

Mum, Can You Lend Me Twenty Quid?

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Extract

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1 Memozies

IN SPRING 1976 the bump appeared, and it grew and grew. My first husband Lawrence and I were delighted that Marie, our two-year-old daughter, would soon have a playmate. We were convinced it would be a little girl. It was quite a shock both to us and the doctors when I produced not just one but two, identical, baby boys.

When Nick and Simon came home after a short stay in the special baby unit, Marie took her big sister responsibilities very seriously. I won't forget the day when she 'fed' both her hungry six-month-old brothers from a bottle with a picture of a baby on the outside. Unfortunately it was the Fairy Liquid bottle and before long the boys were foaming at the mouth. A mad dash by ambulance was followed by several anxious nights in hospital. Having three small children under the age of three was exhausting, and at times an overwhelming responsibility. I was grateful for any help I could get, particularly from their two grannies.

Eighteen months later, the boys joined their sister at a nearby nursery. Beverly, who became their favourite nursery nurse, spoke of them fondly:

Mum, can you lend me twenty quid?

Simon and Nick looked like angels, because they were beautiful boys with their blond hair, but I soon found that looks can be deceptive. They had the spirit of imps. I spent that first day trying to tell them apart and there was never a dull moment. They came in like whirlwinds; if they were ever quiet, I knew it was not a good sign. But they would soon own up to their naughtiness and express wide-eyed regret.

When I came to collect them from nursery at the end of that first day, I found myself kept waiting outside the door. What I didn't know was that Nick had managed to get his head stuck between two rungs of a chair and the staff were still trying to saw him free . . .

Mornings were always a rush. On one memorable occasion Nick arrived at nursery wearing my knickers and dared to complain that his underwear was slipping! The boys loved their food, loved to tease – especially the girls. They were inseparable and were known to all as 'The Twins'. Whenever anyone was looking for them, they had a special trick – they would rush off and hide under the nearest table, shouting excitedly, 'We're not here, we're not here!' In spite of all their antics, everyone loved them. And Marie was always their protector, even though they frequently embarrassed her too.

When Beverley announced that she wanted the three-year-old twins to be pageboys at her wedding and their sister to be a bridesmaid, everyone thought she was asking for trouble. But Marie and the twins rose to the occasion. As soon as Nick and Simon entered the church they stood on the bride's veil, nearly tearing it off. And as the service was about to begin, Simon's little voice was clearly heard by all: 'Remember, we've got to be good. Bev said.' Later, to the embarrassment of one guest at the

reception, Nick's voice exclaimed from under a table: 'Look, she's got green knickers on!'

Time flew by and soon it was time to move from the nursery to school. Sister Joseph, their first infant school teacher, adored them. With their very blond hair and identical faces, she says that to her they were 'just gorgeous – and also lovable rascals'. She found it impossible to tell them apart so she decided to put name badges on their jumpers to identify them. Nick knew Sister Joseph got confused and he soon learnt to swap his badge with Simon's. Poor Sister Joseph would become very angry, often reducing Simon to tears for being naughty when it was Nick who was the culprit. What a show of loyalty at that early stage of life! Years later, Sister Joseph wrote to me about her teaching experiences with 'her twins':

I will never forget you and the twins – you will be in my daily prayers as long as I live. Over twenty years ago your sons were my special identical boys. I often recall the days when my two boys were in trouble! It is lovely to see the close bond between you and your sons.

I remember Nick setting off to school one day wearing a pristine blue shirt and shiny new shoes. He emerged at the end of the day with a grubby shirt, its collar detached, and one shoe missing. Obviously he was learning how to defend himself. Both boys, to our delight, joined the Cubs and carefully learnt their Cub Scout promise for their official enrolment. They practised and practised, even writing it down to secure their confidence for the big day when they would recite it in front of the Chief Scout. Unfortunately, I didn't check Nick's handwriting. When he eventually recited his promise, I wanted the ground to open and swallow me up. I was embarrassed and at the same time unable to stop giggling as Nick said: 'I promise that I will do my best to

do my duty to God and the Queer and to help other people and to keep the Cub Scout law.'

Family shopping trips produced their own brand of rough and tumble. One day as we were unloading at the checkout, Nick dropped a full bottle of lemonade. It split, spun round and round and managed to completely soak a well-dressed gentleman. Everybody around us was speechless. On another occasion, in the same shop, he aimed his suction gun at the deli counter, scoring a bull's-eye on the assistant's forehead. I eventually placated her with a box of chocolates. Safely on our way home in the car the boys would sing like little angels. 'When a knight won his spurs in the stories of old' was their favourite hymn. At times they were a liability, but I adored them.

In 1988, as the boys approached their teens, they were invited to participate in a children's television programme called *Docurama: All About Twins*. The local newspaper took an interest in the story, featuring their picture on the front page underneath a headline which read 'Identical TV Twins Set to Steal the Show!'. The accompanying article described how a new 'identical double act' would be hitting TV screens nationwide at the end of April 1988. I am quoted as saying:

Having identical twins is very exciting but can also be frustrating. To see them in a film is very exciting, but as often I cannot tell one from the other, it is very frustrating. But one thing is certain. They are absolutely no different from other children in their ability to make mischief; not too long ago they decided to have a camp fire with all their friends in the shed and nearly burnt it down!

There was great excitement on the day of filming. We were accompanied by a TV crew for most of the day; I had the day off

work and all three children had the day off too. The boys were filmed at home and rowing on the river Thames. My heart was in my mouth as I envisaged the cameraman and the sound engineer falling in the water as the four of them squeezed into the rowing boat.

It seems that the following interview took place only yesterday. Whenever I watch the video I smile and shed a few tears at my sons' comments:

Nick: I didn't really know what a twin meant until I was twelve years old, though my mum told us many times, 'Look, you are a twin. That means you have the same GERMS!' [The television commentator explained that he meant genes.]

One day I was around my ex-girlfriend's house and Simon was coming down the road from the chip shop. A car pulled out and hit him and grazed all his arms and legs. At exactly the same time my leg hurt really badly. I couldn't walk on it. Somehow I managed to limp home. Simon had been asking for me. I knew I was with him because when I got home the pain in my leg stopped.

Simon: Well, I wouldn't like to grow up 'cos I like my life as it is now and I don't know what it is going to be like when I am growing up. If I do grow up I would like to live in the same house as my brother, with our wives, if we have any.

Nick: I don't want to do that because we would argue too much. He [Simon] gets too possessive of me. I am not that possessive . . .

Teenage years and secondary school led to the development of many friendships and the twins had great fun going skiing, skateboarding and meeting girls. By the age of thirteen, the boys also seemed to have developed a serious affliction. The headmaster diagnosed it as 'severe giggling' and deemed it so serious that he recommended we should seek medical advice. So a leading expert on twins duly saw them at the Maudsley Hospital in London. She delivered her verdict with a broad smile: 'Nicholas is fully aware that the giggling is a deliberate part of his impish character.'

We were reassured by another highly respected doctor with a more serious demeanour, who said later in a written report:

Your sons are developing normally but they are understandably very enmeshed with each other, which is often the case with identical twins. They are now starting to show the signs of individuation by selecting different groups of friends and expressing different interests for the future.

Both the boys were growing into handsome, popular teenagers, much sought after by girls. Once Nick opted out of a date, preferring to go fishing, so the unsuspecting girl dated Simon instead. Did she ever know? Simon and Nick would do anything for one another.

When we moved to Bath in 1991, the mischief continued. Nick's first love, Ruth, fondly remembers the time he asked her to cut his hair. Unfortunately she could only find a pair of blunt scissors, and the result was a very short haircut with several bald patches. Ruth tried to cover them up by 'colouring' the bald areas with brown felt-tip pen. After they had been going out for two years, she remembers, Nick became very romantic and cooked

her a highly creative meal of beans on toast, placed on a small table with candles on it and presented to her in a candlelit room. On another occasion when Nick was in Ruth's car, he lit a cigarette for her and put it in her mouth the wrong way round. There nearly followed a nasty accident.

Their friend Tomsie tells of the time when, after a few beers at the pub, the three of them returned to his home where he fell asleep. The twins seized the moment to shave off one of Tomsie's eyebrows before they too fell asleep. On waking, Tomsie didn't disturb his friends (who would surely have confessed to their prank) but set off to an interview, without glancing in a mirror to find himself one eyebrow short. Douggie, another friend, recalls the time when Nick fell on to the nearest seat in his flat with the words: 'I'm so tired,' then threw his head back so hard that the fish tank behind shattered. Fish and water went everywhere. Ruth made Nick pick up all the fish and pay for a new fish tank.

Mark, also known as 'Teggie', vividly remembers one summer afternoon in the holidays when he and the twins were messing about in our back garden. The three of them decided to play golf with their father's clubs. All three stood outside our patio door trying to drive golf balls into the park behind our house, managing in the process to break several panes of glass in the greenhouse. Going to retrieve some golf balls, Mark looked up, only to be hit straight between the eyes by a drive from Nick. Mark says the twins were more concerned about the broken glass than the fact he was knocked out. Kai, Nick's skateboarding friend from junior school, recalls how he and Nick loved to play snooker in the playroom at our house. They thought they were really 'cool' as they played snooker and drank cherryade made from the soda siphon in our backroom. Kai said that he and Nick thought that they were the best skateboarders and snooker players in their school.

Janet, a close friend from my college days, always reminds me

how kind and considerate both my boys and my daughter were towards her own children, who were younger than the twins. She often recalls how Nick, Simon and Marie always went out of their way to be warm and friendly to her own sons.

We were an ordinary, happy family – mum, dad and three children. I often experience flashbacks to the special times at Christmas or birthdays, particularly when the three children were young. Together, as a family, we had a lot of fun and laughter – at home, on holiday, just doing the ordinary things which ordinary families do. All three children made us very proud. However, it would be wrong to promote an image that my family was perfect – far from it. Just like other families there were ups and downs, fall-outs and quarrels. I did not realise that my sons were aware of our strains and stresses until Simon, then aged eight, gave me a typed note which touched my heart. I still have the original, and it captures perfectly a child's awareness of the tensions within his family:

Dear Mum

I love you most in the hole world, I hope you love me to? . . .
You give treats much too often and I love you for that, you
treats us better than any other mother would

I do not understand it when you and dad don't get on but
you know you really love each other

I will try not to upset my sister in any way and I will try and
set Nick a good example

When you and dad are happy I like that, it fills me with joy
and happiness

I hope you have enjoyed this little letter

I love you

Simon Mills

xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

Some ten or twelve years later, when he was almost twenty, Simon sent his father a note, which we found on the kitchen table, following a heavy night at the pub. This time it wasn't typed, but hastily scribbled in such a manner that it could have been written when he was ten years old. It said:

Dad, can you wake me up at 9 o'clock am?
I have work tomorrow so I have to go to work.
Please wake me up and if you can, give me a lift,
That would be good

Simon

After teaching for nearly twenty years in the same school, I became restless and wanted to change my job. In the spring of 1991 I applied for a new post which appeared to open up many opportunities for Nick, Simon and Marie. I was offered the job and, after talking it through, we decided as a family that I would accept, even though we all knew it would bring a major change in our lives. Just like most mums, all I ever wanted was to do the right thing for my children. I loved them with such intensity I would have moved heaven and earth for them. Most mothers blame themselves for things that go wrong in their children's lives, and I am no exception. But I could never have imagined the personal and family heartbreak that lay ahead.