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At My Mother's Knee...
and Other Low Joints

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Extract

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CHAPTER ONE

AT HOME I'VE GOT A BOX CONTAINING WHAT I SUPPOSE YOU might call the Family Archives. Family Archives sounds very grand but it's actually just an ordinary cardboard box containing an assortment of birth certificates, letters, old diaries and sepia photographs – the flotsam and jetsam of lives past. There's even a pair of yellowing false teeth wrapped up in a handkerchief. God knows who they belonged to. It could have been any one of my long-dead forebears.

When I was growing up in Birkenhead, nearly every adult I knew had false teeth or at least had a couple of fake choppers on a dental plate – either that or no teeth at all. My mother, christened Mary but known to everyone as Molly, had every tooth in her head extracted when false teeth became available on the National Health. She came from a generation where a poor diet and only the most primitive dental hygiene had taken its toll on working-class teeth, therefore a set of gleaming white gnashers courtesy of the NHS was a highly desirable acquisition.

In the early sixties, when she was only forty-four, she underwent this extreme dentistry. I remember her then as being quite slim and pretty, though I can't recall what condition her teeth were in. She used to say that the reason she'd had them all taken out was because she had a mouthful of teeth 'like a row of

bombed houses', which was a slight exaggeration. Like everyone else, she had all her teeth out because it was fashionable.

The sight of her lying in bed, moaning softly, a tea towel pressed to her swollen mouth and a bucket for blood on the floor beside her, horrified me. That nightmare scene put me off going to the dentist for life. Nothing and nobody could persuade me to go, and I'm still the same today. OK, I might not develop rigor mortis, throw myself on the front-room floor and hold my breath until my face turns a vivid scarlet at the mere suggestion of a check-up any more, but if a tooth is playing up I'll stupidly ignore it until the final hour. When I'm defeated by the pain and my cheek is as swollen as Popeye's I'll give in and go for treatment.

My patient dad would try and gently coax me into taking the trip to see Mr Aboud, our dentist, inevitably with no luck. Eventually my mother, exasperated by my carry-on, would get me there by means of devious trickery. On the pretext of visiting a clothes shop called Carson's that just happened to be close to Aboud's House of Torture, she'd whip me into his surgery with the speed and efficiency of the Childcatcher before I realized what was happening.

Mr Aboud, a dapper little man who wore neroli oil in his hair and spoke with an exotic accent – if he had chosen acting instead of dentistry he would have made the perfect Hercule Poirot – would place me firmly in his chair and press the foul-smelling rubber mask over my nose and mouth, telling me to 'Close your eyes, child, and breathe deeeeply, deeply . . .' To my ears he sounded just like Bela Lugosi in the Dracula films I'd seen on the telly. The gas would take effect and, slipping into a coma for what felt like hours but was actually only seconds, I would have wild, technicolour dreams and come to with a start on the leather bench in the waiting room, retching from the after-effects of the gas into a bloodied bowl held by my mother.

Dentistry has a come a long way since the sixties. I've been

through more dentists than I have socks over the years, but now I've finally found a sympathetic marvel I'm a lot better. I still won't have an anaesthetic though; I don't like the after-effects. The dentist's creed back then was 'rip them out'. My aunty Chris, who kept all her extracted teeth wrapped in tissue in a jewellery box in her bedroom and was always threatening to have the poisonous-looking fangs made into a necklace, could never understand 'why anyone would want to spend their lives rootin' around people's gobs' and dismissed all dentists as butchers.

After she'd had weeks of soup and soggy toast, the long-awaited day came when Mr Aboud proudly presented my mother with her brand new set of dentures. She went straight from the dentist's to her sisters, Annie and Chrissie, and the new teeth were premiered in their back kitchen.

'Come on then, Moll, give us a gander at the new choppers,' said Annie, rubbing her hands together like a bookie with a hot tip. My mum, lips pursed tightly, removed her headscarf and arranged herself by the kitchen sink so that the light from the window would catch the full effect of the revelation. She ran her tongue back and forth across the teeth, cleared her throat and then slowly curled back her top and bottom lips, rather like a camel, to expose a set of startling white tombstones. For a moment, nobody spoke. You could have heard a pin drop.

'Jesus tonight,' said Aunty Chris, 'it's Mr Ed.'

My mum hated those teeth. They joined the ranks of her bêtes noires. The reasons she loathed the teeth were many. They were agony. They crucified her, it was like having a mouthful of barbed wire wrapped around your gums. She couldn't eat with them, they fell out when she talked and she wasn't bloody wearing them for no amount of sodding money so you can shove that in your pipe, sunbeam, and smoke it.

She was forever taking them out when she was around the

house and then forgetting where she'd put them. 'Where's me teeth?' was a familiar cry around the halls of Holly Grove. These peripatetic choppers would turn up in the most unlikely places, sometimes with embarrassing consequences.

In my teens, I'd go for a night on the razz, clubbing it over in Liverpool. If I'd managed to pull a bloke with a car, I'd try to convince him that giving me a lift home through the Mersey Tunnel would be well worth his time. Inevitably, such was my gratitude at being spared the hell of the tunnel bus, I would ask him in for a 'cup of tea' – a familiar euphemism for a grapple on the front-room couch, but a quiet one because my mum was upstairs in bed. During the preliminary necking session I would open one eye and to my utter mortification spy the Teeth, wedged down next to a cushion or grinning up at me obscenely from the pages of an upturned library book. As I tried to hide them by dropping them on the floor and pushing them under the sofa with my foot I'd be completely thrown off my stride.

Once I even found them biting into a toilet roll on top of the cistern and another time Jacko, a neighbour's Labrador, a lovely, friendly old hound who had a habit of coming into the house and helping himself to anything he fancied, found her teeth on the side of the bath. 'Where's me bloody teeth?' came the gummy enquiry just before she glanced at Jacko and had hysterics. Jacko was sat in the back yard gurning at her, his tail wagging, proudly showing off a muzzle full of false teeth.

Sometimes, as she sat on the sofa chatting and shaving an apple into wafer-thin membranes so that she could eat it with some semblance of dignity, the top set would unexpectedly slip their moorings and fall out into her lap, causing me, callous little swine, to fall about laughing. Sighing Garboesquely, she'd pick them up and, tossing them across the front-room floor, she'd moan, 'These bloody teeth, why did I ever get them?'

In retrospect, I realize that she sometimes did the teeth act purely to entertain me.

I was born in the Tranmere Workhouse during a violent thunderstorm on 14 June 1955. That's only partly true, I just fancied a bit of melodrama. I was actually born in St Catherine's Hospital, which in its day had been a workhouse. The weather had been stormy but by the time I arrived at 7.30 a.m., a disgusting hour to make one's debut, the storm had subsided and the sun was cracking the flags. According to my mother, the midwife who delivered me interpreted the storm clearing and the sun coming out as a promising omen. My mother, possessing an inherent pessimism, hoped that she was right.

St Cath's was to feature heavily in the lives of our family. Operations for ulcers and varicose veins were performed there. My father died in St Cath's after a heart attack. My sister nursed in maternity. My mother did a spell in the laundry and later she was an auxiliary nurse on the children's ward – at least until the day the hated deputy matron, a vicious little gnome of a woman loathed by staff and patients alike, hit a child across its bare legs. Mum lost her temper and after she walloped Miss Brindle on the head with a bedpan she lost her job too.

I sold newspapers and cigarettes around the wards for Prescott's, the newsagents across the road from the hospital. I wasn't allowed to go into maternity so instead I would position myself at the end of the ward and roar '*ECHO!!*' at the top of my lungs. I was accused of bringing on many an overdue labour. Now I come to think about it, I did them a favour.

I nearly had my first sexual experience on one of the psychiatric wards. An unwelcome one, with an extremely tall male nurse who was married to a Thumbelina of a woman. We frequently saw this incongruous couple shopping in our local Co-op, when my mother would remark, 'Every pan has a lid.' The male nurse made a lunge at me in the sluice, offering me

sixpence if I'd 'just slip my hand' into his open trousers. Even at the tender age of eleven I realized that the going rate for a quick ham shank was a lot more than a tanner so I declined. What would Emma Peel do? Or Napoleon Solo? A rampant fan of secret agent programmes, I knew exactly how to react – I gave him a swift kick in the goolies that would've done any Avenger proud and said no more about it. I doubt if anyone would've believed me if I had run home screaming child abuse and besides, strange as it seems, I didn't want to get him into trouble. I saw him not as a dangerous paedophile but more as someone to be pitied. He certainly kept his distance from me after that.

The better part of St Cath's has long been demolished. Only the old annexe, treating long-term psychiatric patients, remains. The once-smart little porters' lodge is now a needle exchange centre for addicts. Poor old St Cath's.

A week after I was born I was allowed home to 23 Holly Grove, Higher Tranmere, Birkenhead. I grew up in this little house with my sister Sheila and brother Brendan, the youngest child of Molly and Paddy O'Grady. I was the Last Kick of a Dying Horse, an unexpected bonus, or a curse, depending on how well disposed towards me my ma was feeling that day. There's an eleven-year gap between me and my sister. My mother had no idea she was pregnant until she went to the doctor complaining of indigestion. Once she got over the shock, she quite warmed to the notion of becoming a mother again at thirty-nine. (It was in later years that I disappointed her when I failed to match up to her lofty and sometimes unreasonable expectations.) My parents couldn't decide on a name. My dad wanted to call me James, after his uncle; my mother aspired to Damien. Thank God my dad put his foot down on that one! With the advent of the film *The Omen* I can't imagine the stick I'd have got with a moniker like that. In the end they settled on Paul James, boring but adequate, and I was duly christened at St Joseph's Church.

Holly Grove was, and still is, at the top of Sydney Road, a steep hill that my mother once pushed a pram up, loaded with coal gathered from the railway sidings by Cammell Laird's after a direct hit in the Second World War. When she got to the top of the hill she stopped for a moment, exhausted by the long haul from the dock road and irritated by the inconvenience of the perpetual air raids. She stuck two fingers up to the night skies.

'Take this back to Hitler,' she shouted at the planes above her, 'you miserable shower of bastards, bombing women and babies!'

An ARP warden came running up the hill, wondering what this mad woman with a pram was doing, shouting abuse to the skies in the middle of a raid. Shining his torch on the contents of the pram, he realized. 'Gerrin, you daft cow, before you get nicked for looting,' he said, obligingly pushing the pram up the Grove for her.

Number 23 was the third house from the end of a winding row of houses cut into the side of the hill. They were built in the early 1930s on the site of an old quarry and there were signs of subsidence everywhere. Ominous cracks would appear in the walls and ceilings overnight and my mum was convinced that one day she'd come home from work to a pile of rubble. In front of the house was a grass bank leading down to the road. From this I would watch the great Cunard liners sailing up the Mersey and look across to Liverpool, another world when I was little. I used to stand there and listen for the one o'clock gun, a cannon in the Morpeth Dock that was fired electronically from the Bidston Observatory every day promptly on the hour.

Number 23 was like a doll's house inside. Two rooms, a bathroom and a kitchen extension that my dad built after the war downstairs, and three bedrooms and a toilet upstairs, with a postage-stamp garden in the front and a small yard at the back. There were only two power points in the entire house, one in the front room and a deadly old round-pinned Bakelite antique in the kitchen that sometimes gave off electric shocks.

All the electrical appliances in the house were fed from these two sockets. Fuses blew regularly. My mother had a fear of electricity; it was something else on her long list of what was 'not to be trusted'. Everything had to be unplugged before we went to bed. It was a waste of time her ever turning in for an early night as she couldn't relax until the rest of the family had gone up. She'd ask repeatedly if we'd 'turned all the lights out and pulled all the plugs out'.

'Yes, Mam,' I'd assure her, night after night.

'Are you sure?'

'Yes, I'm sure,' I'd reply absently.

'Are you sure you're sure?' she'd ask again. 'Go downstairs and check, just in case.'

For my eighteenth birthday a power point was installed upstairs on the landing wall so that I could play records in my bedroom and my mother could have an electric blanket. She was paranoid about that blanket. Even though it provided her with the luxury of a warm bed she viewed it as a death trap. At around 8.30 p.m. the Ceremony of the Electric Blanket would begin. First she'd ask you to pop upstairs and turn her blanket on. Ten minutes later she'd ask if you'd done it and make you go back upstairs to check. This went on all night. I was up and down like a whore's drawers. Sometimes she'd fall asleep on the sofa or become so engrossed in her latest Jean Plaidy that she'd forget the blanket was still on and when she did suddenly remember, usually halfway through *News at Ten*, she would react as if a time bomb was about to go off.

'Jesus Christ!' she'd scream, hurling herself off the couch and rattling the dinner service in the china cabinet, a present brought back from Hong Kong by my cousin Mickey. 'Me blanket! Gerrup them stairs and turn it off! Quick! Before the bloody bed catches fire.'

One night she fell asleep and forgot to turn it off. She awoke hours later 'gasping for air' and 'sweating cobs', with the bed

'burning the back off her'. After that incident she banished the electric blanket to the top of the wardrobe and took to using a hot-water bottle instead. Like its predecessor the blanket, it was not to be trusted. The bottle had to be bent nearly double in case air got in as she held it by the neck with a tea towel and filled it from a kettle of scalding water over the draining board. She had a theory that if air got inside the bottle it would explode later on in the bed. After she'd filled it to her exact safety standards and screwed the top back on tightly, she would shake it vigorously, upside down, to check that there weren't any leaks. She would then wrap it in an old hand towel and I would be dispatched to put it in the bottom of her bed. The bottle didn't last long. It failed to provide sufficient warmth for that iceberg of a bed. The blanket was soon reinstalled and we reverted to the old routine.

It was always cold, that house. No, not cold – freezing. You could've hung meat in the bedrooms during the winter months. On a bitterly cold morning the frost created strange patterns on the inside of the window pane. I'd lie in bed, the blankets pulled tightly around me for warmth, desperate for an early morning pee but holding out for as long as possible before daring to make the dash to the arctic conditions of the lav. It was a damp house as well, very damp. When the windows weren't frozen up they were running with condensation. Tea towels lined the window sills to soak up the lakes of water that formed. I'm surprised we didn't have a family of otters move into the back bedroom – the conditions were perfect.

The house had no central heating – that was unheard of. The only form of heating was a coal fire in the front-room grate, which also heated the water. If you wanted a bath you first used the poker to pull the damper down at the back of the grate, then, after a wait of two or three hours, you could take your bath. A bath, Holly Grove style, usually meant sitting in two inches of lukewarm water, flinching each time an ice-cold

drip fell from the wet washing hanging out to dry on the pulley above you and hit you on the bare back.

On mornings when the temperature had dropped to Siberian levels, my mother would give in and get the electric fire out from the cupboard under the stairs. She didn't like using the electric fire as she claimed that it 'ate electricity'. She would panic if it was on for what she considered an unnecessary length of time. If you really wanted to send her into orbit you switched on both bars of the fire. She'd immediately go into her act.

'Jesus tonight, the heat in here,' she'd complain, coming in from the kitchen, fanning her face with the *Daily Mirror* and opening her cardigan. Two minutes earlier she'd been shivering like Pearl White on an ice floe. 'There's no need for an extra bar, turn it off before I suffocate. If that meter goes we're buggered because I haven't got a shilling, so get it off.'

She never had a shilling for the meter. I was always being sent round the neighbours' houses with a fistful of pennies to see if any of them had 'a single shilling for me mam, please'.

In extreme weather, when the water in the toilet bowl froze over, a paraffin heater that belched out stinking fumes sat on the upstairs landing. My mother instantly declared this a death trap. Just like the blanket, the heater needed watching, only more so, and it became another perfectly valid reason to tear me away from the telly and send me running up and down stairs to 'have a little look to see if it's OK'.

As the house was at the top of a hill and close to the River Mersey, we took the brunt of the worst weather. A mist from the river would creep up the hill and mingle with the smoke pouring out of every chimney pot in Birkenhead, mutating into a freezing, acrid fog that burned the back of your throat. This was before the Clean Air Act put a stop to coal fires, which in turn meant the loss of a familiar sight around the back alleys: the coalman.

The weekly delivery of coal was a ritual that all the women

in the area looked forward to. They would fluff up their hair and apply a little face powder and lipstick in readiness. The lid of the coal bunker would be flung back in preparation, the back-yard door would be opened wide and the women, purses in hand, would stand on the step and peer down the alley waiting for Alf, the Chippendale of coalmen. Good-natured and with a cheeky line in patter, Alf had the ladies of Holly Grove eating out of the palm of his hand. He was tall and handsome, with a set of magnificent white teeth (his own) and startling blue eyes enhanced by the thick layer of coal dust that covered his face. He wore a leather jerkin open to the waist, revealing a well-defined hairy chest, and a leather cap perched at a jaunty angle covered his greasy black curls. He had two sidekicks, 'the miserable one' with a lugubrious expression and 'the bit of a lad' who was very young and blushed under the coal dust whenever a woman spoke to him. I thought that Alf and his cronies were part of *The Black and White Minstrel Show* on the TV, a suspicion that was confirmed by Alf's repertoire of popular tunes. He fancied himself as something of an opera singer and his powerful rendition of 'The Toreador Song' echoed around the yards and alleys, transforming them for a moment into the back streets of Seville and my mother and the other women into Carmens.

'What do I owe you, Alf?' my mother would coyly ask as he tipped the sack of coal that he had draped nonchalantly over his shoulder into the bunker with a sly smile.

'Run away with me to New Brighton for a night of passion and a fish supper and we'll call it quits,' he'd reply with a dirty wink, making her blush and sending her into a fit of girlish convulsions. He said the same line to all the housewives, making them feel like desirable women again even if only for a moment.

During the winter, regardless of how well prepared my dad had been with his primitive loft insulation of newspapers and old

coats, the pipes always froze and burst, inevitably during the night. Water cascaded through my parents' bedroom ceiling. The neighbours, awoken by the commotion, would arrive, their clothes hastily pulled over their nightwear, armed with buckets and mops to help clean up the mess. My dad vanished into the loft to assess the damage and my mother, soaked to the skin and looking slightly demented, pushed the wet hair from her face with the back of her hand and began mopping up the flood. I'd be evacuated to Mary and Frank's, our next-door neighbours'. Mary worked in the brewery and got on my mother's nerves because she used to 'pop in', unannounced and uninvited, while we were eating our tea and hang over the back of a chair, fag in hand and reeking of Guinness, expounding some crying shame. Mary was an ardent movie fan and loved a good 'fillum'.

'There's a marvellous Bette Davis fillum on the telly this afternoon, Molly,' she'd say to my mum over the back-yard fence as she ran some washing through a mangle so big that she had to jump as she turned the handle. '*Now, Voyager*, with Paul Henreid.' She'd pause from her leaping for a moment to remove the Capstan Full Strength from her lower lip, taking an enormous pull on it first. 'It was Bette Davis that got me smoking, you know,' she'd reflect proudly, exhaling a cloud of smoke in a manner emulating her heroine. '"Oh, Jerry, why ask for the moon when we have the stars . . ." *Now, Voyager* . . . they don't make fillums like that any more.'

As a testimony to her love of the silver screen, Mary had developed a corned beef leg. The skin on the side of her left leg had turned shiny and tight, red and mottled like corned beef from a lifetime of sitting too close to the fire with her stockings rolled down to watch fillums on the telly. According to my mother, corned beef leg was the mark of a slut. So was going about with your stockings rolled down to your ankles, a fag dangling out of the corner of your mouth and more than a hint

of Guinness and whisky on your breath. To be seen running to the shop for the *Echo* in your slippers and a pair of men's socks was inexcusable. Mary, staggering home from work slightly the worse for wear one night, fell over the bin in the back yard and revealed that her choice of lingerie was an old pair of her husband's underpants, grey with age and secured at the waist with a large nappy pin. This damning evidence was enough to condemn Mary as a slut of the Highest Order of Sluttery for life. Out taking his daily wander, Jacko the Labrador strolled into Mary's kitchen one afternoon and helped himself to Frank's tea, a nice piece of yellow fish. He was halfway down the back alley, fish in mouth, before Mary caught up with him and retrieved it. She rinsed it under the tap, said nothing and served it up later that night with mashed potatoes. Frank was none the wiser.

I liked Mary and her good-natured husband. They never had children of their own, which was a shame as they were great around children. Mary was a child's delight, always up for a bit of fun. She'd make ice-cream floats with lemonade and vanilla ice and we'd sit on the back-yard step drinking them. She taught me how to play cards and knew the filthy version of 'Maggie May'. Frank, a diabetic, let me watch him inject himself with his daily insulin and, as he shaved in a mirror over the kitchen sink with a cut-throat razor, told me stories of his miserable childhood and how he survived the cruel regime in the orphanage where he grew up. Frank's orphanage tales worried me. My mother was always threatening to put me in a home if I didn't behave. I didn't want to eat bread and dripping and be beaten with a belt by nuns so I'd be on my best behaviour for a while, making my mother instantly suspicious. 'What have you broke?' she'd ask.

My mother didn't share Mary's enthusiasm for fillums and wasn't very keen on going to the cinema. She'd been 'touched up' (her words) during a showing of *The Blue Angel* and it had

put her off. The film had been on at 'the Colly', the Coliseum Cinema on Old Chester Road, known locally for obvious reasons as 'the Bug House', and during the show a man had put his hand on her leg. She had not screamed out but had sat in the dark, terrified, unable to move from fear. After that her visits to the cinema were rare. It was my dad who sat through all the Disney cartoons with me, not that he had to endure the likes of *Sleeping Beauty* for very long. We'd be back on the street within ten minutes, for as soon as the villainess appeared on screen I'd shoot up the aisle like a bullet to get away from her and back to the safety of Number 23.

Whenever I dream of that damp little house, and I occasionally still do, I recall it in vivid and minute detail. I visualize it as I saw it when I was a child. Like an old movie shot in monochrome, I can see a small boy sat on top of his sister's Dansette record player watching the condensation running down the front-room window, protected from the heat of the coal fire by a fire guard hung with damp washing. I loved that little house. It was the backdrop for my formative years. It's in my blood still.