

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Before I Forget
Fiona Phillips

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About the Book

Fiona Phillips is one of our best-loved television presenters. But in August 2008 Fiona announced that she was to quit the job she loved, revealing that her father, Phil, had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's just a year after her mother had died of the same disease.

Before I Forget is a wonderful account of growing up in the 1960s and 70s and of her parents succumbing to Alzheimer's. We share in Fiona's sadness as she movingly describes watching them fade away, one moment interviewing George Clooney the next taking a call from Pembrokeshire Social Services to say that her mother had wandered away from her care home. This extraordinary book will resonate with the millions of people who are going through, or have gone through, the same experiences.

About the Author

Fiona Phillips is a television presenter who worked at GMTV for twelve years. She has presented numerous television and radio programmes, has appeared in two feature films, writes a weekly column in the *Daily Mirror* and is a columnist for *Tesco* magazine.

Fiona has written widely on Alzheimer's in newspapers and magazines, and campaigns for increased funding for research into the disease as well as more support for carers. In January 2009 she made the Channel 4 programme *Mum, Dad, Alzheimer's and Me* and in January 2010 followed it up with *My Family and Alzheimer's*. She lives in London with her husband and two children.

Before I Forget

Fiona Phillips



arrow books

To Mum and Dad for giving me so many
wonderful things to remember.

But I, being poor, have only my dreams;
I have spread my dreams under your feet;
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.

'He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven'
W. B. Yeats

Introduction

I LOVED MY job on the *GMTV* sofa, but when I decided to quit in the summer of 2008, it was because I loved my family more. I know I'm not alone in believing that family should always come first, but how many of us actually manage to put our loved ones in pole position? And how many of us suffer with a huge burden of guilt because we don't achieve it?

It was something I'd been mulling over for a long time: I had two very young children, a mum who was suffering badly with Alzheimer's disease and a dad who, to say the least, was behaving oddly, all combined with 4 a.m. alarm calls and the fear that my own mind was dissembling, so even finding the time to ponder was a luxury I didn't have. I thought a lot about changing things, worked, a lot, and didn't sleep very much at all. Over the years the agonising, the guilt, the lack of sleep and the absence of a proper social life became my life. And when I finally realised that it was not much of a life, my mind was made up.

It wasn't a decision I took lightly. I couldn't believe I'd got the top job on that famous red sofa in the first place, never mind that I'd still be sitting there after twelve years. I'd worked from the age of eleven, when I took on two paper rounds - lugging huge bags of newspapers around and popping them in letter boxes at the crack of dawn and after school. My mum used to say, 'You're so bloody independent.' I suppose I was. So bloody independent I was desperate to work so I wouldn't have to rely on Mum and

Dad for handouts. They worked hard and it rubbed off on me. I have worked and worked and worked ever since, determined to prove myself and to achieve, so to give up a job that I never really dreamed I'd ever have to begin with was a massive life-changing decision. It could have been professional suicide too - it still might, who knows?

What I do know is that I loved every minute of *GMTV*. It was such a privileged position. I was allowed into millions of homes every morning, while people were getting ready for work and school. It enabled me to travel and, for well over a decade, to talk to those involved in the biggest news and entertainment stories of the day. It's rare for anyone to look forward to going to work every day, but I can honestly say that there was not one day when I didn't relish the thought of chatting away on that famous red sofa - well maybe one or two days, but I'll tell you about those later!

But there were big stories going on in my life too, and in a way the scales tipped from 'My work is my life' to 'My life is my work'. As family concerns got bigger, in my mind the job got smaller, and hand in hand with the enormous pleasure I gained from my work, was a chronic sleep deprivation which robbed me of living life to the full, of being able to handle the extra burdens that having chronically ill parents, two babies and 4 a.m. starts brought with them. After fifteen years of being constantly knackered, I wanted a bit of my life back. My children deserved to see me looking alive and fresh and wanting to play with them after school, rather than being so deadbeat by school pick-up time that I felt like I was on drugs. My husband was worthy of more than a snapped 'I'm shattered, I've been up since three thirty' when he arrived home from work at 8 p.m. and asked how I was. I even started resenting him having more sleep than me and 'just going to work' when I got up before dawn, worked *and* saw to the house, the children, the shopping, the fridge, the

cupboards, the homework, the doctor, the dentist, the haircuts, my parents - you get the picture.

When I quit, I hoped I wasn't giving up work altogether. I couldn't - we still had a mortgage to pay and children and my dad to take care of. That's the reason I took so long to make my mind up. I'd thought about going for at least three years, ever since my old sparring partner Eamonn Holmes packed his trunk and said goodbye to the breakfast circus. I'd thought about it while I was with Eamonn too, when we had our downs - there were quite a few of those! I'd thought about it while I was interviewing self-important self-publicising 'me, myself, I' celebrities. I'd thought about it when I'd chatted to ordinary selfless people who made time for others - foster parents, charity workers, social care professionals - people I admire the most. More and more I felt the treadmill of my crack of dawn starts cramping what I really wanted to be. More importantly, increasingly I couldn't carry on with the burden of guilt which had been growing and growing since my mum was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease and became heavier and heavier when my dad fell prey to the same condition. It weighed me down so much that, in the end, I guess I just gave in. It was so unlike me. I felt ashamed of myself, that I was weak for not being able to do it all.

I had to give a statement to *GMTV's* head of press, Nikki Johnceline, a great friend who'd shared many long chats with me in my dressing room after the show came off air each day. We both filled up as I tried to put my reasons for leaving into words. A statement was finally released to the press which included the lines: 'This has been the hardest decision I have ever made. I love the job but I've got other responsibilities - children, a home life and an elderly dad who needs me - and I've recognised that I can't have it all.' Not quite the whole package perhaps, but enough to explain why I felt it was time to go.

With my life teetering so precariously to maintain a balance, anything that tipped the scales just slightly would be enough to bring it all crashing down. I can remember screaming silently to myself, heart racing, when an extracurricular something happened that I just didn't have time to deal with - when social services phoned with a problem concerning my mum and dad, or if I was asked to change the lead story of my *Daily Mirror* column while I was already on the way to Wales to deal with my parents. Ahhh! I felt I wasn't doing anything properly. The notes that often came home from school asking for parents to help on the latest trip filled me with anxiety and guilt and sorrow because I just didn't have the time. If I was dealing with my workload I felt I should be spending more time with the children. If I was with the children I felt I should be in Wales with my parents. If I was with my parents I felt

...

Well, it doesn't need any more explanation does it? It was such a personal decision and *GMTV* was so much part of the TV furniture - not a huge starry vehicle, no pretensions of grandeur - that I really didn't anticipate the headlines that my decision would generate. I phoned Richard Wallace, my editor at the *Mirror*, before the *GMTV* statement was released. I wanted him to know what I was doing before anyone else. He's always been very loyal to me and I wanted to tell him in case he felt that it affected my job at the newspaper - he might not want me to write my weekly column, I thought, once I'd left *GMTV*. I dropped my two boys off for the day at a Chelsea soccer summer school, got a coffee from Starbucks, went back to my car and called him. 'I just wanted to tell you first that I'm leaving *GMTV*,' I think is what I said. 'Hang on, let me sit down,' was Richard's reaction, which sort of brought home the enormity of my decision. 'Look, I'll completely understand if you don't want me to write my column any more,' I rather pathetically offered. 'Don't be stupid,' he

said. Phew! That was the reaction I'd hoped for but feared I wouldn't get. I'll always be so grateful to Richard for that.

The next day, Friday 29 August 2008, it was frontpage news: I QUIT - FIONA PHILLIPS LEAVES *GMTV* AFTER 15 YEARS. Bloody hell, what have I done? I thought. But it was a fleeting emotion batted away by my growing conviction that in the beginning, in the end and for that huge great bit in the middle all you've really got is family. I wrote my own version for the *Mirror* the day after the story broke which began, 'As I write this I actually feel physically sick. My decision to leave *GMTV* after twelve years on the sofa is the hardest I have ever had to make - like jumping off a cliff and hoping someone will save me halfway down. And yet hoping they won't. So right now I'm somewhere between the top of the cliff and the ground, feeling bilious about cutting my ties with the job I love, yet knowing I've got to move on.'

I'd made my decision while on holiday on the Isle of Mull in Scotland, one of our favourite places to escape to. I'd spent three weeks not caring what I looked like, no make-up, no worries, feeling alive and full of positivity, and I didn't want that feeling to be swamped and buried again on my return home. I went on to say:

In the four weeks I've been away from the *Mirror* over the summer, and probably for at least a year before that, I've been weighing up the benefits of having a job most people would kill for against the negative effects it has on me and my family. Twelve years ago when I first sat on the sofa alongside Eamonn Holmes I was a single girl just back from America, after completing two years as *GMTV's* LA correspondent. Being given the top job, even though it meant rising at 4 a.m. five days a week, was like a dream come true. Over the years I've interviewed

three Prime Ministers - John Major, Tony Blair and Gordon Brown - and four Tory leaders. I've announced wars, election results and Diana's death to the nation. I've seen the Spice Girls become Spice mums and enjoyed exclusive chats with Victoria Beckham and David. I've chatted to countless people, all who have made an impact on me, but non more so than so-called ordinary folk like Kate and Gerry McCann, Helen Newlove, whose husband Gary was kicked to death by thugs, and Sara Payne, who continues to campaign for Sarah's law following the murder of her beautiful daughter. There are too many names to mention, but they are all firmly etched on my mind. And so much has happened to me personally in the twelve years that I've been perched on the sofa. I've got married, had two children, nursed my mum through a long and tortuous battle with Alzheimer's disease and juggled several jobs and a ton of guilt along with running the house. Now my dad is ill and I have finally discovered that I can't have it all. Even though I scaled back my commitment to *GMTV* to three- and four-day weeks a while ago, I've got to the point where I feel I'm 'dropping balls' all over the place. I rise at 4 a.m. and never go to bed before 11 p.m. having usually not sat down, or eaten properly, in between. No one is standing over me with a whip and forcing me to work, but my parents brought me up with a strict work ethic and consequently I try and give 100 per cent to everything: to being a good mum, a good daughter, a good wife, a good professional, a good, caring citizen. And you know what? It is not possible to be that person and still live life to the full. I've got a lovely husband, beautiful children, a nice house, but I'm too tired to enjoy it all, so what's the point? It was while I was away in Scotland over the summer with my

family, feeling care-free, laughing and joking with my husband - a rarity when I'm working - that he said, 'It's lovely to see you relaxed and happy for a change.' And it was lovely being relaxed and happy for a change. Not rushing around like a mad woman, never having time for proper conversations with anyone, dreading the phone ringing at night because I'm too tired to talk, not having a social life, hoping the children won't want me to kick a ball around when I get home because I'm constantly knackered. Those are the things that make life full and enjoyable. Yet they were all enough to tip me over the edge. I love my job. I worked hard for years to get it, I'm lucky to have it, but in the scheme of things it means nothing when life feels as though it's passing me by and I'm not on the journey. The children ask every night: 'Are you working tomorrow?' If I say yes they groan, if I say no they shout 'Yay' and deal out high fives all round. They love my on-air partner Ben Shephard - as do I - but they can't understand why I'd rather go in and chat to him than be with them. 'Why do you have to go and sit on that sofa and just talk to other people when you could be taking us to school?' they ask. They're right. And then there's my husband, who increasingly says: 'You're so busy with the children, your parents, your work. I'm just like the lodger around here. There's no time for me.' Which normally leads to an argument about him not understanding how much I have to do. So instead of ditching the children, the parents, or him, it's the job that had to go. Yes, I'm a fool, I know. But to celebrate the end of a relationship, as girls do, the hair had to go too. I had my long locks lopped off. Free at last! Obviously chucking a brilliant salary away along with the hair might seem pretty reckless. It does to me too. And I'm scared - we've still got to

pay the mortgage. But I know it's the right decision. Since the news came out, the phone hasn't stopped ringing, and people have been so supportive. And I'll still work. I'm looking forward to new television and radio opportunities and, of course, I'll still write for the *Mirror*. I never wanted the day to come when I would have to go to bed before my children, and now it won't. I'll miss the viewers, my lovely colleagues, and the people I meet on a daily basis on the *GMTV* sofa, but I won't miss feeling shattered all the time. Getting up at 7 a.m. instead of 4 a.m. will completely change my life, and me, for the better.

Phew! I'm glad I got that all out! It's funny, but reading it back I think I sound a bit self-righteous, a bit 'poor me', but that's not how I meant it to come across. Still, it helped to piece it all together in my head and write it down. And once it was out there in print there was no going back, so it sealed my fate too. In fact the bloody awful photos that accompanied the story might have sealed my fate in more ways than one: my new haircut didn't suit me and I'd done my own make-up - I looked as if I'd been punched in both eyes. Who in their right mind would ever want me presenting anything for them ever again, looking like that? Then the phone started going mad with interview offers - the broadsheets wanting to concentrate on the 'I can't have it all' angle with the tabloids homing in on 'Why I left *GMTV*'. Meanwhile *Grazia* magazine posed the question: 'Can women have it all?'

On the Friday of that memorable and loaded-with-emotion week the telephone rang in the evening. It was Gordon Brown, phoning from his home in Scotland. 'So what's this I hear that you're leaving *GMTV*?' he enquired with a warmth and a mischievousness I'd come to know over many years of talking to him. I honestly can't remember most of what I said or what he said either; I just

remember at one point exclaiming, 'You are soooo sweet for taking the time to phone me.' So *sweet*? What was I thinking of? Maybe I was losing my marbles like Mum and Dad. Maybe it was because I couldn't believe that I'd actually done it. Maybe Gordon's words had confirmed that it really was true. Otherwise, what the hell possessed me to call the man who ran the country 'sweet'? I didn't read any of the other stuff in the papers or elsewhere because it made it seem too real. Plus I didn't want to be crushed by the usual dumping off of bile and vitriol which I was sure was going to accompany some of the reports on the Internet. I felt very unsure of myself as it was. I could always change my mind, I suppose, I tried to reassure myself. I had four months to go before actually leaving; maybe they'd forget I was going! But I knew inside, with an increasing inevitability, that the die was cast.

On and off in the build-up to my last day I got freezing-cold feet. It was an emotional time for all sorts of reasons, but it was mainly the thought of leaving my colleagues, some of whom I'd worked with since the very beginning of *GMTV* in 1993. I'll never forget walking into the office at the crack of dawn after the story of my resignation had hit the papers. I felt terrible for not telling them first, but I couldn't. It had been decided that we had to control the story - such is the nature of a job in the public domain - so the first that most of my lovely friends heard about it was when the newspapers were dumped off in the middle of the night. They'd found out from Thursday 28 August's headlines and I was due back after my summer break on Monday 1 September. In the car on my way to work that morning I had butterflies in my stomach for the first time in years. The security guards, some of whom I'd also known for fifteen years or more, greeted me as I skulked in, saying, 'I can't believe you're leaving us' as we shared the usual banter that had greeted me at that ridiculous hour of the day for so many years. They were always my

introduction to the morning – comforting presences who made me feel the world was all right whatever lay ahead of me in the hours to follow.

The *GMTV* offices had undergone a massive makeover during my time off, so it was like walking into a different company that morning, which was good in a way, as though they'd left me rather than the other way round. I don't know how I absorbed what was on the programme that day because all the talk during the briefing with Abi my senior producer and the guys on the news desk was about me leaving them. The next four months went by in a blur of what amounted to near-hysteria on my part: positive one minute, 'what on earth have I done?' the next; all the while holding on to my co-presenters Ben Shephard and Andrew Castle for support and encouragement. There were tears, there was laughter, uncertainty and a whirl of meetings and prospective job offers. And there was the 'What if I never work again?' question. I'm not a doctor, a nurse, a lawyer; I don't have something useful or sensible to fall back on. What if I'm like some of those actors who leave *Coronation Street*, never to be heard of again? What if I'm not good enough to work outside *GMTV*?

It had taken me a long time to summon up the guts to make that decision.

I'd had the children and coped with my early starts despite being riddled with guilt, but it was when an uninvited unknown lurched into my life, a thing I'd never encountered before, an evil presence that started to blow our family apart, that I first started thinking about cutting my ties with breakfast television. I knew I had to ease up and concentrate on what was happening at home. Not in our house in London, but in my parents' home in west Wales, hundreds of miles away. It was there that two lives were slowly, cruelly disintegrating.

My mum, the love of my dad's life, was gradually disappearing before our eyes. Alzheimer's had grabbed her, was throttling her personality and robbing her of her heart-jumping smile - the smile that my dad had first fallen in love with. For years she lived without really living, my short nights often punctuated with phone calls begging: 'Please help me.' There was nothing I could do. It's a bastard is Alzheimer's - there's really nothing anyone can do. Anyway, I left it too late. I agonised and cried and beat myself up that I was getting on with my life while hers was descending into a dark pit. She suffered and cried for years, always saying 'please help me', and me knowing there was nothing I could do. And, feeling an all-consuming despair and guilt and helplessness. Anyone who has lived with a relative or friend with Alzheimer's or just watched from close by will recognise these sentiments, I'm sure. My mum died on her own. Then, almost immediately, just when we thought that Alzheimer's was out of our lives, it found my dad. So I made the decision to change my life.

Now I know that when I eventually look back through the years I will never regret being able to be around my children and my dad a whole lot more; I won't have second thoughts about actually having some time for my husband; and I certainly won't have any misgivings about enjoying a full night's kip instead of dragging myself out of bed in the middle of the night. I only wish my mum was around so that I could spend more time with her.

1

MY DAD WORKED in telly. He fixed them. He fixed them during the day and worked in a bakery at night. He fixed it that we had the first colour telly on our road. He fixed it that my mum had something momentarily interesting to brag about when the neighbours dropped in to gawp. He fixed it that we had a telly in our infants' school. Once, in 1966, he turned up at my class when I was five to install a colour telly! Can you believe that? I was overcome with pride at the time. My dad was the coolest dad ever. I didn't think he rated me that much but, goodness, I rated him. There, in front of my classmates, delivering a TV and having intimate knowledge of the most amazing thing we'd ever encountered! Was anyone's dad *that* cool? And. Get this. When I was seven, he fixed Dora Bryan's telly. She was actually *on* the telly as well as owning one and my dad got to go inside her flat on the seafront in Brighton. He was so important, my dad. And then, as if Dora wasn't enough to top Mum's bragging list, Dad was called round to fix Wilfred Pickles' set. Dora and Wilfred - two of the best-known comedy faces on television in the 1960s and 70s, and my dad fixed their TVs! Could life be more heady?! Well, maybe, but probably only just. If he'd fixed Tommy Cooper's or Batman and Robin's, for example, I think I'd have died a happy human being before the age of ten.

They were proper celebrities back then. Celebrities who put in the graft for their rewards. They mostly came from 'up north', where real celebrities spewed forth from hard

work, raw talent and local recommendation. Anyway, I remember Wilfred Pickles, a Yorkshireman like my dad, not just because he was talked about as the first man on the wireless with a regional accent, a man of the people and the star of the 1970 sitcom *For the Love of Ada*, but because his set broke down just before Christmas. It was my dad's busiest time. 'Bloody Wilfred Pickles' I think were my dad's words, when bloody was a word that would get you sent to your room with a smacked behind. Everyone wanted their TVs fixed so they could watch Christmas telly, which was worth staying in for in those days. So Dad was never home until very late on Christmas Eve. And we grew to hate Wilfred and people like him for robbing us of our dad. But particularly Wilfred. Because we knew his face.

My dad worked on tellies when they were worth nearly as much as a car or house. People didn't own TVs in the 60s; they rented them. Rediffusion and Radio Rentals were the most popular stores on the high street. My dad worked for Rediffusion. We thought it must be very special because he told mum he didn't want to be bothered at work. 'When I'm at work I'm working,' he'd say. 'If you've got something to say to me, you can say it at home.' Of course we had to say it in person then, because only the very well-off had telephones, like the Banks family in *Mary Poppins*. But Mum was mischievous and probably bored rigid with staying at home with two children every day, so we did turn up at the hallowed workshop on occasion. I don't know why because the reception was always frosty. 'I've got work to do; I've told you never to bother me here.' So off we'd go back home to our telly, only I don't think we ever properly owned our own, just a procession of other people's tellies which he tested out on us before installing them in someone else's house.

I knew every control around the back of those sets. And I hated it when they wouldn't obey my dad's commands. As those tellies came on they emitted a hot, heated-up smell,

like something on the verge of melting, and like his TVs my dad heated up too. He sighed and grunted, got bad-tempered. He hated them, but he loved them. Tellies were his life. Sometimes I think he loved them more than us. Well, he didn't acknowledge us a lot of the time anyway, and he certainly didn't spend as much time with us as he did with his beloved, hated tellies. He had work to do and we were Mum's job.

His indifference made me crave his attention. I was bursting for him to say proudly, 'That's Fiona, my beautiful little daughter.' But he was too wrapped up in work, too lacking in emotion for that. His love sometimes seemed beyond our reach. Occasionally he'd tell Mum, 'I never loved you.' He'd say it - although I'm sure he never meant it - in front of me and my two brothers. It was something we'd rather not have heard, so to ease the awkwardness it became a bit of an uncomfortable family joke. He told me, sometimes with a chuckle, sometimes with a grumble, 'Never get married. Whatever you do. And never have children.' I wanted to show him that I was worthy of his love, so I convinced myself that I'd never get married and never have children, just to impress him. He was too busy to be impressed though. Too busy working in a bakery at night and fixing tellies during the day. All for us, I guess. The family he sometimes wished he didn't have.

We lived in Canterbury in a little three-bed semi. To us, it was the biggest house in the world. To Mum and Dad, who'd previously lived in digs, owning it was their greatest achievement. In 1965, I think it was, Dad had worked enough double shifts at the bakery and Rediffusion fixing tellies to be able to afford our first house. Independence. That was a buzzword in our family. Independence. Never be obliged to anyone; never be a burden; never be dependent on anyone. Dad's determination to be independent and make his own way in life led to his long absences from home and his complete immersion in work, and because of

that he was a bit of a stranger to all of us. Perhaps it was his absence which made me want his love more than anything. Even more than Mum's, who loved me without doubt, more than anyone could, even though she couldn't quite bring herself to say, 'I love you.' It was more a demonstrative kind of enveloping-us-in-love kind of love. Always with us. At home. At the school gate. At the oven. By the sickbed. At Christmas. On birthdays. At school open evenings. In the kitchen. Always there. Always smiling. Because she loved us, even though she couldn't quite say it. She was always at the doctor's too. Dr Miles became a family friend. He comforted Mum and heard her sobs when she was pregnant with me, a honeymoon baby, a baby Dad wasn't ready for.

They were married on 26 March 1960 and I was born on 1 January 1961 - 1.1.61 - so easy to remember, yet a date my dad had trouble coming to terms with. When he found out that Mum was pregnant he wanted her to have a termination. Dr Miles wouldn't hear of it, so he put her on Valium, told her my dad was full of nonsense and to go home and tell him so - and that's why I'm here. Dad wasn't there though, when I was born. He had a bit of previous on that front. Mum often told us, when she'd fallen out with him, how he had failed to turn up for a date the day after they got engaged. Apparently he wouldn't speak to her and appeared a week later offering no explanation at all. Of course, it made her love him more. My dad, the embodiment of 'treat 'em mean, keep 'em keen'. I guess it must have been the same when mum was pregnant with me - maybe, like the engagement, it was all getting too serious, too much of a commitment for him. It took him a while to get his head round having a baby, and when he eventually did, he decided it had to be a boy. But I came out instead. Bloody inconvenient. And on a bank holiday as well.

I loved looking at my christening photos when I was little, spotting my mum's beloved sister Auntie Mary with her husband Uncle Roy, Grandma (Dad's mum), Grandad (Dad's dad) and Mum, lovingly showing me off, wrapped up in my satin and net christening gown. Oh, and there's 'Narnie', my godmother, Mum and Dad's second mother, the kindly lady whose council house, 'digs', we lived in until mum and dad could afford their own. And there's Dad's brother Uncle Barry with his first wife Sonia, and Uncle Tom, Mum's brother, and his wife Auntie Audrey, but no sign of Dad. He must have been taking the photos, I thought, so proud of his new baby girl, turning the dials on his huge camera and snapping away with pride. The truth is he wasn't in them because he wasn't there. Imagine that! My lovely mum, newly married, having moved from Pembrokeshire in south Wales to Canterbury to marry my dad, entertaining the family at her first baby's christening and the father of the child gone AWOL! I don't know to this day where he went. Or if it was his navy background that made him think he could leave port whenever he liked. All I know is that Dad never quite got used to family life. And he made us think that we, in particular Mum, were a hindrance to what he really wanted to do. Although he never quite knew what that was.

One of his grandest plans was to move to South Africa in the early 1970s; I think he actually got a job there, but then we didn't go. Of course we didn't, because Dad was a dreamer. He always put off life; never really lived it, storing bits away for the future and then getting there and storing them away again. Dad's version was: we didn't go because 'That bloody woman wouldn't go without the dining room table.' So it was Mum's fault we didn't go. Mum and the dining room table's - part of a set that she had saved up for when they got their first house in Canterbury. It was oval, oak, I think, and accompanied by four chairs and a Welsh dresser stacked with china Uncle Barry had given them as

a wedding present. It eventually travelled from house to house with them each time they moved but never outside of England or Wales! My brothers David and Andrew still laugh about that table: 'There it is. We could have lived in South Africa if that hadn't stopped us!' That was Dad though, always blaming someone else for his excruciating inability to take life by the scruff and live it to the full.

In September 2008 I moved Dad out of the last home that he and Mum had shared in Pembrokeshire. David and I travelled to Haverford west in November 2008, having put off the onerous task of clearing the house and sifting through the memories. The table and dresser and chairs were still there. So was Uncle Barry's wedding china. It was a house. But not a home. As if all the misery of Mum's illness, the guilt, the remorse had cast out the warmth, the love and the laughter. Depressing. Cold. Damp. Squalid. Mouse droppings. Carpet almost ingrained into the floor. Dirty mattress in the middle of the living room. Most of my mum's treasured diaries missing. Her wedding dress missing. Our christening gown missing. Bloody Dad. He must have dumped them all. Were there just too many memories, too many regrets, of a love he never appreciated, of a life never lived? Bloody, bloody depressing. We threw stuff in a skip with no sentimentality at all. We hurled it in. Just stuff. It meant nothing.

Then, among the wreckage of their lives, of our home, I found piles of notes, some of them scrawled, some neatly typed. Dad had talked about a book he was writing for years, since 1984 in fact, when he first started jotting down his thoughts. 'Phil's writing a book,' Mum would brag, and here it was, scattered among the debris. It was all about a time when life was good, when he was in the navy and single. It was called *Chase the Shouting Wind*, and as with everything Dad took on, it wasn't finished. Reading through the dog-eared pages I realised the deep regret for what he

hadn't achieved in life and the deep love he felt for my mum.

2

DAD WAS BORN in Sheffield in October 1934. His mum, Edith, was a dominant force in his life. Always was, always will be, even though she's been gone for thirty years. He calls me Mother now. It's the Alzheimer's. He's not far wrong though - I'm a bit like Edith. She was a feisty little woman, a rabid socialist and so disgusted by the fact that Neville Chamberlain, Tory prime minister from 1937 to 1940, bore the same name as her eldest son, she never called my dad by that name again. Instead he became Phil, a shortening of his surname Phillips. Edith brought up three children almost single-handed, my grandfather Reginald, a warrant officer in the army, being away pretty much from 1939 to 1945, performing his duties in the war. They lived in Attercliffe, a working-class mining area of Sheffield, where my grandmother ruled the house with a rod of iron and a carving knife which, so Dad says, she attacked him with when his behaviour became too much for her sharp tongue alone to control. In Dad's notes for *Chase the Shouting Wind* he calls her 'a little woman of Anglo-Welsh descent, who spoke with machine-gun rapidity, frequently airing her political views, always with a socialist bias. On one occasion she told me that Winston Churchill was a warmonger.'

Mum always made excuses for Dad when he didn't show us any affection. 'It's because his mother didn't show him any love,' she'd say. He was a loner too, and a 'devil', according to my grandma. I've got a picture of him with his