

Twenty-three men.

There are three whose surnames I can't remember, including one whose name eludes me entirely.

Ten were proper boyfriends.

I slept with nine of them only once: five of those were people I already had crushes on, one was dressed as a woman.

One was Korean-American, one was Italian.

One was Jewish.

Two were married.

Two were brothers.

One gave me scabies.

Two were significantly older than me.

One of them was 'good in bed', two of them were terrible in bed and two felt faint after sex.

One had to have the radio on all night and one kept up a tormenting monologue during sex.

There are five that I came to dislike intensely, three that I would sleep with again if I had the chance. I really regretted having sex with six of them.

One had an unusually large penis and two had unusually small ones.

None of them 'gave' me an orgasm, except one – possibly. I wanted it to happen so badly I think I believed my own faking.

One is now dead.

I loved three of them.

I was engaged to three of them (not the same three) and married one of them.

Of course, the men I didn't get to sleep with are just as important.

INTRODUCTION

MY sexual desire started digging its way underground long before I had any actual sexual experiences. As a child, an instinctive feeling of shame (about almost *everything*, I'm ashamed to say) gave rise to a great secretiveness – my strategy for dealing with the embarrassment that constantly engulfed me. If nobody knew what I was doing, or thinking, then I could act and think with impunity. There would be no need to worry about what anybody – especially my mum and dad – thought of me. My parents were, to all appearances, perfectly tolerant: they never told me what I could and couldn't do, they were never angry, they never tried to tell me that sex was wrong. No, but perhaps that's because I had absorbed their unspoken taboos at such an early age, and been so successfully transformed into an obedient and unchallenging daughter, that there was no need for them to keep on ramming the message home.

When a toddler, I once ran out into the traffic without warning and gave my mother a terrible fright. In her alarm she walloped me hard, a moment of uncontrollable rage, perhaps, that I had tried to escape from her. From then on, I never again threatened to leave the magic casing she had thrown up around the two of us until I got married, quite late in life – and even then it was more that the casing gradually grew thin and wore away rather than that it was torn down. Until then, she and I were as one, an undivided mind.

A mother and her child are merged when the child is first born, and that's natural, the way it needs to be. But usually the child separates from the mother, in stages, gradually becoming their own person. Of course the separation causes anxiety on

Cutting Up Playgirl

both sides but if the mother is sufficiently strong in her own sense of self, then she will let the child emerge without feeling too great a sense of loss. In my mother's case, I believe she thought having a baby would be completely magical and that the baby would overwhelm her with love, filling the gap left by her own less than loving mother. The discovery that a baby is endlessly needy and that she was expected to fulfil those needs – rather than the other way round – must have been a profound psychological shock.

Once the first two years of dependence were over, though, it became possible to skew the deal the other way, to start to claim something in return for all that had been paid out. If that happens, then in effect the child becomes servant to the parent, fulfilling the mother's fantasy of having a 'beautiful little girl', an accessory that makes the mother look good, always there to listen, sharing secrets. This is what happened to me – I was inside my mother's bubble and, knowing no other way, I was happy in there, pleasing her, privy to all her secrets, laughing about people with her, ganging up against my dad. I had absolutely no sense that this might not be the best way to be, and did nothing to undermine the way things were between us. The punishments that might be brought to bear on me if I did... well, who knew what they might consist of? Some form of annihilation?

However, even within the bubble, it was still possible to hide things – thoughts, words, desires – and so to keep oneself alive and in some sense separate, even whilst reassuring my mother that nothing was changing.

But any overtly 'sexual' things I did were, firstly, delayed long after the age when most adolescents start to take an interest in sex and, secondly, constrained by what I felt my parents would be able to bear. The things that really excited me were already

stored safely away. So whilst the *idea* I had of sex (which had evolved through my secret readings of the books in the special drawer upstairs and of my dad's soft-porn magazines) was dark and explicit, the reality was incredibly tame. Anything that threatened to make my pulse race had to be hidden from sight.

Why would somebody with such a veiled sexual life suddenly decide to reveal all? What if people should read it and *find out*? I think I must be experiencing a grotesquely delayed adolescence – it was basically this or tattoos and body-piercing. The teen rebellion is finally happening, it's just that I'm forty-three. But, undeniably, it is also the result of sublimation: my thwarted desire has found an outlet in these pages.

I've felt myself driven by sexual steam-power before – it usually takes the form of embarrassingly juvenile 'grand projects'. A boyfriend to whom I was engaged but for whom my feelings had completely died must have been bewildered when I undertook to recreate the Mexican Day of the Dead in the spare bedroom of our flat in Crouch End.

For months I sat in our small kitchen funnelling my deadened sexual energy into making papier mâché skulls, dancing cardboard skeletons and crêpe-paper marigolds. Then, as All Souls Day drew near, I made 'shrines' in the spare room, heaping exotic fruit and bottles of pale Mexican beer in front of blown-up photographs of my great-grandfather (a very bluff Yorkshireman, and almost certainly not a fan of fancy fruit and weak foreign beer) and his daughter, my granny. Enough fairylights and candles to pose a quite serious fire hazard, what with all the doilies I'd used as edging, and the effect was almost complete. On the Night of the Dead itself, I put on a tape of teeth-jarring mariachi music and scattered rose-petal confetti from the front door of the flat to the pink spare-bedroom carpet – in Mexico real flower petals

Cutting Up Playgirl

lead in the souls of dead ancestors to indulge in the treats the family has laid out for them. As well as the poor boyfriend, who had to live with this madness, I had invited all my friends to enjoy the spectacle I'd prepared for them over so many weeks. As they arrived, I began to sense a collective reluctance to enter the spare room. Perhaps it was the tang of incense that disturbed them, perhaps the jangling guitars of the mariachi band were not to their liking. Maybe the voodoo Catholicism of the festival unnerved them. Of course it was only *pseudo voodoo*, in this case, but soon they were all huddled in the kitchen, taking comfort in the chilli con carne and avoiding talking to me. In my Day of the Dead shrine in the bedroom, the candles burnt low and one of the frilly trifle cases they were standing in started to smoulder. My great-grandfather, stern in his tinsmith's overall and strangely warped because I'd photocopied him from a very old, bent photo, looked offended by this exploitation of his memory. As a social event, the night was a disaster. No one would touch the exotic fruit, and when I brought out a bottle of tequila, first one and then all of my guests made hasty excuses to leave.

Not too long afterwards, I managed to tell the boyfriend it was over and my sexual energies soon had new and more conventional channels through which to sluice. So perhaps, by comparison, a book is not too outlandish a product of sexual frustration.

I can't lay claim to any great trauma that might colour my narrative with gothic: no fashionably horrific abuse (unless you count the hairy knitted matinee trousers I always had to wear to the cinema as a small child), no serious neglect, no eating disorders, no drug addictions, no direct encounters with death as yet. My existence surely falls within the bounds of what's termed 'normal'. In fact I think many aspects of my personality are signs of a protracted 'childhood'. Like a child I hate strong alcohol,

cigarettes are even 'yukkier', drugs just scary; high heels and make-up are something to play dressing-up in occasionally but feel ridiculous. Being a 'sensible girl' is second nature to me.

As for my wicked 'inner sexpot', you have to wonder how much reality she can have if she hardly ever gets an outing. How long can she sustain me with her promise of erotic fulfilment if she is never integrated with my other persona, the School Librarian? When I re-read the endless letters I wrote to my mother (from childhood to well into my thirties) I'm nauseated by the false tone of them, the sugary cooings of adoration, the safe chitchat about art exhibitions and craft projects. Worse still, my childhood and teenage diary entries are the same, as if I feared that they would be read by my parents and so must keep up the same loathsome sweetness. I want to revisit my past and write an account of it to show that there was something else going on in my head beyond the 'super walks' I went on and the 'delicious goodies' I ate, the jigsaws and choir practices. For every phoney page in my diary, there was another reality in which a girl who had found out secret stuff about the power of the sexual drive, and who was both afraid of it and fascinated by it, tried to hide her knowledge, her knowingness from those closest to her.

Picking my way through the dot-to-dot of my sexual experiences may show up some of the reasons why I have ended up, in my early forties, split into two mutually hostile sexual personae: one withdrawn, rebarbative, sour, the other driven, curious, prepared to take risks – Mary Whitehouse arm-wrestling with Emma Bovary. I have a feeling, a fear more like, that the married woman who has put an end to sex is intimately connected to the would-be adulterer who harvests sweetness from every encouraging look, every flirtatious encounter, who devours sexual images and words and longs to make them flesh. An efficient

Cutting Up Playgirl

way to over-sexualise everything is to banish sex itself, normal, boring, if-it's-Saturday-it-must-be-sex sex. Then all that's left is the promise of sex, fantasy sex, and you don't even have to get your hands dirty.

Chapter I

STILL LIFE

They had packed all their movable furniture into the van, wrapped all their ornaments in muslin and left dear Swallowcroft...

Dr and Mrs Marsh travelled up to Cambridge by second class train but Hilary had to go with the furniture on the cart... The cart stopped abruptly outside a small whitewashed cottage... Hilary burst through the door and stood panting.

'Mama!'. 'Papa!' she called, but there was no answer. Suddenly Hilary felt an icy wind against her face. She noticed how cold and unwelcoming the dusty cobwebs looked and how bare the rotting wallpaper looked. Hilary realised that she was alone... Not only was there the prospect of spending a night alone in this grim dark house but the thought of her mother and father travelling on a train through the dusky evening. Then she had a terrible thought: what if her mother and father had been in a crash?... She walked slowly up the twisting path. She did not notice how beautiful the mellow sun looked through the amber leaves as it set, nor how the gentle breeze rippled the pond into a distorting mirror. Hilary was Alone.

Extract from 'Hilary's Story', completed 16 January 1974 (age 11)

WHEN I was ten, in the summer between leaving primary school and starting at the local comprehensive, we moved house. We left the two-up-two-down cottage that my parents had rented off my maternal grandmother to move into a much larger house that they had bought at auction. It was a big Victorian terrace on one of the main roads out of the town ('main road' being a relative term – it still had pavements

Cutting Up Playgirl

raised above the road to make it easier to get in and out of your carriage). There would have been a wonderful view over the whole valley if it hadn't been for the equally big houses over the road obscuring the view. My mother had spent a great deal of her childhood and youth in the enormous red-brick house almost opposite, which had belonged to her granny and grandfather. It was to that house, in the early Fifties, that she had brought her glamorous new acting friends back from rehearsals at the local theatre. And where they had heard great-grandfather peeing loudly into a tin bucket (which he had made himself) in his room next to the kitchen while they were drinking instant coffee and attempting to chat vogueishly.

When I first saw inside the new house it had just been vacated by tenants and was still crudely divided into two flats. A chunk had been sawn out of the banister rail which curved up all three floors to accommodate a cheap plywood door at the top of the first flight of stairs, and all the rooms beyond this door were the domain of the upstairs flat. The upstairs tenants would have had to come in and out of the house through the downstairs people's territory so there must have been awkwardness. The downstairs flat had only half as many rooms as the upstairs one, but they included the grand front drawing room by way of compensation.

I remember that first visit and the seemingly endless floors stretching up and up. It was huge compared to our cottage, but it was also cold and dirty and unlovely. The back part of the house felt as though it was tacked on, although in fact it was part of the original building. There were three rooms sandwiched into the ground floor of this back part: the kitchen, a bathroom (which was a narrow slice stolen from the kitchen, put in as a grudging necessity when the house became flats) and the 'Orange Room'.

Carrie Jones

Today, over thirty years later, this living room is still known as the Orange Room, for when we first saw it that day it was entirely painted with thick gloss paint in a neon shade of orange. Even the light switches and cupboard doors were orange. As soon as we moved in, my father covered the ceiling in polystyrene tiles and the walls in anaglypta as a matter of urgency, but the room remained orange in memory.

My father worked very hard all that summer to make the house habitable for us. For the move itself he borrowed a pick-up truck and he and my uncle loaded it with our furniture, which wasn't much. I was allowed to ride in the back of the truck for the short journey through town. This was unprecedented and also frightening: jollying along the cobbles reminded me of the time when the door of my dad's car had accidentally come open next to me as we went over the cobbles and, terrified, I had seen them rushing along beneath us. Whenever I see *The Grapes of Wrath* it reminds me of that brief trip as an Okie, which I now think my father may have deliberately set up in order to embarrass my mother. She wasn't involved in the move because, as a town councillor, she was required that morning to take part in a solemn procession of dignitaries through the town to the Parish Church. It was surely not a coincidence that the beat-up truck, piled high with our humble belongings and with a grubby child perched on the tailgate, should lurch through town just as my mother was slow-stepping through the marketplace in her best outfit. I'm sure he honked the horn and waved.

Once we were in, there was a territorial battle between my parents over who should choose the decorative style of the rooms. It being the early Seventies, both of them had strong ideas about décor. My mother had been heavily influenced by Terence Conran's Habitat and by Laura Ashley. My father

Cutting Up Playgirl

disliked Mum's ideas on principle. She managed to grab control of the core rooms while conceding the downstairs bathroom, the top-floor bedrooms and what had been the kitchen of the upstairs flat. This last room became his 'workshop' where he would spend increasing amounts of time.

In the downstairs bathroom, the black enamel paint favoured by my dad in all practical tasks was dominant. The floor, the tiled splashbacks, the panelled sides of the bathtub – all were soon painted the glistening black of wet tarmac. Inspired by one of his favourite artists, 'Douanier' Rousseau, he papered the walls with a dense stylised jungle print. If my dad had embraced the 'crazy' Sixties to any greater extent than wearing black polo-necks and having a copy of the Penguin Liverpool Poets in the loo, it might have had been suspected that he had decorated this room whilst under the effect of psychedelic drugs. There was no heating in this bathroom and steam never cleared from its clammy confines, so, as a precaution, he carefully varnished the wallpaper with high-gloss polyurethane. The added gleam completed the impression of being pressed in upon by giant succulents, where acid-crazed monkeys might descend from the mist-tendrilled trees at any moment and tear out your eyes as you peed.

My father also got to decorate the upstairs loo, which he chose to do with a highly fashionable collage of women cut from the pages of the *Sunday Times* colour supplement. This trumped what his bachelor friend had done, which was to hang a board on the back of the loo door pasted with a melange of women's bodies and faces. The friend taught in a convent school and could not risk the opprobrium of the Mother Superior if she should call on him at home and need to use the lavatory. In case of such visits, the board was turned round to

show a portrait of the Queen on the other side. Our family, apparently, had no such concerns, and so the back wall of our loo, carefully shaped around the cistern, was entirely papered with heavily made-up eyes, scarlet lips, breasts, Modigliani nudes, Brigitte Bardot and other starlets, Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* (which I've always hated) and countless other fragmented women. I don't know if they were intended to provide any sort of stimulus, but the pictures were behind you if you sat down, so not easy to contemplate from that position. Nonetheless, I was very aware of them. There was a particular grouping of eyes, nose and mouth – three separate cutouts – up on the left which, together, made a grotesque face and I always tried to avoid making eye contact with that Gorgon as I feared it would put the evil eye on me.

It wasn't long before the new house had absorbed us. We soon established arrangements for living there which then continued for years, never varying until I had left home, and even beyond that, until my parents got divorced. Those years of routine – those meals cooked and eaten, those cups of tea in bed, those baths where you huddled beneath the taps to keep the last gallon of warm water around your knees after all the water behind you had gone grey and cold – are impossible to differentiate. They stand as a solid block, seven years long for me, during which our habits created battlements which must not be stormed. These routines were the very infrastructure of our privacy as a family, and it went without saying that, like the Borrowers, we did not want to be *seen* living the way we did. It wasn't that it was *so* shameful, but our routines would have been disrupted by visitors and that in itself meant casual visitors were to be discouraged. There was a strong sense of reliance on the sameness of things, on familiarity and predictability, to

Cutting Up Playgirl

anaesthetise the pain of unhappiness. The unhappiness itself was utterly routine.

My father put a Parkray fire into the Orange Room and, the only reliably warm place in the house, it became the nest room. The butter dish always sat on the slate mantelpiece above the fire to soften the butter, which as a result was always slightly rancid. The damp salt, a coppery blue-green, was also kept there.

My mother and father got dressed down in the Orange Room every morning – separately, of course – stooping to step into their underwear in front of the Parkray. Mum kept most of her clothes in the bottom of the large cupboard to the left of the fire, and dad kept his in the corresponding cupboard on the right. These were huge cavities, floor to ceiling. Mum kept her underwear stuffed in the drawers of the dresser, which also contained piles of magazines, bills and bank statements, medicines, the striped box with her hairpiece from the Sixties, art materials, and the very many zippered bags and old chocolate boxes containing her make-up.

Only once in all the years of my parents getting dressed in front of the Parkray did I see something I shouldn't. I was used to seeing my mother naked – she never locked the bathroom door and thought nothing of summoning me to talk to her there – but my father's body was very much taboo. So much so that I knew nothing of his dressing rituals, always coming downstairs to find his ancient towelling dressing-gown hanging on the back of his cupboard door; this proved that he had come downstairs in it, although he was always fully dressed by then. The dressing-gown was unpleasantly short, and showed not only his hard white calves (threaded with veins that made me think of Blue Stilton) but also his knees, which were like twin pots of face cream, their surfaces smooth but uneven. Only once did I come in through

the door without pausing and see him at the very moment of maximum stooping, his back to me, one foot already hooped by the leghole of his Y-fronts, something dark and pendulous dipping down beneath the worn hem of the dressing-gown. After that I learnt to look through the heavily ribbed square of glass that was set into the door before going in. The ribs sheared the view of the room into disguising slices but it was possible, nonetheless, to discern the dark-green dressing-gowned form of my father if he was not yet dressed – in which case I would turn aside to the cupboard under the stairs and crouch there to sort out the books I'd need for the day's lessons or perhaps polish my shoes. It was hardly ever necessary to do this, in any case: minute adjustments – him carefully starting to dress a little earlier, me carefully taking a little longer to clean my teeth – meant that he was usually sitting rolling his cigarettes for the drive to work by the time I opened the Orange Room door.

The Orange Room was a dressing room, then, but it was also the room where things were supposed to dry. The collapsible wooden dryer was nearly always up and hung with damp clothes which dried stiff and grey. Mum wasn't interested in white goods. She hadn't woken up to spin cycles and tumble drying and fabric conditioner (and in fact never would). It was not so many years since I had helped her feed the handwashed clothes through the mangle in the back yard of our old house. *A mangle!* When we moved to the big new house, a washing machine was bought, a huge step forward into a technological world of wonder. But the machine that Mum chose was already almost obsolete for she picked out the contraption which most closely mimicked, mechanically, the ancient copper of her childhood. This washing machine had to be filled by hand with buckets of hot water. Then, on shutting the lid, a churning motion began which drubbed the

Cutting Up Playgirl

clothes for as long as one wished. Then you had to fish the sodden, soapy bundles out of the machine's narrow chamber, rinse them by hand, and, having meanwhile emptied the dirty water out using the rubber hose at the back, slap them back in for spinning. The machine actually made doing the laundry more laborious, not less, and was a poke in the eye for modern Britain. The clothes and sheets came out of the spin moulded into fantastic cones and coils, the creases so fiercely embedded into the fabric that no amount of ironing could remove them, especially after they'd been fixed like papier mâché by the Parkray. The final step was not so much to fold the washing as to *bend* the items at various hinge-points until the pile waiting to be taken upstairs resembled sheets of medieval vellum.

Sometimes my dad took the laundering of his clothes into his own hands. In order to preserve the proper division of labour by gender, it was necessary that his way of doing his 'dhobi' was entirely different from my mother's and very male (akin to a man only deigning to cook if it's on a barbecue). He would occasionally boil an armful of underpants in the large brown enamel pan that was otherwise only used on those rare, not to say aberrant occasions when Mum tried to make strawberry jam. Who knew why the underwear must suddenly be boiled, but I sensed that the ceremony represented a release of frustration following an inexorable build-up of dissatisfaction with the cleanliness of his undergarments. I imagined there must be some quality of the fabric, a mustiness, or a fine dust clogging the cotton fibres, which eventually became intolerable and must be attacked in an aggressive male way, rather than by Mum's patently ineffectual methods. It was literally a letting-off of steam, and as he prodded at the bubbling cloth with the handle of a wooden spoon (as if this were somehow more hygienic than using the other

end) grey vapour billowed around his head like a genie. It was impossible to say whether he was happy or angry to be boiling his knickers; he seemed to have the gift of being both simultaneously. Mum hated him doing this, which of course gave it a pleasurable edge: he was righteous in his commandeering of the stove because it was *her* failings as a laundress which forced him to take this drastic action.

The one thing we didn't do in the Orange Room, which we might have been expected to do since it had a huge table in it and was right next to the kitchen, was eat our meals. Apart from Sunday lunch, we always ate in the telly room. The routines associated with this room were even more sacred than those of the Orange Room and there was a strong sense of its being a sanctum. The telly room was always in shadow, trapped in the armpit of the L-shaped house, and the walls were higher than they were wide, which gave it the feeling of an ancient bailey. The thickly gathered net curtains at the window shut out still more light. Sometimes the boy with long hair in the house across the back alley would hang out of his bedroom window for hours on end and then it was good to have the nylon nets obscuring the view.

For all the years that I lived in that house, I would come home from school and sit on the little foot stool in front of the Gas Miser watching children's television. The fire always had to be on because it could be the hottest day of the year outside, the heat would never come inside. The side of one leg would become mottled by the heat, while the rest of me remained cold. The little stool was my place, between my mother's brown corduroy chair from Habitat and Dad's wide, low chair with flat squares of wood at the ends of the arms, imprinted with rings of dried coffee. Squatting on the stool, my knees came up towards my chin and my school skirt slipped down into folds around the top of my legs.

Cutting Up Playgirl

Underneath the chinkling music of *Wacky Races* or *The Singing Ringing Tree*, whatever was on, I would hear Dad reversing the car into the garage at the top of our long, narrow back garden. Could I *actually* hear it, or did I just sense it? The revving engine thickened the air with its vibrations and the skin on the back of my hands responded by tingling. He always sounded angry backing in.

I would hear the garage door slamming shut, the bit of nailed-on plank at the bottom scraping on the cracked concrete because the hinges had dropped. Then the ting of the latch on the gate going up, the gate clinking shut, and his feet striking down the path. He always walked down the path in the same way, as though he hoped sparks would fly from his soles.

When he came into the room I smelled him straight away. The grey leather car coat and the cigarettes. It was only when I was older that he took to keeping the coat on when he came in. The leather was thick and rode up around his neck when he sat down in his chair. He looked uncomfortable, as if he was on the verge of leaving at any minute, and I think that was the point – he wanted to believe that his continuing to stay in the house was provisional, that he was free to leave. And so he was, though it took him decades to do it.

'Now then.' His voice always sounded slightly projected when he said this, the vowels tightened. He'd been trying to lose his north-east accent for years.

I would pull my skirt down over my knees and wrap my arms round them.

'Let's have a sight of the fire, then.'

Reluctantly I would push my heels into the carpet and the stool would move back a foot or so. The heat of the gas fire no longer reached me. There was that thickening feeling in the

air again; he wanted to talk to me, but the things he said were usually wrong.

As the news headlines began, my mother would push open the telly room door with the edge of the tea tray and put the tray down in front of the fire. Having been brought down the unheated passage from the back of the house, the food was never very hot.

My father's face would register sudden pain, a trapped nerve perhaps, or a stab of toothache.

'Did you warm these plates?'

Mum's eyes would swivel towards me and cross very slightly.

If my dad had a further problem with the food he would do the *papping* thing, churning a suspect mouthful between his tongue and the roof of his mouth. Of course he wanted Mum to ask him what was wrong with the food, but she wouldn't. She listened intently to the news.

Dad would then elaborately spit the mouthful of offending food, say runner beans, onto his plate, not at the side but on the highest peak of his mashed potato.

'Stringy tasteless things.'

He would put the plate down on the floor, lever himself up out of his armchair and go out, leaving the door open.

Mum would hope he wasn't coming back so that she could put *Crossroads* on. Dad could not tolerate *Crossroads*. But then the door would open and he'd come back in again with a doorstep of bread and jam. Sighing, he'd sit down heavily in the armchair again, still in the coat, which was like a statement of his unhappiness.

Then Mum might do the thing with her tongue, sticking the tiniest tip of it out of the side of her mouth and wagging it at Dad, while her eyes stayed innocently fixed on the telly. I would

Cutting Up Playgirl

see it and be complicit in the mockery. That was how we got one back at him when he was in a state. One of the ways.

After a few minutes, Mum might nudge my thigh with her foot and then, when I looked up, signal towards Dad with her eyes. He'd be asleep, the tea plate in his lap and crumbs skiing down the grey slopes of the coat, his lips pressed sourly together.

'Put *Crossy* on.'

I'd creep forwards on my hands and knees towards the telly. First you had to turn the volume down, slowly, imperceptibly. Then with one hand waiting to cushion the BBC1 button as it popped back up, gently press the Tyne Tees button down. The sharp retorts of the buttons could easily wake him, but if we were lucky we'd get to see almost all the day's excitement at the Brummie motel. If my dad woke up and discovered it was on, he would immediately walk out and go up to his workshop. After he had gone I would feel guilty and hollow, the pleasure of watching the forbidden programme vanished.

This is how it was for years, until I started to change. Then there came a threat that incomers – *boys* – would try to storm the citadel and upset the morbid equilibrium.