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What a Way to Go

Written by Julia Forster

Published by Atlantic Books

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WHAT A WAY TO GO

Julia Forster



Atlantic Books
LONDON

First published in trade paperback in Great Britain in 2016
by Atlantic Books, an imprint of Atlantic Books Ltd.

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1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Trade Paperback ISBN: 9781782397526
Ebook ISBN: 9781782397533

Printed in Great Britain

Atlantic Books
An Imprint of Atlantic Books Ltd
Ormond House
26–27 Boswell Street
London
WC1N 3JZ

www.atlantic-books.co.uk

To my mum and dad

Prologue

Soon after my parents split up when I was five and I became one of the Lone Rangers, I asked Mum to record the credits of television programmes for me. I used to play back the videos, pressing my face close to the screen so that my nose was almost against it. My hair would stand on end with the static. I'd pause the rolling list of actors, producers, executives and directors, and in those frozen moments I'd search for my name – Harper – and those of my parents, Mary and Pete. I'd only just learnt how to spell them. If I ever spotted those three names together, it would be a special sign. A sign that one day, my parents would get back together. Here's the story of how they never did.

PART ONE

one

I'm sitting at the top of the stairs with my legs dangling through the banister railings when Dad comes to pick me up one Friday after school. My copy of *Chambers*, the fat red dictionary, is by my side. I've been looking up the meaning of the word 'sheath': *a case for a sword; a tubular dress; a contraceptive device*...

At Lone Rangers parties I've heard tales of every kind of family break-up. From the ones where you can only visit your separated parent under supervision at Access Centres in cold church halls where the chess sets are missing pawns and the only cassette tape played is by The Beatles, to the ones where the ex-parents still go on family holidays together without a single argument. I've also compared notes on how to try to get your parents back together; I know kids of failed marriages who have faked everything from Valentine's cards to selective mutism.

On the whole, my folks can manage my fortnightly handovers without throwing cutlery or crying. Success is them having a conversation that lasts longer than two minutes.

At the front door, Mum says to Dad, 'Have you got time for a quick cuppa?'

I don't need a dictionary to understand that Mum inviting Dad in means one of two things. Either she wants a rise in her maintenance payments or an extra weekend off looking after me. Dad coughs then wipes his feet several times on the itchy doormat which says *WELCOME TO THE MAD HOUSE!*

They head into the kitchen where the kettle's filled. I think of going down to say hello, but would rather find out what Mum is after by earwigging their conversation. I grab my rucksack and creep downstairs, treading on the steps in the special way so that I don't make them squeak. Then, I dart across the hall into the lounge like a gerbil in headlights. I wedge myself between the radiator and the back of Mum's never-never sofa which is wrapped in plastic. Luckily the heating's off.

'Have a pew,' Mum says.

Dad sits on the sofa. The plastic cover crackles. I breathe as quietly as I can.

'How's things at British Steel?' Mum asks.

'Been better,' Dad says, then changes the subject. 'I guess this is about Harper? Is she up to her anti-capitalist tricks again?'

'She seems to be heralding free enterprise now, actually. She's setting up her own shop. Wants to contribute towards the fund.'

'What "fund"?' Dad asks, very slowly, as if he's selecting letters with which to make up a word from the dregs of a Scrabble bag when the game is nearly up.

'The house fund,' Mum says.

Seems Dad's Scrabble bag's empty.

'Interest rates are only going one way, Pete.'

'You're nowhere near having enough for a deposit, are you?' he asks.

'How would you know what I manage to save?'

'By your shoe collection?'

'Do you have any idea how expensive it is to bring a kid up alone?'

'You're *not* doing it alone.'

Although the radiator isn't on, I'm starting to feel toasty. Someone on our Kendal Road dead end is practising scales on the piano as if playing with their big toe. Far off, an ice-cream van tinkles its metallic lullaby.

Mum says, 'The landlord has been dropping hints that he wants to sell. If we don't buy this place then we'll have to move. Again. Harper'll have to go to a different middle school if I can't find another rental nearby.'

We've already moved three times in as many years. We struggle to find places to rent because most landlords in Blackbrake either don't believe a single mum could earn enough to pay the rent, electric and water, or they don't approve of divorce. I'm the only outcast in my class *and* on my street with separated parents. As far as school goes, my best mate Cassie reckons year eight will be crap whatever school you're in because the National Curriculum is starting under the GERBIL this September. I don't know what this means, but I think it has something to do with a flagpole and the school pet.

'So...' Dad says.

Mum says, 'I'm asking for a rise.'

'Another one?'

Mum's voice is an octave lower: 'You got Ivy Cottage, after all.'

Dad: 'You got the Mini!'

Mum: 'That rust bucket full of out-of-date baked beans? Which do you think is worth more?'

Dad: 'That's not the point. You got Harper.'

'But *you* didn't want her,' Mum says.

'Now, Mary...'

I block up my listening chimneys by pushing a thumb hard into each of my ears. My parents often sort through their scrapyard of arguments. They never find anything shiny or new, just the usual unwanted, broken, battery-flat crap which they pick over like a car scrap merchant looking to take something worthless and make it valuable again.

There's a car-breaker round the back of Louise's house in Coventry – she's one of the Lone Rangers parents. Excavators scrape through the heaps of totalled cars, their bumpers bent awkwardly after head-on collisions. Men in orange overalls salvage what they can from the write-offs then squash the wrecks into massive cubes to be liquidized. I imagine all the things the car metal could be made into: hospital beds; drip stands; wheelchairs; a record stylus; clasps on a jewellery box; cartridge pens; cheap wedding rings...

When I poke my head around the side of the sofa, both Mum and Dad have gone.

I sit on the pebbledash doorstep to wait for their return. Next door at number eleven, Edna's Rottweiler barks blue murder.

The Lone Rangers logo is a paper-chain family of three; there's a kid in the middle with arms which stretch out in both directions to keep hold of the mum in one hand and the dad in the other. You can tell that no child helped to design that logo because this is not how it feels when your parents separate.

Us kids left behind in the wreckage of a broken home cope by creating two cut-out versions of ourselves: one for each parent. At Mum's, I watch four hours of telly a day, read trashy novels and speak my mind. At Dad's, I watch my Ps and Qs, digest facts and toe the line.

After twenty minutes or so, Dad drives down Kendal Road, pretending that he's come straight from work when he hugs me, though I catch the malty smell of Blackbrake lager on his breath. Mum plays the same game and fakes meeting Dad for the first time that evening. I bet she went to check the bank balance.

While I'm putting my rucksack into the boot of Dad's car, Mum dumps five large boxes of baked-bean tins on to the pavement just outside our front door and disappears upstairs again without even saying goodbye.

Mum and Dad won a car full of a thousand tins of baked beans in a competition before the divorce. When they split up, Dad got custody of the cottage. Mum took me plus the X-reg Mini. The tins were split fifty-fifty. They're beyond their use-by date now but, Dad says, as he loads the car boot with the boxes, tinned food never goes off.

two

On the outskirts of Blackbrake, Dad and I hit a traffic jam on the ring road. Some people cheat by driving along the wide pavement with their hazard lights flashing. Dad leans across my lap, winds down my window, then sticks two fingers up in a V-sign at each of the cars as they pass.

'I can do that for you, if you like?' I say.

Dad sinks back into his bead-covered car seat and sighs, 'It's all right.' This is the sum-total of our conversation on our journey to Ivy Cottage.

If you tried to spot the difference between life in a village like Hardingstone compared with a town like Blackbrake, you'd notice that in the countryside, people don't lock front doors, cars or even bother putting on handbrakes. No one drinks lager in the streets in Hardingstone and nor are there arson attacks down the playground.

Before Mum and I left the cottage in Hardingstone, I used to play with the village kids all the time. But when I started seeing

them just two days out of fourteen – on the weekends I was visiting Dad – they began to leave me out of their games. I made a real effort to join in, but within a few weeks they stopped talking to me altogether. It's like I have some kind of jinx.

My only friends now in Hardingstone, apart from Mrs Curtis, are down the graveyard. At least they don't answer back. Or call me a weirdo.

It's dusk when Dad and I arrive at Ivy Cottage, the street's so quiet I swear I can hear crocus bulbs cracking the soil, desperate for sunlight. A new blue Lada estate is parked right outside the cottage. It puts me in mind of a hearse with its polished bonnet and many large windows. I peer through one of them; instead of carrying a coffin, the car is littered with crumpled papers, empty takeaway cartons and cardboard boxes, as well as large plastic bottles of chemicals marked 'hazardous'. It must be Patrick's car; Mum's always said that Dad's best mate should come with a health warning.

I walk up the moss-covered garden path, trying not to get stung by the waist-high nettles growing at either side of the narrow pavement. The sharp smell of lemon juice wafts out of the gaps in the rotting window frames next door where Mrs Curtis lives. She'll be at her jam pans of lemon curd. Inside, an Italian LP is stuck on her gramophone. It's the only song I've ever known her play:

Ma l'amore no,
Ma l'amore no,
Ma l'amore no,
Ma l'amore no...

Inside Ivy Cottage, we find Patrick crouching in the kitchen next to the open door of the electric oven which he has switched on to the highest temperature setting. He's still wearing his raincoat, scarf and woolly hat. When he stands up to his full height to explain, the red bobble on the top of the hat scrunches up against the ceiling. 'I couldn't find the coal scuttle,' he says.

Grey mould shapes creep up the once-beige wallpaper in the cottage. The rising damp has left orange stains, too, as if tracking its plan of attack towards the ceiling. Outside, the ivy, which used to crawl up just one side of the house, chokes the whole cottage. It's so thick now that before I can open the window in my bedroom, I have to take a pair of scissors to the new growth and give it a good trim.

If I had to find an A-side to my dad having so many history books lining the walls it would be that they offer extra padding for the sounds and smells from next door, and soak up the dampness in the air like a yellow car sponge.

At the hearth, Dad ties sheets of newspaper into figures of eight, stacks the twists in the grate then places kindling on top; the fire has never drawn well, so next a large piece of newspaper is put over the fireplace to trap the oxygen, which makes it catch eventually. Once it has begun to roar, Dad tongs single lumps of coal on to it.

I nurse the fire while Patrick helps Dad to carry in the boxes of beans from the boot of the car. Dad unpacks them, stacking the tins in pyramid shapes in the puzzle cupboard under the stairs. Then the three of us sit by the fire and Patrick shares out the sherry trifle he brought with him. He makes sure I get the most glacé cherries.

'You *still* not got a new telly?' Patrick asks Dad. 'How d'you survive, Harper?'

'With difficulty,' I reply.

'She reads,' Dad says, without looking up from the fireplace.

Dad hasn't replaced the television since the cathode ray tube blew up. I can still picture the black and white telly we had: it was the size of a small cupboard, with a wooden frame and a screen that bulged outwards. Like when I wake up in the mornings, the telly took several minutes to come to its senses. While you were waiting for a picture to appear, a fuzzy mess of hissing white lines crossed the black screen.

'Why *don't* we get a new television?' I ask.

'Bubblegum for the eyes,' Dad replies. 'When I was teaching history, you could tell the kids who watched too much of it – they had fewer brain cells. It was depressing.'

'You up to anything exciting tomorrow?' Patrick asks.

'Village fête,' Dad says, prodding the fire with the brass poker.

'Sounds fascinating,' Patrick says, winking at me.

I leave the two of them by the fire to finish off the last of the trifle and I go to boil the kettle with enough water for my three hot-water bottles.

In my bedroom I draw the crushed-velvet curtains closed. The hems are two feet too long; when I was seven I tried to shorten them with a stapler, but the green velvet was much too thick. I could just cut off the extra material, but deep down I still imagine that Mum might come back to fix them.

Weekends in Hardingstone are low voltage, thanks to Maggie Thatcher. Dad explained to me recently that Hardingstone is

becoming 'dormitory' because of her policies. I discovered when I looked up 'dormitory' in *Chambers* that this means Hardingstone is becoming 'a large room in which people sleep'. It's true that Hardingstone's sleepy; people walk, without aim, as if the footpaths are covered in treacle; they speak as if their mouths are stuffed with caramel and their heads with feathers. Even the large bomb from the First World War which stands lopsided in the graveyard hasn't bothered to explode yet. The house where the bakery once was has long since had its oven sealed and the school closed its doors to pupils in 1982; last year it was converted into a house. There's nothing much to do here but carve up your quiet life into quarter hours each time the church bells toll.

Mornings, I usually wake up around ten and watch the white aeroplane writing of my breath as I call out for Dad to make sure he's still there. Once I'm up, I stand in front of the fridge in the kitchen, willing breakfast to suggest itself: difficult, given that the contents are often just a large bottle of mayonnaise, a block of butter and a couple of bowls of leftovers hidden under a layer of what I can only describe as cuckoo spit. Luckily, the village two miles down the road is big enough to have a convenience shop. While we're in civilization, Dad also buys us both a magazine to read during the weekend – his about history, mine about pop stars – two potatoes to bake and eat with out-of-date beans, a box of cereal and, if the mood strikes, a Viennetta.

Sundays, I do homework, piano practice and wish I could watch *The Waltons*. We walk around the dead village so that bang on one o'clock we're at the Spread Eagle – now up for sale with permission to convert – where Dad orders a roast dinner with all the trimmings for us both. We always sit on the same red velvet stools in the snug and Dad does the Sunday crossword while I

make a list on the back of a beer mat: my fortnightly guess at who'll be in the top ten later that evening.

Every so often, Dad and I go on trips to places of historical interest – the kind of visits he used to go on with his students when he was a history teacher, I suppose. Last autumn we went to Flag Fen in Peterborough to see how Neolithic people lived in their roundhouses back in the Bronze Age. I bought a tiny piece of ancient wood, over three thousand years old, which I keep in its plastic box by my bed. And last summer we went on a day trip to Portsmouth to see the carcass of the *Mary Rose* which sank in 1545.

Dad may be able to remember the names of all the kings and queens of England going back centuries and important dates from the past thousand years like when the Magna Carta was signed, but he draws a blank whenever I ask him about our recent history and what my life was really like before the divorce.