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Life with the Lid Off

Written by Nicola Hodgkinson

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Life with the Lid Off



Nicola Hodgkinson



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Part One



New Beginnings

Chapter 1

Follow Your Dreams

I sprint up the hill, but not fast enough to catch my horse, which has just broken into a canter. Doris is harnessed to a gypsy wagon containing the full complement of my children. Joe, the April baby, waves to me from the back window gloriously unaware of the impending crisis. I can't see Elfie and Dan, but I imagine they're rattling about like peas in a pod. As I run, I weave about the road to avoid the avalanche of pans and kettles that have dislodged themselves from beneath the jolting wagon . . .

Faced with a steep hill, a good wagon horse will automatically change pace in order to reach the top without losing momentum. This is fine as long as you are prepared; but as I dingle along at her head delighting in other matters, Doris catches sight of the incline before I do. Off she goes with my children as I look on aghast. The wagon rocks and rolls behind her, while pots and pans jump off their hooks and tumble back down the road. Now, I deliberate, do I catch the horse, implicit in which would be rescuing my children, or try to

grab the utensils while ignoring the ire of passing motorists? Maternal instinct triumphs over worldly possessions, vital as they are, and I take off after the horse.

At the brow of the hill the most extraordinary thing happens: Doris, worth every penny of the small fortune I paid for her, comes to an abrupt halt, hangs her head and takes long, deep breaths. When I catch up, Joe is clapping his hands and chanting, 'More, more!'

The children think the whole thing is a complete gas and are laughing their heads off. Until, that is, I send them back down the hill to gather everything up.

Let me start at the beginning. Beside my bed hangs a small embroidered picture; on it is sewn a sun, a star, a puffy white cloud and a rainbow. Written across the centre is *Follow your dreams*. It's the first thing I see when I open my eyes in the morning and I love it.

I suppose we all have dreams, but not everyone is lucky enough to realise them. As dreams go, mine was modest: to own a wagon, a brightly painted gypsy wagon. Like Toad of Toad Hall, from the first moment I glimpsed a bow top, I knew I must have one. With a horse, my children and a love of the countryside, I would wander the lanes of this green and pleasant land, make clothes pegs out of hazel wood, glean food from the hedgerows and generally get up motorists' noses.

The latter I became aware of only after a while. Instead of the cheery waves and smiles I naively imagined, far more frequently our lot would be a gesturing of fists with the occasional addition of blasphemy.

We have been invited to a local steam fair for the weekend, to 'add a little interest', I think were the words of the chap who asked us. I am in my element as I pack the wagon with

all our needs, the children and two bantams. Then I harness Doris to this charabanc and set off on our adventure. On the whole, modern roads are not conducive to a horse-drawn wagon meandering along at around three miles per hour. Gone, sadly, are the halcyon days of Toady wending his way along sun-filled country lanes. Instead there are empty grain trailers rattling or overly full ones on a mission to get crops home before the rain.

After a journey of about fifteen miles we arrive exhausted. With only three hours of daylight left, there is much to be done before we can even start looking around the fair.

When you reach your destination in a car, what follows is relatively straightforward: park, turn off ignition, remove key etc. Not so with a horse and wagon. Given the weight of the latter, it is imperative to place it where you intend it to be before taking the horse out of the shafts. Everything involved is so terribly physical: unharnessing, lifting the huge collar over the horse's head, banging in tethering posts and lugging chains.

I cherish the simple belief that getting back to basics is character-forming, especially for the children. As yet they remain unconvinced. Having settled the horse, a degree of order is now desired, something that continues to elude me. It is vital that I am organised in order to sort out the workload before dark.

Collecting water is without doubt the most important task. While it is prudent to carry a small amount on the journey, every drop we need has to be carried by hand. I send the two older children off with buckets to fetch water not only for us to drink, cook and wash in, but ten times that amount for a singularly thirsty horse. Bearing in mind that on a tether she may knock her bucket over and need it replacing, they have

to make several journeys. I remind them that in order to save their energy they had better stop bellyaching. Then there is wood to gather; as it will be our only means of heating, we must have plenty.

Enough water and wood to start the day will facilitate much.

With the children gainfully employed, I set about lighting the fire. For this I snap dead twigs from branches. These are drier than any I will find lying on the ground, and within a few minutes the fire is blazing away. Traditionally the wagon would be lit with oil lamps and candles, but this is too risky with youngsters, so a good torch is our only concession to the twentieth century. With the light rapidly waning, the sooner I can get my offspring fed and into bed, the better.

At eight, six and nearly three I think my lot are a bit too young to send off into the woods with a spade or indeed use public loos unaccompanied. Instead I carefully position a gaily striped windbreak amongst the trees behind the wagon and stick a port-a-potty in the middle. The children flatly refuse to use this on account of their heads appearing above the parapet and the fear of being spotted by some passer-by. I tell them not to be so coy, while wondering how they have become so dreadfully bourgeois . . . or perhaps if I am scarring them for life.

Wagons are deceptively commodious. I sleep on the full-sized bed at the back, while my two older children occupy the cupboard beneath. The April baby is precariously balanced on a narrow bench beside the (unlit) Queenie stove. It would normally be the old and the young who slept inside, while the rest of the family would lie in the great outdoors.

There is something magical about lying in a wagon looking up at the night sky through a tiny open window. Outside I

can just hear the steady grazing of my old mare and the odd rattle of her chain. The chilly air on my face is filled with the comforting smell of wood smoke and despite their earlier protestations, the children sleep soundly.

I awake at dawn and creep down the steps to greet the rising sun. Doris leaves off from her grazing to offer me the gentlest of whinnies. Last night's fire, while giving the appearance of being dead, is only teasing; the white ash may look lifeless, but how willingly a fire will spark back to life with a handful of twigs and a gentle poke, even after rain. I fill the kettle and hang it on a hook that I swing over the now dancing flames and gather up mugs as I listen for the water to boil.

Gradually, bleary-eyed children emerge from the wagon like little pupae from their cocoons. Firstly Elfina, my daughter, appears, all bare legs and wayward hair, followed by her youngest brother, Joe, who turns around gingerly to take the steep steps backwards. Then Dan, intent as always on fiddling with some vehicle he is making, absent-mindedly almost trips into the flames. They huddle round the fire for warmth, cradling mugs of steaming tea while I begin to cook a massive fry-up in the cast-iron pan. Even they enjoy this part of the day. There is no doubt that living outside gives us huge appetites and we're all as hungry as hunters.

I toast my toes by the fire. My cheeks burn while a cool breeze chills my back; the contrast exhilarates me. Going 'horse drawn' is like stepping back in time. Life slows down almost to a standstill and makes me think how much I take for granted. We quickly start to conserve water now it is no longer on tap. I smell like a kipper as I keep the fire going to boil kettles to make endless cups of tea. All the while I rabbit away to anyone who cares to listen about the joys of 'living vans'.

'The pan box at the back is used as a larder . . . above it is the cratch over which hangs a tilt . . . this is for storing the harness when not in use. There is room here too for a bale of hay . . . all in all they're so well thought out . . . with such a tiny amount of space things get lost quickly . . .

While I love every minute of this, I forget it is my dream exclusively. First big mistake: children do not enjoy being exhibits. Why should they? They are tired of being asked by passers-by for the umpteenth time if we are having hedgehog for supper. Instead they have rapidly become feral; they have taken to scavenging anything they can find discarded about the fairground.

I remember a woman I would not normally have credited with having anything worthwhile to impart saying the sagest thing: 'If you are lucky you will get everything you want in life. But, it won't necessarily be in the order that you would have wished for, and it certainly won't be all at the same time.'

At this juncture my marriage is in its death throes; my almost-to-be-ex-husband deigns to join us around the fire for tea. He is spotted by a friend of his, who subsequently asks:

'Who was that gypsy I saw you with at the weekend?'

'That was no gypsy, that was my *wife*!' he replies.