



A PERSONAL MEMOIR

The Story of Me

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CHAPTER 1 **Early Life & Childhood**

**WHAT DID YOUR CHILDHOOD HOME LOOK, FEEL, AND SMELL LIKE?**

Our house on Abbeydale Road was a red-brick terraced house, two up two down, with a yard at the back where Dad kept his pigeons. It always smelled of coal fire and something baking — Mum rarely let a day pass without bread or a pie coming out of that oven. The kitchen was tiny and permanently warm, with a wooden clothes airer strung above the range that was always draped with something damp. The front room was kept for best — Sunday afternoons and Christmas mainly — and I can still remember the feel of the scratchy horsehair sofa and the particular way the light came through the net curtains on a winter afternoon, making everything golden and still. There was a crack in the ceiling above the fireplace shaped like a running dog. I used to stare at it for hours.

CHAPTER 2 **School Years**

**WHO WAS YOUR FAVOURITE TEACHER, AND WHY?**

My favorite teacher was Miss Patricia Holloway, who taught English at Meadowhead Secondary Modern from 1959 to 1972. She was a small, fierce woman with short dark hair and a habit of tapping her finger on her desk when she felt I hadn't grasped a point. But what set her apart was her unwavering belief in me—something that no one else in that school seemed to share.

Miss Holloway was the first person who told me that I could write—not just adequately, but with a voice and something meaningful behind the words. I vividly remember the day she entered my essay about the view from our street into a county competition when I was thirteen. To my surprise, I came in second. When she returned the marked paper to me, she looked me in the eye and said quietly, "Second is nothing to be ashamed of. But you could have been first if you had trusted yourself." Those words have lingered with me ever since, and I've been trying to trust myself in my writing and in life ever since that moment.

Years later, when my novel was published, I felt compelled to reach out to her. I wrote to share my news, and she sent back the loveliest letter, a reminder of the impact she had on my life. I carry her belief in my potential with me, a guiding light in my journey as a writer.

CHAPTER 3 **Education & Career**

**WHAT WAS YOUR FIRST 'PROPER' JOB?**

My first proper job — and by proper I mean the one I could not leave at the end of the day the way I could leave the Saturday counter at Woolworths — was as a junior secretary at a steel merchants on Savile Street in Sheffield. I was seventeen years old and terrified. The office smelled of carbon paper and cigarette smoke and there were six men to every woman, none of whom took particularly seriously the idea that the women might have opinions worth hearing. I learned to type at sixty words per minute, to make tea exactly as Mr Hargreaves liked it, and to file correspondence in a way that defied all logic but made perfect sense once you had cracked the code. I also learned that I was considerably more intelligent than most of the people giving me orders, and that I was going to have to find a way to use that fact rather than simply being frustrated by it.

CHAPTER 4 **Challenges & Growth**

**WHEN DID YOU FEEL BRAVER THAN YOU THOUGHT POSSIBLE?**

When my husband Derek left in 1987, taking a great deal of the household income and a considerable portion of my confidence with him, I had two children under ten, a part-time income, and a mortgage I could not cover alone. The first month I sat in the kitchen at midnight going through figures and felt genuinely afraid — not a word I use easily. But fear, I discovered, has a strange quality. Once you have been right inside it and found that you can survive it, it loses a great deal of its power. I went back to work full time, negotiated a better rate from the magazine I wrote for, found a childminder I trusted, and got through it. I remember a day about six months later when I realised I had not been frightened for several weeks. That was the bravest thing I ever did — not any single dramatic act, but simply carrying on, month after month, until carrying on became natural.

CHAPTER 5 **Family**

**WHAT FAMILY STORIES DESERVE TO BE REMEMBERED?**

There are many, but the one I return to most often is the story of my grandfather, Harold Ashworth, who walked from Sheffield to Leeds in the winter of 1926 during the General Strike to find work, carried there by nothing but the absolute conviction that his family would not go hungry. He was twenty-three years old. He found work in a wool mill, sent money home every week, and walked back six months later when the situation in Sheffield had settled. He never spoke about it as heroism. He spoke about it, when he spoke about it at all, as simply what needed doing. I think about that walk a great deal when my own difficulties feel large. I also think about my mother, who raised four children on my father's wage and somehow contrived to make every Christmas feel abundant despite there being very little abundance to speak of. She was a woman of extraordinary domestic resourcefulness and I did not appreciate it nearly enough while she was alive.

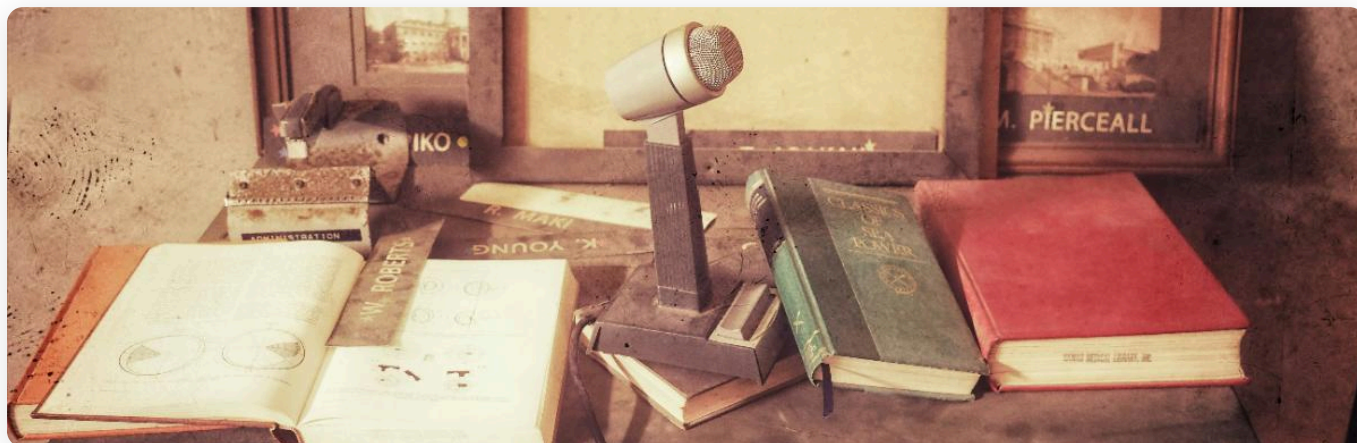
CHAPTER 6 **Friendships & Relationships**



DESCRIBE A FRIENDSHIP THAT HAD A LASTING IMPACT ON YOUR LIFE. WHERE DID YOU MEET THEM, ARE YOU STILL FRIENDS NOW?

I met Rosemary Fielding at an evening class in 1972 — we were both attempting to learn conversational French, both failing spectacularly, and we ended up laughing so hard at our own pronunciation one evening that the tutor asked us to leave. We have been friends for over fifty years. She has been at every significant event in my life: my wedding, my divorce, the birth of both daughters, the funerals of people I loved. She is the person I call when something wonderful happens and when something terrible happens, and she is one of the very few people in my life who has never made me feel that I ought to be different to how I am. We live forty miles apart now and see each other less than we once did, but when we are together it is immediately as though no time has passed. That is the test of a true friendship, I think. The comfort of returning to it.

CHAPTER 7 **Moments of Joy**

**WHAT IS THE HAPPIEST SINGLE DAY YOU CAN REMEMBER, AND WHAT MADE IT SO?**

The happiest single day I can remember was September fourteenth, 1994—my first book was published. It was a Tuesday. That morning, I drove to the bookshop on Division Street as soon as it opened at nine. I stood in front of the shelf, my heart racing, and there it was: my name on the spine. Margaret E. Ashworth.

I had brought my daughters, Janet and Caroline, who were eleven and eight at the time. They didn't entirely understand what we were experiencing or why their mother was making a sound that hovered somewhere between laughter and tears. But they held my hands tightly as we stood there together, soaking in the moment for what felt like an eternity.

Afterward, we went for breakfast. I savored a full English breakfast paired with a pot of tea, while Caroline, in her innocent creativity, drew a picture of the book on a napkin and handed it to me. I still have that napkin tucked away somewhere, a tangible reminder of that magical day.

I've had larger successes since then, and easier days too, but I have never felt quite that particular quality of arrival again. On that day, I was not just an author; I was a dreamer who had finally seen the fruit of her labor come to life.

CHAPTER 8 **Creativity & Passions**



WHAT DID YOU DO AS A CHILD PURELY FOR THE LOVE OF IT, BEFORE ANYONE TOLD YOU WHETHER YOU WERE GOOD AT IT OR NOT?

I wrote. I filled exercise books with stories from the age of about seven — adventures, mostly, in which girls did things that girls were not generally expected to do. They climbed mountains and found treasure and argued with people who were wrong and won. Nobody suggested I do this. Nobody told me to stop, which I appreciate in retrospect. I simply could not stop the stories from coming and the exercise book was where they went. I also collected things — smooth stones, interestingly shaped sticks, feathers, buttons — with the absolute conviction that each one had significance I had not yet worked out. I kept them in a biscuit tin under my bed. I suppose what I was doing was paying close attention to the world and refusing to let things go, which is essentially what I have been doing professionally ever since. The writing and the collecting were, I think, the same impulse.

CHAPTER 9 **Places & Travel**

**WHAT PLACE FEELS MOST LIKE 'HOME'?**

Sheffield, without question, though it is a complicated home. I left it in my twenties and returned in my forties and the city I returned to was not the one I had left — the steel works were largely gone, the skyline had changed, whole neighbourhoods had been remade. And yet something essential remained. It is in the hills, I think, the fact that Sheffield sits in a bowl of hills and you can be in moorland in twenty minutes from the city centre. It is in the particular flatness of the vowels that I hear in the supermarket and on the bus. It is in the way people talk to strangers. I have lived in London and in Edinburgh and spent several years in France and I loved all of those places, but Sheffield is the place that I did not choose. It is simply where I belong, in the way that the word home is supposed to mean: not preference, but fact.

CHAPTER 10 **Values & Beliefs**

**WHAT DO YOU THINK MAKES A LIFE WELL LIVED?**

I have changed my answer to this question many times, which is perhaps itself the beginning of an answer. In my twenties I thought a life well lived meant achievement — publication, recognition, the marks of having been taken seriously by the world. In my thirties and forties I thought it meant the raising of children who would be good people. Both of those things still matter to me. But now, in my mid-seventies, I think what makes a life well lived is simpler and harder than either of those things: attention. The willingness to be properly present to the life you are actually living rather than the one you intended to live or the one you compare yourself to. The capacity to notice — a good meal, a kind act, a piece of music, the particular quality of morning light in November. To have been genuinely here, for as much of it as possible. That is what I am working toward.

CHAPTER 11 **Life Milestones**

**WHAT IS THE BRAVEST DECISION YOU EVER MADE?**

Leaving Derek, without question. Not because the marriage was violent or overtly cruel — it was neither — but because leaving a marriage in 1987 as a woman with two young children and an income that did not cover the bills was still, in the circles I moved in, considered an act of recklessness bordering on selfishness. People said things. My mother was worried for years. Derek's family were considerably less than gracious about it. The bravery was not in the decision itself, which felt in the end inevitable and almost calm, but in continuing to believe it was right through all the months when it was very difficult and there was nobody telling me it was going to be fine. Eventually, of course, it was fine. More than fine. But you do not know that at the time, and you have to act anyway. That is what bravery is, I think — acting without the reassurance of the outcome.

CHAPTER 12 **Wisdom & Legacy**

**HOW WOULD YOU SUMMARISE YOUR LIFE STORY IN A SINGLE SENTENCE?**

A woman from Sheffield who was told, in various ways and by various people, what she was capable of, and who spent the better part of seven decades proving them wrong — not out of defiance, but because she was curious about what happened if you just kept going. I am aware that is more than one clause and arguably more than one sentence. I am a writer. I cannot help it. If pressed to a single clause: she paid attention, she kept going, and it was enough.

CHAPTER 13 **Health & Wellbeing****WHAT UNEXPECTED GIFTS HAS AGEING BROUGHT YOU?**

The most unexpected gift of ageing — and I mean this entirely without irony — is the disappearance of a particular kind of anxiety that plagued me for most of my adult life. The anxiety of being found out. Of not being good enough. Of taking up too much space or too little. Somewhere in my late sixties I noticed it had gone, or at least diminished to the point where it no longer ran the day. I do not know precisely where it went. I suspect it was worn away by the sheer accumulation of having managed, year after year, despite the anxiety insisting I would not. The other gift is time. Not more of it — less, if anything — but a different relationship to it. I no longer spend time the way I once did, on things and people that do not deserve it. That is a significant freedom and I wish I had claimed it earlier.

CHAPTER 14 **Looking Back & Looking Forward**

**WHAT HAS BEEN THE GREATEST SURPRISE OF YOUR LIFE SO FAR?**

The greatest surprise of my life has been my happiness. I don't express this with complacency; I fully recognize that happiness is not a permanent state. I've experienced significant chapters of unhappiness. However, when I take a step back and look at my life as a whole, I see that the prevailing condition has been one of happiness, and that genuinely surprises me.

As a child, I was not particularly happy. I was an anxious young woman, navigating a failed marriage, grappling with years of financial anxiety, facing professional frustrations, and enduring various kinds of grief. Yet, as I reflect on all of this now, the dominant note of my life is not sorrow. Instead, it is a warm, improbable gratitude that I didn't foresee when I was forty, caught in the middle of those difficult years.

I want my children to understand this: the challenging times are not the entirety of our story. Sometimes, they barely even make it to a chapter.

CHAPTER 15 **Firsts & Lasts**

**WHAT HAS STAYED CONSTANT IN YOU FROM CHILDHOOD TO NOW, DESPITE EVERYTHING?**

The curiosity. I cannot switch it off and I have long since stopped trying. As a child it manifested as a biscuit tin of collected objects and exercise books full of made-up stories. As a young woman it manifested as a compulsion to ask questions that people sometimes found exhausting. As a writer it became, eventually, a professional asset. Now, in my seventies, it is simply the thing that gets me out of bed — not duty or habit or routine, but genuine interest in what the day might contain. What I might read or learn or notice. Who I might talk to. What might happen that I did not anticipate. I have heard people describe getting older as a narrowing, and for some perhaps it is. For me it has been nothing of the kind. The curiosity keeps it wide. I am still, fundamentally, the child on the back step watching the cat. Still taking note. Still interested.