as it might sound, confusing love and sex is probably at the root of most of the problems in the

world – that’s my philosophy anyway - but I have to say that over the years I haven’t found it to be a popular one.

Anyway – enough of philosophy – let’s get Al out of the way and then I can talk about my ruinous time in London. Obviously I’d already been sacked by my dad, ‘Self-made’ Morgan, for smoking and having sex in the leaflet cupboard, by the time I had the incident with Alan. If the truth were known (not that I’m making excuses) I *was* feeling sorry for myself at that time. Nobody enjoys getting the sack – not least because it leads to a problem with your finances. I also had a bit of a visual complex at the time which didn’t help matters. I had lost some weight – thanks to the cigarettes and cottage cheese in the café, but my thighs were still too big and I’d never felt comfortable with my hair and my breasts have never really pointed in the right direction – I could go on and on, but I won’t. That’s why Pauline was such a tonic and worth getting sacked for – I didn’t give my appearance a second thought while I was in that cupboard with her!

Call it a combination of circumstances or just plain bad timing, whatever the reason, one day I found myself in our back garden reading a magazine and thinking about how hot it was. (I sometimes find it strange that all my memories are hot ones – I don’t think I have a single thought in my head involving rain or wind or anything like that). I remember closing my eyes for a moment and then sensing a shadow – ‘Typical’, I thought, the sun’s gone behind a cloud! But when I opened my eyes it was just Al. Big, moon faced, pillow bodied Al.

‘Fuck Al! I thought you were a cloud, you stupid bastard!’

I shielded my eyes and peered at him. As usual he didn't speak. I sometimes wondered if Tina had had more than six words out of him in the entire seven years of their courtship. How she stood it was another matter!

'What do you want?' I asked him.

'At this moment in time?' Al said softly. His voice was always like this, billowing and breathy, so I didn't immediately pick up any signals.

'No, stupid! I'm talking about next week.'

That might have sounded rude, but don't you find yourself talking to your brother-in-law like that? It sounds aggressive – but actually there's a lot of love beneath the surface. But then I really did get pissed off because he pulled the magazine out of my hand and threw it across the garden. I know Cameron wasn't much of a gardener but no homeowner likes their dahlias beheaded by flying magazines.

'I was reading that, you fucker!' I said and got up a bit too quickly.

One subject I haven't touched upon so far in my autobiography is health. Not that there's a great deal to say – but light-headedness is something I'll probably go into if I get time. Suffice to say that I suffered a great deal during my growing up years (the years from five until eighteen, I mean) from fainting spells. Or as they were known in our house 'Tracy's spells' – which I didn't mind at all - I thought they made me sound witchy and interesting. The 'spells' themselves were far from interesting, they were a pain in the neck and they'd already led, on several occasions, to sex I might otherwise not have had! Anyway I'm sure you can guess the rest, I staggered and swooned a little and, I can honestly say, I must have had a little

blackout. When I came round I was lying in a shady part of the garden and Al was untying my bikini top.

‘What are you doing?’ I asked him woozily.

‘Don’t talk,’ he whispered and started kissing my nipples.

One thing led to another as you might expect and it wasn’t all bad. I mean, I wouldn’t go as far as saying I wanted a romance with him after one quick bit of sex, but on the other hand the pillow resemblance had it’s advantages. But, as the saying goes, every advantage has it’s own disadvantage and if Al hadn’t be the shape of a pillow, I might not have got so comfy and Tina and Barbara might never have found us snoozing away in the warmth of the late afternoon.

Within twenty four hours I was all packed up and sitting in coach C of the express train to London. All I kept thinking about was that expression about feet not touching the ground. In fact I was so preoccupied by it that a few times I actually examined my feet - just to make sure they were still on the ends of my legs. The other thought which wouldn’t leave my brain was that Ray would be so annoyed when he got back from his holiday and found out that I’d been thrown out of the house. I tried to think of a way of leaving him an address so that he could get in contact, but I didn’t have one. I didn’t know where I was going or who would take me in.

But I did, of course, have a plan. In that brief time we’d spent in the cupboard, Pauline had mentioned that she worked in an Electronics store on the corner of Tottenham Court Road. It was just after we had lit up and she was explaining that no-smoking was really catching on in London and she was finding it a real pain. They were even planning on making Tottenham Court Road a smoke-free

zone – that’s how I got to find out that she worked there. My only real worry was not being too sure about what an ‘Electronics’ store was. Does that mean computers or stereos or both? Or is it car radios? Whatever! The whole thing was starting to feel like an adventure – and God knows there couldn’t be more than a couple of Electronics stores on one road, so she wasn’t going to be that difficult to spot!

I have to say that I wasn’t over-impressed by London in the beginning. It was probably just the small town coming out in me, but it was so *very* big. I was overwhelmed. In fact by the third day I was so overwhelmed that I just sat right down on the filthy ground in Trafalgar Square and howled. It was a horrible experience – all the pecky pigeons having a go at me and some louty London boys pelted me with bread and all the time I howled louder and louder. I howled for my TV nights with Nameless, I howled for the looking up at the library ceiling, I howled for Jo and me lying on the roof and smoking Gauloises – but most and loudest of all I howled for my poor lost baby, the baby I’d never had.

Of course, in London, howling in public is par for the course. Not like in our town where if you so much as sniffled along the High Street, half a dozen people would offer you a tissue. So after I’d done my howling, I picked myself and my bags up and went to the Bella Pasta restaurant on the corner of the square. And that’s where life in London really began for me – maybe it was getting the howling out of my system after all those years or maybe I was just lucky.

I didn’t find Pauline for six months and maybe it would have been better if I never had. But the one thing you can say about the clock is that you can’t turn it back, no way, not ever! I know that better than anyone. I’d like to be able to tell you that I’m old enough and wise enough now to adhere to Ray’s most favourite song of

all time 'No Regrets', but I'm not. I'm not either of those things and I honestly believe that now I never will be.

## Ray

*: shaft of light; beam, gleam.*

One of the things that really troubles me is how all my memories of Ray are bound up with Nameless now. I know that the older you get the more tangled life becomes and that when you look back it's nothing but a cats cradle – even so it would be nice to pull one pure, unadulterated thought out of all the mess. The fact is that this is the hardest bit for me to write down; Ray wasn't my brother and perhaps deep down I always knew that, because what I felt for him wasn't really a brotherly kind of love. I wasn't attracted to him, by which I mean I found him attractive, but I had no sexual feelings towards him – I really loved him. In my darkest moments I've wondered if I only loved him because he loved me and because, at times, it felt like he was the only person that loved me, but I honestly hope to God that I'm not that shallow.

So much of this story is, as they say, water under the bridge that I will tell it as fast as I can. It begins the morning after the night before. The morning after I turned Nameless over to see whether he was still breathing. I got up, had breakfast, which on account of my pregnancy I made mostly liquid. So much so that Barbara was beginning to think I was anorexic. It seemed safer to let her think that than although, I must say, it also troubled me that I was losing weight. But as I didn't know much about it I put it down to the hormonal changes I must be going through. Anyway, the long and the short of it is that I went to school that morning and I came home that afternoon. Nameless called up to see Barbara while I was out, but the first I knew of it was after dinner when she told me and Ray that she wanted to talk to us

in the lounge. I remember that on that day I'd been feeling really happy because I'd told Nameless about the baby and God knows that information had been hanging over me for weeks.

'I've heard some very disturbing news today and I need to talk to you both about it.'

We knew that it was disturbing before Barbara opened her mouth because her glasses were on the top of her head, just sort of sitting there as if they had been abandoned in a moment of stress - usually it was down to some terrible disaster that was on the TV.

'Are you two having a relationship?'

I must say that took us both by surprise. It was a real shock and she must have seen our faces, but on she went – more like a Prosecutor than a mother.

'Are you denying that you're having a relationship?'

Ray spoke first, which was brave of him, because he didn't like words – he much preferred music.

'No, we're not!'

'You're not denying it, or you're not having it?'

She was cool as a cucumber and I think that's what did it for Ray. He exploded. Before I realised what was going on he'd grabbed the standard lamp and was threatening her with it. I thought then that that was as bad as anything could ever get. But of course it wasn't, and as I began to realise what was coming it felt like the dread of it was an animal crawling up my naked spine. Inch by inch until I almost said it myself, anything to get it over with.

'Tracy's pregnant!' Barbara screamed as Ray swung wildly at her with the lamp.

And then everything stopped and went very still. The animal stopped crawling up my spine, he froze and dug his claws in until I thought I would die with the pain of it. Ray stood with the lamp in mid-air staring at his mother and then, as I knew he would, he turned his gaze onto me.

'Oh Tracy,' he breathed in a voice so soft I swear only I heard it.

He never said my name again.

Barbara crawled along the floor until she reached the phone. She called Cameron and told him to come home immediately.

'Please,' I heard her say, 'I need you.'

Ray didn't take his eyes off me until Barbara had prised the lamp from his grip. She guided him into the armchair, Cameron's armchair with the ashtray built into the armrest and the newspaper tucked neatly into the pocket on the side of the chair. I stayed where I was, my feet gleaming with a new pair of shoes Barbara had bought me only last Saturday. I looked down at them and remembered how I'd persuaded her to buy a more expensive pair that she couldn't really afford. I'd been doing that a lot lately, since I found out about the adoption, and Barbara caved in every time. I felt for her briefly, thinking how badly it had all turned out and then I remembered what she had asked us not five minutes earlier and I felt nothing for her.

'Why did you ask me and Ray that?' I said coldly to her.

Barbara and Ray both looked at me then, almost with a little shock. Like they'd forgotten I was there, forgotten the awfulness of the situation.

‘Why did you?’ I asked again.

Barbara sat down suddenly on the settee. She didn’t look at me.

‘Michael, from the shop on the corner called round, he said there were rumours about you and Ray all over the school and he thought I should know. He said he’d heard children in the shop talking about you.’

‘What did they say,’ I whispered.

‘That you had been seen kissing at school.’

Her voice trailed to a whisper so that the word ‘kissing’ was almost like a kiss. It fluttered on the air and then crashed as Barbara let out a terrible cry. The noise went on and on until in the end I couldn’t stand it any longer. I stepped out of my new shoes and padded across the room and up the stairs into my bedroom.

I don’t know how long I stayed there. I don’t remember. I know the room became dark and then light again and then as the dusk crept around the room for the second time I sat up in bed and listened to the sounds of the house.

I don’t think Ray ever told Barbara and Cameron that he wasn’t the father and I don’t know why he didn’t. I did and I think they only believed me because they wanted to, because they couldn’t bear it. About a week later I told them about Nameless (I didn’t call him anything, he was never Michael to me, he was nothing).

Everything goes demented in my head after this. I know that my parents called the police. Nameless was arrested. There was a trial. I gave evidence. He got a two year sentence and it then it came out that he’d been prosecuted before for, ‘having intercourse with a minor’, was how they put it. I looked up minor in the dictionary just to check out who I was: ‘small, negligible, inconsequential, trivial, insignificant and unimportant’ – sounded about right to me.

There was of course still the question of the baby. At dinner, from which Ray tended to be absent, there were long discussions about what would be best for me. I stayed pretty quiet, didn't have much of an opinion. I spent the whole time thinking about Nameless and wondering how he could do such a thing to me. I knew that he didn't like me, but he'd had sex with me several times a week – didn't that mean anything? Round and round in my head it went, just like our little hamster on his wheel. Always the same questions and no answers that made any sense to me.

Now, of course, most of it just feels like a bad dream that happened to someone else. In my head I've put it inside a box that can't hurt me anymore. Okay, so he sacrificed us, me and Ray, knowing as he did so that we would be destroyed by it. He put his survival above ours. But I don't know one single person in this world who doesn't put themselves first. Everyone does. So did he have to involve Ray? He could have just picked on any old tourist and I might even have gone along with that, especially given the way things turned out. But Ray was about revenge for Nameless – for the robberies, for being the blue eyed boy, for being an 'insider'.

Ray and I never recovered. We didn't know how to look at each other any more. There was no more sitting at the kitchen table together, writing up the Top Twenty. He didn't come into my room and play me my favourite songs, in fact, I don't think he ever came into my room again – at least not while I was there. We went our separate ways, under the same roof, but not under the same sky anymore.

That's the end of my Ray story.

## **Baby**

*: infant; childish person; something which is a small example of it's kind; girlfriend, sweetheart.*

Baby: there wasn't one.

## **Phantom**

*: supernatural apparition; ghost, spectre; imaginary figure; hallucination; visual illusion.*

## **Pregnancy**

*: state of being pregnant; duration of this state.*

## History

***: chronological record or narrative of past events; series of past events in the existence of a nation, individual, institution etc.***

Every time I'm asked was this *really* your incredibly true history, I lie. But that's only because I'm a private person and I worry about too many people knowing too much. I believe in secrets, in the concealing of identities and the closing of doors. I have learnt my lesson. I know the purpose of my writing down what has happened to me is to give you all a clear picture, so that you can see how far I've come and make your own mind up. I have tried to be truthful, I swear to God I have! If there are small discrepancies it's only because of the tricks that memory plays – not through any deliberate deceit.

As for Ray. I couldn't bear to go through all that again – I know that all of you either know or can guess – and I hope you know that my heart is broken. As for all the not knowing night from day business – I haven't the strength anymore. However I would like to end on a more cheerful note and so I'll leave you with two verses of a poem my American mother once sent to me.

Then whatever does the waking woke, or dreamt it woke,  
To share our dream-beneath-a-dream before the primed  
Alarm could tear us back to me and you.

This is no dream: it's 5:15. I wake. I pack. Before I go  
I'll press my ear against your back – a hostage at a wall –  
To hear one beat. No. Two beats fall.