Keep Smiling

The Autobiography

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with Fanny Blake

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Extract

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CHAPTER 1

Family Business

TIP:

Listen to the opinions of your family and friends. They're the ones who'll keep you grounded by telling you the uncomfortable truth, rather than the people you work with, who tend to tiptoe around the 'talent'.

There isn't a single shrinking violet in our family. If any of us has something to say, we say it. Everyone enjoys our family get-togethers, especially when it comes to stepping up and taking the microphone for a song. We all like to take centre stage, particularly after a few drinks. Even when I was being born, my mum couldn't resist trying to steal my limelight by having an asthma attack after twenty-four hours of labour! As a result, my heart stopped. There was a real *ER* moment as she was rushed into surgery for an emergency Caesarean, double doors clattering behind her as doctors and nurses swarmed around her bed, shouting instructions at one another. I eventually emerged, weighing six pounds twelve ounces, pink and peachy-skinned, at ten o'clock on 21 February 1986.

They say that I was a happy baby and, to my subsequent embarrassment, was breastfed until I was fourteen months old. Mum used to tell everyone that I'd walk over to her and say, 'Titty, Mummy.' She laughs when she tells the story, and although I don't mind people knowing about it now, when I was younger I used to wish she'd shut up. She tells me that she nursed me all the time; we were like a little unit of our own. All I can remember is loving her to bits.

Mum was nineteen when she got pregnant. She was with my biological father for about a month before she got pregnant and about eighteen months later she left him because she was incredibly unhappy. I know that I've got his eyes and that's all. I also know that her version of events may be biased, but it's the one I've grown up with and, whatever he might say in his defence, as far as I'm concerned he stuffed up big time in the way he behaved towards her. I hate the idea of anyone treating my mum badly.

The only thing I regret is that by not contacting him I will never know my two half-brothers, who were born after they split up. They're young and none of this is their fault, any more than it's mine, but that's the choice I've made. Some people feel that their life's only complete when they know their entire family history. Not me. I'm 100 per cent happy with the huge extended family I already have. I don't need to complicate things any more.

Once Mum and he had split up, she and I spent almost two and a half years living happily with her parents, my nana and bampy, and my auntie Caroline in their house in Victoria Avenue in Cardiff. My nana is the rock in our family. She's a tiny woman, only four feet eleven inches tall with size-three feet, and she's very classy. She's always joked that she was

born in the wrong class. Her hair's short and neat, and she always looks good, whether she's wearing her best or her everyday black trousers with a loose top. She's a devout Catholic and goes to church every Sunday – it's the one thing I suspect she wishes we'd all do. I really respect her for her belief. After she's got the dinner in the oven, Bampy drops her off for twelve o'clock Mass and picks her up when it's over. I used to go to church with her until I was twelve, then my life turned upside down and it was too difficult to keep it up.

Apart from her religion, Nana has passed on her Welsh pride to the rest of the family. She was born and brought up in Cardiff, although originally her family came from Ireland in the nineteenth century. Jim McKay, Nana's father, and his wife, who I knew as Nana Kay, lived in one of the five streets in Cardiff's New Town that were built for the city's Irish community. Because Jim was unskilled and jobs in the docks tended to be passed from father to son, it was hard for him to find work. They had four children: John, Maureen (my nana), Terry and Frances. John drowned in the docks when he was little. Although she was only four when it happened, Nana remembers that day vividly and believes the tragedy broke her father's spirit. He drifted in and out of jobs, never settling to anything, so that, as Nana says, 'He wasn't a great provider.' Instead, her mother worked hard to provide for them, taking on cleaning jobs and working in a local factory. In those days nothing was easy. The other families in the street were all better off, thanks to the regular money their men brought home from the docks. Nana and her brother and sisters were often dressed in second-hand clothes and didn't have everything their friends had. 'I felt being poor,' she told me. 'And I didn't like it.'

I don't remember Nana Kay, although she was alive until I was about three. All our family remember her sitting knitting, a fag in her mouth, wreathed in smoke because she never inhaled. What's the point in smoking like that? As the column of ash grew longer and longer, her granddaughters, Mum and Caroline, would watch transfixed, waiting for it to drop.

My great-grandfather might not have been much of a provider, but apparently he had a wicked sense of humour, was always cracking jokes and, like Nana Kay, he really loved his children. Nana says he gave them things other fathers never gave their children in those days, things that money couldn't buy. He would take them on long walks where, as they picked bluebells and primroses to take home, he taught them all about nature. Whenever a big ship came into the docks he'd take the kids down to share the excitement and look over it. He also loved musicals and the cinema. Whenever he could, he would take Nana to the Central Cinema, better known then as the Bug House. For threepence (1½p) they'd sit through a Hollywood musical, then go home and re-enact all the dances themselves. Bing Crosby, Gene Kelly, Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers: they saw them all.

Nana left school at fifteen after the head nun pointed out to Nana Kay that, even if her daughter did pass the scholarship exam to senior school, the family wouldn't be able to afford the uniform. Instead, during her final year of school, she took shorthand and typing lessons for a shilling (5p) a week. She absolutely hated them. Nonetheless, secretarial jobs were ten a penny in those days so she was soon earning a wage. After a couple of false starts, she settled into being a secretary at Roath Furnishing until she got married and had children.

She met my bampy, real name Edward Gary Cooper, though everyone calls him Gary, when she was sixteen and Bampy was eighteen. Nana had noticed him at the St Albans Catholic Youth Club, but she was seeing someone else. Then while she was away on a caravan holiday in Somerset, her boyfriend dated her best friend, so that was the end of him. When Nana makes her mind up about something, that's it: a trait she's handed down to me. The Saturday after she got back to Cardiff, she went to the dance hall in Sophia Gardens, where the band-leader Ted Heath was playing. Bampy was there and asked her to jive. That night he walked her home, and they've been together ever since. They married on 4 August 1962.

Bampy's family originally came from Gloucestershire, just over the border from Wales. His grandfather worked in the Forest of Dean mines until he moved to the Welsh coalfields, and he died when he was only twenty-eight, leaving his widow to bring up their five children alone. Bampy's father started work as a cobbler when he was fourteen. He must have done well for himself because by the time Nana met the family, they lived in a five-bedroom house in Splott, just near Cardiff's docks, with the cobbler's shop in the front room. Before she married, Bampy's mother had worked below stairs as a kitchen maid in a big house somewhere. As a result, her own house was always immaculate. She would never go to bed at night until she had cleaned out the grate, set a new fire for the morning and laid the breakfast.

As the youngest of ten, Bampy was the baby of the family. He left school when he was sixteen to start work in the local steelworks, but the shift work didn't suit him. He's always been a real night bird and was just as bad about getting out of bed then as he is now. He'd stay up all night if he was on a

morning shift, but if he was on nights, he'd sleep all day. Eventually, one of his brothers who worked on a building site, came to the rescue and found him a five-year apprenticeship as a plasterer. His five brothers, were furious that the apprenticeship, then a bad knee and the fact that his parents were old-age pensioners, exempted Bampy from National Service. They thought he needed the discipline!

Apart from Nana and his family, Bampy's greatest love has always been music. The skiffle group he started when he was nineteen was the first of many bands he's been involved with. He was still rock 'n' rolling ten years ago with Gerry and the Atrics!

The nearest he got to topping the charts was when he was guitarist and saxophonist in the Solid Six during the early sixties. He always tells us how the band spent seven months roughing it in a van in London, trying to break through. Nana would leave work on Fridays and catch the train to spend the weekend with him. Bampy would book her into a B&B, then park the van, complete with band members, outside for the night. She slept in the B&B and then during the day he'd show her the sights.

While he was in London and on the circuit, he met all the up-and-coming singers. Their single 'If Liszt Could Do the Twist' was a hit in Holland and Australia. The other place they made it big was Israel. They were the first rock band to tour there and spent two months getting their audiences to jive in their seats. When they got back to the UK the band disbanded, but Bampy's never stopped singing and playing the guitar.

Bampy is unique, crazy in the most fabulous way and really entertaining. He's about five foot six and a quarter, although

he always says, 'Five foot six and a half, Charlie.' (He's the only one who calls me Charlie.) Drinking a couple of pints every night with the boys has given him a rock-hard beer belly. His brown eyes are always twinkling, and although he's bald on top he's got plenty of grey hair round the sides. Retired now, he still wears his thin, grey working shirts which are completely knackered, covered in bits of plaster, with his old jeans slung below his belly over low, black ankle boots.

He's full of jokes and, thanks to being a lifelong smoker, he's got a deep, gravelly laugh to go with them. He'll often interrupt me, laughing to say, 'I made that one up forty years ago, Charlie.' He's the wisest man in the world and he looks it. His is wisdom that comes with age and experience. He can read people so well and can be very profound. I can't wait to be that wise. He's got so many facets to him that he can talk about lots of things: music, astronomy, politics, you name it. He has loads of catchphrases, too, but the one I always remember comes out when he signs off a phone call. He always says, 'Keep smiling.' His positive attitude to life is infectious and everyone who meets him loves him.

Nana and Bampy settled in Cumrae Street in Splott in a two-up, one-down railway worker's cottage. They might have had an outside toilet but they had a shower in the kitchen, which according to Nana was posh. Everyone else had a tin bath that was covered with a lid when not in use. The house was tiny, but Nana's milkman told her his mother brought up eight children in it. Eventually plans for a hook road that would run right through the street meant Nana and Bampy had to up sticks, and in 1970 they moved to Victoria Avenue, a cul-de-sac just off Victoria Park, where they've been ever since.

This house has always been our family home as far as I'm concerned. I spent so much of my childhood here that however Nana redecorates, I still love everything about it. A short path leads to the front door. I was devastated when Nana changed the old yellow and green wooden door for a white PVC one with little windows. When I told her off, she asked me if I wanted the old one, but it wouldn't be the same without the house!

The front room on the left of the hall is only used for best (so hardly ever) and, when she was living there, as my auntie Caroline's rehearsal room. Nana keeps the colour scheme simple with a brown sofa by the fireplace, an olde-worlde dresser stuffed with her Lladro pottery figurines, a drinks cabinet where they keep all the drink that they never drink and a little glass drinks trolley. There's also a stack of LPs and singles lined up by an old-fashioned record player.

Day to day, we all lived in the big open-plan back room. There's a living area where two red leather sofas sit against the creamy walls on which Nana has always hung family pictures. The TV sits in the corner with her chair right beside it. Through a big archway are the kitchen and dining area, which both look out into the back garden. When Nana and Bampy first moved there, the kitchen was tiny, but they extended it so there's plenty of room for family Sunday lunches or parties. Upstairs there are two double bedrooms, a guest room, a tiny toilet and a bathroom. Nana's changed that too. The bathroom suite used to be that weird-arse Seventies shade of pink, but I preferred that to the white she's got now.

By the time they moved here, Nana and Bampy had two children, Maria (my mum) and Caroline. My mother was born in 1966, with Caroline following in 1968. Mum's an Aquarius and that makes her quite quirky and mercurial with a quick

temper. She's always been very smart, but by the time she took her A levels let's just say she had more interests outside school than in, so she didn't concentrate on her work.

Encouraged by Bampy, both she and Caroline loved music. Caroline has a fabulous voice and became a cabaret singer; she still occasionally performs today. Mum was a brilliant classical guitarist and a natural musician. She practised for hours every day and dreamed of playing professionally. Nana and Bampy had high hopes for her passing music A level and going to music college. Instead, she flew through the practical but failed the theory. Nana was furious. The alternative was office work, so she learned to type, then blagged her way into the Cardiff Council's Housing Office, where she worked for eight years, ending up as senior estate management officer.

I was born just as she was starting her career. I may have been a beautiful baby, but I was the ugliest toddler you've ever seen. Needless to say, my mum disagrees, but I've seen the photos. I ate like a pig – everything except bananas – so I was pretty chubby with massive legs. My hair only grew round the sides of my head, leaving me bald on top for the first two or three years. And my big ears stuck out. My teeth didn't come through until I was three, and I had a constantly running red nose – I was minging. However, my mum and Caroline did their best with me. They dressed me up like a doll, always in matching socks, dress and hair bobbles so I looked really girly. Looking at the old photos, some of those outfits shouldn't have been allowed. In one of them, I've got that dodgy hair and am wearing what looks like a little old lady's dress in navy blue with a white lace collar and a big blue bow. Disgusting! My looks aside, I'm told that I was quite a

cool, placid little kid who wasn't too much hard work.

Things changed when my stubborn streak emerged. I knew what I wanted and would do what I had to to get it. Once, Mum and Caroline took me into town dressed in a pink dress and petticoat, matching pink and white socks and hair in bunches, as always. When Mum refused to give me some sweets, I hurled myself screaming into the nearest puddle. When I refused to get up, they both waved me goodbye and walked away. That old trick. Most kids would have got up and run after them. Not me. I sat in that puddle until they came back and gave me the sweets I wanted.

The one person in the family I idolised was Caroline. I wanted to be just like her. Our whole family remembers the Christmas when I was three. The day before Christmas Eve, I came downstairs looking radically different. I had found a pair of scissors and cut off one side of my long hair so I'd have short hair just like her. Nana was horrified, although I think she saw the funny side. Caroline had to cut the other side to match before Mum came home, but it wasn't a good look. Then on Boxing Day I struck again. Someone had given Caroline a big bottle of Chanel No. 5 so, because I wanted to smell like her too, I sneaked up to her bedroom and poured the whole bottle all over me. I stank for days no matter how much they washed me.

I may not have been the ideal three-year-old but there was more to my behaviour than just the 'terrible threes'. I blame the fact that Mum had met the man who was to become my proper dad, James Church. She had gone out one night with her friend Mary to a club in Cardiff where everyone used to go for a Sunday singalong, when a guy she knew from work came in with his best mate, James. Both of them were completely

pie-eyed, but James was tall, dark-haired and handsome, or so Mum says. He worked for Sheffield Insulation, a firm that sold building materials. They got chatting and Mum ended up giving him her number. Three days later, he phoned her at work. All he could remember was her bright red lipstick. He even asked to speak to Mary! Luckily Mary realised he meant Maria and transferred him. Mum agreed to meet up with him that night and it went from there.

Apparently things were a bit strained when he and I first met, and I'm sure that's because I wouldn't have wanted anything or anyone to come between me and my mum. At the time he thought I was a brat because I caused lots of trouble by telling anyone who'd listen how nasty he'd been to me. In fact, he'd never have been nasty, he's just not the sort. All the same, I managed to stir up quite a few rows between him and Nana. I didn't want a stranger in our close-knit, *cwtchy* (affectionate) family and did my best to get him out. My war of attrition was short-lived, though, and after my initial resentment wore off, I abandoned the campaign and absolutely accepted him as my dad.

Not that my obstinacy disappeared entirely. My mum always reminds me of what happened on my fourth birthday when I played musical statues with my cousins and a couple of friends. She was watching out for who moved when the music stopped, but when she picked me I went nuts. Show a bit of loyalty, Mum. So what if I moved? It's my birthday. I ran straight to Nana's cupboard under the stairs, shut the door and refused to come out. In the end, whoever won the game had to give me the prize – a Galaxy bar – to stop me crying. As I came out clutching it, right as rain, they all looked at me as if I was the devil child.

Dad is the one person I've met who's got exactly the same greeny-blue coloured eyes as me. People say he's very good-looking but I don't see him in that way. To me, he's just my dad. None of his features particularly stand out, but they all fit together quite nicely and he wears his dark hair in a stupid quiff. He's always looked after me and I love him to bits, even though for years he teased me about my sticking-out ears and nicknamed me 'Dumbo'. No wonder I had a complex about them.

As far as I was concerned, Dad was my real father until my cousin Nadine told me he wasn't. She broke the news when we were both about five, but as far as I can remember it was a case of, 'Yeah, whatever.' I've always been quite accepting of situations and rarely make a scene – unless I'm drunk! – so I just accepted what she told me and got on with life. No big deal. I think my mother was more upset when she sat me down at the age of nine to break the news. She'd got incredibly nervous about telling me, then I said, 'I know. Nadine told me years ago.' She was so shocked. Knowing had never been a problem for me. I never questioned it.