Ruth and Stan



Our life together, told to our grandchildren

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The voice recordings of Ruth and Stan, written down as they were told.

The pictures in this book are generated.

Recorded with VoxMemories
voxmemories.com

For Holly, Jamie, Amy and Noah. You asked us how it all began, so we sat down with a pot of tea and told you.



CHAPTER 1

A Girl from Bedminster

Told by Ruth

I was born in 1941, in a street of tall, thin houses in Bristol, with the war still going on. I don't remember that part, of course. What I remember is everything that came after.



TOLD BY RUTH

Our Street

We lived at number fourteen, two rooms up and two down, with a yard at the back and the lavatory at the bottom of it. There was me, my brother Derek, who was two years older and thought he was in charge, and Mum and Dad. Friday was bath night: the tin bath in front of the fire, me first because I was the smallest, which meant Derek never forgave me for the clean water.

We played out in the street until somebody's mum shouted. Nobody had much, but I never once thought we were poor. There was always bread and dripping, and always somebody next door to talk to.

This photograph is our yard when I was about seven: Mum in her pinny, Derek pulling a face, and me holding the cat, who did not want to be photographed.

TOLD BY RUTH

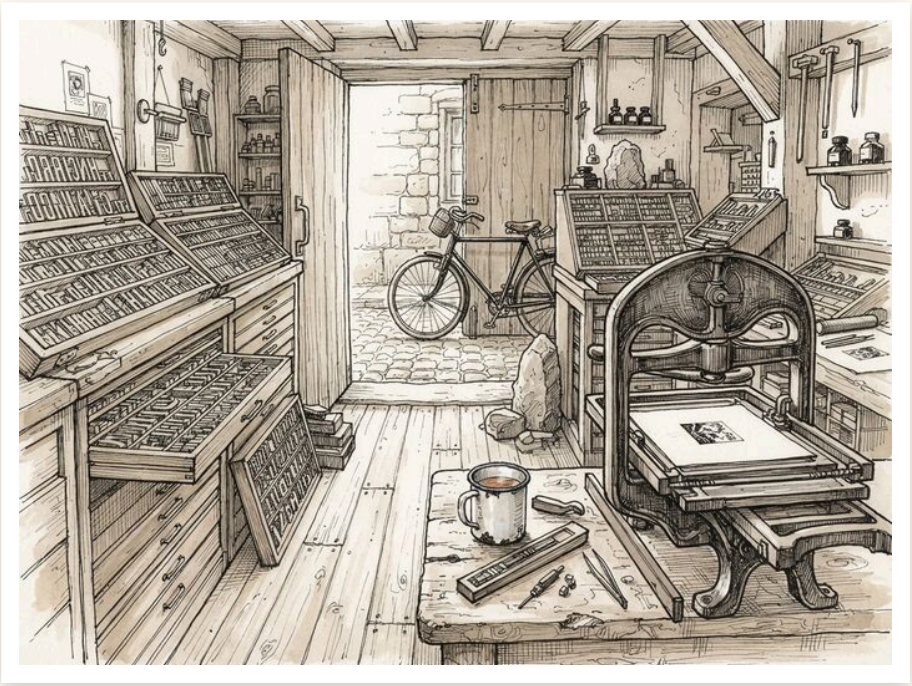
The Day the Sweets Came Off the Ration

I was eleven when sweets came off the ration. It was February 1953, and I'd been saving my pennies for weeks because everybody said it was going to happen. I think I had one and ninepence in a sock.

I went straight to the corner shop after school and asked for a quarter of pear drops. Mrs Dobbs weighed them out on her brass scales and tipped them into a paper bag, very slowly, as if she knew what it meant to me. I ate nearly the lot on the way home, sitting on the wall outside our house, and was sick in the yard before tea.

Mum didn't say a word. She just handed me a glass of water and a dry biscuit and said that she'd been wanting to do exactly the same thing for eleven years.

I left school at fifteen, which is what you did then. I'd have liked to stay on, and my teacher Miss Ward came round to the house and said so, but there were Derek's boots to pay for and a bit of money was needed. Mum cried a little in the kitchen afterwards. I told her it was all right, and I think by then I meant it. I had already been told there was a job going at the draper's in the town, and I'd always liked the look of the ribbons in their window.



CHAPTER 2

Ink on My Hands

Told by Stan

I was born in 1939 in Kingswood, on the other side of Bristol from your grandmother. I was the quiet one in a very noisy house. I still am, if you ask her. She says that's why we get along.

TOLD BY STAN

The Boy and the Bicycle

There were five of us in three bedrooms, so you learned early to share and to keep out of the way. My dad was a coalman. He went out at five every morning with his sack and came back black from head to foot, and Mum made him wash in the yard before he was allowed in. I have never known a harder-working man, or a gentler one.

When I was ten, Dad found me an old Raleigh from a man who was giving it up. It had no mudguards and the brakes were more of an idea than a fact, but it was mine. I did a paper round on it every morning before school, and by the time I was twelve I knew every street in Kingswood by the smell of its breakfast.

That bicycle took me everywhere. Down to the river to watch the ships, out to the fields at Hanham, and once, when I was thirteen, all the way to Bath and back on a Sunday with a bottle of water and a jam sandwich. I told Mum I'd been at the park. She knew, of course. She waited until I was home before she said a word, and then she gave me a good telling off and a second helping of pudding.

I was never clever at school, but I was good with my hands, and I liked things to be neat. A teacher once said that to my father, and he never forgot it. It's how I came to the printing.



TOLD BY STAN

Learning the Trade

I started at the printing works the week I turned fifteen: seven years' apprenticeship, and for the first six months I swept the floor and made the tea. In those days every letter was a little piece of metal, set in a stick backwards and upside down so that it printed the right way round. Old Mr Pritchard, the foreman, never raised his voice. He just tapped the case with his pencil whenever I put a letter in the wrong box.

That's where mind your p's and q's comes from. They look the same in the metal, only turned round. I mixed them up on a wedding invitation, and it was the only time I saw Mr Pritchard laugh. I came home every night with ink under my nails that no soap would shift, and I loved it.

The photograph is from my sixth year, when I was twenty and thought I knew it all.



CHAPTER 3

The Night We Met

Told by Ruth and Stan

We both remember the night we met, but not in quite the same way. We've agreed to put down both versions, and you can decide which of us is telling the truth.

TOLD BY RUTH AND STAN

Ruth's Telling

It was a Saturday in October 1961, at the Assembly Rooms, and I'd been talked into going by my friend Brenda. I was twenty. I'd been to a dozen of those dances and never met anybody I'd have walked to the end of the road with, and I'd more or less decided it was all a lot of nonsense.

Brenda disappeared within five minutes, as she always did, and I was standing by the tea urn in my best green dress, holding a cup I didn't want, when this young man came across the floor. He had very shiny shoes and very red ears. He said, 'Would you like to dance?' and I said I would, and then he told me, quite seriously, that he couldn't.

So we didn't dance. He trod on my foot, and then he spilled orange squash down his trousers, and then he apologised so many times that I started laughing, and I couldn't stop. We sat on the stairs for the rest of the evening. He told me about the printing, and I told him about the ribbons at the draper's, and he listened as if I'd said something very clever.

What I remember most is how easy it was. I'd spent my whole life being a little bit careful with people, and with him I wasn't. At the end of the night he asked if he could walk me home. I said I lived the other side of the river. He said that was all right.



TOLD BY RUTH AND STAN

Stan's Telling

I didn't want to go at all. My mate Terry had bet me half a crown that I wouldn't ask a girl to dance, and I never could resist a bet. So I stood against the wall for an hour, and then I saw your grandmother across the hall in a checked dress, looking as if she'd rather be anywhere else.

She said yes. Then I had to tell her I couldn't dance, which I hadn't planned. It just came out, and it worked better than anything clever would have done. I walked her home, nearly three miles, and I don't believe my feet touched the pavement once.

Terry still says I owe him half a crown. I tell him I won, and he can take it up with her. The photograph is from the following Saturday. We look like two people with no idea what's coming.



CHAPTER 4

Walking Out

Told by Ruth and Stan

That's what we called it in those days. Not dating, just walking out. We did a great deal of walking, because neither of us had a penny to spend on anything else.



TOLD BY RUTH AND STAN

Sundays at Weston

Stan: By the summer of 1962 we were meeting every Saturday and Sunday. There was a Sunday bus to Weston-super-Mare, one and sixpence return, and we went nearly every week from May to September.

Ruth: He couldn't swim. He rolled his trousers up and stood in the water with his arms out as if the sea might knock him over, and I laughed so much I had to sit down on the sand.

Stan: It was cold!

Ruth: It's always cold at Weston, Stan. He won me a china dog on the pier, which is still on the kitchen windowsill. The chip in its ear was Michael, in 1974, with a football.

Stan: A man on the front took this photograph and we paid him sixpence. We both look cold. We both look very happy.

TOLD BY RUTH AND STAN

Meeting the Parents

Ruth: I took Stan home to meet Mum and Dad in the November, a few weeks after the dance. Dad was a quiet man, but he had a way of looking at you over his pipe that made grown men confess to things they hadn't done.

Stan: I wore my best suit and I'd had my hair cut that morning, so it stuck up on one side. Her father looked at me for a long time and then he said, 'And what are your prospects, young man?' I said, 'I've just finished my apprenticeship, and I've a good trade for life.' He nodded and said, 'Good,' and went back to his paper. That was all.

Ruth: Mum had made a steak and kidney pudding big enough for eight. She watched every mouthful and when Stan had a second helping she looked at me across the table and I knew. He was in.

Stan: I asked her to marry me in the December of 1962, on the Suspension Bridge, on a very windy day. I'd had the ring in my pocket for three weeks and I'd been saving for it since September, fourteen weeks at ten shillings a week, from a little jeweller on Castle Street. I took it out of the box to show her and a gust of wind nearly took it over the side.

Ruth: I grabbed his hand. We stood there holding the ring between us with both hands over it, in the middle of a bridge, while a man with a dog went past and pretended not to see.

Stan: She said yes.

Ruth: I said, 'Yes, but please put it on my finger before you drop it.'



CHAPTER 5

The Wedding

Told by Ruth

We were married on the eleventh of May, 1963, a Saturday. It rained every day that week, and then on the Saturday it stopped. I have always said that was Mum's doing.

TOLD BY RUTH

The Dress

I wanted a proper white dress, and we couldn't afford one. Not a bought one, anyway. My Aunt Lil, who was Mum's older sister and the best seamstress in three streets, said that wasn't a problem and she'd make it herself.

The satin came from the draper's where I worked. The manager, Mr Hanley, let me have it at cost, and then at about half of cost when he thought I wasn't looking. He pushed it across the counter wrapped in tissue paper and said, 'Don't tell the others.' I've never forgotten that.

Aunt Lil fitted it on the kitchen table, with pins in her mouth, turning me round and round like a joint of beef. It took her eleven evenings. She worked on it by the light of one lamp, after a full day at the laundry, and she wouldn't let anybody else touch it. When it was done, there were forty-two covered buttons down the back, every one of them done by hand. Forty-two. I counted them again and again, standing in front of the wardrobe mirror, and I couldn't believe it was me.

On the morning of the wedding, Mum did up the buttons, one by one, and she didn't say anything. She got to the last one, and she put her hand flat on my back for a moment, and then she went to find her handkerchief. I've still got the dress, wrapped in tissue paper in the wardrobe. Janet and Sue both wore it, and Amy, you can wear it too, if you want to, though it will need letting out a little for your height.



TOLD BY RUTH

A Day of Sunshine

The sun came out at about nine o'clock that morning, in a clear, pale sky, as if somebody had pulled back a curtain. We got to the church in a car lent to us by Stan's uncle, with ribbons on the front. Dad walked me up the aisle very slowly. I could feel him shaking, just slightly, through his sleeve. I squeezed his arm. He didn't look at me, but he squeezed back.

Stan was at the front in his best suit, with Terry beside him as his best man. He turned round when the music started, and I saw his face. I have never seen anyone look so frightened and so pleased at the same moment. I nearly laughed, and had to concentrate very hard on the flowers.

We had our reception in the church hall. There was ham and salad, a trifle that Mum had been making for two days, and a three-tier cake that Stan's mother baked and iced herself. Terry gave a speech that lasted twenty-two minutes. I know, because Dad timed it on his watch, and showed us afterwards.

The photograph is on the church steps. Somebody has thrown confetti, and it caught in my hair and stayed there until the evening. Look at Stan's face. He's looking at me, not at the camera. Everybody always notices that.

After the meal we went round the tables saying thank you. Stan's grandmother, who was ninety and rather deaf, took my hand and said, very loudly, 'You're too good for him, my girl, but he'll do.' The whole hall heard. Stan went the colour of a beetroot, and I have never loved her so much.

Dad took me aside before we left and gave me an envelope with five pounds in it. 'For emergencies,' he said. I never spent it. It's still in the dress box, in the same envelope, in the wardrobe.

TOLD BY RUTH

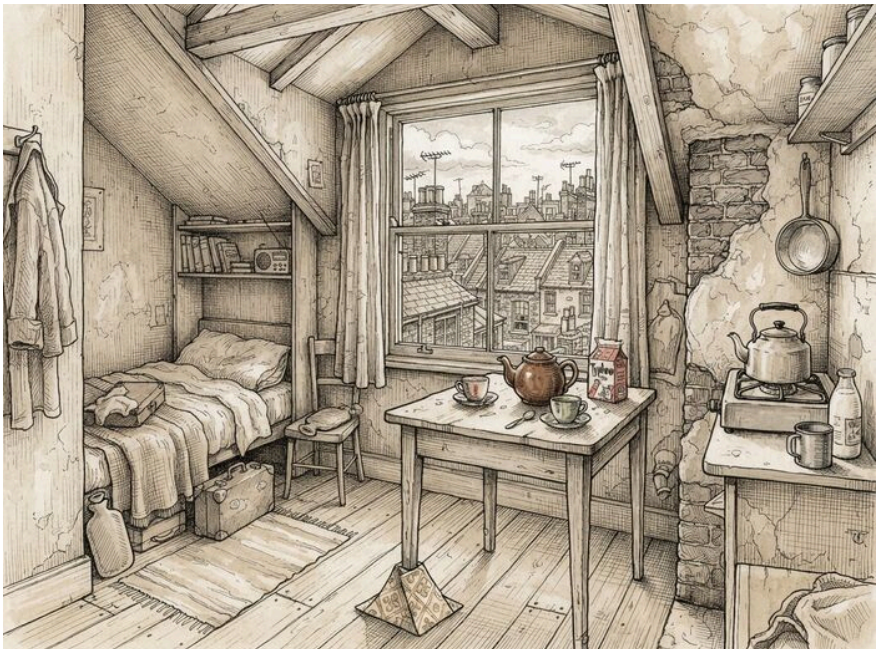
Three Nights in Torquay

We had three nights in Torquay for our honeymoon, in a boarding house run by a Mrs Pym. Stan had found it in the back of a newspaper. The advertisement said 'Sea Views', and what it meant was that if you stood on the washbasin and leaned out, you could see a slice of the harbour.

Mrs Pym had rules. Breakfast was at eight o'clock exactly, and if you weren't at the table by five past you didn't get any. No visitors in the bedrooms, no wet towels on the radiators, no talking after ten. There was a notice on the back of the door that said GUESTS ARE REQUESTED TO BE QUIET ON THE STAIRS, and we giggled about it all weekend.

It rained the whole time. We walked along the front in our macs with one umbrella and a bag of chips between us, and went to the pictures in the afternoon, and I can't remember a single second of the film. We had our tea in a café with steamed-up windows, and an old man at the next table raised his cup and said, 'Newly-weds,' as if he could tell from across the room. I suppose he could.

On the last morning Mrs Pym gave us a little pot of marmalade and said we were the best-behaved couple she had ever had. Stan thanked her very politely, and then waited until we were out in the street before he burst out laughing. I've often thought she knew perfectly well.



CHAPTER 6

Our First Home

Told by Stan

We had two rooms, a gas ring and a landlady who knew everything we did. They were the happiest rooms I've ever lived in.



TOLD BY STAN

Two Rooms in Totterdown

We rented the top floor of a tall house in Totterdown from a Mrs Gunter, who lived downstairs and had very good hearing. There was a bedroom, a sitting room with a gas ring in the corner, and a bathroom we shared with two other families, so you learned the timetable quickly.

We bought the table ourselves, a plain wooden one, and saved for it over six Saturdays. It was the first thing in the place that was properly ours. Ruth's first meal was a stew with a whole tablespoon of mustard in it, because she had turned two pages at once. I ate every mouthful and said it was the best I'd ever had. 'You're lying, Stan Ashby,' she said. 'Yes,' I said, 'but I'm going to finish it.'

That's me at the table, and Ruth with the teapot.

TOLD BY STAN

The Shilling Meter and the Wireless

We had a gas meter that took shillings, and a habit of never having one when we needed it. More than once, we went to bed with our coats on rather than go down and borrow one from Mrs Gunter.

We didn't have a television until 1966. Before that, we had a wireless that Ruth's dad had given us, a big brown thing with a dial that glowed. In the evening we sat on the two chairs with a cup of tea and listened to the plays, and the music, and the football on a Saturday. In the summer of 1966 we crowded into Mrs Gunter's front room downstairs, where the set was, with half the street, to watch England win the World Cup. Mrs Gunter sat in front, in her best hat, and when Geoff Hurst scored the last goal she stood up and cheered so loudly that her false teeth shot out. It's the one story that Ruth hasn't told you, because she was too busy trying to catch them.

I think about those rooms often. We hadn't got much, but we had a lot of quiet evenings, and a sort of plan, and each other. When people say they'd like to go back to being young, I never do, quite. But I'd like to go back and sit at that table with her, just once, and have another go at the mustard stew.



CHAPTER 7

Working Days

Told by Ruth and Stan

Neither of us ever did anything grand. We got up, we went to work, we came home. But we were proud of what we did, and we'd like you to know about it.

TOLD BY RUTH AND STAN

Behind the Counter

Ruth: I started at Hanley's the Monday after I left school, and I stayed nine years, until Janet came along. I swept the floor and carried the parcels for the first year, then they let me stand behind the counter and measure the cloth.

You measured it off the roll against a brass rule fixed to the edge of the counter, and you cut it with a big pair of shears, and I could tell you a yard and a half from across the room. I knew all the customers. I knew which woman wanted a velvet ribbon for her granddaughter's hair, and which man was buying a hat for his wife and was too embarrassed to say so. You can learn a great deal about people from what they buy for others.

Mr Hanley was very strict about the buttons. They were kept in little wooden drawers, hundreds of them, each one labelled, and if one of them was in the wrong drawer he knew. I'd say he could tell by the sound.

When the children were at school, I went to work in the dinner hall, and I stayed there for twenty-two years. I cooked for two hundred children a day. They were not all well behaved, but I never met one that didn't like a custard. I still get stopped in the supermarket by men in their forties who say, 'Hello, Mrs Ashby, do you remember me?' And I do, nearly always. They were the ones who asked for seconds.

TOLD BY RUTH AND STAN

The Press Room

Stan: I stayed at the same firm for thirty years. People say that now as if it's a strange thing, but in my day you found a good place and you stayed. By the time I was thirty-five I was the foreman of the press room, and I had eleven men under me, and not one of them was ever late.

My job was to make sure that whatever came in through the door, whether it was a hymn sheet, a wedding invitation or a catalogue of garden tools, went out the other way looking right. I'd walk down the line of presses every morning with a cup of tea in my hand, and the noise of them was like being inside a very large clock.

The work changed a good deal in my time. We started with metal type, then we went over to photographs and plates, and at the end the computers arrived, and a boy of nineteen showed me how to do in ten minutes what had taken me a week. I wasn't against it. I just missed the weight of the type in my hand.

Friday was pay day, in a little brown envelope with a window in it. I'd bring it home and put it on the table, and Ruth would tip it out and make it last. I never once saw her look worried about it. She would say, 'We'll manage,' and we always did.

I never missed a day through illness in thirty years. Ruth says it was because I was too stubborn to catch anything. She may be right.

TOLD BY RUTH AND STAN

The Works Outing

Every June the firm took us all on an outing, wives and children and all. It was the best day of the year, and it was paid for by the owner, old Mr Ellery, out of what he called the goodwill fund, though I never knew it to be used for anything else.

We went by coach, a proper one, with a driver in a peaked cap, and it left from outside the works at eight o'clock sharp. Everybody was in their best. The men had ties on and the women had hats, and the children had been scrubbed so hard they shone. A man called Reg from the stitching room played the mouth organ and led the singing, and by the time we were out of Bristol the whole coach was doing 'Daisy, Daisy', with the actions.

We went to Weston most years, because I could never keep away, but sometimes it was Barry Island, and once, in 1969, to Longleat to see the lions, which Janet talked about for a month. We always stopped for dinner at the same pub, where they laid long tables outside, and the landlord brought out plates of ham and tomatoes and pickled onions until nobody could eat any more. The men had a pint. The women had a shandy and said they shouldn't. The children ran about until they were sick on the coach home, and nobody minded.

It was the foreman's job to make a speech, and for twelve years that was me. I hated it. I would stand up with my glass, red to the ears, and say, 'Well, thank you all for coming,' and everybody would cheer as if I had said something marvellous, and I would sit down again. Ruth says it was the shortest speech she ever heard, and the best.

Mr Ellery himself came along, in a camel coat that he wore whatever the weather, and went round every table asking after each child by name. He knew all of them. I learned from him that people will do a great deal for a man who remembers their children's names, and I tried to do the same in the press room. The photograph that hung in the canteen afterwards showed the whole firm on the steps of the pub, squinting. I'm in the back row, trying to look taller.

On the way home, with the children asleep in a heap and the light going gold over the fields, Reg would play something slow on his mouth organ and the whole coach would go quiet. I would look at Ruth, with Sue asleep on her lap and her hat gone crooked, and think that I was the luckiest man in Bristol.

I know the firm has gone, and that kind of outing has gone with it. But I would like you to know that it happened, and that a hundred and forty people once climbed onto a coach on a June morning and sang all the way to the sea.



CHAPTER 8

Three Children

Told by Ruth and Stan

Janet, Michael and Sue. You know them as your mum, your dad and your aunt, and also as the people who tell you to put your coat on. Here is how they began.

TOLD BY RUTH AND STAN

Janet, Michael and Sue

Ruth: Janet came first, in August 1965, in the hottest week of the summer. I was enormous and miserable, and Stan went up and down the stairs all night with a wet flannel. She was born at six in the morning, with a lot of dark hair, and the midwife said, 'Well, she knows her own mind already.' She did, and she still does.

Stan: I walked to work that day on air. I told every man in the press room, and the milkman, and a dog on the way. When I got to the hospital in the evening, I was allowed to hold her for about a minute. I'd never held anything so small. I thought if I breathed too hard she would blow away.

Ruth: Michael was two years later, and he was in a hurry. He arrived two weeks early, in the middle of the night, while Stan was on the late shift, and I had to knock on Mrs Gunter's door at two in the morning. She came out in her curlers and her dressing gown and took charge of the whole thing as if she'd been waiting all her life for it.

Stan: I arrived at the hospital with ink on my hands and a loaf of bread, I don't know why. The nurse took the bread away. Michael was a month before he looked anything other than cross.

Ruth: And Sue came in 1971, as easily as a letter through a door. She was the calm one. She slept through the night at six weeks. We didn't trust it at first. We kept going in to check.



TOLD BY RUTH AND STAN

Sunday Dinners and Saturday Baths

We moved out of Totterdown in 1968, into a three-bedroom house in Fishponds that cost two thousand nine hundred pounds, which seemed a fortune. It had a front room that was only for best and never used. With three children every day was a small riot: a sock always missing, somebody needing something ironed for school.

Ruth: Sunday was the big day. I did a roast, and Stan carved like a man conducting an orchestra, slices so thin you could read the paper through them.

Stan: Saturday was baths, then pyjamas on the sofa for the television. That's the photograph, 1974, I think. Janet has her arm round Sue, who has her thumb in her mouth, and Michael is pulling a face, because Michael always did.



CHAPTER 9

Holidays by the Sea

Told by Stan

Every year, the first two weeks of August, whatever the weather and whatever the state of our bank account. We went to the sea. I'm not sure we ever once had good weather.



TOLD BY STAN

The Caravan at Croyde

We bought an old caravan in 1972, from a man at the works who was moving to Canada. It was long and cream with a green stripe, and we towed it behind a second-hand blue Cortina that didn't want to. We called it The Dumpling, because it was pale, heavy and very hard to shift.

It took seven hours to get to Croyde, in Devon. The children were sick twice, and I got out three times to check the tow bar. But once we got there, oh, it was worth it: a field of caravans, a walk through the dunes, and the widest beach I'd ever seen. Ruth sat on the steps with a cup of tea, watching the children in the sea. I've never seen her look so peaceful.

We went back every August for eleven years. This is 1976, the hot summer. That's me in the shirt. I don't want to talk about the shirt.

TOLD BY STAN

The Day the Car Broke Down

In 1977, on the way home from Cornwall, the Cortina stopped dead on a hill outside Okehampton. There was steam coming out of the front, a long queue of cars behind us, and a caravan sticking out sideways.

I'm a patient man, but I'll admit I went a bit red. Ruth said, 'Well, we may as well have our sandwiches.' So she took the children and the picnic basket out onto the verge, and I stood there with my head under the bonnet, saying things I wouldn't say in front of you.

And then a farmer stopped. He got out of his Land Rover, looked at the engine, looked at me, and said, 'Radiator hose.' He had a spare one in the back. He fitted it in ten minutes, and when I tried to pay him, he said no. He said it was a nice family and he hoped we would have a safe journey. Ruth gave him a ham sandwich and a slice of her fruit cake, and he ate them standing by the Land Rover, and he said it was the best cake he'd had in a year. I don't know his name. We never saw him again.

We talked about him for weeks afterwards. Ruth still says that when she's feeling low she thinks about that man, who'd stopped on a hill for people he'd never met, and it makes her feel the world is a better place than the newspapers say.

I think she's right. I've tried to be that man whenever I could, since.



CHAPTER 10

The Harder Years

Told by Ruth and Stan

Not everything was easy, and we wouldn't want you to think so. But we got through the harder years the same way we did everything else: together, with a cup of tea and a great deal of help from our neighbours.

TOLD BY RUTH AND STAN

When the Works Closed

Stan: In 1985, the firm closed. It happened over a few weeks, rather than all at once, and by the end of the month a hundred and forty of us were standing in the car park with a small envelope each. I was forty-six. I had never in my life been without a job, and I didn't know what to do with my hands.

I'd get up in the morning and put my work clothes on, out of habit, and then remember, and take them off again. I walked a lot. I sorted out the shed, twice. I'll tell you the truth, I felt like a bit of a fraud.

Ruth: What I remember is that he never once stopped being kind. Not to me, not to the children. But he was very quiet, and I could see it. So I did what women of my generation did. I took on extra shifts at the school and a few evenings at the village hall, and I said very little, and I kept the kettle on.

Stan: And people were wonderful. Next door's husband turned up one morning with a bag of potatoes from his allotment. Terry rang every week. A man I'd trained twenty years earlier sent me a postcard that said, 'You taught me everything I know.' I kept it. I've still got it.

In the spring, I got work at a little printer's in Staple Hill, on a smaller wage, and I was glad of every penny. We managed. We always did.

Ruth: And I'll say this. I know it's a strange thing to say. But those were some of the closest years we had.

TOLD BY RUTH AND STAN

Mum and Dad

Ruth: My mum died in 1988, and my dad had gone a few years earlier. I don't want to say much about it, because it's still hard, but I wouldn't want to leave it out. They were good people, and they had a good life, and they were with us right until the end.

I was the one who cleared out her kitchen. It took two days. I found the old recipe book, with her handwriting on the pages, the corners soft with flour. I found a tin of buttons. I found the hat she wore to our wedding, in a hatbox in the wardrobe, with a little tissue paper folded round it. I sat on her bed with it in my lap for a long time.

Stan: I didn't know what to say, so I made her tea. I made a great many cups of tea that month. I think I got quite good at it.

Ruth: Janet and Michael came round, and we sat in Mum's garden with a pot of tea and a bag of apples from her tree. And somebody said, 'She'd have liked this,' and I thought, yes, she would have.

Stan: What I'd say, if you ever have to go through something like that, is don't hurry. And don't do it alone. Ruth and I did it side by side, and it was the only thing that made it bearable.

Ruth: I make her scones every Sunday now. They never turn out quite like hers. But they get close, and when they do, I feel as if she's standing in the kitchen with me, telling me I've put in too much flour.

TOLD BY RUTH AND STAN

The Allotment

Not long after the works closed, our neighbour Walter came round and said, 'Stan, I've a plot at the allotments that needs somebody, and you need something to do.' It was said very kindly, and I was too proud to say yes, so I said I would think about it. I thought about it for exactly one night.

The plot was at the bottom of Fishponds, behind the railway: a long strip of brambles and old bedsprings and dandelions as high as my knee. I went down on a Saturday morning in my oldest trousers with a spade and a flask, and by dinner time I had cleared a space about the size of a table. By the end of the week my hands were blistered and my back ached, and I felt better than I had in months.

I knew nothing about growing things. I knew about type and presses and paper, and I had once kept a geranium alive. Walter showed me how to dig in the manure and prick out seedlings, and gave me a packet of runner bean seeds and said I couldn't go wrong. That summer I grew forty cabbages. Forty. They all came up at once, they were all the same size, and nobody can eat forty cabbages. Ruth made cabbage soup, and cabbage pie, and a thing she called bubble and squeak, and then she gave cabbages to everyone in the street, and I walked about for a fortnight with a feeling of enormous pride. Walter laughed until he had to sit down on an upturned bucket, and then he said every gardener grows forty cabbages once.

Ruth: I'll tell you what he's not mentioning. He came home every day smelling of earth and rain, and he was whistling. I hadn't heard him whistle in nearly a year. I would stand at the kitchen window and watch him come up the road with his spade over his shoulder, and I'd put the kettle on. I'd have given every cabbage in Bristol for that.

Ruth: He tells everyone it was the best thing he ever did, apart from marrying me, and he always says it in that order, so I know he's thought about it.

Stan: I think the allotment saved me. It gave me a reason to get up and something to show for the day. And there was a quiet I had never had at the works, just the wind and the blackbirds and the sound of Walter's radio three plots away. Men don't say much about that sort of thing. We say, 'I'm just popping down to the allotment,' and what we mean is, 'I need a bit of peace.'

I've had that plot for forty years now. It's why you have all eaten more runner beans than any children should. Walter passed away some years ago, and I took on his shed as well. I still keep his old tin mug on the shelf. I think he would like to know it's in use.



CHAPTER 11

Grandchildren

Told by Ruth

Nobody tells you about this part. You think you've done your love, and then somebody hands you a small person with enormous eyes, and it starts all over again.

TOLD BY RUTH

Four Small Surprises

Holly came first, in 1994. Janet rang us at four in the morning, and I was in the car before Stan had found his slippers. I held her for the first time at seven o'clock, in the hospital corridor, with the rain running down the windows, and she looked up at me with a very serious face, as if she was making up her mind about me. I thought, well, that's fair. I'm making up my mind about you too.

Jamie arrived in 1997, in a great hurry. Amy was the spring of 2000, and the first thing she did was sneeze. Noah came last, in 2004, the quiet one, and a very good sleeper. Stan used to carry him up and down the landing with his hand spread across his back. He said it was like holding a warm loaf.

I never expected to love being a grandmother so much. When your own are small, you're so tired, and so busy keeping everything going, that you hardly look at them. With the grandchildren, I could look. I had time. I could sit in the garden and watch a snail cross the path for ten minutes, and there was nothing I'd rather do.

I said once to Janet that I was sorry I hadn't done more of that with her. She said, 'Mum, you did everything.' But I still think that I'd like to have had the time.

I taught Holly to knit, and Amy to bake. Jamie, I'm afraid, never took to either, but he makes a very fine cup of tea, and that's a skill for life. Noah sat with me and did the crossword, and he still sends me the clues he can't get.



TOLD BY RUTH

Jam Sandwiches and Allotment Days

When the grandchildren were small they came to us on Wednesdays after school and most Saturdays. We had rules, but not good ones. Anybody could have a jam sandwich at any time, and nobody had to go to bed until they were asleep.

Stan took them to the allotment and gave each of them a patch of their own. Holly grew runner beans, Jamie carrots that never came up, Amy sunflowers taller than she was, and Noah put in a single potato and visited it every day, and worried.

The photograph is from one summer in our back garden, when the four of you still fitted on one bench. Four of us have an ice lolly. Jamie and Noah had eaten theirs already, and Noah is eyeing Stan's. I'm in the middle, looking as if I've been given something, which, in a way, I had.



CHAPTER 12

What We Want You to Know

Told by Ruth and Stan

We're not wise people. But we've been married sixty-three years, which has taught us a thing or two, and we'd like you to have it. Take what's useful. Leave the rest.

TOLD BY RUTH AND STAN

Things We've Learned

Stan: Measure twice and cut once. It's carpentry, I know, but it's true for most things. Take your time. Most of what looks urgent isn't.

Ruth: Say sorry first. It's much easier than you'd think, and much cheaper than being right. When Stan and I have a disagreement, whoever says it first gets the last biscuit.

Stan: I've got the last biscuit rather more often than she has.

Ruth: That's because I can't bear to see you go without.

Stan: Turn up. When somebody is ill, or sad, or moving house, or having a baby, go round with something in a dish and sit with them. You don't need to say anything clever. It's the turning up that counts.

Ruth: Be kind to the people who serve you. The woman behind the till, the man delivering the post. They have a long day, and a kind word costs nothing.

Stan: Keep your friends. Terry and I have known each other for seventy years. We've seen each other through weddings, funerals, a long fight over a lawnmower, and a very bad holiday in Wales. He's still the first person I ring.

Ruth: And when you find someone you can sit beside in silence, and not feel any need to speak, hold on to them. That was the thing I noticed the night I met your grandfather, and it's been true every day since.



TOLD BY RUTH AND STAN

The Last Word

Ruth: People ask me what the secret is. I tell them there isn't one. We got up every morning and made a pot of tea. We held hands in the car. We said thank you for the little things. That's all it was, over a great many years.

Stan: I'll tell you what I think, though. I think we were lucky. We found each other at the right moment, and we didn't let go. And I've never once woken up in the morning and wished it had been anybody else.

Ruth: He says that, but he also says the stew was nice.

Stan: I'm standing by the stew.

Ruth: Mind, it hasn't all been sunshine. We've had our rows, and there were a few evenings when one of us slept in the front room with a cushion and a bad temper. But we never went to bed without making it up. Not once in sixty-three years, except one night in 1979, over a wardrobe, and I won't go into it.

Stan: It was a very large wardrobe.

Ruth: The last photograph in this book is of us, taken this summer on the bench at the end of the road. You can see we're older. We've shrunk a little, and Stan's got his stick. But I'd like you to notice the hands. Look at the hands. That's what we're about.

Stan: We don't know how many more summers we'll sit on that bench. Enough, we hope. And we'd like to think that you will sit on it too, one day, with somebody you love, and think of us.

Ruth: And when you do, put the kettle on first. You'll want a cup of tea. Stan will say it's too strong.

Stan: It will be too strong.

Ruth: You see? Sixty-three years.

TOLD BY RUTH AND STAN

A Word for Each of You

Ruth: Holly, you were the first, and you taught us how to be grandparents. You are the one who tells the truth, even when it's hard, and we are very proud of you for it. Never stop.

Stan: Jamie, you have a gift for making people laugh, and don't let anybody tell you it isn't a proper talent. It is. The world needs people who can put a crooked hat on their grandad and make him like it.

Ruth: Amy, you are the one who bakes, and who sits and listens. You have my mother's hands, you know. Look at them next time you roll pastry.

Stan: Noah, you're the youngest, so you'll be reading this last. Keep asking questions. Keep sending your gran the crossword clues. And do keep an eye on that potato.

Ruth: We love you, all four. More than the words can hold, and we have used a great many of them.

That's our story, as well as we remember it. We've told it as it came, with the wrong turns left in, because that's how it happened. We hope it makes you laugh in the right places. We love you all.

Ruth and Stan