MEMOIRS OF A NOT SO DUTIFUL DAUGHTER

JENNI MURRAY

TRANSWORLD
BOOKS

About the Book

The only child of an electrical engineer and a mother who resented the fact that she'd never been to university, the broadcaster Jenni Murray grew up in a traditional household in the 1950s. But instead of becoming the housewife her mother expected her to be, Jenni opted to forge her own path in her career and her personal life.

The resulting tensions have lasted as long as she can remember. How, she has often wondered, could two women be so full of love for each other, and at the same time so full of hate that they broke each other's hearts?

And so Jenni began this remarkable memoir – and continued to write throughout 2006 as her mother lay dying, and Jenni struggled to care for her and her beloved father while herself being treated for breast cancer.

Filled with love and laughter, frustration and heartbreak, and with the courage 'to keep on keeping on' even in the darkest days, it will speak to every mother and daughter, dutiful or not.

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Memoirs of a Not So Dutiful Daughter

Jenni Murray

In loving memory of Alvin and Win Bailey

My thanks to David, the best life support system a woman could wish for, and to my sons, Ed and Charlie, who accept with gracious resignation that, as the American writer Nora Ephron said, ‘Life is copy.’ I’m especially grateful to my editor, Selina Walker, whose loyalty, patience and judgement have been invaluable through very difficult times.

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INTRODUCTION

‘I feel I am beginning a love letter. I’m saying things I could not have expressed even a year ago, because there was a barrier between us that’s existed for as long as I can remember. It collapses today in hospital when I hold her hand and stroke her hair, and she says, “Do you love me? I’ve often wondered.”

‘The words come, barely audible, through the haze of the wicked disease that has taken away the difficult, argumentative, demanding woman who has haunted my life from the moment I was born, driven so much of what I have striven to achieve and yet has so frequently evaporated my courage.

‘In the past five years, as the illness took its relentless hold on my mother, there have been hints of vulnerability and uncertainty and a willingness to talk about what has in the past been utterly taboo, but we have continued to dance around each other. I know I’m not the only woman to have had a difficult relationship with her mother, but our family history and the times in which we live seem to have militated against any possibility of reconciliation. We were two women forever joined by an invisible umbilical cord but torn apart by circumstance, education and a sexual revolution that opened opportunities for me that for her had been unimaginable.

‘Some of the things I did to offend or upset her were, even as an adult, carried out in childlike defiance. Others were political acts, rooted in my convictions but at odds with her own, as I rushed with wild enthusiasm through the new gender landscape that stretched before me. Some were designed to please her but never seemed quite to hit

the mark; at other times I was paralysed, unable to say or do the things I wanted to do because she sat on my shoulder, critical and displeased, oozing disappointment and disgust.

‘Now my mother lies dishevelled and desperate, needing me as she has never appeared to need me before, and I feel a rush of love for her that I have never been able to acknowledge. I tell her I do love her. That I always have, but have often been too angry or too sad to express it. I ask her to forgive me if I have made her feel uncared-for.

‘I have a photograph of her aged six, her dark, straight, shiny hair cut into a pudding-basin style. She had the same dead straight, sleek locks I had as a child and a young woman, before either of us discovered the delights of the permanent wave or the highlight. There are other strong physical similarities – shape of face, height, colour of eyes – except that I inherited my father’s build, big-boned and powerful, while she, as she has never ceased to remind me, is delicately boned, almost skinny. I can’t count the number of times she has sighed and, in what frequently felt like a crowing tone, bemoaned my deficiencies in the feminine delicacy department.

‘In the photo, even at that young age, she’s wearing black-rimmed, bottle-bottomed spectacles. Now, her poor sight further clouded by cataracts, she asks me to wipe away the sticky gum that accumulates on her left eye and causes her so many problems that she can no longer summon up the energy to read – our one shared pastime.

‘I look into a mirror image of my own best feature, hers now fuzzy with age. She fights hard to focus and to articulate. “I love you too,” she says, “more than anything and I’m sorry too that I haven’t always shown it.”

‘As I leave the lonely little room she’s occupying – she’s generally alone on the many occasions she has to be admitted as she can be disruptive if there are other

patients around her – she looks over to the flowers I brought her.

‘“They’re beautiful. Thank you,” she whispers and makes a supreme effort to smile. “And you’re beautiful too.”

‘It is the first time she has ever paid me an unconditional compliment. I am fifty-six years old. I weep all the way home.’

It was this entry in my diary in the summer of 2006 that made me think seriously of writing this book. How, I wondered often, could two women be so close, so full of love for each other and at the same time so full of hate that they broke each other’s heart?

My mother’s slow deterioration as Parkinson’s disease did its worst and my frequent visits to her and my father – far more than I had ever made in the years since I left home at the age of eighteen – drew me back to a book I had read when I was still at school. *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* was my introduction to the work of the French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir. She wrote of the conventional, bourgeois childhood she had escaped through a determination to educate herself and break away from the constraints of her mother’s plan that her daughter would become, like her, a loyal wife and mother.

Instead, Simone became one of the great intellectuals of twentieth-century France and wrote one of the most influential of all feminist texts, *The Second Sex*. But it was the *Memoirs*, the first volume of her autobiography, that had stayed most clearly in my mind. Like her, I had no brothers. She had a younger sister while I was an only child, but we were both accorded many of the privileges generally only open to boys. Like me, she adored the father who described her as having a ‘man’s brain’. Like me, she had a mother who saw her job as conditioning her daughter to become a woman who knew her place – which would be secondary to a man. But she never sought to blame her mother, acknowledging in a later book, *A Very Easy Death*,

how Maman de Beauvoir ‘lived against herself. She had appetites in plenty; she spent all her strength in repressing them and she underwent this denial in anger … she had been taught to pull the laces hard and tight herself.’

It was from De Beauvoir that I learned to understand why my mother behaved towards me as she did. Mum’s outlook was shaped by the privations of the Second World War, and she was raised by Edwardians. It was not her fault that she felt it her business to pull my laces hard and tight (a Playtex girdle at the age of fifteen, as I recall – soon abandoned, along with, for a short time, my bra).

Until my middle and her old age, I was a ‘not so dutiful daughter’. I had the benefit of the women’s movement and the chance to go to university, have a career and a family and I escaped my mother’s control, often neglecting her but never free of her influence or the guilt I felt at my selfishness. But again there was solace in De Beauvoir. She too asked herself if her ambition was ‘selfish’ or simply ‘self-possessed’. I often accuse myself of the former, but hope it’s been the latter.

After I began this book life took a distinctly downward turn. I had always thought myself lucky. I had work that I loved, a man on whom I could rely, children I adored and who were turning out well. I did, though, frequently wake in the night full of fear that somehow I would be found out as a fraud and everything would fall apart. I often felt that a working-class girl from Barnsley had had ideas above her station and was bound to be brought down.

It was a terror my father always had. Redundancy was what scared him. Me too. What happened was much worse. My mother and my father died within six months of each other, and on the day of my mother’s death I was told I would have to have a mastectomy because of breast cancer. So this book became a diary of that terrible year and a memoir of what is a universally complex set of

relationships: the eternal triangle made up of an only daughter, her mother and her father.

July 2006

THIS SUMMER HAS no right to the title. The rain is relentless and perfectly suits the gloom of my mood as I drive across the backbone of England. It's a landscape which used to delight me, but now I barely notice the all-too-familiar hills and valleys. I'm shaken by an enormous lorry which has come far too close for comfort – practically demolishing the driver's side of my vehicle. It's a rude awakening from what can only be described as a driving daze.

I curse angrily through the open window at the driver who's pounding far too fast through the narrow streets of Tideswell, a town in the midst of the Peak District which more or less marks the halfway point between home and my mum and dad. But it's not altogether his fault. I should have been more awake, concentrating on the matter in hand – driving the car. This journey has become so routine, I realize I've noticed none of it since I bypassed Buxton.

It takes one and a half hours there and one and a half hours back and I've been doing it pretty much every weekend for nearly ten years, as we've lurched from one medical disaster to another. First, soon after my mother's seventieth birthday, there was the diagnosis of Parkinson's. Bad fall number one and the broken hip. The bodged repair. The second broken hip. The fractured wrist. The inability to travel to see us. The shaking. The flat blank face that was once so animated. All the classic symptoms of the condition. And now she's in hospital as they try to help her become mobile again. The physiotherapists and medical staff are beginning to acknowledge that their battle is all but lost and Dad's getting ill and exhausted from the strain of it all.

Nor am I immune from the strain, hence the doziness of my driving. I'm really only aware this is Tideswell because I'm hungry. This is where I stop to buy the best cheese and onion sandwiches in Derbyshire to eat en route. I've obviously joked too many times about my car knowing its own way to Barnsley to visit my parents. If I don't apply more concentration, it'll be the end of me.

Finally, towards the end of their lives, I've learned how to be my parents' dutiful daughter. But it's a terrible chore. I'm more than a little ashamed that I dread the trips so much, but, even as an adult, the pleasure of visiting the folks was all about relaxing back into childhood: being ticked off for minor misdemeanours, getting a cuddle when things are going wrong, being reassured that everything will be all right and being spoiled with delicious home-cooked comfort food. Now Mum's in hospital, I hardly go to the house. Dad spends every second he's allowed at her bedside – the nurses have to throw him out at the end of the day – so this is where we meet.

The most crippling fatigue overtakes me before I even arrive. I know that when I get to the hospital the room will be hot and I'll just want to curl up in the arms of one of my parents and fall into an untroubled sleep, but I am the grown-up now, responsible for comforting them, sorting out their affairs and guiding them through the awesome bureaucracy that passes for care of the elderly and infirm. I'm disgusted with myself because I find it such an awful burden. Will my two sons one day feel this about me? For now, they and their father are doing everything they can to support me, but the bottom line is still me. I am my parents' only child. The sense of duty and the umbilical bond that bind us are mine and mine alone.

I park the car outside the hospital, gather up the flowers, jelly babies and liquorice allsorts – always my mother's favourites – and make my way towards her room. The hospital is dedicated to the elderly and infirm – a place

she'd dreaded all her life – but she's completely isolated from those around her. She has to be in a room by herself because the drugs she takes for the Parkinson's can bring about angry, noisy, disruptive behaviour and the most frightening hallucinations. She pictures malevolent strangers invading her private space. Sometimes she offers sweets to imaginary children. She once told the boys on one of their visits to watch out for the rabbit that frequently ran past her room.

'But Grandma,' they giggled, 'we're in a hospital. There's no rabbits here.'

A rare flash of comedy during these sad times.

Today, I push open the door, throw out a cheery greeting and am confronted with an atmosphere of desperate tension. My father, the kindest, gentlest, most faithful of men, is huddled in a chair in the corner, his white face etched with pain.

'Dad,' I ask, 'whatever's the matter?'

He says nothing. He can't formulate the words.

'Don't speak to that man,' my mother bellows. It's astonishing that such powerful venom can emerge from someone so thin and frail. She's tucked up in her sterile hospital bed, unable to move her wasted, useless legs and supported by a pile of pillows.

'Mum,' I gasp, 'what are you talking about? It's Dad. He's here, looking after you, like always.'

'Looking after me?' Her voice loses none of its truly evil tone. 'Don't make me laugh. Do not speak to that man. He's a faithless vagabond.' Her facility with wounding words is clearly undiminished.

Dad sobs quietly in the background. I tell her not to be so silly and not to hurt his feelings – to no avail. She beckons me over to her bedside and explains in conspiratorial tones that one of the nurses is blonde and very pretty and she and Dad are having an affair.

‘Mum, the nurse is probably still in her teens. Dad is nudging eighty and barely leaves your bedside. You’re being ridiculous.’ But, of course, I am not dealing with an entirely sound mind. Not today anyway. Tomorrow it may be completely different and she’ll be her old loving self again with never a bad word to say about him. But today there is nothing to be done.

I spend a couple of hours flitting between the two of them, listening to my mother’s rant and desperately trying to explain to Dad that it’s the drugs that are making her behave this way. That maybe they’ve removed any inhibition or rationale she had and she is now able to express her greatest lifelong, albeit entirely unjustified, fear: that somehow she wasn’t good enough for this handsome, charming, lovely man and she would lose him to someone else. She once confided it to me when I was a teenager, when Dad was working abroad and we were at home together, but generally it was one of those issues that remain unspoken within a family. She had certainly never shared her concerns with him until now. My poor father is inconsolable.

Eventually I have to leave them for the long drive back across the Pennines. Through tears of frustration and tiredness I hold in my mind an image of the photograph which my father brought to my mother’s hospital room. He explained that he wanted the staff always to be reminded that the elderly husk whose most intimate needs they are there to service was once like them. She was young, full of fun and unquestionably beautiful.

The year is 1944. My father, Alvin, was seventeen and my mother, christened Winifred, known as Winnie but preferring Win, was eighteen, although he lied about his age and added an extra year. They are walking arm in arm along the Prom at Blackpool on their first holiday together. They were heavily chaperoned – Grandma and Grandpa were lurking somewhere in the background – occupied

separate rooms at the boarding house and were clearly, grinningly, hopelessly in love, a state from which they seem never to have wavered in more than sixty years.

They had met when my mother was playing what she always described as ‘a fallen woman’ in a play at the local amateur dramatic society. Dad has been only too aware of her lifelong condemnation of what she called ‘the selfishness or simple immorality’ of the ‘unmarried mother’, and he told me some time ago, with more than a hint of irony, that she was performing just such a role with sympathy and gusto. Perhaps her view on this, so forcibly expressed over many years, was merely intended as a warning to a potentially wayward daughter? There’s so much that I don’t know of what my mother really thought.

My father, a trainee electrician, was there to do the lights and had opened the door to the women’s changing room by mistake. He’d caught the merest glimpse of her in a state of partial undress and decided on the basis of those few seconds that this was the woman with whom he would spend the rest of his life.

He asked her out. She played hard to get for a little while, which, she assured me, one should always do. It wasn’t right to let men think you were keen or easy, as they wouldn’t respect you. Eventually she relented and allowed him to take her to the pictures. He was earning next to nothing as an apprentice while she, a junior civil servant, was salaried and relatively well off.

‘Did you go Dutch then?’ I remember asking her. It seemed obvious to me, even during my teenage years, that being paid for was somehow demeaning and positively wicked, especially if you were the one with the most cash.

‘Good grief,’ she replied, ‘the very idea! You should never let a man think you don’t depend on him. It makes him feel inferior.’ We were, you see, worlds apart from the start.

As my father walked her home from one of their early dates, she asked him why, if he too was eighteen, he hadn’t yet been called up for National Service. He confessed to having told a fib, because he’d suspected she wouldn’t consider him if he was so young. She sent him packing at the kitchen door. My grandfather, who had recognized a good man when he saw one, chased after him along the road.

‘She didn’t mean it! Come back, lad,’ he called. ‘She’s in the sitting room, sobbing her heart out.’

My father went back. My mother relented, but made him promise never to reveal their age gap. Her birthday was February and his was April. She was ready to acknowledge being older by a month or so, but not a whole year; it simply wasn’t done for a woman to marry a younger man.

He kept his vow for years, only letting the cat out of the bag during a solo visit to me at university after I had plied him with more beer than he was used to in the Union Bar. My mother still has no idea I know their secret, and no one in the family has ever asked why we don’t celebrate big, milestone birthdays. At the turn of every decade, Dad has always said that growing older is no cause for any kind of jubilation, a policy with which my mother readily agrees, although I would have loved to mark her eightieth earlier this year.

Dad was called up eventually, luckily too late to suffer any action or witness any of the real horrors of war my mother's older suitors might have seen. Nevertheless, they were separated for the best part of two years. Yet their closeness seems always to have stretched across continents. There's a story my mother told me when I was a child which she believed demonstrated the tie that bound them. She was at work at the Food Office in the village of Worsborough where she lived. It was her job to manage rationing and ensure that women with young babies received their allocation of orange juice and cod liver oil tablets. She suddenly felt a searing pain across the right side of her face. She told me how she'd squealed and spoken Dad's name – a tale which is corroborated by her friend Eleanor, who sat opposite her and who was later to become my godmother.

After work Mum crossed town to visit my father's mother. By now her cheek was red and stung like a severe burn. My grandmother had heard nothing – unsurprisingly as Dad was in Egypt and any news would have taken an eternity to reach Barnsley. But she later confirmed, when I demanded to know if the story was true, that my mother had indeed arrived at her home in a state of great anxiety and physical pain. Some weeks later my mother received a letter in Dad's familiar, spidery handwriting, composed on the date of her 'face incident'.

Earlier that day – at around the time she had been in the office with Eleanor – my father had been sitting in the NAAFI when a fellow soldier had tripped and spilt a mug of boiling hot tea down the right side of his face. His first thought, he wrote, was that he would be scarred for life and she wouldn't fancy him any more. I've always been rather sceptical about such matters as extrasensory perception, having never experienced it myself, but the evidence my mother gave, backed up by all the witnesses, has always seemed compelling.

It was a story that delighted me as a child. To have such confirmation of the absolute adoration your parents have for each other at a time when you appear to be the centre of their small universe is profoundly comforting and reassuring. And my earliest years were entirely untroubled. Dad went off every morning ‘to earn pennies for Jennifer’, Mum stayed at home cooking, baking and cleaning and my grandparents, with whom we lived until I was three, were just around the corner after we moved to our own house.

In the early 1950s no one thought of child abduction or abuse and my mother would watch from her kitchen window as I trotted happily across the road and rolled head first through the hole in the hedge which gave me access to my grandfather’s garden. His carefully tended plot was a hymn to wartime making do and boasted the tastiest sprouts and cabbages in the neighbourhood, the most blight-free potatoes, and beds of strawberries and canes of raspberries which were regularly raided by me and my small gang of pals.

Only the gooseberry bush was to be the source of a lifelong loathing. After one particularly enthusiastic raid, I was sicker than I ever remember before or since. When presented with gooseberry tart during a recent cookery broadcast I found myself turning up my nose at beautifully cooked food for the first time in living memory.

So I had constant access to the comforts of two homes where the women made wonderful food and spent hours of every day keeping everything startlingly clean. My grandmother often boasted that you could eat your dinner from her toilet seat. It’s one of the few household obsessions I inherited. In the days when she was able, my mother would often visit my home and run her finger along my mantelpiece or banister rail with a disapproving ‘tut!’ at the dust she picked up. But my toilet was always immaculate and still is. Raising two boys through the thoughtless and sloppy-aim stage was purgatory.

The men of our little family went out to work – my grandfather as a winder at the local pit and my father as an electrician – and looked after the garden. The allocation of tasks by gender was never questioned and when we were together there seemed to be harmony and, for spoiled little me, a never-ending stream of treats.

I can't remember what age I was when I began to wonder whether I was not quite all my mother had wanted, but I know I was around seven years old when I told the dinner ladies at my primary school that my mother would not be turning up to the beetle drive organized by the PTA that night. She was in St Helen's Maternity Hospital, I said, and had already had the baby. They seemed surprised, but I assured them that she had had a little boy, that he was lovely, and his name was David Robert.

This story was not merely the product of a vivid imagination. At some point in my early childhood my mother had told me how surprised she had been when she gave birth to me to find that I was a girl. All through her pregnancy, she said, she had longed for a little boy, and right until the moment the midwives had placed me in her arms she had called the baby that she carried David Robert.

The midwives, she told me often, had greeted my arrival with the awful words, 'Ah, look, you have a sweet little girl' (I'm quite sure I determined right then not to fulfil their infuriating prediction – sweet I was never going to be).

She hadn't been able to think of a name for me, so Grandma had come up with Jennifer, after a popular movie star of the time, Jennifer Jones, and Dad chose Susan as my middle name. Mum had been prepared to go along with whatever they suggested. I heard the wistful disappointment in her voice every time she told the story.

Maybe if I couldn't be quite what she wanted I could conjure up a baby brother simply by saying he existed? My mother found out, of course, when she did attend the beetle

drive and the dinner ladies expressed their surprise at seeing her. How come she'd got out of hospital so quickly and how had she managed to conceal her pregnancy? She was furious with me and never seemed to consider what might have induced me to make up such a story. Child psychology in Barnsley must have been in its infancy.

My mother did, though, tell me very early on what an awful time she had had giving birth to me. I sometimes think it's strange that some mothers tell their daughters nothing of what happened to them in the delivery room, perhaps because they want to protect them from fear of an experience that they will one day be expected to endure.

My mother was not one of them.

I would not describe her as a religious woman – she always called herself loosely C of E, and never attended church except for occasions of hatch, match or dispatch, but she appeared to have absorbed with unquestioning faith God's diktat in Genesis chapter 3 to the wayward Eve. As punishment for failing to resist the temptation to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge, 'Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.'

When Dad was working away from home she and I would snuggle up in bed together and I would ask her about the day I was born. I must have been a sucker for punishment because she pulled no punches as she regaled me with the horror story of her long labour and near demise. She should, of course, have been benefiting, as so many women of the period were assured they would, from the new National Health Service which was formed two years before my birth in 1950.

Until then confinement for most women had been a domestic affair. In such books as *Doctor at Large* Richard Gordon relates the experiences of a young GP who arrives at a house where a woman is in labour. The husband is in

the kitchen boiling endless kettles of hot water for sterilization and the woman is in the bedroom, walking around or sitting on the bed, attended with bustling efficiency by the local midwife. The imprint of the *Daily Express* on her bottom is no surprise as newsprint is the only sterile material to hand. In the later stages of labour she will crouch on the bed and deliver.

The NHS brought the hierarchy of the hospital to the experience of birth, no doubt with the best of intentions. Maternal and infant mortality rates were still high in the 1940s and it was assumed that the sterile environment of the hospital would be safer for mother and baby. It's now accepted that reductions in mortality have been achieved by high-tech interventions in high-risk pregnancies and by general improvements in diet, cleanliness and antenatal care for those who can expect a normal delivery. Whether the birth takes place at home or in hospital is now considered irrelevant to safe delivery as long as there are no anticipated complications and the woman is attended by a proficient and experienced midwife. But for my mother it was assumed that going into hospital had to be the best option and she is of the generation that never thought to challenge the authority of the trained professional.

It must have been terrifying. She was twenty-four years old and married for only a year. I doubt my grandmother, also the mother of an only daughter, ever divulged her own experience of birth. Certainly she never mentioned it to me and it was, I suspect, a taboo subject in her respectable household. So for my mother labour was a journey into the unknown. Hospital protocol demanded that a woman in the early stages of labour be shaved and given an enema. She was made to lie down on a hospital bed, legs akimbo with her ankles held in stirrups. Never was there a more unnatural way for a woman to labour; it was a position designed to facilitate easy access for the midwives and doctor, but which limited any help gravity might offer.

Deprived of my father, who was not allowed near her, my mother was left alone for most of her twenty-four hours in labour. She remembers terrible pain and a sense that she had left her own body and was floating close to the ceiling, watching herself slowly fading away. We were, evidently, both at a critical stage when the consultant, a Dr Bhattacharya, came to see her and immediately ordered a forceps delivery. We made it, but, according to Mum, only just and she was so damaged internally as a result that she had to return to hospital some weeks later for surgical repair.

The long-term consequences of this life-threatening bloodbath were profound: there would be no more children. I don't even want to imagine the impact on passion in the days long before reliable contraception. For me, there were headaches. Always, when I have been anxious or stressed, studying for exams or reading small print late into the night, a sickening thud would begin at the base of my skull and wend its way towards my right eye and my temple. I dreaded it, but could do nothing to avoid it and only the most powerful painkillers – the marketing of Ibuprofen was a boon – could touch it.

Then, in the mid-nineties, after a nasty contretemps with an impossible office chair which would suddenly sink, entirely of its own volition, I developed a crippling back pain and was recommended to see an osteopath. Before beginning treatment, she took a thorough history and I told her about the headaches I'd suffered for as long as I could remember.

'I don't know if you've heard of cranial osteopathy,' she offered, 'but I'm qualified to do it, if you'd like me to have a go.'

I hadn't heard of it, but could see no harm in giving anything a try. So, after manipulation and massage of my lower back, she began to range her hands over my head. It was the most peculiar sensation. I'm convinced she never

actually touched me, but it felt as though separate parts of my skull were shifting around of their own accord. When she finished I rose from the treatment couch and sat by her desk.

'Mmmm,' she said. 'Not surprised about the headaches. Very nasty forceps delivery.'

'How did you know?' I asked, truly astonished.

'I could feel the indentations and the impact the forceps had had on the shape of your skull. But don't worry; I've manipulated everything back into place. I don't think you'll have any more problems.' I walked out of her consulting room convinced that my £30 would not have been well spent.

I was wrong. I've never had one of those headaches since.

My feelings about the graphic manner in which my mother described what happened have veered between extreme fury that a young woman, full of hope, should have been so inhumanely treated, terrible sadness that her subsequent fears deprived me of a brother or sister, and anger that she should have made me conscious of her resentment of the harm I had, albeit unwittingly, caused.

It's rarely acknowledged that, even in the most apparently loving and affectionate mother/daughter relationships, there is frequently a deep well of jealousy that exists in the mother, who inevitably compares her no longer perfect physique with that of the fresh, unspoiled, hopeful girl she has brought into the world, and in whom she sees her old self reflected. The most enlightened and honest psychologists – and I'm thinking particularly of Dorothy Rowe, with whom I've had a number of conversations on the subject – encourage us to acknowledge and understand that such envy can cause terrible emotional damage if we fail as daughters to recognize and forgive it. It's taken me a long time to get there.

It struck me forcibly when, some twenty-five years ago, as a presenter and reporter on the news and current affairs programme *Newsnight*, it came to my attention through contacts with schoolteachers in the East End of London and in Cardiff that small girls of six and seven were being taken back to their family villages in Somalia – both cities have significant Somali communities because of their seafaring traditions – for the most radical form of female genital mutilation.

I talked to African activists who were trying to stop the practice in both cities and they insisted I should talk to the mothers to begin to understand why, even though their daughters were born in the UK and the practice was illegal here, they were prepared to take them home for such a cruel operation, carried out by village practitioners in the most crude and unhygienic manner.

'You have to understand the mothers if you're to comprehend why it continues,' explained one such worker.

I met a large group of warm and welcoming women in a community centre in the East End and questioned them closely about why they insisted that their girls should make such a long journey for such a damaging practice. 'It's our culture,' they told me. 'Without it, no one will ever want to marry our daughters.'

One could almost understand the cultural pressures they were under, but there was more.

'It was done to me,' a number of them said, 'and yes, it was terrible. The pain was dreadful and, of course, there is no pleasure in sex and it's dangerous – some die – and they have to cut you open when you are married and more when you have a baby, but then they sew you up again. But it's what we women have to bear to please our husbands. They did it to me. Why should it be different for my daughter?'

I don't blame them for it, though it offends every principle I've ever held dear and I can only condemn a practice which mutilates millions of women around the

world. But it’s a strong, courageous and supremely confident mother who would struggle to overturn centuries of cultural pressure, and an extraordinary one who could entirely set aside her sense of outrage at the harm done to her by the birth of her perfect daughter.

There can have been no reassurance for my mother in the atmosphere in which she was expected to deliver me. The building in which I was born – St Helen’s Hospital – was grey, cold and forbidding, a Dickensian structure which had been converted in the forties from a workhouse to a maternity unit. That I was ‘born in the workhouse’ was a family joke of which I was constantly reminded throughout my childhood and it was only as I grew up that I fully understood why the word ‘workhouse’ held such resonance.

My maternal grandmother, Edna, came from Yorkshire farming and pub-owning stock around Huddersfield and Holmfirth and was the youngest of twelve children. She had met my grandfather, Walter, while on holiday in Southport with her family and fallen for his smart dress, silver-topped cane, dashing looks and easy charm. His background was less secure and comfortable than hers. His family were miners in North Wales who had migrated to Yorkshire when the North Welsh industry began to fail.

Most had managed to find jobs – my grandfather ending up above rather than below ground, winding the men and the coal up and down in the cage at the pithead. But a sense of insecurity haunted him all his life. My father too, the youngest of six, had a dad who was a miner and who died in his fifties – when I was three years old – from the suffocating effects of silicosis, the miner's lung disease. The shadow of redundancy and unemployment and the memory of the disgrace of the old workhouses, despite the arrival of the welfare state, were never far from my parents' thoughts.

It seems unthinkable now – in an era where a father who refuses to be present in the delivery room is considered to be greatly behind the times – that dads then were kept so far away from the end stage of the business of reproduction. It was also common at the time of my birth for new mothers and babies to spend a couple of weeks in the hospital before returning home. Dad still talks about his longing, during that long and lonely period, to hold me, or even just touch my cheek. But visiting hours were strictly regulated and babies totally inaccessible.

'I was always first in the queue,' he boasts even now, his memory as clear as if it were yesterday. 'The maternity ward was on the first floor and we dads had to wait at the bottom of the stone staircase behind a thick red rope that was strung across the steps. The matron, a right old battleaxe in a starched apron and cap, would stand by the rope with her watch in her hand. On the dot of six in the evening – there was no visiting in the afternoon because we were all supposed to be at work – she would lift the barrier and I ran as fast as I could so as to be the first on the ward.

'I'd see your mum and take her some flowers or grapes or something and then, as we were leaving, we were allowed to pass the nursery. All the babies lay in row after row of cots and they let us see you through a big glass window. I was lucky because I managed to sweet-talk one