

How to cut the umbilical cord

Playing Mummy's little angel wasn't the ideal way to spend my formative years. In fact, it was hell, which is why November 1973 found the 17-year-old me downing my halo, ditching my schoolbooks and slamming the front door with mother's words of encouragement reverberating in my head.

"If you leave now, our Kathryn, you needn't bother coming back," she screeched as I crossed the kitchen floor. "And don't think I'm going to give up my retirement to look after your illegitimate babies, either."

This was baffling for two reasons: first, mother had never gone out to work in her entire life so God alone knew what she would retire from – thawing TV dinners or spying on the neighbours perhaps. Secondly, I wondered where she thought the illegitimate babies would come from. To the best of her knowledge, I was still little Miss Innocent, the preservation of my virginity having been mother's *raison d'être* since I hit puberty. "You mark my words," – a phrase that seemed to prefix every piece of advice she offered – "if you give them what they want, they won't respect you in the morning. And then what will you be? Damaged goods, is what – and no fella wants damaged goods, do they?"

I don't think she believed I'd leave home and, to be honest, neither did I. It wasn't as if I'd been planning my escape. I'd just got fed up living at home. Well, living with mother to be precise. Before she drove daddy away, family life was perfect. It just came to a head when she told me I'd have to leave school and get a job. This was a big deal. I was much cleverer than my big brother, Rees, and she'd practically begged him to go to Sheffield Poly, so I couldn't see why I couldn't go to university. Though I shouldn't, perhaps, have been surprised.

The main problem with mother was the fact that she had this imaginary daughter; who was prettier, more talented, and more devoted than I could ever be. The older I got, the harder it was for me to fit into this paragon's flawless skin.

Looking back, I should have realized that I would never meet mother's exacting standards. When I was about three years old – and this is my very first memory as I think I blocked out the earlier years – I was sitting on her knee. We were dressed identically in revolting *Broderie Anglais* frocks that mother had made herself. My determinedly straight, blonde hair had, in a complicated process involving mother's twirling finger and lots of spit, been fashioned into a semblance of curls. My aunties had been invited around for mother's latest pretension to being middle-class – afternoon tea.

Mother adhered to her own very strict rules. She never drank, well only the odd small sherry or Snowball – a revolting mixture of Advocaat and lemonade – at Christmas. Although she rarely went out, she was always fully made-up and dressed as if ready to receive passing royalty. She loved her magazines and sewing machine, and she was an amazingly frugal housekeeper. Mother's idea of a nutritious lunch was a small tin of Heinz tomato soup diluted with a can of water or, on the odd heady day, milk.

But on this occasion she'd set out a doiled plate of tiny triangular sandwiches filled with tinned salmon, Dairy Lea cheese and sandwich spread. Each offering was garnished with a sprinkling of mustard and cress. Battenberg – or window cake as my little brother Darren

called it – was stacked high on an elaborate, tiered, chrome stand. There was even a platter of scones and jam.

Mother hated pop singers, but with two fairly predictable exceptions: Anthony Newley and Shirley Bassey. She would often sit at our shabby upright piano, wearing her best-martyred expression, enthusiastically bashing out an alarming rendition of Nancy's song from *Oliver*. "As long as he" – *plonk* – "needs" – *plonk* – "me, I know where I" – *plink* – "will" – *plink* – "be . . ."

Mother also despised the Labour Party, Catholics, miniskirts, and my father. The jury was still out on me, with this day being something of a decider. The two of us had spent a large part of my young life rehearsing mother's favourite Anthony Newley number, and she was manically keen to show it – and me – off to her sisters-in-law. All I had to do was sing, "Why?" at the appropriate time. Mother smiled down at her little prodigy. Naively, the little prodigy smiled back. Mother took a deep breath and began.

"I'll never let you go . . ."

Only the sharp pain of a nipped arm told me I'd missed my cue.

But that was then.

Today, the reign of terror is to end, I told myself as I stamped down the path trying to ignore Darren as he whimpered. "Please don't go, Kay-Kay. Mum didn't mean it."

The moment I banged the gate shut, it began to rain – great, big, ploppy drops that ran down my face and diluted the tears. But there was no way I was going back for my mac – not now, not ever.

I walked down the street. Nothing much had changed around our way since we moved in the Christmas before Darren was born. Still the same straggly hedges, unswept paths, and the smell of stale fat and bubble-and-squeak pervading the air. The occasional pebble-dashed house had been enhanced with stone cladding – a sure sign that the occupiers had bought from the council. Mrs. Youle at number 18 owned hers, which led to much nudging and conjecture as to where she'd got the money. Looking through her window and into the front room I saw her, head full of big, spongy curlers. She was drinking tea and dragging furiously on a cigarette. She waved at me, scattering ash all over the table. Guiltily, I waved back. Mother didn't allow us to mix with the likes of Mrs. Youle; it had something to do with her selling her babies into white slavery, I think. Or was it entertaining men after dark? Either way, she was no better than she should be and must be ignored.

Further down the street, huddled in the doorway of The Plaice to Be, I saw girls from school. They were doing their usual – bitching for England while consuming huge quantities of chips in curry sauce. I hoped they hadn't noticed me. No chance.

"Eh, look, it's Saint Kathryn."

"Where's your Bible?"

"Sing us an 'ymn."

Red faced, I hurried by, ignoring their friendly overtures.

"How come she believes in God? I mean, with a face like hers!"

I wouldn't mind, but I'm an atheist. Mother's fault again – after a childhood of enforced elocution lessons she only sent me to the crappiest school in the north. Obviously, everybody hated me, except the English master. I was his unchallenged favourite. I won the first-year English prize on the grounds that I was the only person in the entire school who could speak it – including most of the teachers. My reward was a navy blue dictionary, all leather-bound and gold-embossed. It looked for all the world like a Bible. Thrilled with my gift, I resolved to learn a new word every day, and to look up words I didn't understand. This

resolution lasted all of nine days. Just long enough for the whole school to have me down as a born-again Christian freak.

To say I didn't fit in is a major understatement. I guess being small, skinny, and totally un-coordinated in a school filled with athletic amazons was not the ideal recipe for social success. When sides were selected for rounders or netball, I would cower in the corner of the changing room, inevitably the last girl standing. Lonely and unchosen, a brave smile on my face, I hoped my demeanour would conceal my churning stomach and all feelings of self-loathing as I listened to my peers discuss my sporting prowess. "Miss, Miss, that's not fair, we had her last week, can't we play one short?"

No matter how hard I tried to fit in, I always failed; if there was a baton to be dropped, a catch to be missed, or an own goal to be scored you could depend on me. I wasn't even picked for country and western dancing. To dispel any suggestion that I might be paranoid, on Sports Days the housemistress insisted on forging sick notes for me. She clearly missed her true vocation as they were far more convincing than her attempts at teaching.

By the time I reached the bus stop, my sodden tie-dye T-shirt had bled crazy purple patterns onto my Wranglers. Being something of an Enid Blyton fan, I kept telling myself what a great adventure I was on, but really I was cold and scared.

I didn't go far. I caught the bus out of Sheffield and into Derbyshire, a journey of about 35 minutes (I know, Marco Polo eat your heart out). I got out at Hathersage, and then walked through water-logged fields to the little village where I hoped to get work. I was heading to Grimley Manor (everyone knows the streets of Grimley are paved in gold.) I'd worked there in the summer holidays, when mother thought I was on a school trip to France grape-picking and learning the language (*Je ne pense pas!*) I spent six wonderful weeks holed up with my then boyfriend, Jimmy. That's all over now; he dumped me. But that summer was fantastic; I was paid for having the time of my life and condensing all the rites of passage into one glorious season. No wonder it was hard going back to live with mother.

I reached the Manor but, as it was Monday, the restaurant was closed. I squelched my way down to the staff door around the back. The door was locked, so I put my bags down and climbed onto the bin, reaching up for the spare key above the doorframe. I found it there. But any joy was short-lived as the bin toppled over, sending me clattering onto the muddy ground, and into the scattered kitchen waste. If I'd looked a sight beforehand, I looked twice as bad now, potato peelings and fish bones like macabre confetti around me. Just then the back door opened, and I squinted up into the light.

"Eeh! Look what the cat's dragged in."

Oh no. It was bloody Dee-Dee, looking as irritatingly sexy as ever with her long, long legs and spiky black hair.

"I didn't expect you to be here," I said.

"Clearly. Nice of you to dress up on my account," she said with a well-practiced pout.

Ignoring her sarcasm, I scrambled up, blood dripping from my hands, onto the dank ground. I picked up my stuff, but the bottom of the carrier bag stuck to the mud so everything spilled out. I hoped Dee-Dee didn't notice my padded bra, or the teddy bear pyjamas.

"You'd better get that seen to," she nodded at my hand, but made no effort to help with my things which were now lying in a muddy, slimy soup. She made an elaborate show of holding the door wide open and inviting me in. With a toss of my hair and my best condescending look, I gathered up what was left of my possessions and walked back into Grimley Manor. Once in the kitchen, I reached down to the cupboard under the sink and pulled out some disinfectant to slosh over my cuts. The sting was enough to bring tears to my eyes, but I willed myself not to cry in front of her.

I cleaned myself up, put on my driest clothes and went in search of Mr B. He was in his office pouring over the *Reader's Digest Cookery Yearbook*. When he looked up and saw me it erupted into a proper Mr B welcome as he effortlessly lifted me off my feet and swung me around while swearing his hello. He seemed pleased to see me.

"Nah then, what the fucks tha doin' 'ere? Thought yer were goin' away to be a brain surgeon or summat."

I could have told him about mother, and explained how, as she was culturally some years behind Emily Pankhurst's reactionary great grandmother, she considered university a male domain, but what was the point?

"I've left school. I just wondered, is there any chance of any work? Living in, if . . ."

"By 'eck. Does tha' want jam on it too?"

I admit it. I grovelled, cajoled, and begged for my job back. It paid off, but I'd known I was on pretty safe ground; they struggled to keep staff in that draughty old mausoleum.

"Go on then, tha's a good worker. Go and find Dee-Dee, she'll sort you out." He wagged a good-natured finger at me, "But early shift tomorrow, mind."

I could have kissed him but settled for a hybrid of a curtsy and a nod.

As the first person in the kitchen the next morning, it was my job to breathe life into the food machine. Remembering the routine from summer, I percolated an industrial-sized pot of coffee and busied myself setting out trays with little dishes of preserves and butter ready for the continental breakfasts we served in the guests' rooms.

Mr. B came back from market at around seven, and together we unpacked gleaming ripe fruit, earth-crusting vegetables, and trays of fish with wet glistening skin and bright, unfocused eyes. The meat was delivered twice a week from the nearby Chatsworth Estate – ribs of beef, lamb shanks, venison, sausages, and the farm-cured bacon I was about to fry into a mountain of sandwiches for the staff breakfast.

We sat round the big wooden table eating bacon butties and drinking thick, dark coffee. To be honest, I preferred the instant stuff we drank at home but I didn't say anything, not wanting to show myself up. Mr B was running through the day's specials when I caught sight of my reflection in the shiny oven door – a face pink with exertion and excitement. The obligatory white cook's hat perched on top of my head was as crooked as my little brother's teeth. I wondered if mother would make him wear braces.

Tears crept into my eyes at the thought of Darren. When he was born, my brother Rees and I had spent the day with Nana, our dad's mum. I was seven and hadn't really understood that mother was pregnant, even though we'd all gone swimming in the Cornish sea that summer, and I'd seen her pat her tummy and say to daddy, "Look, it's going to be a water baby." We were a happy family then; maybe she liked being pregnant. Although I was disappointed when I heard I had a baby brother. I already had a brother and all we ever did was fight.

Nana said that when we went home we wouldn't see mother or the baby because they were both tired. I couldn't actually see why but I didn't say anything. It was dark when we got back so we tiptoed into the house and upstairs to bed. As Daddy kissed me goodnight, I remember thinking I had to be very grown up now that I was a big sister. I was nearly asleep when Daddy came back; he gently plucked me out of bed and carried me into their room. Mother was drinking tea. I wanted some but they didn't have a spare mug so I had it in the pink Tupperware cup they used to clean their teeth. I sipped the tea, which tasted of plastic and toothpaste, and peered into the crib to look at my baby brother. He was

beautiful, better than any girl, and I loved him more than anyone in the world, even my daddy.

Later, I wasn't a bit surprised when the baby doctor told us that Darren was a special baby. It was obvious to me. The funny thing was that mother and daddy didn't seem a bit pleased about it.

I soon got back into the swing of things at Grimley Manor – waiting on tables, getting orders mixed up, half-heartedly servicing the bedrooms, then spraying them with furniture polish so they smelt like I'd done a proper job – Dee-Dee taught me that one. We got on better now, really well in fact, but I still felt a little mad at her for snogging Jimmy. I didn't bring that up though; she was such a laugh that I couldn't risk falling out with her again.

On Saturday nights, Mr B would leave as soon as the last cover was seated, leaving Mr Purvis in charge. Mr Purvis was headwaiter, sommelier, and night porter rolled into one. He always wore a white, starched, wing-collared shirt with a stringy black bow tie and shiny trousers that flapped a good couple of inches above his even shinier patent shoes. He was easy meat for Dee-Dee, and she made his life a misery. He once told me that as a younger man he'd had aspirations to work on the Queen Mary or as a butler to a fine gentleman. Regret clung to him like yesterday's cigar smoke. I liked him. He called us his young ladies, as in "Your bill, Sir? Certainly, I'll get one of my young ladies to deal with it" or "You look chilly, Madam, should I get one of my young ladies to fetch you a rug?"

Dee-Dee said I was weird, liking him. She claimed that he used to brush up against her tits, accidentally on purpose, and touch her bum. I didn't believe it, even when Dee-Dee imitated him in a silly posh voice.

"Oh I do believe I've got an erection. I'll get one of my young ladies to deal with it."

I looked away, trying not to laugh. "He's not like that."

"He is so," Dee-Dee interrupted. "He feels you up then spends the night playing with his wrinkly old willy. Pervy, pervy, Purvis."

The thing is, looking back, Mr Purvis couldn't have been much older than forty, and what Dee-Dee didn't realize was how kind he was.

Soon after arriving at Grimley Manor I wrote to give Dad my new address and suggested that we get together at last. Mother had always made things so difficult for him that he'd been forced to give up on his access visits. He wrote agreeing that, without mother's interference, we could make a new start. We arranged to meet in the little village teashop on my next afternoon off.

I was so thrilled at the prospect of seeing him that I set my hair with heated rollers and ditched my usual leisure look of jeans and denim jacket. Remembering that daddy used to like his little princess to wear pink, I got all dressed in a fluffy pink mini skirt and matching cardi. (I know, needy or what!) Dee-Dee said I looked like an over-excited poodle but I think she was just mad because I wouldn't let her come along.

Of course I got to the café early. I'd bought a magazine in case he was late but I was far too excited to read it, or even sip at my chocolate milkshake. Every time the doorbell chimed I looked up eagerly hoping to see him. I was glad that Dee-Dee wasn't there; she'd be sure to tell me I looked like one of those nodding dogs you see decorating the back windscreen of cars.

After what felt like a lifetime, he finally arrived. He looked as handsome as ever and I noticed the waitress flutter her eyelashes at him as he ordered a pot of tea and two toasted teacakes. We chatted for ages, well to be honest, I did most of the talking. I told him about

my new job and friends and made him laugh about the antics of Dee-Dee. He said he'd like to meet her one day, so I suggested that he walk back to Grimley Manor with me.

He looked at his watch. "I'm not sure I've got time."

"Oh please, it's only about half a mile."

"I really should get off."

I finally persuaded him to make a quick visit but before we reached the Manor gates, he said, "Look, I'm sorry, Love, but I've got to get back."

Trying hard to hide my disappointment, I smiled brightly and gave a nonchalant shrug. "Well, how about meeting them next week . . ."

He shook his head.

So, just to prove I had absolutely no pride, I grabbed his arm and said, "Well, the week after then? Or we can do something else – whatever you want."

He disentangled himself and said, "The thing is, Kathryn, I've got another family now. And they're young and they depend on me. You're all grown up and I'm so proud of you, but you don't need me like they do. I'm sorry."

"But I do need you," I said. "I do and I thought you wanted to make a fresh start." I was clutching at straws but obviously not very effectively.

He turned and walked away.

"You'll be in touch?" I called after him, but he just kept on walking.

I sat down on a mossy tree stump too stunned even to cry. And that's how Mr Purvis found me, much later, when it was cold and dark.

"Miss Kathryn," he said, wrapping his coat around me. "Whatever's wrong?"

He sat down beside me, took my hand in his and I found myself telling him the whole sorry story. He listened, saying nothing, just occasionally nodding his head or squeezing my hand. When I got to the end, he put his arm around me in a gesture more fatherly than any I'd experienced that day and said, "Please don't take on so. Of course he loves you. But the man's clearly bonkers to treat you so shabbily. I'd give my right arm to have a daughter like you. We'd have afternoon tea twice a week with hot, buttered scones and strawberry jam."

"And clotted cream?"

"Lashings of it," he said, which made me smile.

"The thing is, some people just aren't very good at showing their love. And who knows, maybe he's under pressure from his new wife to leave the past behind." He helped me to my feet. "Now come with me into the scullery. We'll have a mug of Horlicks to help warm us up."

So I went with Mr Purvis, feeling better for our chat. Of course, it wasn't my dad's fault; if only he hadn't remarried.

However much Dee-Dee sneered at Mr Purvis, she wasn't against flirting with him if that's what it took to get her own way.

"Oh please, Mr Purvis, please be a darling." She pronounced it dah-ling as a joke. "Let us go now, we've nearly finished. We've been invited to a get-together at the church hall. I'm sure it will be very good for our souls."

Wearily, he nodded his consent. He couldn't resist her. Nobody could.

"Oh thank you, thank you," she said, kissing his cheek. "We'll say a prayer for you."

If he thought she was overdoing it, he said nothing as she whisked me upstairs to change. She fumbled under the bed and took out two big bags.

"Fancy dress – Abba, I'm the blonde one."

Typical, my hair was miles lighter and longer than hers, but of course she'd bought a big, blonde wig. I said nothing. Together we scrambled into spangled cat suits and white platform boots.

I wasn't convinced about the clothes so, as she applied sparkly makeup to both of our faces, I spoke up. "You don't think, you know, it's a bit much for church?"

"Church? Are you mad? Come on, Pollyanna, grab your purse." She rolled her eyes. "Church!"

We spent that night, and the next million Saturday nights, hanging out in an old barn with colourful hippy types that mother would have called common. I hadn't seen mother since I'd left home nearly six weeks ago nor had we had any contact, although I rang Rees now and then to find out how Darren was getting along without me.

Then, one day in early December, Rees rang me. I was in the bridal suite with Dee-Dee. We were cleaning up after a couple of newlyweds who had thoroughly consummated their marriage. Well, to be accurate, I was cleaning and Dee-Dee was dancing around and spraying air freshener on the curtains to mask the smell of the cigarette she was smoking. She was belting *Stairway to Heaven* into the Hoover handle when the room phone rang. I answered and got a ticking off from Mr Purvis because we weren't allowed personal calls, but in the end he put me through to my big brother.

Rees wanted to know if I'd come home for Christmas. Of course I refused. Well, what I actually said was, "You're joking aren't you? Anyway I've got to work, but Christmas with Cruella Deville? I'd rather spend the festive season indulging in clitoral circumcision." You don't spend day and night with Dee-Dee and not pick up the odd choice phrase.

"Okay. We'll come to you," he said.

"What?"

"To the Manor!"

"No way," I said, horrified at the thought.

"Yes! It's a public place."

"Rees, no, I'll ring her and send presents, but please no, don't bring her here."

"Okay," he said, "you win – but what's clitoral circumcision?"