

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Finding My Voice

Russell Watson

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About the Book

‘Let me tell you, there’s nothing like nearly dying to give you an appreciation of life...’

At the age of 30, Russell Watson was still working in a Salford factory. He spent his evenings singing in working men’s clubs and dreamt of the big time, but in truth the bailiffs were never far from his door. Then a chance flirtation with opera – something he knew nothing about – set Russell on an unlikely path to stardom.

Now for the first time, Russell tells his own story. Full of his cheeky charm and Northern wit, it’s the story of an ordinary man with an extraordinary voice overcoming life-threatening tragedy to finally find happiness.

About the Author

Russell Watson was born in Salford, Lancashire, in 1966. He has sold over five million albums, won four BRIT awards, embarked on numerous sell-out world tours and entertained the Pope, Blair, Bush and the Emperor of Japan. He has two young daughters, Rebecca and Hannah.

RUSSELL WATSON

Finding My Voice MY STORY



EBURY
PRESS

*I'd like to dedicate this book to everyone who has helped
support me through my illness; especially my two loving
daughters Rebecca and Hannah.
Lots of love Russell x*

PROLOGUE

October 2007

'Russell, can you hear us, mate?'

Not really, no.

'Russell, hang in there, pal.'

I'll do my best. Can't promise anything.

'Stay with us, pal.'

I manage to raise my head.

'Not too heavy for you, am I?' I ask.

Typical. I'm drifting in and out of consciousness, I can barely see – my vision's all but gone. Been getting worse since early this morning after a night of near-continuous vomiting, when it began to feel like I was viewing the world through neon-coloured mesh, when I started to think this wasn't just food poisoning, this was something much, much worse. And all I'm really worried about is whether I'm too heavy for the paramedics. Like what are they going to do? It's not as if they're about to pop down the ambulance chair and go, 'Well, yeah, as it happens, you are a bit hard on the old back, Russell, you wouldn't mind walking the rest of the way to the ambulance, would you?'

'Believe me, mate, we've carried them out a lot heavier than you,' laughs the paramedic.

My eyes flicker. Lights flash and distort. I drift. In my head I'm back at the City of Manchester Stadium, July 2002, the opening of the Commonwealth Games. I'm singing for the Queen, for an audience of billions. The song: 'Where My Heart Will Take Me'.

It's been a long road, getting from there to here.

‘Stay with us, mate.’

It’s been a long time, well, my time is finally near...

And I’m drifting...

‘STAY WITH US.’

There’s a slap on the back of my hand, a hard, continuous slap. My eyes flicker open.

‘Do you know where you are, Russell?’

‘Yeah,’ I manage. Or maybe I don’t. Maybe I just nod my head.

‘Do you know your date of birth, mate?’

Yes, it’s November...

But I’m drifting out of consciousness and the next voice I hear is Gary’s. He’s asking the paramedics if I’m going to be okay and the paramedic’s telling him that it’s serious, that I’m in a bad state. Got to get my temperature down because I’m at 38.9 degrees and if I get to 40 something bad happens – something called pyrexia. Causes convulsions.

I hear the ambulance doors shut. Through brightly coloured wire mesh I see paramedics reaching for me, undoing my clothes, hear the word ‘temperature’ mentioned and I think, I’m dead.

And now I’m on my back, somewhere else, and there’s a flash. Then another flash, and another. And I become aware of lights flicking past overhead. It seems so familiar. From the movies, I guess. And I hear doors banging and I think, I’m dead. Lying there half-cooked, thinking, That’s it, I’m dead.

‘He’s haemorrhaging,’ I hear. ‘Get him into theatre. Get him into theatre *now*.’

Is there a worse word in the English language than haemorrhage? Maybe cancer?

‘Come on. Into theatre. *Now*.’

I lose consciousness. Blissfully.

I find out later that the tumour was literally in danger of imploding, taking my brain with it. I discover that the

tumour had swelled so much the resulting pressure on my optic nerve was in danger of causing permanent blindness. I live by the matter of an hour or so. That's all it is.

They take the swelling down with anti-inflammatory medication but I remain on the critical list. Mr Leggat comes to see me.

'I know you've been looking at surgeons to deal with this,' he says to me, 'but you're at severe risk, you need an emergency operation and I'm one of the top surgeons at this kind of procedure. I want you to let me do it. I can do it for you. I can get it out.'

I take some convincing.

'I need to see my children first,' I tell him. 'No operation until I've seen them.'

All I can think about is the kids. Rebecca and Hannah. The most important people in my life. These experiences change you. Maybe once upon a time I might have put my career before my children, but not now. Not ever again. I live for my singing. But I'd die for my kids.

Which might happen, says the look on Mr Leggat's face as he stands.

'You'd better get them over here, then,' he says.

Helen brings them. They come to my room and I watch the colour drain from their faces when they see me, their dad, in bed, modelling the new line in near-death chic.

Someone closes a door, so we can have a little privacy.

CHAPTER ONE

December 2007

HERE'S SOMETHING THAT might come as a bit of a surprise. Chris Tarrant. He swears like a trooper. Honest. I've never known anyone swear so much. We're standing waiting for the Queen at Buckingham Palace and he's like, 'When's the fucking Queen going to fucking appear then?' Chris Tarrant? Torrent, more like. Nice guy though.

Still, I can talk.

This morning a courier arrived to pick up a camera. We'd been using this camera to film some material on the making of the new album, *Outside In*, which we finished in mid-October. It's now mid-December, and in the meantime I've completed the album, moved house and almost died.

We can't, believe it or not, locate this camera at just a moment's notice. If you want to send a courier for it, camera-people, here's a tip: a bit of warning might be nice.

Which is what I told Gary, who was dealing with the courier, and who was probably grateful that it was him dealing with the courier and not me, and that I was remaining in the kitchen, pacing it, narky. Because I'm not a morning person at the moment, not since the operation. Mornings aren't good. And nobody wants me storming out to give a courier a gobful. You'd hear a bit of Chris Tarrant language then. So I stalked, riding out the bad mood, knowing that a good one will be along again in a minute and I'll be myself again, back to the old Russell.

I have lunch. Victoria brings me some more pills and I take them. How many am I on now? It's like every time I

reach to take a sip of Coke there's a new cluster of pills, placed there by Gary or Victoria, ready for me to take. The cortisol is the most important one. The tumour was a pituitary adenoma - that's its proper name, although I just call it 'this bloody thing', or something worse - and it affects the pituitary gland, which is what they call the master gland. It gets you up in the morning, it deals with growth hormones, endorphins, that kind of thing. It basically controls and regulates the flow of your hormones so if it gets damaged you're in trouble; your body underproduces the hormones you need, so you need to take them in pill form. Which is what I do. Testosterone, growth hormone, stress hormone. All of them come in pill form, and when those pills wear off I have to take more. It's why I'm so down one minute, same old Russ the next.

Mornings I stalk and grouch. Afternoons are better. I have a laugh with Gary and Victoria, a few games of pool or table football. I'm not really supposed to work out, but I do. A room of the house is my gym, and there I've got a bike, cross-trainer, punchbag, weights. Running is absolutely, strictly forbidden, so I've put the running machine in the garage. I use the rest of the gear instead. Got to get strong. Got to be strong for what lies ahead.

I go out for the odd drive. Not really supposed to, but come on: I'd go mad otherwise, cooped up all day.

I do anyway. Go mad, that is. You do, don't you? I watch the odd DVD, play on the Xbox or PlayStation. Management call and tell me the album's doing well, at number 12 in the charts. Outselling the Spice Girls they tell me. Which is good going considering the only promotion I've done for it is...

Actually, I haven't done any promotion for it. Not unless you consider news footage of me being wheeled out of hospital with a bandaged face as promotion. I suppose it is in a way. But even so, it's not exactly Parky, is it? Maybe the old me would have been worried about that. Thinking, Now

I've got to do this show, or that show, or be on this radio station or get in that newspaper. Not any more. All I care about are my kids. All I care about is being strong. About wanting to be well. Taking pills, working out, getting a bit stronger every day.

They're saints to put up with me, Gary and Victoria, they really are.

Especially when things are likely to get worse.

This tumour's my second. The first one was apparently taken out during an operation in London in September 2006. I say 'apparently'. We'll come to that. Either way, this time I found myself being carted away by paramedics and had Mr Leggat fixing me with a look and telling me, 'Let me do this. I know I can do it.'

So they went in. Last time they went in through the nose, this time through the top lip. And when the doctors had finished, most of the tumour was gone.

Most of it. Not all.

There's still a bit left. It's small enough to deal with using radiotherapy. Which is good, I suppose. Except, I have to have the radiotherapy. Five weeks of it, to be exact. For five days a week, starting on January 2.

I had my hair cut yesterday. Cut short. So that when it all falls out it won't be such a shock. Somebody asked me if I was worried about it. About the hair falling out, I mean. But come on, least of my problems, my bloody hair. That'll grow back they say, and most of my mates have lost their hair anyway. So no, it's not the hair that worries me. It's the sickness, the fatigue, the mood swings, the other side effects. The five days a week of spending an hour a day inside some kind of radiation accelerator. I'm claustrophobic for a start, and that worries me far more than losing a bit of hair. For hair loss I can go skinhead for a few months, wear a hat. It's not like I can hide the claustrophobia.

So I've got that to look forward to. I have a laugh with Gary and Victoria, but all the time I've got it lurking in the back of my head, hanging around in there: *radiotherapy*.

I say, 'Why, thank you very much, Johnson,' in my best Jeeves impression when Gary brings me a sandwich. And in the back of my mind is my hot date with radiotherapy.

Victoria brings me yet more pills and I say, 'I hem most obliged, Victoriah,' in the same pampered-posh-bloke voice. And there lurking in my mind is the second of January. The radiotherapy.

So I work out, to get strong, because I really believe that if I'm strong, both mentally and physically, then I'll beat this. I really do.

And I go to the hospital, once a week at least - I get fitted for my radiotherapy mask next week, to protect my face while they're zapping my brain. It's all go, you know. And I watch the odd DVD, play on the PlayStation, get on Gary and Victoria's nerves, think about the future.

Sometimes, to stop myself thinking about the future, I think about the past instead.

Most days in 1975

'Are you going to make it go faster?'

This is me, a little Mancunian voice in the garage of a house in Irlam, Manchester, where I'd stand looking down at my father, who would be tinkering with the car. When he wasn't at work, at the Irlam steelworks, that's where he'd be: in the garage, underneath the car.

He'd look up from where he knelt or lay, oily rag in one hand, spanner or something in the other, streak of grease across his cheek. Manchester warpaint.

'Russell, it's a *Hillman Imp*. It goes as fast as it goes.'

'Yeah.' I would bounce on my toes. 'But are you going to make it go faster?'

He'd sigh, shake his head, as though to say, That boy. That bloody lad. Then get back to work, doing whatever it was he was doing to the Hillman Imp in the garage of our house on Sunningdale Drive.

Sunningdale Drive, Irlam, Manchester. That's where I grew up. Before that we lived on an estate in a village called Flixton. We lived in Flixton when I came into the world in 1966. On November 24, 1966, to be precise. Born at Davyhulme Park Hospital (the Trafford General these days) to father Tim and mum Nola. Little sister Hayley came along later, and that was it for us. We weren't a big family. Neither were we a particularly remarkable lot. And if I had to describe my childhood in one word, it would be this: uncomplicated. Uncomplicated and mainly idyllic. Which is four words, I know, but which pretty much sums up my entire childhood anyway. Oh, it gets harder. Don't you worry about that.

So, my memories of the Flixton house are hazy at best. I do remember one thing, maybe my earliest recollection. I recall being put on the front of my dad's Royal Enfield 260 and taken for a ride, just a few faltering, *phut-phut-phut* yards down the street. Not far, but enough for it to make an impression, obviously. What else? Well, I remember a bay window and there being loads of kids around. Then, I was - what? - two, three, four, when we moved house. Moved to Sunningdale Drive in Irlam, Manchester, just across the Manchester Ship Canal.

It was a step up for us. Dad had got a job at the steelworks. He worked on the cranes, this at a time when almost the whole of Irlam was employed by the works: thousands and thousands of workers, miles and miles of steelworks. Literally as far as the eye could see, almost a town-within-a-town. Go there now, of course, and it's the Northbank industrial estate. Because in 1979, after a near-century of steel manufacture for first the Partington Steel and Iron Company, then the Lancashire Steel Corporation,

and next British Steel, the Irlam works shut down for good. Dad went to work for a firm in Warrington after that, making wire.

Our house was a bungalow, one of many bungalows on the estate. Like a lot of them we'd had a dormer installed and this is the bedroom I shared with Hayley. It had yellow patterned lino on the floor and a wonky dividing line drawn down the middle of the room to separate my bit from hers. We used crayon.

There was a little garden out the back, a small drive out the front and then of course the garage, scene of these father-son talks.

'Are you gonna make it go faster?'

'Russell, it's a... oh, never mind.'

I would run, escaping my father's exasperated look, into the street, joining my mates there. Or, more likely, getting them to join me. Because Sunningdale Drive was a cul-de-sac, so we used to take it over and I was always the ringleader, dragging the other lads out to play. Woe betide you if you wanted to stay in and watch *The Hair Bear Bunch*, *Bagpuss* or *The Banana Splits*.

'Is Michael coming out to play, Mrs Bird?'

He was one of those I used to hang around with. Michael Bird. We called him Birdy. No idea why.

Doyley. He was another. Johnno. Still another. Their mums had to get used to Russell Watson ringing on the doorbell just after tea, regular as clockwork.

'Russell Watson's at the door,' she'd call over her shoulder. I could smell cooking from inside the house. Mashed potato and boiled veg. 'He wants to know if you're coming out.'

'Nah, I'm watching telly tonight,' was often the reply, shouted from within the house.

'Come on, Birdy!' I'd lean into the doorway, calling to Birdy, or Doyley, Curzy, Johnno... Whoever it was who just

wanted a quiet evening in. 'Come on, we need the numbers, it's four against five.'

Sigh. A sigh you could hear from the front room to the door.

'All right, I'll be out in five minutes.'

What a pushy little sod, eh? Never took no for an answer.

Like I say, the back gardens of the houses on Sunningdale Drive were tiny. They were just about big enough to lark around in, and if you were playing by yourself, maybe enough for a little kickaround. But no good for anything more organised. Instead, we took games out onto the street. It's become a cliché now, the whole 'jumpers for goalposts' joke. But that really was us. Two cardigans at one end. Two cardigans at the other. The street was long enough for a decent game of football and I'd done enough work rounding up the players, so there were usually about ten of us playing.

We'd play all day, if we could. If there was no school. Until the sun went down most days. Mums in the kitchens, Dads at work. And if it was the weekend then Mums in the kitchen and Dads in the front room dozing off in front of *World of Sport*, or in the garage working on Hillman Imps. Doing Dad stuff.

Later, I'd be called in.

'Russell, it's time for bed.'

'Aw, Mum!'

'Russell, will you come inside!'

'A bit longer!'

'Come on, it's getting dark!'

And reluctantly, I'd take myself indoors. Reluctantly, always reluctantly. The next day, out again.

And that house in Irlam was where I lived until I got married and left home. My mother still lives there. She and my dad were together for forty years then split up, the daft sods. He lives in Atherton these days, him and his new lady.

Mum is still in the family home, still at the bungalow on Sunningdale Drive, where the neighbours are virtually the same now as they were then. Most of the kids have moved on, of course, but not the parents. Most of those same Mums and Dads – who I used to pester night after night – are still there. The Burns family, who lived next door to us. Still there now. As are the Woods, who used to live at the end. And so are the Birds. So, yes, apart from my mum, out of about ten or eleven houses on the street I'd say five or six of them still have the original owners in them. The people who lived there when I did. It's hardly changed; I drive around it now and it's still so recognisably the place where I grew up, where I discovered football and music, where I never really wondered what I wanted to do with my life because why would I? It was all here on Sunningdale Drive.

CHAPTER TWO

WE DIDN'T SEE much of Dad, to be honest. He worked hard. Everybody did. And for him that meant a lot of night shifts. He'd get in as we were getting up, and he'd be knackered, absolutely dead on his feet. His was a life of back-breakingly hard 12-hour night shifts and if he got weekends, he'd do weekends as well. Then he started doing these 'mid-shifts', they were called, all kinds of strange hours.

That was what you did back then. You worked to support your family, and though I didn't see much of my dad growing up, we never went without. Ever. It sounds like an old cliché, but there was always food on the table, a telly in the corner of the room and family holidays courtesy of the prized Hillman Imp in the garage. I remember it being a massive event when we got that car. Dad had bought it new, the old L reg, and I recall him driving it back from the garage. We all stood outside on the drive as though we were about to greet royalty. Then, gliding into view, the sun reflecting off the windshield, the paintwork gleaming, this shiny red car enters Sunningdale Drive, Dad at the wheel. We let out a collective 'Wow', and I remember just looking at this car in awe, the newness of it. It was sparkling on the outside; its interior pristine and fragrant with that new-car smell that transports you whenever and wherever it fills your nostrils. They even do 'new-car smell' air fresheners these days. That's how powerful the scent is. People want to revisit their own Hillman Imp moment.

It was the cheapest little car on the road at the time, but we were all so proud of it, Dad especially. When he wasn't underneath it, tinkering with it ('Are you gonna make it go faster?'), he'd be out there cleaning it, polishing it. No joke, he'd clean the wheels with a toothbrush. I bet there aren't many who do that any more.

And looking back, some of my fondest childhood memories are linked to that car. We used to go to North Wales a lot. Mum and Dad straight-backed in the front seat. At the rear, me and Hayley. No seatbelts in those days, of course. We'd be sitting there with all our toys out, a right little playroom spread across the back seat: Action Men, dolls and teddy bears. Just playing in the back of the car until we got to wherever we went.

We used the car for day trips and for longer holidays, too. I've made up for it since, of course, but I didn't leave the United Kingdom until I was in my early twenties. Ibiza just wasn't an option for our family; instead we'd have a chalet or a cottage in Llandudno, somewhere like that. Somewhere me and my sister would inevitably find a stream and spend hours playing in it.

The day trips, the Llandudno holidays. I remember them more as feelings than anything else. What sticks in my mind is the excitement of the planning, the fun of the journey and feeling tired on the return; that warm, snuggled-up feeling of falling asleep in the back of the car and dimly registering strong arms gently picking you up and taking you into a warm house and then to bed. The next thing you knew, you were waking up in your own bedroom the next morning, when it was Monday, and life got back to normal: Mum in the kitchen, Dad at work.

Being kids, Hayley and I didn't really spare much of a thought for our poor old dad, out on the cranes, earning a crust to keep the roof over his family's head on the night shift. Nope, we just thought: Great, we can play up Mum a

bit more, go to bed a bit later than usual, watch a bit more telly. All that kind of stuff.

They were both pretty even-tempered, truth be told. Of the two, Mum was the one you could wrap around your little finger. Dad, he was calm as well, but with him we had that 'wait till your father gets home' relationship. Dad was Dad. He had this other life and he brought little bits of it home with him: the smell of the factory, the weariness that settled across his face when he dropped into a chair at the end of the day. He had the steelworks, the other place. It made him an enigma.

Mum. Well, she was just Mum, wasn't she?

She was massively protective. Over-protective, you might say, although as far as I was concerned she was just stopping me having fun. Because up until 12 or 13, as old as that, I wasn't allowed out of the street – not beyond the boundaries of Sunningdale Drive.

'Are you coming out on your bike, Russell?'

That would be Johnno, Birdy, Curzy, Paul Bennett or one of the others. *Their* mums used to let them out of the road. *Their* mums used to let them go cycling round some of the other streets on the estate. But not mine.

Looking back now, perhaps that's why I became the ringleader, the game rounder-upper. I wanted to keep the lads on Sunningdale Drive for games of football. Mum was protective, so in return I had to learn to be outgoing, unafraid of knocking on people's doors and, yes, pushy. Now, I'm good with pre-show nerves, I don't get intimidated easily and I get on with most people I meet. Maybe that's where it all started. Perhaps I've got my mum to thank for being able to get up there, do my thing.

Even so, at the time...

'Oh, but Birdy's mum—'

'I don't care what Birdy's mother lets him do. The answer's no, Russell.'

The radiogram playing in the background. Mario Lanza most likely. It sat on the side in the kitchen and would be going all day long, providing the soundtrack to my regular appeals for freedom.

The answer was always no. So in my continuing push to make my road the social centre for the Irlam Under-10s set, we had the famous Sunningdale Drive Super Striker tournaments. Organiser, yours truly.

And if you're thinking, 'Super Striker?', then the chances are you didn't grow up a lad in the mid-1970s, because it was *the* toy. It was a football game. A bit like Subbuteo, but not. In the box you got a plastic moulded pitch instead of the cloth you used to get with Subbuteo, so it was a bit easier to set up. Plus you had a rebound wall, which meant you weren't forever fetching the ball off the floor, although it did used to crack at the edges. Also in the box you got two teams of players. But instead of flicking the players like you did with Subbuteo, you tapped down their little plastic heads to make them kick the ball. There were ten of them, so it was a five-a-side game. As far as I can recall they came in red and blue colours; I don't think they came in actual club colours, although I could be wrong. What I do remember is that I used to paint them. They needed painting for the Super Striker tournaments.

Watland Town was the venue. And Watland Town's stadium was either in my bedroom, just over the crayon dividing line, or in the garage. At first I let the other lads use my players, which had been customised, so each had a name and number, meticulously painted on. But soon the other kids were doing the same thing. They'd get their own team together, customise their own players. Believe me, it was a serious business, especially when there was a tournament date fixed – again, organised by me.

I'd draw a programme, write up fixture lists, then we'd have draws for various different cups. Sometimes we'd play away, we'd go to somebody else's house. But mainly the

tournaments were held at the theatre of dreams – Watland Town. In my bedroom we'd set up the pitch and lie surrounding the field of play with our elbows on the floor, feet in the air, laces of our plimsolls dangling.

In the garage, Dad used to let me put up a wallpaper table, so sometimes we used to stand around that, cheering on our respective teams, ten or more lads in the garage, crammed in there, the Hillman Imp on the drive outside.

I used to make little cups, too. No joke. And whoever won the cup got to keep it for week. Before the next tournament at Watland Town.

I did the same thing with Subbuteo, too, organising tournaments and stuff, although it's the Super Striker matches that really stick in my head. And I think if I'm honest – and I'll probably get hate mail from hardcore Subbuteo heads for saying this – I preferred Super Striker. When I think of Subbuteo I think of it taking hours to set up; of it having lots of players that always needed gluing because they were always breaking.

But when I think of Super Striker I think of fun. I think of a bedroom full of my mates, carefully painted teams and homemade cups for the winners. Afternoons in the dormer at Sunningdale Drive.

Still, there's only so much you can do. You can't organise Super Striker tournaments for ever, and at 12 or 13 I was *desperate* to leave the cul de sac, and Mum, if you're reading this, I'm sorry to say but I did sneak off on the odd occasion. Because when you're 13 and all your mates are off on their bikes, and you're not allowed – *banned by your mum* – well, it's embarrassing, isn't it? What self-respecting lad wouldn't risk it? Wouldn't risk a bollocking to explore their surroundings?

So, yes, sorry, Mum, but I did. Only a couple of times, mind. Other than the odd thing like that, though, I was pretty obedient as a kid. We both were, Hayley and I. All the more surprising when you think that we were never

smacked, either of us. There was never any physical punishment, just bollockings. Mainly these would be from Dad. No doubt the last thing he wanted to do after a 12-hour shift was give me or Hayley a bollocking, but that was the way it worked in the Watson house.

The dreaded words: 'Right, Russell Watson, you wait till your father gets home.'

Then what felt like – and probably was – hours. Twisting like a worm on a hook. In agonies of anticipation. Okay, so there were never beatings, no smacks. But Dad was scary. He so much as raised an eyebrow and you were browning your trousers.

Sometimes she'd let me off. Either forget or contrive to forget. I recall feeling, at times like that, as though it was a little secret I was sharing with my mum.

Other times, though...

'And how has Russell been today?' Dad would ask.

'He's been very naughty today.'

And the eyebrows would lift.

Uh-oh...

Other kids used to get the smacked behinds. Not us. Things were different back then and smacking your kids wasn't frowned upon like it is now, but even so, it never happened in our house. They had other ways of keeping us in line. Like going to bed. Every kid acts up at bedtime, right? Sharing a room, Hayley and I acted up more than most.

'Right, you've gone to bed to go to sleep, now get to sleep.'

This was Dad. All you'd need was one floorboard to creak and he'd be up the stairs like gangbusters.

'It sounds like the bloody roof's caving in down there,' he'd shout. 'I told you to get to sleep.'

All parents do it, don't they? Exaggerate, I mean. I do the same these days. Memo to kids. It doesn't *really* sound

like the roof's caving in. You don't *actually* sound like a herd of elephants.

If it continued, our apocalyptic house shaking, we'd get a final warning: 'Right, if you don't want to go to sleep, you can come downstairs.'

Of course we wanted to go downstairs. Come on. We wanted a sneak peak at *Kojak*, *Rising Damp* or the one every self-respecting kid wanted to see: *Hammer House of Horror*.

But we'd get downstairs and he'd say, 'Right, you can stand in that corner until you're tired.'

What?

We'd stand in the corner for about ten minutes, hearing, but, crucially, not seeing the TV. And it wouldn't take long.

'I'm tired now.'

'Right. Well, go on and get to sleep.'

And off we'd go, tails between legs.

And that was pretty much it. That was as harsh as the discipline ever got. I did tell you I had an uncomplicated childhood, didn't I? Because I'm sorry if you were hoping to read all about how Russell Watson suffered as a kid, but he didn't. About the worst thing to happen to the ten-year-old me was being told I couldn't leave the cul-de-sac, and even then Mum had to let me go in the end. She had to. Apart from anything else, I was mad keen on my bike - on building my bike. And what was the point of building your own bike if the only place you could ride it was up to the top of the street and down again?

Back then, we used to scan the Grattan catalogue, and if you're of a certain vintage I bet you did the same thing. Later, of course, we used to look at the (ahem) underwear section (and again, if you're a lad and you're of a certain vintage, don't try to pretend you didn't do the same). But in those days it was the toy section we pored over, for the Action Man toys, the Scalextric, the Subbuteo and the Super Striker. That and the bike section. And wow, that

Grattan bike section. The holy triumvirate of the three Raleighs: the Strika, Boxer and the one everybody wanted: the Grifter. The racing bikes. The Raleigh Chopper.

Untold hours I used to spend looking at the catalogue. So much so that the book would end up flapping open to the bike pages if you put it down, the corners dog-eared, the colour faded on the pictures of bikes I liked, worn away from hundreds of finger-points. 'That one. That one. That one.'

I never had a bike from the catalogue, though. You had to pay something like a pound a week for the rest of your life if you wanted to get a Raleigh Grifter from the catalogue. And my dad was a crane operator at the steelworks. Raleigh Grifters just weren't an option.

So I built my own bike, one that was made up of parts. All of us used to do it. We'd get an old piece of second-hand scrap and just add to it. Get some nice handlebars for it, improve the brakes, the brake shoes, stuff like that. Next, get a couple of new tyres, maybe give it some new grips, some reflectors for the wheels. Just adding to the bike, always adding to it.

So anyway, yes, you're 12, you've got this gleaming bit of pedal-powered machinery at your disposal. You want to get on your bike and ride, as Queen might say.

'Be careful, then,' said Mum, in the end, after what felt like days and weeks and even months of pestering. 'Just be careful, Russell. Please.'

Deep down, I understood. Mum's attitude towards me sprang from the fact that she had two brothers who were both born mentally handicapped: one younger, one older. So I think she saw me like a gift almost, something to treasure, and around me she tried to create this protective force field. Looking back, it was an environment that was, I think, one of the main reasons why it took me such a long time to grow up and realise what I wanted in life; why I really wasn't thinking about being an adult, or how I was

going to make money or any of the things that children are supposed to do when they get to a certain age.

It was like a cocoon, made up just of Mum, Dad, Hayley, Sunningdale Drive, the garage, the kitchen, the music constantly playing and cardigans on the road. Maybe that's why writing it down it all sounds so quaint and a little bit too perfect, like something you'd expect to see on telly on a Sunday evening just after *Songs of Praise*. It sounds like that because it was created to be like that. By Mum.

For example, and you won't believe this, but I remember when we first got a video recorder, Mum used to edit bits over the violent scenes in films. And believe me, we're not talking that violent here, either. We wouldn't have been watching it if it was. The first time she did it, I forget what the film was, but I remember that suddenly in came some footage of a brass band. Right at a good bit.

'Oh, Mum.'

I think what she'd done was to change the video channel during the recording, and it just happened to be a recording of a brass band, but after that it became an in-family joke.

'Right, we'll have to put the brass bands on.'

It didn't matter too much. Violent films were never really my thing anyway. And staying on the cul-de-sac, well, I could still play football. The only thing you could have done to really hurt me at that age was take away my football, because that was my one, enduring, all-consuming, passion: football. And who was my team? Who was the club I grew up supporting, and still support to this day?

It was Everton.

CHAPTER THREE

I'M PULLING YOUR leg. It was Manchester United, of course.

Imagine my bedroom. Well, my half of the bedroom at least. If you're imagining it messy, then stop. It was never messy unless there was a Super Striker tournament taking place, or maybe if I had all my toy soldiers out or something. Mainly, I was as neat and tidy then as I am now, almost obsessive, actually. Back then, I used to collect plastic toy soldiers, and as with the Super Striker players I would spend hours carefully painting them. Sometimes I'd save up a bit of pocket money and buy the metal-based ones from a specialist shop. Action Man, that was another toy. It was big back then, all the kids had them.

But tidy, you understand. All these toys were kept in their right place, not strewn across the lino. Then you've got the bed, and on the wall above that, my collage of football pictures clipped out of magazines, out of *Match* and *Shoot*. Almost the whole wall covered with pictures of United players.

Why United? Probably because I was from Manchester, United were doing well at the time and I liked the kit. Most of my mates supported United, too. But I will say this: you know that old chestnut about how only true Mancunians support Manchester City? A load of rubbish. It's just that United's fame has spread universally. (Now I'm going to get hate mail from Subbuteo enthusiasts *and* Manchester City fans.) Whatever my reasons were for supporting them, they didn't include my dad. He didn't really have much interest in football. Or, if he did, he was just too busy making the

butty to indulge his interest. So I never went with him. When I did go to the football, it was with a mate, Stephen Hancock, and his dad. The first time I ever went with my own father was years and years later when... well, I'll tell you about that in a bit.

So. I had the posters. What was next?

'Russell, how would you like the Manchester United kit for your birthday?'

Traditionally, little boys don't really like kissing older ladies (it's the old-lady smell, the make-up), but I gave Grandma Watson a right smacker then. I gave her another one the next day when she took me to a shop, the name of which I've since forgotten, sadly lost in the mists of time. What I haven't forgotten, though, is the kit. Shirt, shorts, shinpads, the whole deal. And something else I haven't forgotten is the way I felt, standing in the shop, new kit on, gleaming red. I looked at myself in the mirror, Grandma Watson a smiling figure behind, but somehow out of focus and pushed into the background, relegated - sorry, Grandma Watson - by how bloody great that kit looked. How I'd love to say that I looked in the mirror and knew there and then that my future was to be inextricably linked with the club that I loved, but what am I, Doris Stokes? No, I just looked in the mirror and thought: Check me out. I'm wearing a Manchester United shirt.

It was a great moment. Up there with the first time I was ever handed a school football kit, when I was chosen for the Irlam Endowed Primary School squad by Mr Walsh, the PE teacher. True, it wasn't exactly difficult to get picked for the team. It was a bit like, 'You're in, son. You're in, too. And we'll need to find a couple of others from somewhere...' But even so, I was on the team.

At first, I played on the wing. Then I ended up in goal, which is the position I was playing when Irlam Endowed entered a local schools seven-a-side trophy.