THE UNTHINKABLE

A STORY OF CONTROL, VIOLENCE AND MY MOTHER

DAVID CHALLEN

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David Challen is a domestic abuse campaigner. He successfully campaigned to free his mother in a landmark appeal that recognised the lifetime of coercive control she suffered. David continues to speak out against violence against women and girls and is an advisor to the Domestic Abuse Commissioner for England and Wales and an Ambassador for the Prison Advice and Care Trust (Pact) and the Employers' Initiative on Domestic Abuse (EIDA).

The Unthinkable is his first book.

This story is dedicated to the child I forgot
and for the mother I saw.

For John

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The Unthinkable

Memories.

Some are familiar, their surfaces smoothed by the years until they fit into the palm of your hand, into your life story. Some are colossal and jagged, and you only rediscover them when you least expect to. And the really painful ones, well, you don't want to touch or see them ever again.

But how can you leave your past in the past if you haven't ever explored it? How can you survive memories you haven't held up to the light?

People often want to know what it was like, my childhood. Sometimes they ask me straight. Their voyeurism desires something they can hold up in front of them, hard and definite and grotesque. Something concrete. Something that explains it all. Something that confirms it won't happen to them.

But terrible things happen all the time. To everybody. To anybody. The unthinkable parts of life are sitting just below its surface. Waiting to trip you up.

Prologue

It began as a normal Sunday morning.

'Are you ready?' she said as she climbed into the driving seat of her red Ford Ka.

'Yeah, coming, Mum,' I called, shutting the front door and jumping into the passenger seat.

It was subdued in the car – the atmosphere of the overcast day weighed down on us. In good times my mum would have been chatty on these drives to my work, cajoling me into laughter. I would be more taciturn, trying to ready myself for yet another working day. I was twenty-three years old, and in an emotionally selfish phase. The pressure of a working day spent constantly forcing a smile onto my face for customers left me unavailable to her. But on this drive she didn't try to coax conversation out of me; instead she was lost in her own thoughts.

I was still living with her, but we weren't living in our real home. It was a new house, fifteen minutes' walk away from the old one where I had grown up with my parents and elder brother, James. Mum and I had moved there after my parents' marriage had gone through its death throes eighteen months ago. It was a quiet and soulless red brick house, hived off in a gated community. Inside it was sterile, more of a shelter than a place we could call home. Life ever since had felt an octave off-key; the house's furniture was different, flimsier,

not the comfortable trappings of my childhood. Bog-standard flatpack furnishings to get us by until we started again. The leafy suburban streets and lanes were as known to us as each other, but we came at them now from the wrong direction. It was as though we had been trying on a different life for size, and it was the wrong fit.

Mum pulled up into one of the parking spaces outside the restaurant and I climbed out of the car, unthinkingly. Just as I turned to shut the door, she leaned over, right across the passenger seat, and looked me deep in the eyes. Her own blue eyes crinkled with intensity at mine, her mouth drawn downwards so that her lips almost disappeared. It was as though she was trying to locate and fix on something within me, trying to speak to the child still within.

'You know I love you, don't you, David?'

The cool of the car door handle was frigid in my clamped hand. This intensity was all off. I was used to hearing 'I love you', but this wasn't that. This was an opening, or a closing. But it was also 9.30am. My shift was starting, and I didn't want to be late.

'Yeah . . . yeah, of course. I love you too,' I said, turning to go.

But the unease didn't lift and it forced me to turn back to look at her, just once. She didn't return my gaze, and a frown was now etched across her face as she settled back into her seat, her lips still folded in on themselves. She had closed off.

By the time I reached the back entrance of the restaurant, she was gone. I didn't have time to cross-examine it, so I stitched a smile across my face, opened the doors and began my day.

*

A large party of eleven came in just as the lunchtime rush had slowed to a trickle of tables. I had already dealt with their complicated drinks order, and was readying myself to ask about food, when my manager appeared in front of me.

'David,' he said, 'do you mind heading up to the locker room for a moment? I need to speak to you. I'll be up in a minute; just wait for me there.'

'Yeah, sure,' I said, taken aback at his serious tone. I headed up the stairs into the locker room. Its heavy door with a porthole window shut heavily behind me. *I've been fine today, haven't I?* I thought. *No tables complaining, nothing massively delayed* . . . And it was there, pacing around the hot little upstairs room, that I caught a glimpse of something shocking through the window: heading towards me at speed was my mum's cousin, Noel. And looming behind her was the hi-vis jacket of a police officer.

My sense of space and time loosened with the shock and knowledge that something very bad was about to happen. I was a child again, hurtling through space, knowing I had fallen, waiting for the pain to hit.

And then time sped; Noel had me by the shoulders. She was forcing words out, forcing them into my comprehension:

'David.
Your
dad's
been
found
dead.'

The air around me screamed.

I threw anything within reach on the floor.

Your dad's been found dead.

Now I was on the ground. Flailing.

The last words I had said to him; the insults.

Noel caught me round the waist. My body resisted my mind. My hands burning from the blow after blow I was raining onto the thin metal of the surrounding lockers. A policeman at the door, waiting.

. . . I am gathering my stuff from my locker . . .

. . . now I'm downstairs, still wearing my apron, I can't find my uniform hat . . .

. . . now I'm in front of my familiar station, fumbling to hand over my work stuff, in tears . . .

. . . I can't start a sentence, finish a sentence, utter a single word . . .

. . . My hands are shaking and someone, somewhere, is saying *it's fine . . . don't worry . . . don't worry . . .*

. . . I'm standing in the middle of the packed restaurant with a police officer at my shoulder . . .

. . . outside it's afternoon and rain is falling, there is a police car parked in the side road, and I am getting into the back . . .

. . .none of it computes.

My father's body.

Found.

Where is my mother?

Somewhere through the seething mass of static, the words:

'Beachy Head'.

My mother is there,

she is on a clifftop,

ready to jump,

and people are trying to talk her down.

. . . my father is dead.

Were they jumping together?

She is still alive . . .

he jumped and she didn't?

But.

He was found at our home . . .

The police car drives us to Noel's house. I curl up on the sofa in the bay window of her sitting room, marooned. A police officer stands at the door, walkie-talkie crackling intermittently, his uniformed presence a looming spectre.

I will never get out of this room.

The entire gravity of my world shifts to Mum.

Can they rescue her?

Will she jump?

Everything I have stands on that precipice with her.

But she is still here, and I am still here.

We are both still in this world at this moment.

She wouldn't let me and my brother go.

She loves us too much.

She won't leave us.

Will she?

Time collapses into one singular point all around me.

Here are the things I didn't know then.

On Saturday 14 August 2010, the day before, my mother had gone to see my father at our old family home in the

morning. They were clearing out the garage together. She had been attempting a reconciliation in spite of their separation and his treatment of her. That reconciliation came with strange conditions he had set. And still she went over. Her need for him overwhelmed everything else.

Dad insisted she go out to buy some ingredients to make him lunch. Used to taking his orders, she trekked out to the local shops in the pouring rain.

As she was cooking and serving up bacon and eggs at home, she noticed that the home phone had been moved. She dialled 1471, to check the number of the last caller, and listened to the automated voice spiel out the number of a woman that she knew he had been seeing since their separation.

As Dad ate the lunch she had made him, she asked him, 'Am I going to see you tomorrow?'

'No.'

'Why?'

'Don't question me, Sally,' he had replied.

And with those words, my quiet and fearful mother picked up a hammer and hit him. More than twenty times to the head. She then went upstairs to change out of her bloodied clothes.

When she came back down to the kitchen, she covered his now-lifeless body with some old curtains, wrote a note and placed it on top of him.

I love you. Sally.

Before leaving, she cleared and washed up his dirty pans and dishes. When she arrived back at the new house we were living in together, she typed up a longer note and

printed it out, changed her clothes again, and returned to our old home's kitchen once more to leave the new note on his covered body.

When I got into her car the next morning, Mum had already placed a little plastic stepping stool behind my passenger seat. After dropping me off at work, she had driven for two hours to Beachy Head. When she reached the car park, she called Noel and told her what she had done to my father, and gave her numbers for my brother and me, asking her to pick me up from work.

She hung up and got out of the car, taking the little stool with her, which she used to climb over the fences between her and the cliff edge. She then headed out along the headland to find a spot to jump from.

A chaplain who often patrolled the cliffs for jumpers spotted her. She tried to get away from him, but he followed her to a precipice and tried to talk her down.

Noel didn't do as she was told.

She called the police, who went round to our family home, broke down the front door, and found my father on the kitchen floor, just as my mother had described.

I have no clear memory of when I realised my mother was responsible for the death of my father. I can't remember those sentences coming out of anybody's mouth. It was a knowledge without words, a creeping build-up of unthinkable certainty.

My mother was the cornerstone of my morality. She was kind and compassionate; my guiding shepherd.

This wasn't her.

Every part of me knew that. It wasn't in her nature to do

this. Let alone to my father, who she'd always loved in spite of everything.

This wasn't her.

That night, I dreamed in vivid technicolour that my father was standing at the foot of my bed. I was trying to tell him about my life, my hopes and ambitions, pouring it all out.

Whatever I said, however I tried to reach him, he just stood there, in silence. Unmoving. Unreachable. It was a feeling that was horribly familiar.

And then I woke up, and I was alone in the room, and he was gone.

BEFORE

Chapter One

Sometimes, when I think about my home, my childhood, I grasp for the golden moments.

I am six or seven, kneeling on the carpeted floor of our living room and playing a game with my mother. She's sitting facing away from the main doors to the living room, and from behind me I hear my dad come in. I look up at her as she turns towards him and see happiness swimming across her face as she recognises what is in his hands: a small black box. Opening it, she beams with joy and pulls out a heavy gold necklace. My father smiles at her reaction as he reaches behind her neck to help her put it on, threading his arms under her shining blond hair. Their togetherness, the intensity of it, I feel inside myself.

But however much I search my memory, that togetherness is a one-off. They would never be like that again.

When I was little, I used to love looking through our photo albums, seeing the story of our family.

There were my parents at their wedding, an English garden on a sunlit day. My mother, only 24, with loose hair, smiling in a high-necked dress. My father, dark-haired and grinning, twining his hands into hers.

Then, as the years pass, there is a family, the four of us grinning up from the photos outside a perfect-looking family

house. It was a secluded four-bedroom house perched at the top of a road, Ruxley Ridge, in the small, leafy Surrey village of Claygate. The long driveway burrowed down into the land the house sat on, and from the road you could almost see right into all four corners of our house. But my favourite place was the back garden, where I had a little white Wendy house with a red trim on the roof. There I am in the pictures: it's a sunny, bright day and I am in a red plastic car, pedalling as fast as I can, laughing. My mother isn't in the picture but I know she is near. She loved the garden, loved weeding and digging up bulbs, stopping occasionally to call to our cat Tiggy, who she adored. He would be hiding in the bushes waiting for her call before darting out to greet her.

Beyond the garden and the Wendy house lay deep bushes and rhododendrons with an opening hidden within the leaves, a little hideaway from where I would secretly watch my family. Further still lay a deep, wild area with tall, spindly trees. It was a square of land belonging to no one, left untouched and uncharted, and at night it was dark and terrifying. On rare occasions, deep into the evening, I would spot the small shape of an owl there, a harbinger of the darker world outside the glowing warmth of our home. I felt safe on my side of the glass.

Mum stayed at home for the first half of my childhood. She and I would often explore together in a small wood at the bottom of our road. She would watch as I cycled down the dips and up the humps of the dirt-bike track. In autumn, the woods were an ideal foraging ground for conkers, and my exploits would always leave me with splinters in my fingers. Late afternoons were then spent at my mother's dressing

table as she kneeled in front of me, pulling them out one by one with tweezers.

As a child, I was bursting with life, always moving, always talking. There was a brightness in me, a kind of boundless energy that I couldn't contain. I had a head full of dreams, one minute wanting to be a soldier, the next a vet, then an architect.

I would dress up in little military outfits, saluting around the house, or sit glued to the television, enchanted by films, eager to recount every scene to my mum. She loved it, indulging my stories, questions and endless chatter. There was a warmth to those days. Even simple car rides felt special with her. Windows down, our voices would tangle together as the music rotated through the CD player. Prince's 'Little Red Corvette' tied with REM's 'Losing My Religion', her all-time favourite. Freddy Mercury would declare 'It's a Kind of Magic,' or Tina Turner would belt out 'Nutbush City Limits' with Mum in full-voiced support.

'Look at you, David, singing every note!' she would say, turning to me with a huge smile. It was just us, and I felt safe.

She would take me on errands to The Parade in Claygate. She stopped to talk to everyone we encountered, from the family who ran the newsagents to the bakers, where, if I was lucky, she'd buy me a chocolate-dipped Viennese whirl. On supermarket trips I would race to find my favourite cookie from the bakery counter, always a giant double-chocolate cookie wrapped in cellophane. I would make a game of trying to sneak a bite before we reached the checkout, only to be betrayed by its crinkly rustling noise.

She taught me to swim at the Kingfisher Centre in Leatherhead, the vast, echoey indoor pool leaving me with the taste of chlorine on my skin. Sometimes she'd suggest an even larger adventure, like the beach at Camber Sands a few hours' drive away. And once a year we went to the annual Flower Show on the common, where the large, desolate green would be transformed by cream-coloured tarpaulin tents and music from marching bands.

These small moments in time were sewn into the fabric of my childhood. They felt impossible to spoil.

My early memories of Dad come separately. He was a successful businessman, an entrepreneur who had built his second-hand car business from the ground up. He had started out as a sole trader, selling cars out of a rented flat, and by the time I was a child, he had his own showroom. He was good at his job, people liked him, and until I was about five, he was a doting father who would playfully pinch my cheeks and coo 'Little David' as I cuddled tightly up to him on the sofa.

He helped me tie my shoelaces, showing me the dance – up and over, under and through. But if I failed, he would leave, looking to Mum to help me rather than kneel down himself.

And as I grew older, something shifted. It was a slow, almost imperceptible change, like a tide pulling away without anyone noticing. Dad, who once burst through the door, eyes searching for me to grab and pull me up, suddenly stopped looking. One day I was the bright thing he reached for, and the next, I was part of the background. There was a wrongness I couldn't explain. I don't remember when and how it happened, but I remember the thud within me. It wasn't just

the loss; it was how readily I accepted it. Something in my stomach felt different. Because he felt different.

It felt like I had outgrown my purpose in his life, and the fact I was discarded sat quietly inside me.

That's when I started to notice the fog. I couldn't hold it in my hand. I couldn't clearly describe it. It didn't fit into the shape of words, but the atmosphere changed. Something noxious crept in and filled the rooms of our home.

Over time, the house on Ruxley Ridge became like a doll's house in which the little figures kept to their own particular spaces. There was us, and there was my Dad, and the spaces in between us felt too vast, too unreachable.

The living room was Dad's territory, where you'd find him in the evenings or on Sundays, with Formula One or MotoGP on the television. The racers ticked left and right, in and out of the corners of the huge plasma screen, tyres glued to the tarmac. Dad's rimless glasses would wink in the light of the TV as he followed them.

Often, he would ignore any attempt to engage with him while he was watching TV. Or, if you came into the living room part way through a programme, he would pick up the remote to mute before slamming it down and ask, 'Are you in, or are you out? Decide!'

He had bought the TV off a friend and spent a fortune mounting it on a wall. He didn't like people watching it without him, complaining it 'curtailed its lifespan'. Using the DVD player was an even greater offence. This was all his property and not for our use.

So it was clear that the living room was Dad's territory.

Meanwhile, my mother's domain was the kitchen, on the other side of the house. She was a great cook – there was always something delicious to eat at the kitchen table.

Every Sunday afternoon Mum could be found marshalling a hot stove with rows of old stainless-steel pans, the edges burnt, dented and worn. They seemed vast from my small height and sat simmering, brimming with goodness as I lingered in the doorway, watching. One afternoon, Mum looked over at me.

'David, do you want to learn how to cook a roast?' she asked.

The idea of learning something so grownup felt enormous. Within moments I was sitting up on a chair, painstakingly peeling a bagful of potatoes, trying not to catch my fingers and thumbs as my hands fumbled with excitement.

Then Dad walked in. Somehow, his presence pierced a cold stake through the warmth of the moment.

'Oh, you're learning to cook,' he grinned, leaning down to my ear. 'Good. You can help your mother in the kitchen. It'll be useful to have another pair of little hands. She's always saying she hasn't got enough time.'

He was smiling, but his words had an up-to-no-good air about them, an off-kilter edge. I could feel them needling into me, the tone sharper than their meaning.

Mum didn't say anything. Her eyes were set on stewarding the pans that grumbled away in front of her. Then he left, and the air uncoiled slightly. But the warmth between us had shifted into a flatness. She looked back at me, her smile gentle but distinctly thinner now. Muted.

*

Mum's day-to-day life became a timed assault course of challenges when I was twelve and she started working full time as an office manager at the Police Federation of England, supporting 43 forces. After picking me up from school and cleaning and cooking for her mum, Granny Jenney, the second shift – running the home – would begin. Weaving her way through the house, she was always on the way to one chore or another, before preparing dinner for all the family.

Occasionally we would all eat together, but Dad would often get irritated. If my brother or I held my knife and fork the 'wrong' way, his head would angrily pan round to my mother: 'Why don't you teach these children table manners?' There was never any question that he would teach us. While she was a cook, a cleaner and an after-school tutor, Dad's responsibilities, to both the household and the family unit, ended at the front door.

So, adding to Mum's burden, most nights became two-dinner nights. She would make dinner for the three of us and cook again for Dad when he came home around 8 or 9pm. If she was running behind schedule, he would stand imposingly in the entrance to the kitchen: 'Sally, why isn't dinner ready? You knew what time I was coming home. I don't understand why it's not on the table.'

Mum would hover over the stove, anxiously manoeuvring her way round pots and pans. 'I'm sorry, I've had a lot to do today, it'll be ready in 10 minutes, I promise.'

The idea that he could make food for himself never arose. Dad was in charge; he brought in the money. Everything else, Mum took care of. Mum was the engine of the house, Dad was the captain. And his word was law. He never had

a list or an explicit set of rules or punishments. He didn't have to: we all instinctively knew where the lines were. And we followed them.

But Mum's duties didn't stop with the housework. Because Dad didn't trust anyone, he never employed help in the garage. It was Mum's duty to do the business accounts, and she would work for hours on weekends in the office upstairs, a large brown leather book in front of her. He'd insist on paying the business's taxes in cash, so that once a year, her domain of the kitchen table was taken over with towering piles of notes. That was the way he ordained it.

It was also Mum's job to drive him to collect the cars he had bought. 'Sally, I need you to help me pick up a car in Guildford,' he would spontaneously announce a couple of times a week. 'Don't argue about it now, come on.'

It was an instruction. Mum's body would sink a little; I would look up at her pleadingly.

'Do your homework, David. I can look at it when I come back,' she would say consolingly.

'But when are you coming back?' I'd reply.

'I'm sorry.' And with that, she would walk out. There was never any warning or discussion, and it would take hours sometimes.

With her gone, loneliness would fill the corners of the room. When she left, the house fell into shadow. The street was always so silent – no children, no laughter. Doors closed tight.

Chapter Two

My parents met young, introduced by way of their mutual friend Del, who my mother had been on two dates with as a teenager. Del had dumped her for another girlfriend, but not before my father had seen her one day at Del's parents' house.

Until then, Mum had led a sheltered life in a large and rather colourful family. My Granny Jenney had been raised in India. The daughter of a powerful Commissioner, Granny had witnessed the dying embers of British colonial rule and the horrific bloodshed of Partition. She spun tales for me about the pet monkey she used to adore and the local maharaja who tried to gift her a baby elephant – a gift that was blocked by her father, who could not be accused of showing favouritism. She could speak Urdu, and recite word-for-word reams of long poems.

Mum's father had been part of the Royal Engineers in India, and together they'd had four children: Brian, Terence, Nigel and – a full ten years later – my mum. When Mum's father died before she turned five, Granny Jenney was left a widow. Worried that Sally would be lonely, since she was so much younger than her brothers, Granny took the unusual decision to adopt a son near Mum's age, Christopher, to keep her company.

Granny Jenney's charming little house always felt like home to me, more so than Ruxley Ridge, which felt