

# 50! The Life, Loves & Psyche of a Male Mid-Life Crisis



Cory Y. Standby

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Tags

/ drinking/ fun/ dating/ secretaries/ strippers/ parties

Edit

This is the story of life. It is about love and relationships; about the importance of family; about how real life and human emotions invariably mess each of these up. It looks at death, divorce and dating; losing loved ones; family feuds and other intertwined issues; grief and stress & much more

Cory Y. Standby

To my family & loved ones

*"There is only one way to avoid criticism:*

*do nothing, say nothing, and be nothing "* (Aristotle)

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Prologue

*"Life isn't about waiting for the storm to pass; it's about learning to dance in the rain"*

(Vivian Greene)

The concept of writing this book has been swirling around the author's head for years. The transition from random thoughts to some kind of outline structure and then actually committing to paper and recounting the tale itself makes an elephant's gestation period seem like the blink of an eye by comparison. Although it is at the very least a semi-autobiographical tale, all real names have been changed in order to protect the innocent and especially the extremely guilty too. As the saying goes, *'the truth will out'*. Fortunately the truth is (from a legal perspective) a defence. There is some poetic licence in the telling of the tales but the facts are accurate and the incidents recounted are all real events which occurred. No doubt many will speculate as to who, what, when, where and probably even why — but that's all part of the fun, isn't it?

This is the story of life. It is about love and relationships; about the importance of family; about how real life and human emotions invariably mess each of these up. It looks at death, divorce and dating; losing loved ones; family feuds and other intertwined issues; grief and stress and how we seek to cope (or spectacularly fail to do so) with all that fate and fortune throws at us on our journey through life. It is a series of personal anecdotes intertwined with the author's view of the world, both then as it happened and especially now he is older and hopefully much wiser. It is written with the benefit of hindsight. If he had had such clarity and understanding at the time, much of it would never have happened. But he didn't. As we all

know:

*"To be old and*

*wise, you must first be young and stupid"* (Anonymous)

The aim has been to strike a balance between the main themes and recurring messages of the book, alongside some kind of chronological overview of his life events particularly his relationships with women. The purpose being to seek to explain why he did what he did; why he made the decisions he made; and if possible to understand and explain it all more clearly now, looking back with a more rounded view of the world. It is not intended to be hugely introspective or overly personal but more a series of examples of how, to paraphrase the saying, rarely does each element of your life go well at the same time. Many people endure far worse in life; he knows that he has been lucky. He is grateful for all that he has had and done, and hopes that these tales may even offer some help, solace or guidance to others as they cope with some of the pain we all go through. The author is very sorry about the people he has hurt along the way, but this book is not intended as any form of excuse or attempt at personal apology (this is not the right forum for that); rather it is an exploration of why things happened the way they did. Some things happened by choice, some by chance, fate and circumstance. In no way should it be read with the author as a victim and if at any stage it comes across like that, he apologises. He accepts full responsibility for all his actions, good and bad. He is truly sorry for all the bad and accepts that:

*"Circumstances do not*

*make a man, they reveal him"* (Wayne W. Dyer)

All of the quotations which appear throughout this book have been carefully chosen by him as reflecting his views on life, perhaps best epitomised by the following:

*"Reality is we are born and then we die, whatever happens in between is up to you. Cherish every day, don't waste a second of it"* (Rashida Rowe), and

*"In the long run, we shape our lives and we shape ourselves. The process never ends until we die. And the choices we make are ultimately our own responsibility"* (Eleanor Roosevelt).

He has grabbed his life by the scruff of the neck shaken it, at times far too vigorously. He reacted as he felt was appropriate at the time; he clearly got it wrong often. With the benefit of hindsight and the wisdom life's experiences have brought him, he would have done so many things differently. But life isn't like that. We live and learn from our mistakes and should aim to make the best of what we have, who we are and what we want from life. There are constant extraneous factors of course, and things happen to us that we wouldn't choose and can't control. But that is all part of the rich tapestry of life, isn't it? We each are given one life to live, and we choose how to live it; how to respond to things that happen to us outside our own control; and how to make the best out of whatever life throws at us. Cory is the main protagonist in his own life, never a bystander, no mere witness; he chose how to act and react throughout, undoubtedly far too strongly at times. It was always his choice how he dealt with life's travails, especially when fate brought him some bad times. Even when lost in grief and losing our way in the world, it is up to each of us individually always to take responsibility for what we do, whether we are thinking rationally or not.

It is written in the third person, not because the author has the same egocentric pretensions of grandeur seen in many public figures, but rather because it is easier to recount tales more dispassionately like this. Let's see if it works.

## Introduction

*"Everyone makes mistakes in life, but that doesn't mean they have to pay for them the rest of their life. Sometimes good people make bad choices; it doesn't mean they are bad. It means they are human"* (Anonymous)

As Cory sat at his desk staring out of his window observing the beautiful autumnal landscape of the southern English countryside, he smiled wryly to himself. Here he was entering his 50th year; he felt more empowered, free and generally just content with life than ever before. That is to say inner contentment was finally his, after years of striving for the perfect life, but is that just an illusion? What he had come to realise as he approached his half century in this world was that the old saying was so true – *“The less you give a shit, the happier you will be”* (Anonymous).

This book is an exploration of his path through life. The ups and downs and where it had now brought him. He had first thought of writing a book many years ago, having been told by his lovely, mad, eccentric English teacher decades earlier that he had an eloquent writing style that should be explored further. He doubted that she had meant this much later, but real life kind of got in the way in the intervening thirty-plus years. Mind you, she was also full of praise for his stylish handwriting back then too, but that (like so much else) has been destroyed by real life grinding it down over the decades ever since. It has descended from beautiful calligraphy then to an illegible scrawl now. That really is a true metaphor for life!

Actually his earlier thoughts on the book had been a variation on the theme, which crystallised after England's then latest major football tournament failure at Euro 2000. The football fans amongst you will remember the last minute penalty we gave away to snatch failure from the jaws of our qualification success, but life as frustrated England sports fan is a whole other story and perhaps too close in subject matter to Nick Hornby's superb benchmark of that genre "Fever Pitch". For numerous reasons it didn't happen and that leads us to where Cory sits now – a decade and a half on. What a journey it's been since then! And that really is the point of this book, because in the summer of 2000 rather than settling down to write his book, Cory instead left his marriage to the woman he'd been with for thirteen years, had met at University and with whom he had four wonderful kids.

This book isn't however a study in what specifically went wrong in that relationship, though who knows whether future volumes may explore such themes further should this tome find critical or even mass approval. Nor indeed whether Cory has spent the subsequent years desperately trying to make up for all he lost, although it is entirely possible that that could be the conclusion and the salutary tale for every middle-aged man. At this stage, as he sits here contemplating life — having spent years 'getting his shit together' — it is intended as an exploration of that incredible phenomenon: his male mid-life crisis. It is obviously written by Cory, from his perspective and through his eyes; no doubt others will have different views and interpretations, but the facts are correct whatever spin either side may wish to put on them. As the saying goes:

*“When writing the story of your life, don't let anyone else hold the pen”* (Harley Davidson)

In order to look at this amazing journey, we shall explore its highs and lows. The purpose being to see whether, as he enjoys single life with the opportunity to reflect properly for the first time in decades, any sense can be made of it all. It is hoped that with the benefit of hindsight, even if not necessarily with any greater wisdom, some kind of order can finally be brought to the chaos he has lived through. Certain issues and themes will arise throughout and here he relies on Churchill's guidance:

*“If you have an important point to make, don't try to be subtle or clever. Use a pile driver. Hit the point once. Then come back and hit it again. Then hit it a third time – a tremendous whack”.* (Winston Churchill)

He therefore makes no apology for that aspect. Before we get to the main part of the story however we look briefly, by way of background at those crucial formative years: so let's start at the beginning.

## Part 1 — Childhood & Teenage Angst

*“Everyone had gone through something in their life that has changed them in a way that means they could never go back to the person they once were”* (Anonymous)

### *Childhood bliss – running free*

Cory recalled a visit to a stress counsellor, an anger management specialist (psychotherapist/ psychiatrist/ trick cyclist or something similar) at the height of his divorce, when the learned professional had insisted his then issues all stemmed back to Cory's early childhood. Utter bollocks! As you'll see here, Cory and his brothers had a loving, safe,

normal upbringing by great parents, with no issues outside the ordinary growing pains of boys. There were two distinct parts, their respective births and early years in the north; then the move south and real formative years down here (though with regular visits back to the remaining family in the north to maintain their roots up there).

Cory is the eldest of three boys, all born in major northern industrial cities. Their Dad was a teacher, who moved around with the family in tow, from Leeds to Newcastle, on to Liverpool and then down to the Home Counties. Although this peripatetic life was interesting, growing up at different stages in different places; acquiring different dialects and accents depending on the stage the boy were at in each place, it was disruptive and meant childhood friendships came and went as the family followed a slightly nomadic existence. However there is no criticism at all of his parents for that (despite during his teenage angst, repeatedly claiming such travesties as part of a litany of issues he set out forcefully in the late 1970s/ early 1980s). It was all clearly for the betterment of the family as Dad moved each time for a promotion, a better job, more pay, a school house etc. This was essential back then, in the bleak late 1960s and 1970s, when teachers still earned very little; and Mums roles were firmly to stay at home and look after the household, kids and family – no dual income nonsense back then. Their Dad worked hard and was a highly respected professional of whom the boys were all very proud, as well as a loving devoted parent along with their Mum, who brought them up on little money but in the kindest most loving way anyone could ever have wished for. It taught the boys the value of family stability, love and affection, and being happy with what you had – a far cry from today's materialistic world.

They made their own fun, unlike this current generation's indolence. They had one black and white TV in the house, showing programmes from some time each morning until midnight if lucky – the test card filled our screens the rest of the time. BBC 1 and ITV were the stalwarts, with BBC 2 as the backup. Nothing more. When Cory now tells his own kids that that was all they had for most of his childhood, they are aghast. He recalls Channel 4 being a major development when launched in the 1980s; there was no Sky or Virgin, Freeview, DVDs, digital, or even VCRs (until the 1980s). No all-night TV, multi-channel options, no pause and play, no recording programmes, no wall to wall sport – just Match of the Day and The Big Match for footy, and The Word of Sport and Grandstand generally for everything else. He fondly remembered the mad rush to get to a radio (no portables, laptops, I phones/ pads, PCs etc even contemplated back then) to hear the classified football results on a Saturday evening after going to real football games. What a very different world it was then – in so many ways far less complicated and better than that in which we now live with the increased wealth, prosperity and numerous technological advances. Certainly not necessarily what Tomorrow's World had in mind when it told us of how the world and our lives would change; and is it really what the visionary technology gurus of our age (Gates, Jobs et al) envisaged for our brave new world? As the Dali Lama accurately says in "*The Paradox of our Age*":

*We have bigger houses but smaller families;  
More conveniences, but less time;  
We have more degrees, but less sense;  
More knowledge, but less judgment;  
More experts, but more problems;  
More medicines, but less healthiness;  
We've been all the way to the moon and back,  
but have trouble crossing the street to meet the new neighbour.  
We build more computers to hold more information to  
produce more copies than ever but have less communication.  
We have become long on quantity,  
but short on quality.  
These are times of fast foods but slow digestion;  
Tall man but short character;  
Steep profits but shallow relationships.  
It's a time when there is much in the window,  
but nothing in the room.*

The early years of their family started in the early 1960s, when their parents romantically met on a Yorkshire railway station in their early 20s. Dad was a University student embarking on his teaching career in Leeds; Mum was brought up in an archetypal small Yorkshire working man's village (where the Working Man's club was the focal point, more of that later) and was starting her secretarial working life. They were a beautiful young couple, clean cut and attractive and married in the mid-1960s. At the time of writing this book, they have just celebrated their Golden Wedding Anniversary. This is not something Cory will ever experience, and he is in awe of their lifetime together. It is perhaps not something many will experience in current and future generations, which is a shame, but is symptomatic of much this book will seek to explore in subsequent chapters. Cory's birth followed a year later, on a bleak winter's night, snow storms and high winds whirling around the old granite and stone of Leeds Maternity hospital (perhaps the Gods rumblings, on the anniversary of JFK's assassination- we could read all sorts of omens into such signs). The three of them lived happily for the first few years of Cory's life within sight of Elland Road, and still close enough to both families for regular contact and support – as people still did in those days, not so much anymore (despite what the TV soaps would have you believe).

Cory was loved by his parents. By his maternal grandparents, whose bungalow and land in the village became his constant northern base, and 'other' home as they moved around in subsequent years (and continued until fairly recently when his lovely down to earth, woollen mill working Grandma's longevity finally expired in her early 90s). And by matriarchal paternal Grandmother (whose husband, Cory's Granddad he never knew, had died after WWII as a result of

shrapnel injuries apparently) leaving her to bring up 6 children as a single mother in true Irish catholic style. She was a pillar of the local Catholic community in Leeds, and known as Lady Rosemary, or the Duchess, for her middle class bearing! Many of his parents' siblings and cousins were still based in and around Leeds too. The extended family on both sides was something Cory grew up very appreciative of, and enjoyed many happy years at family parties and gatherings. The family expanded as his cousins were born to his uncles and aunts. These happy memories led to his own desire to have a big family in later years. As a child Cory was blissfully unaware of the inevitable family tensions behind the scenes, which were never discussed openly (that was just the way it was back then). Certainly any hint of discord was hidden from the dozen-plus cousins, as they played happily together throughout their childhood years. Church hall venues on his Dad's family's side (the Duchess' influence with the priest securing use of the Catholic church near her home seemingly endlessly!); the working men's club as a regular venue for Christmas parties and the like in his Mum's family's small village just outside Leeds. Joyful times all round.

As Cory has recently discussed with his own kids as they grow up, life as a child is great, blissfully ignorant, happy and carefree with no responsibility. And yet, being human, one of life's ironies is always to want more. As children, we all always want to be older and reach the next stage, to be a teenager, and then to be an adult once we reach that point. Yet you get to adulthood and look back fondly on how simple life was as a child. Obviously this is based on personal experience, coming from a secure, loving family – no doubt it's not the same for those who have had abusive or deprived childhoods, which must be awful. It is clear how much the quality of your childhood affects us all as we develop into adults. Cory recalled one his Mum's work colleagues in Oxford, a very jolly, apparently happy young lady who was terribly posh and well-spoken, who had a well-paid professional job in the health sector, and came from a very wealthy family. And yet, she apparently poured her heart out to his Mum, saying she would have swapped all the money and privilege for some love and affection from her parents; to be a normal child living at home with them as she grew up, rather than packed off to the poshest boarding and finishing schools. Cory recognised the type, very prevalent in the City. Outwardly brash, confident types, with loud braying voices, clothes and behaviour crying out, look at me, aren't I great. But it's all a front: people with real confidence don't need or demand recognition from others. A couple of saying sums this up perfectly:

*"Confidence is not, 'they will like me'. Confidence is, 'I'll be fine if they don't"* (Anonymous), and

*"Work hard in silence. Let success be your noise"* (Frank Ocean)

People with inner security and confidence just get on with their own lives and generally don't seek attention and adulation from others. They aren't usually bothered about others' opinions, or what most people may think of them. Often those who do are invariably making up for deficiencies in their own personalities, mainly caused by a lack of affection and true love when we all need it most, as we grow up. Cory would not have swapped all the wealth in the world for the loving security his parents had given him and his brothers — and yet even that wasn't necessarily enough, as we will see later sadly. The three brothers enjoyed their childhoods, now living on the North Sea coast, just outside Newcastle. Their Mum walked them to and from school when they were small, and took them onto the beach in the afternoons where the wind was always blowing and the North Sea was always cold, even in summer. They learned to sail little boats in the shallows and in the harbour area too. Cory had the terrifying experience when a solid wooden rowing boat caught a wave as they tried to sail out from the beach, being flipped over and he was trapped underneath in the dark water washing in until the adults lifted the boat off. He was too young to understand fully how scary the situation was at the time, but certainly has never lost his respect for the awesome power of the sea ever since. Undoubtedly it was this open air life, being at one with nature that has made him love the space and beauty of nature as he has grown. He feels trapped and confined in the concrete jungles of our major cities, and loves the commute back out to greenery and space. He loves the beauty of the rolling countryside, the raw force of the sea against coastal rock formations and particularly the tranquillity of exclusive beach resorts, with their azure waters and golden sands. He hates modern offices and hotels, with their hermetically sealed windows; he hates internal rooms with no natural outside light, the nonsense of internal atria and not being able to see the real world outside. He feels trapped, confined, caged and claustrophobic, desperate to break out. He craves natural sunlight, its warmth on his face, the smell of fresh air – no doubt why he loves tropical island resorts so much. The joy he feels every time he hires jet skis on holiday and glides (or bounces) across the Caribbean or Mediterranean is intense. He needs to feel free, as this was his childhood. It explains a lot about his personality as you will see.

The boys played with their neighbours' kids, exploring the fields and empty spaces behind their houses, long before it was all built on with never-ending new housing estates and developments in later years. This was the early-to mid-1970s and life was simple. Cory's best friend had a sister, who not only was one of their playmates, but became Cory's first girlfriend at the tender age of 5 or 6! They had secret snogs in the coal sheds attached to their houses (as houses still had in the industrial north in those days, before Thatcher destroyed it all in subsequent decades). They used the trampoline at the gym in the school where their Dad taught, he took them swimming at weekends, and life was good. Cory only really has two bad memories from that period: the first being his beloved (and then still mighty) Leeds United losing to huge underdogs Sunderland in the 1973 FA Cup Final – not ideal when living in the north east. Fortunately in their area Sunderland fans were outnumbered by Newcastle fans, but the teasing was still painful! Secondly, the boys' bedroom was at the front of the house, which meant that apart from the main road and a timber yard behind it, it was not far from the beach and the crashing waves of the North Sea. Whether it was the howling winds, shapes and shadows swaying at night, or just his fervent imagination, Cory recalled many nights believing the house was haunted, or witches were flying in to get him. He would run full pelt along the long corridor to the sanctuary of his parents' bedroom at the back of the house. As a then sensitive soul, he was prone to a number of these incidents, seeking the security of being in his parents loving embrace. He recalls this nervousness led to something of a sensitive bowel too, which was bad

enough at home but particularly awkward when he started at the Catholic primary school; and on many occasions didn't make the outside toilet block across the playground under the shadow of the Church in time. All very messy and embarrassing, but his parents never shouted at him for it, just reassured him all was fine, and would be ok. He soon outgrew the problem, as children often do (as long as there are no further psychological reasons involved).

There were the inevitable childhood injuries. Cory still bears the scar above his left temple where he cut his head falling off a huge, industrial sized cricket roller (the type pulled by a tractor, not pushed by a person) as he and his friends played on it. As he was climbing up it he slipped and fell hitting his head on the solid metal roller on the way down. As the blood poured down his face he felt dazed and was concerned to hear his friends screaming, he's cracked his head open! As always, his parents looked after him, as stitches and butterfly strips were applied at the local hospital. They became regular visitors as his brothers also injured themselves often. It was the nature of things back then; they were allowed to be adventurous, making their own fun without any of today's distractions. On one occasion, a smaller garden roller at his grandparents in Cory's hands slipped and the spring-handled solid metal stanchion hit his brother on the head. Their Dad had to drive from home in Liverpool to Leeds to take them to the hospital. Another time, a brother fell off a slippery wooden ladder onto sharp stones beneath at one of the docks, badly cutting the back of his head. There were no health and safety issues back then; nor when they shimmied across the huge industrial pipes in the dock, with no safety elements at all in place. Life was freer and simpler. They had huge freedom, going out on our own and with friends to play outside all day long. Parents would not necessarily know where they were as they wandered off, but in those days that's what kids did. They disappeared for hours. They had none of the gadgets today's youth do, and it was regarded as natural and healthy for kids to go off and explore. The fear that abounds in today's society wasn't a feature of life then, they literally ran free.

Although this nostalgia is lovely, the point of it is simply to show that life was good. Cory and his brothers were happy, loved, secure, free, and enjoyed the basic freedoms life offered with relish. A happy home and loving immediate and extended family was enough. Holidays with grandparents, parties with cousins, family gatherings on both sides were all great fun. But then of course, childhood innocence gives way to teenage years, and life changes. Confused hormones replace innocent happiness; doubts and questions interfere with simple childhood truths; those loving parents who cherished, loved and supported you for over a decade become irritating old codgers, ruining your life. In short, the beauty and sweetness of childhood innocence gradually gets lost in the mists of time, as the growing pains of moving from that period of blissfully naive ignorance to adulthood lead to every parent's worst memories of their once sweet kids – the teenage years.

### *Teenage Angst*

After their childhood tour of the north, at about 10 years of age, Cory and family moved to the south. His Dad had secured a promotion to Assistant Principal of a residential school for delinquent types – a reform school as it was known in the old days. Quite what the current politically correct term is, Cory is unsure, perhaps a residential facility for emotionally and behaviourally maladjusted boys? His Dad had a stint a similar school in the north, as well as teaching in a grammar school and lecturing at College level. Although it was all far more intense, given the nature of the kids in his care and the fact you lived on site, one of the perks was housing for the family so it suited them well. Mum later explained that they had struggled financially on just a teacher's salary with three hungry boys to raise, particularly when having to buy a house to fit five of them. Given their Dad's seniority, they were given one of the new senior staff houses built on the edge of the school grounds (an old farm, so there was plenty of land which has subsequently all been sold off privately after the school closed a few years ago). They were happy as they grew up in a decent home, their Dad worked hard, long hours, evenings and weekends but at least he only had a 5 minute walk to work. As the boys became teenagers their Mum also resumed her working life, initially away from the school but after tiring of the commuting, at the school itself. It was a good community to grow up in; the other senior staff became friends of the family. If they had kids of a similar age to Cory and his brothers, they all became friends too. One of Cory's closest friends was a year or two older, but they got on very well. They played football and tennis, used the school's gym, swimming pool and other facilities, especially in the holidays when the resident boys weren't around. It was all very idyllic. This friend had a sister Cory's age, Abbey, who was a tom-boy joining in with their games in the early years, who went to the same school as Cory, and was the closest thing he ever had to a sister (for a few years at least). Their paths diverged in mid-teenage years, as Cory pursued his studies and Abbey who by now had grown into one of the most beautiful girls in the school, was less academic and busy with her constant array of male suitors. However their childhood bond and friendship was always there, even when they were parts of the different groups at school and therefore didn't hang out together socially anymore. Although Cory missed his friend, he understood he had to work hard for his exams and couldn't party as much as they types Abbey was hanging around with. One of whom was another of his best friends as a child, Gez, who went on to become a professional footballer, marry Abbey and then ruin it all by so predictably having an affair with a hairdresser.

One day Cory got the bus back from school to his home with his brothers, at the end of which they had to walk over a field to their house. As they left the bus, he noticed a beautiful girl out of the corner of his eye and to his delight she got off the bus too. He realised it was Abbey, who by now he hadn't seen for some time, even though they only lived 10 minutes apart, as their lives had gone in different directions. She was as beautiful as ever. He was confused. This was his friend, his childhood tom-boy mate. His good friend's little sister. His own quasi-sister. And yet as Cory looked at her, he realised his feelings were far more than that. Teenage hormones were at play, and all the more intense given their

previous (albeit innocent) history as childhood friends. They talked excitedly with each other, catching up on what each had been doing for the past year or so since they'd had any proper contact. Back then, in the early 1980s, there were no mobile phones, internet etc, so contact was face to face, or landline phone calls occasionally. Cory was besotted, but didn't know how Abbey felt. Fortunately she started babysitting for his neighbours' younger kids around this time, so they bumped into each other much more regularly. Cory had a few relationships at school and he knew Abbey was still, not surprisingly, very popular with many boys and in constant demand. But he felt a connection and wondered if she did too. He wasn't sure if she just saw them as reunited friends. Being a slightly awkward teenager, still learning the mysterious ways of women and how best to approach them, he took it slowly. Eventually, after far too long dallying, talking and being unsure if he would ruin their friendship if he finally made a move, one evening he did. He thought what the hell he would never know if he didn't try, after months of not trying for fear of having read the signals wrong – every teenage boy's eternal dilemma.

He made his move and kissed Abbey, and the passion between them exploded. She said she had been waiting for him to make a move for months (as girls do) and felt she had been giving signals which he had ignored. He explained he was nervous as they were such good friends; he hadn't wanted to ruin it. And because they had spent years growing up together, he wasn't sure if she was just being friendly. They had a summer of fun, but sadly were never able to build what could have been an amazing relationship as his parents moved at that stage to another school, his Dad having secured a headship. Cory in turn completed his exams, worked and went travelling, then off to University back in the north. Although he kept in touch with Abbey, she settled down with Gez. They had occasional contact over the years, but after her divorce she eventually remarried, as did Cory and their lives again went in different directions. Even now Cory believes she is the one that got away (well her and possibly Chloe, the current on/off love of his life, but she features in much later chapters). If only they could have got their acts together at the same time, they could have converted their summer fling into the solid relationship it should have been. But that's life, sadly. You don't always meet the right person at the right time. It did however teach him a very valuable lesson, namely that if you find a girl attractive, whether a long term friend like Abbey or someone new, you tell them and avoid all the awkward uncertainty. As their circumstances prevented them building their relationship by the time they finally got together, he resolved then he would never again in life let that happen to him. So all the girls subsequently who have accused Cory of being direct, that's why! Although the bond and connection with Abbey was amazing, based on childhood friends eventually growing into teenage lovers and possibly therefore being his first real love, she wasn't his first real, serious relationship. That was Penny.

As a young teenager, Cory had been the quiet type. He preferred to watch and listen and only speak publicly when he had something to add. Initially his teachers had worried he was shy, or reserved, but eventually realised he was just a bit more selective in his social interactions than some of his peers. Interestingly Cory worked out that although he was good looking, the girls at school responded better to his more garrulous mates. At this very early age he realised what he came to know as a truth in later life, that women respond much more to guys with a personality than just the strong silent type. Another valuable lesson learned, and another reason he has been the way he is with women in adult life. Cory had dated a few girls in the early years at school, but like many adolescent boys, preferred the company of his mates, football, other sports, and just being lads to all that soppy relationship stuff. That was all fine in the early teenage years, when having a girlfriend wasn't a serious issue. Those he did have were ok, but never particularly serious. Strangely looking back now, Cory can see that all his relationships with women have been one of the two types – either, the intensity, strong bond and connection (is that love?) that he had with Abbey and Penny; or the short term, ok but not serious and ultimately not going anywhere episodes (whether all the women knew they were in the latter, he was less certain of). Certainly those Cory has loved have talked of the incredible connection and intensity of love; those he hasn't have talked of emotional distance, coldness and almost lack of interest.

Cory was happy as a teenager until the stress of his O Levels, revision and build up to them coincided with his inexorable teenage hormone rage. Looking back he realises what a complete pain in the arse he was. Having now been through it with his own teenage kids he sees how utterly bewildering it is for all concerned. As Harry Enfield so accurately portrays through his teenage character Kevin, everyone is at a loss to understand how the sweet, lovely child of the previous 13 or so years suddenly changes into a bundle of conflicting emotions, raging hormones and incredible mood swings. The first real manifestation of this in Cory was his gradual refusal to attend Catholic church any more. When they lived in the north, he had always attended Catholic schools so it was all part of both the school day and general life and wider community. There was no question of not going to weekend mass, first communion, becoming an altar boy (although luckily one of his parents' moves had scuppered this for Cory, or who knows what additional tales of Catholic priests he would have had to relate now!). Generally being part of the Church community was a big, inescapable part of your life. In the south however, the small Catholic church they went to seemed like an outpost in the heathen southlands. There was a much less religious feel to life generally down here, and the schools were largely non-denominational, certainly in the area they lived in. So that weakening of the Catholic church's inherent vice like hold over their lives coincided with his hormonal teenage maelstrom of changing views and challenges to any authority – particularly his parents and the church. As he played football on Sundays, that became his real religion and focus. Sunday Mass got in the way. Having been a good boy and attended classes to take his Confirmation, and Mass regularly for years, he now suddenly felt empowered as a stroppy teenager to announce that he didn't agree with Catholicism and no longer wished to attend Church. This debate raged at home for some time but ultimately his parents gave in. Church became less regular and eventually no longer part of his life at all. Cory's primary motivation was, firstly, to avoid the hassle of Mass on Sunday's when sleep and football mattered much more; secondly, to assert himself and make changes from his childhood subservient ways. Attending Church was simply now boring and irrelevant to his new life in the secular south. His considered views on religion (if he really had any) were largely ancillary at this stage but as he skilfully pointed out, how could he have apparently known as an 11 year old that he wished to confirm himself to God, if he now didn't know as a 13 year old that he did not! Early signs of that fine legal



mind at play? Or just a bit of a stropky teenager twat being awkward? Probably a bit of both but mainly the latter. As things were to play out a few years later though, Cory ultimately felt vindicated as we shall explore shortly.

The crux of the teenage problem is that despite their apparent strident, dogmatic views on everything, the teenagers themselves are more confused than anyone. Cory knew this himself at the time, but of course could never admit it to his parents. He stomped around raging against their life, where they lived, how noisy and disruptive his brothers were and the house was and anything else he could think of. Apparently his parents dreaded the evening meal time, as he would often launch into his diatribes at the end of the meal. Cory has related all this to his own kids, now that hopefully they are largely through their own teenage issues, anger and resentments. They agree that it's just some weird shit we all go through as we grow! Apart from the obvious physical manifestations, the oddest part of that side of the teenage years was to see (both when Cory was a boy, and watching his own kids grow) not only their own changes, but also those of their friends. It's bad enough to watch your own kids' transformations, but to see their sweet, cute little friends also morph into dodgy teenagers is so sad. It truly is the loss of the innocence of youth. On the football pitch especially, the effects can be soul destroying – the small skilful pre-pubescent star player can turn into a lumbering uncoordinated oaf, cruelly ending his parents' lifelong dreams of him becoming professional footballer. Cory did all he could to channel his teenage rage, being was generally as active as possible. He played every sport he could, all year round and cycled to his Saturday job in the kitchen of a local hotel and his summer holiday job labouring for a local builder. But the reality is that all of this is never enough; his own kids now don't even do a fraction of that, as they vegetate in front of the TV and games consoles. They appear listless and lifeless unless plugged in to some form of online device; they even use I Pads for every lesson at school now, for God's sake! But there is no shortcut to getting through the teenage years. You just have to go through the full gamut of teenage pain, angst, confusion, uncertainty, anger and frustration, whilst hoping that what you say and do during the hormonal tsunami that hits you doesn't leave any irreparable damage. Cory hopes and believes that was the case for him, as it has been for his own kids subsequently. It is not always the case sadly however, as we will touch on later.

Cory enjoyed his school years. There was the sporting side where he captained very successful school football and rugby teams throughout and was an accomplished athlete, holding various school records for sprint events. The group of boys in these teams was generally the same; many of whom were also members of the same local Sunday league football team, which was managed by Gez's Dad and coached by Cory's. The only bad memory Cory has of these times was breaking his nose as an 11 year old when an opposition player headed him in the face, rather than connecting with the ball. The shock and realisation that blood was pouring from his nose, the hospital visits, and operation to re-set it (pointless as it turned out, as you will read later) were all unpleasant experiences. But they were nothing compared to the post-operative discomfort of waking to find packing wedged up his nose to the back of his throat. Disgusting, uncomfortable and not something he would ever put himself through again, as is evident from his nose now. He had had a tonsillectomy as a 5 year old but didn't recall this level of discomfort. Looking back now, he would put it on a par for unpleasantness with the laser eye surgery and post-operative pain following a minor umbilical hernia repair he subsequently had. When he broke his nose again in later years he refused to go through this again as the memory was so bad. How the hell women go through child birth, time after time, he will never be able to comprehend!

The football team was good and they were a great group for many years; playing sport together, socialising around the local town, knowing each other's families well, and generally enjoying growing up in a small Oxfordshire market town. As everyone finds though, as you grow from 11year olds through to 16 year olds, not only does life change, but your friends do too. The sporty guys who aren't as academic, who were your best mates in the early years become less so as you stay in at weekends and evenings to do homework, revise for exams. They don't, they go out more and more, socialising, womanising and enjoying life. Although Cory was torn and sad to lose his friends, he knew he was making the right choice. It was a small price to pay and generally to be regarded as a swot. As mentioned, Gez became a professional footballer (which had been Cory's dream), but at a time before the big money brought by Sky and the Premier League had arrived in English football. His promising career was curtailed by a series of leg breaks, and he ended up in the lower leagues and running a sports shop. Far worse though, he blew his marriage to Abbey — the biggest crime any man could ever make in Cory's view. The rest of that group ended up running shoe-heeling bars and other similar jobs in their local town, marrying girls they'd known at school, drinking in the same pubs they had as teenagers and never leaving or progressing their lives. In comparison, the group (of swots) that Cory graduated towards for the final years of his school days, who he stayed on in the sixth form with, all moved on attaining successful careers all over the world. It was an interesting socio-economic experiment for Cory to witness, and indeed to be part of albeit inadvertently. Although it was sad at the time to have his erstwhile friends turn against him, as he was no longer one of them as he put his studies first. This turned out to be another important one of life's lessons for Cory – you do what's best for you whatever those around you say, even if you have to go against the crowd; you never let anyone's comments, barbs, or unpleasantness deter you from achieving your own goals and ambitions; and just because someone has apparently been your close friend for years, it doesn't mean they always will be. Life moves on, and we have to move with it, looking forward, never dwelling on what was in the past. Sadly, Cory has brought this attitude into relationships in his adult life when they have run their course (in his opinion at least, although not always mutually agreed by the ladies in question it seems).

The transition to a new group of friends was ok, as they were all decent kids, and of course they had a mutual aim in studying hard to get good grades and progress – not something necessarily always shared by Cory's kids' generation these days it seems! A number of them were sporty too, so had played in the same teams as Cory over the years. He didn't necessarily have the previous years' closeness to them and the bonds that they had developed with each other, but that didn't really bother him. Given the transitory nature of his childhood, due to his Dad's peripatetic teaching career, he was used to making friends for a few years then moving on and losing them. Cory vowed that when he had

kids, he would bring them up in one place. Although he fully understood his parents' reasons for moving around and the necessity of it to improve their quality of life as his Dad won promotions, he did not want that for his own kids. He accepted that his and his brothers quality of life had been far greater than his parents had been able to afford, due to the nice house provided by the schools, but determined that he would do all he could to give his own kids more. Whether he achieved that, perhaps only time will tell. Or rather did he end up by giving them security and stability to begin with, that was then lost in the divorce from their Mum and subsequent acrimonious years, and then trying to compensate by spoiling them? All to be investigated much later.

So this new group of more academic types became Cory's new friends. These were the nerds and swots of earlier years who Cory's old group of cooler kids hadn't liked. But as the saying goes, the meek shall inherit the earth – just look at Gates, Jobs, Zuckerberg et al. They were a good group and they all got on well as they progressed into sixth form together. The new headmaster's son was part of the group and as he was from Leeds they had that mutual connection too. They shared the piss-taking of their northern accents (Cory having avowedly never lost his northern pronunciation of those tell-tale words such as glass, grass, after, ask and so on); and a mutual love of Leeds United, which led to trips on the bus from Oxon to London to watch them play. This was in the early 1980s, when English football was still a rough game, with rougher still crowds. They stood on terraces in those days; no respectable fan ever had a seat (well before Hillsborough and the Taylor report changes). A typical vivid memory being standing on the dirt terracing at Stamford Bridge, as Chelsea stewards taunted Leeds fans, who responded by ripping up clumps of the mud and decaying concrete terracing to launch at the offending stewards. These were teenage boys, from a nice middle-class Oxfordshire market town, studying ultimately to become lawyers, doctors, and scientists etc, caught in the war of hatred between those rival football tribes. Cory and friends were penned in by the police for hours after games, escorted miles from train stations to grounds and back (whether we wanted to go there or not!) and generally treated like cattle. Any efforts to communicate with the police, let alone reason with them rationally, were flatly rejected. All very scary indeed. On the safety of the bus out of London back to their middle-class world, they would pontificate about the perils of Thatcher's police state, and other suitably political topics such as the validity of the Falklands war, her destruction of our northern homelands, entire mining communities, steel mills and generally the demise of industrial Britain. Although they were technically, chronologically (sadly and reluctantly) Thatcher's children, and their parents' generation appeared to support her as their lives became more affluent, the boys were free of such financial worries and generally hated her for all she represented. That view never changed as Cory grew older. He once saw her through the window of a Mayfair private club decades later, as she was in her final years, and felt the same rage at her destruction of much of Britain and the polarisation of the haves and have nots (continued apace, in true Tory style, by her party ever since). After her death, Cory stridently refused to be anywhere near her funeral procession, although he was working in the St Pauls area of the City, as many of his colleagues poured out to watch.

As well as Leeds games in London and across the south, their little gang also ventured to Wembley (the old, original version with the twin towers) to watch England play. The highlight undoubtedly being the 9 goals scored against Luxembourg on a cold December night in 1982, when Luther Blissett scored a hat trick, supported by half of the rest of the team getting a goal each too. Cory & Co had also discovered the pubs in their small market town that would serve them under-age, en masse. Ironically the best one (the Row Barge) tucked down some backstreet was closest to the small police station in the town – the received wisdom was that as long as the police knew the teens were all there, then they weren't causing trouble elsewhere. Ultimately the landlord was prosecuted and the pub closed, as such early 1980s lenience and pragmatism was swept away by rules, regulations and jobsworths. The effect being to drive the disenfranchised youth into the public parks to drink, smoke, experiment with substances and the like. More fine planning by bureaucrats with no real understanding or knowledge of the local community, and certainly no provision of any suitable facilities for bored, restless teenagers. Remember they had no online and social media diversions in those days. So they drank themselves silly, with ridiculous concoctions like depth charges, snakebites and other suitably horrible mixed drinks designed to get these teens drunk as quickly as possible. There wasn't really the culture of pre-loading as Cory witnessed now with his own teenage kids. The pub was king back then or the party at someone's house if their parents were away, which certainly hasn't changed between generations. Cory and the gang had so many of these. The view seemed to be that as they were all bright, well educated, serious, hard working kids, who studied and didn't mess around they could be trusted. Oh dear. How wrong. Whilst all of that was true, they were teenagers after all, who did study hard and take the important bits seriously, which meant when they came to party, they did it in style! It started, inevitably, with bottles of cider bought cheaply from dodgy corner shops (the supermarkets wouldn't serve us under age), supplemented by whatever could be raided from the host parents' drinks cabinet. Cory cannot now still even smell whiskey or port without feeling sick, let alone drink them as a result of those days. There was the usual smoking as it was cool, and weed around too but no other drugs in those days. Cory, as a non-smoker, was somewhat hampered and after a few feeble efforts to inhale, finally gave up after a party at his own house one Christmas when his parents were away visiting relatives in the north. He had naturally promised to have no parties, and using the same logic his own kids do now too, had justified inviting a few mates round in breach of this promise, but as 'a gathering' rather than a party. Such semantics rarely impress parents but it's good to see every generation instinctively tries it. Teenagers are just teenagers after all, whichever era they are born in. As Cory prepared his parents' house for the impending arrival of his friends, he obviously drank a few cans of strong lager, some suitably horrible cider and thought he should probably practice his smoking, so lit up a fag and inhaled deeply. The violent eruption from his mouth all over the kitchen floor of all he had drunk, as he coughed, spluttered and gagged was enough to put him off smoking for life – well that and having to change his clothes and clear up the mess all over the kitchen floor. The lingering aroma didn't help his pulling efforts that night either.

Those parties were very popular as this group of teenagers got to know each other better, and as they started exploring each other sexually too. Lots of kissing, petting and sometimes more. Although they were all young and inexperienced, some swapping around happened too; but as they were all friends, it was regarded as normal behaviour – though

usually not when people were a couple (although that did occur occasionally and cause much angst, see below). Cory, to his shame, recalled on one occasion pretending to have passed out as one girl (who he had been told was keen on him but the feeling was unfortunately unrequited) started kissing him! Not his proudest moment, but sadly not his worst either (but more of that later). It is fair to say that many of the more intimate moments happened privately, or on subsequent one to one meetings; and although the group all knew it was going on, as long as no one was a couple and straying it was fine. As part of his invaluable life lessons, Cory had two experiences over this period where his then girlfriends became intimate with another of his male friends (in both cases there was previous history, which was perhaps part of the explanation). That said, to be clear Cory did also go with girls he knew were liked by or involved with other boys he knew; everyone was at it, and the lines were rather blurred. Or rather as has worked out and we will return to a few times in this book, the male species is made up largely of predatory beasts; and where sexual activity with females is concerned, there is very little (if any) loyalty to other males. Look at all the affairs that occur between married neighbours, couples' best friends, work colleagues and so on. Sadly the cliché that too many men think primarily with their balls rather than brains is scarily true.

Benji and Penny had been an item in their early years at school. Cory didn't really know Penny then, she was part of the geek and nerd grouping when he had been part of the cool crew. Benji was in the same form group as Cory so although they knew each other, they weren't close friends at that stage as he was more in tune with the other group. Cory couldn't recall if he knew Benji and Penny had been together – probably not, as they weren't really relevant to his life at that stage. Weird how things change, isn't it? She evidently moved away from the school for a year or so, as her Dad was relocated somewhere (he was some eminent scientist). Cory didn't know whether Benji and Penny had reunited on her return as it was irrelevant to him. But that all changed once they all entered the sixth form. The story of Cory and Penny will be recounted shortly, but for present purposes it is enough to record that they became friends and developed into much more. Benji was by now one of Cory's very good friends too. Cory spent little time thinking about Benji and Penny's previous childhood romance, as he and Penny were happy together and Benji was a good mutual friend to them both.

Cory was about to learn another of life's cruel, but vital lessons he would never forget. Beware of men who claim to be 'just good friends' with attractive women. As Billy Crystal's character pronounced in 'When Harry Met Sally', men and women can never just be friends as the sex thing always gets in the way. Oh so true. Not necessarily from the woman's point of view, but almost invariably from the man's; particularly if she is attractive, he will want sex with her. Looking back now with the benefit of many years' experience, his view has not changed; in fact it has hardened and been reinforced at every turn. Cory regards it now as a universal truth, with many personal examples to back this up. Every time one of Cory's girlfriend's would tell him, X was just a good male friend; he knew the truth and was always proved right. The problem is that invariably that's really what the girl in question honestly thinks. Her belief is that X is lovely and sweet and just a very good friend, as that's how she sees him. She wants nothing more than that from him, and she believes he knows and accepts that. A classic example of men and women being so different in their thoughts and emotions — Men truly are from Mars and Women from Venus. The reality is that each of these 'best friend' men are obsessed and in love with that girl. They adore and worship her and crave her so much. Either they have been rejected and pretend they are ok just being friends, or they have never had the courage to try progressing, so live in eternal hope and frustration at their unrequited love. They spend hours with, and talking to these girls in the hope that she will realise his love, have a revelation about what a fool she's been not recognising it and they will fall in love and live happily ever after. X will have rescued her from all those bad men she prefers to him and he will be her saviour. Cory relates further evidence of this weird phenomenon in later chapters to prove his point. The one exception to this is the gay man who is every girl's best friend. Every girl wants one, if she doesn't already have one. She gets all she often really wants from a man, the kind, sympathetic ear, the best friend, in short, the nicer version of normal men without any of the testosterone driven sexual desires for her that ruin all other friendships and many relationships too.

As Cory and Penny's relationship developed, they decided to go to see Dire Straits (who were cool and happening back then!) in concert at the Hammersmith Apollo. Benji, as their good friend, came along too. It was a great concert, a good night out and everyone was happy and in party mood. This however was all soured and ruined by the following turn of events. As Cory returned to his seat from a brief toilet break, he was staggered to see Benji leaning in towards Penny and the two of them snogging each other's faces off. Cory approached and asked what the fuck was going on. Penny went bright red and said she was sorry; it was a temporary aberration, she had got caught up in the mood of the concert. Although the details of the rest of the evening are hazy, Cory did not speak again to Benji from that moment for many months. He managed to resolve issues with Penny, by her apologising profusely and promising to have nothing more to do with Benji. She came out with the classic line that she had been taken by surprise when he leaned in for the kiss, as she thought they were just good friends. He had however admitted that he still had feelings for her and she had temporarily been swayed to not resist, slightly drunk in the good mood of the evening by her ex declaring his ongoing feelings for her. Cory said it was her choice, if she still wanted Benji she should go for it, but Cory would no longer be part of her life. She decided to stay and cut Benji out until the anger subsided. Therein lies another of life's eternal truths – you can never lose real friends. Yes, you can argue, hate each other, feel let down and betrayed by them, and vow never to speak to them again. But if they are real friends, no matter how long the impasse, how big the schism in your friendship, one day you will both think, fuck it – our friendship matters more than whatever we fell out over. If this never happens, then the sad reality is they were never truly a real friend. Naturally those were not Cory's thoughts at the time, and he avowedly ignored and avoided Benji for a long time. It was awkward in a small town and for a while in the sixth form environment, though helped by the summer holidays intervening. Eventually, after a long period of reflection they were reconciled. Benji was his friend. Benji and Penny had been together years ago, long before Cory was with her. She was a very attractive, vivacious young lady who many boys lusted after. Cory decided that as long as there was never any repetition, it was an understandable one off that could be forgiven. So he did. Given what was about to transpire, he was very glad he had done so.

Adrian and Nina was a very different scenario. That said, it was also scarily similar in too many ways to the Benji and Penny incident. Adrian was the headmaster's son mentioned above. He and Cory were friends, they went to football matches together and they spent time together outside school. They got on well. Nina was also in the sixth form with them. Apparently there was some sexual history between them, but then that applied to many of the randy teenagers in the sixth form! Cory had paid little attention to Nina previously as he had been happy with Penny. After Penny though, Nina had made it obvious quite quickly that she was interested in Cory, and he in true teenage boy style (which sadly many men never outgrow) he thought what the hell, why not. She had seduced Cory at one of their usual house parties and he had gone along with it. He knew very little about her, but teenage male testosterone levels don't need to know very much. They got together and much later Cory found out that she had a habit of seducing boys at parties. She had with Adrian, and a number of others before and since. Cory took the view that he was enjoying their time together, the sex was great and it served its purpose there and then. He went along with the relationship for the period of months it lasted. He knew it wasn't love. The intensity and connection he had enjoyed with Penny was not there. Partly because they were very different girls, but mainly because Penny had been a very good friend before anything romantic developed. As Cory came to realise (especially now looking back over the decades) his best relationships have always evolved from some form of friendship first. His least meaningful or concrete have been those where he met someone he didn't know, and immediately fell into a relationship with them (with a few hybrid types too thrown in for good measure). Perhaps this is all overly-analytical, though that is inevitable in a book such as this. Frankly, if he'd known then what he does now; with the benefit of decades of experience, wisdom, hindsight and failed relationships; and generally just 'getting his shit together', he probably would never have done a lot of it. But that's life, isn't it. We live and learn (or not in many cases) don't we?

Nina was from a friendly working class family. Her Dad ran a local business in which her older brother worked. He still lived at home with Nina and their parents, along with his much older girlfriend (who had kids nearly his age from her marriage) and their new baby. Her Mum ran the house, and was always friendly and welcoming, providing hot meals at lunchtime for all the family, organising the regular family nights out in the local pubs and holidays. Her Granddad lived two doors down from them and joined in all the above activities. This was all a new world to Cory though, and he took a while to adjust to these 'salt of the earth' types. He was told he was too polite and formal by Nina's Mum over the first few weeks, and gradually learned to just join in. It was an interesting change to his own middle class upbringing. What shocked him though, apart from Nina's apparently insatiable desire for male attention, and sexual favours offered in return was the wider shenanigans that probably explained Nina's attitudes and behaviour. He became immersed in their family, as that's the way these traditional families are, open and welcoming, and you become one of them. His slightly sheltered, blinkered upbringing by his caring, loving parents, but who weren't very worldly, was eye-opening changed. The scales didn't just fall from his eyes; they were ripped off and destroyed forever. Although it was all quite shocking at the time to a still somewhat naïve 18 year old, it was all invaluable life experience. Like everything else in this book, vital life lessons were learned that have made him into the middle aged man he is today, for good or bad, for better or worse.

It transpired that Nina was evidently known as something of an easy lay around town. People asked Cory why he was with her, especially when compared to Penny. All he could say was that given the way that had ended, he was just having fun. He came to realise he was just on the rebound and seeking solace and comfort given the emotional trauma he had been through. Although it was never at the time as callous as it now sounds, he had used Nina to get over Penny. As she had initiated things, he didn't feel guilty. It probably explained his attitude to her reputation and much of what he learned about her. She was known to have had a whole string of one night stands, often with older guys, but then many attractive girls do as they grow up, and many men exploit this. What shocked Cory though was to learn that she had even shagged some of her Dad's mates. Even worse, one of them was also having an affair with her Mum at the same time. These were mind-boggling scenarios for Cory to comprehend. Her brother's older girlfriend also turned out to have been the wife of another family friend, until she started her affair with their son. Against this background Cory thought, well she's ok when they were together, and if he found out she'd done anything behind his back, with any of her other older men, he would work out how he felt and deal with it at that time. No need to worry unnecessarily now and to stop his regular sex life just yet. What he didn't expect however was the scenario with Adrian. Cory divided his time between nights at Nina's and time at home studying for his imminent A Levels. One Sunday morning as he was leaving after another night of passion, she started asking him to spend the day with her. He said no, he had revision to do as did she. Although she was bright, she was less academic than Cory and got upset with him. He was resolute though, he had to go and study. She said she might catch up with some of their friends, which he thought nothing of. She jokingly (or so he thought) said also that if he wasn't going to have sex with her again, she would get one of their other male friends to do so. Cory laughed and said, yeah fine. He of course did not mean it. As it transpired, she evidently did! She chose to revisit her previous assignations with their mutual friend Adrian. Not just as a one off apparently but as a bit of a fling. Although Cory was still relatively naïve, he gradually realised over the following weeks that she was acting differently. One night when he wasn't due to see her, he suddenly decided to check where she was, not something he had ever contemplated before. His view was (and remains) that if you don't trust someone you are involved with, you probably shouldn't be with them. She was not at her friend's where she had claimed to be but at Adrian's (her car parked outside being conclusive proof). Cory confronted them, all sorts of arguments ensued and it was all highly-charged and very emotional. Adrian's Dad, their school headmaster, subsequently learned of it all, and as a devout Christian disapproved of his son's actions, whilst pointing out to Cory he should get out of this rebound relationship. Adrian and Cory went through the inevitable period of silence and eventually tried to repair the damage, but never could. Months later an argument between them over something completely unrelated led to this issue arising, and Cory knocked Adrian off his feet with one punch. Nothing more was ever said about it, but their friendship was over. As for Cory and Nina, after their exams they went to Ibiza on holiday to see if they could fix things. Another valuable life lesson learned here, a holiday with your partner is a great way of finding out how compatible you really are, stuck together without a break for a week or more. He has used it very successfully many times since. It became clear that

they couldn't fix the damage. Cory decided that although sex had been good and fun as a release from A level study tedium, now that was all over and he was going away to Uni. (after a gap year) he no longer needed her in his life. It was at that stage that he and Abbey finally consummated their long-term friendship into something more physical and tangible, but the timing just wasn't right to make it into a longer term relationship. Sadly. But all of these incredibly important life experiences, good and bad, have undoubtedly influenced him over the decades since. The fact that he can recall them now, over thirty years later, so clearly shows how engrained they are in him. Sadly though they pale into insignificance alongside the next major event, and perhaps one of two main things in his life that have made Cory into the man he became.

Cory had achieved good O level grades in his exams (pre GCSEs, coursework assessments and all the modern changes), and decent A Levels. He had no idea what to, had toyed with joining the Forces but the Falklands War had just happened so the spectre of real fighting and death (ironically as it was soon to turn out) was too real, and so went to University instead. Many did as it was always a good option in those days as you decided what to do with your life, before tuition fees, extortionate student rents and the prospect of a better job on graduation – all unlike now. He got an excellent degree and then launched his professional career in the City. But it could all have been so different, as he could have been stopped in his prime because of what he did just before his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday.

### *Finding love*

Cory and Penny got together about halfway through their first year in the sixth form. They became friendly as they were doing some of the same subjects and through the study and social time they spent with each other in the common room. She was a popular girl, well-liked by all. She was attractive, intelligent, sporty, musically talented and from a lovely, posher middle class family. She was particularly popular with the boys. Cory noticed that the older boys in the upper sixth spent a lot of time around her. But he and Penny got on very well and the bond between them appeared to be growing daily. Do please remember though that at this stage he was still a shy 17 year old and less confident around girls – very hard for women these days who know Cory to appreciate no doubt! Cory valued their friendship, increasing closeness and connection but given that she was being pursued by the older boys thought it would just have to stay at that, at least until the older guys left at the end of the year. He subsequently learned from Penny that she was having similar thoughts. Indeed her contemporaneous diary talked of liking Cory, but being unsure if he liked her romantically as although they were so close, he never made a move. Although she wanted him to, she wouldn't make the first move as good girls didn't, so if he wasn't going to she may as well start seeing one of the older guys. She recorded that maybe she would have Cory as her closest male friend, whilst being romantically involved with one of the other guys. The traumas of teenage emotions, love and lust!

Fortunately, the situation soon resolved itself. One day Penny invited Cory over to her house to study, to discuss some of the work they were doing and to hang out. He was delighted. It confirmed what he had hoped but been unsure of, that she liked him romantically too. He arrived at her house, they had pleasant chats, discussed work and then the moment came. He resolved it was now or never, they were alone, they liked each other and got on so well, so what the hell. He was nervous, as he really cared about Penny, but had to know how she felt. So he leaned in for a kiss. Their lips met, and wow! All doubts evaporated. It turned out they had both been feeling the same for some time. Nervous excitement and wondering if the other felt the same. They did. It was so sweet, so lovely, such a beautiful culmination to months of an increasingly strong connection growing between them. They laughed at how stupid they had both been to almost lose out on this, given their relative inexperience and naivety. After this, and the subsequent events with Abbey, Cory was a changed man. Never again he vowed would he ever be left wondering if a girl liked him. But for now, he and Penny enjoyed their burgeoning romance adding to their already close friendship. All their sixth form colleagues asked why they had waited so long, as it was so obvious to everyone else how close and attracted to each other they had been for months. The only surprise was that it had taken them so long to finally get together. Seemingly the only person who wasn't happy for them was their mutual friend Benji. They spent even more time together, got to know each other's families and their great connection grew quickly into teenage love. It was the first serious, deep, grown up real relationship for both of them. Life was great. They enjoyed the spring and summer together, in the sixth form and out. Over the summer holidays they went to Wales camping with another friend and got ever closer. They went up north for her to meet his extended family. The culture shock for her particularly in the small working man's village was marked. These blunt-speaking Yorkshire people with their strong views, opinions and directness were a far cry from her genteel, socially correct posh Oxfordshire village tennis and dinner party circle. She struggled to understand their accents, causal profanities as part of every other sentence and local phrases. She was thrown by their politically incorrect views of the world, their inherent racism (although to them, it wasn't) as they used names and labels, long since banned in polite society that had been prevalent on 1970s TV shows such as 'Love thy Neighbour' and those of a similar ilk. Her visit with Cory and his family to the working man's club was educational. She had asked for a gin and tonic with ice please as a posh southern girl would. The barman bluntly replied in his broad Yorkshire accent that they didn't do cocktails, and 'if tha wants ice, tha'll 'ave to get up on 't bloody roof in winter lass!' She survived the experience; they were together, happy and in love.

They returned to sixth form to start their final A level year full of the joys of life, looking forward to making their University applications and started discussing their possible future life together. They intended to study different subjects at Uni. and that meant they weren't necessarily applying to the same places, but they had started to talk about whether they should or whether they should at least be close by. They knew deep down that they might meet new people and go their separate ways at Uni, so there was even talk of a temporary break once they got there to get that out of their systems, without destroying what they had. It was all very sweet young love. Looking back now Cory sees it for the tragic romance that it was. At that stage they were very good for each other and very happy. Cory had even not done some of

his assigned essays over that summer holiday as he was enjoying his time with Penny so much. That was a first for him, as he had always been so diligent previously about doing school/college work. He was beginning to realise though that sometimes you just go with the flow, enjoy what's happening and don't stress. As things turned out, he was so glad he had taken that decision. It caused a few fraught discussions with the head of sixth form at the time, who noticed the change and encouraged Cory to keep a balance. As Cory has gone through life since, he realised how important that advice was. We rarely achieve a proper balance between our home, work and social lives and we are all the poorer for it. They got their studies back on track, but carried on seeing each other regularly outside sixth form too. As Cory's home was slightly outside the local town and Penny's village was on the other side of it, relying on lifts from parents and long bike raids had become tiresome, so Cory had bought himself a moped with the money he earned from his Saturday and summer jobs — no spoilt teenagers then, unlike Cory's own kids now! His parents worried about him out on it (ironically as it turned out) but it gave him a new freedom he fully exploited. It also meant his image at sixth form suddenly changed into something of a biker boy albeit a very mild, middle class, small Oxfordshire market town version. This was all rather ironic as he was at the same time elected head boy of the entire school, probably as recognition of his good behaviour in the main school for 5 years and lower sixth the previous year. Such are the teenage years though, just as he achieved recognition he was finding love and his perspective on life was changing. Penny was elected as one of his deputies, reinforcing her popularity too. They were the golden couple; bright young attractive, sporty, intelligent people; recognised by the school as Head Boy and Head Girl, a great couple together deeply in love (well as much as you can be at 17) with glorious futures and their whole lives ahead of them. Or so they thought.

As mentioned, there was great social scene amongst the sixth form group; gatherings in local pubs were more regular now, as although all still under age, many pubs would serve them without question. The regular haunts in town were now becoming boring after too long drinking in them. It was decided that they would start to explore the more rural pubs in the beautiful Oxfordshire countryside in which they lived as a number of them were passing their driving tests, and had access to parents' cars on certain occasions. One Friday evening at the end of September, it was agreed that a crowd of them would meet at one particularly isolated pub, in the middle of nowhere down endlessly long, winding narrow country roads cut out between the trees and fields. So they all piled into a few cars and descended en masse onto the hostelry where they had a great night. At closing time they clambered back into their cars and headed off back to town, to drop off the various passengers at their homes. Everyone was in great spirits; they were a crowd of decent, bright, well-educated young things from nice homes, all about to apply to the Universities of their choices, enjoying their final year of sixth form together. How quickly that happy mood was violently shattered. The cars drove away from the pub in convoy down the dark, narrow country lanes. At one of the junctions, they split and went in different directions. The car Cory and Penny were in with three other friends proceeded further along a long winding single track country lane. Cory recalled that they had to pull over at least once to let an oncoming car pass, but other than that were in splendid isolation. The car gathered speed on the long straights, then slowed as the bends in the distance came into view under the full headlight beam. That was the general pattern as they approached the outskirts of civilisation again; just around the corner and down the last stretch of country lane lay the main road, fully illuminated unlike these dark treacherous country lanes. But they never quite made it; they suddenly swerved at the final corner, the driver losing control on a sharp bend and as he tried to steer back the other way, over compensated (as young inexperienced drivers do) and ended up in the ditch. The left hand side of the car had hit one of the huge trees bordering the ditch and left the car crumpled on that side. The impact was loud and the full force was felt in the car. Bang. Darkness. Eerie silence.

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To follow:

Part 2 — Deaths & Births; Marriage & Divorce

*"Don't confuse your path with your destination. Just because it's stormy now, it doesn't mean you aren't headed for sunshine"* (Anonymous)

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Part 3 - Drinking & Dating; Secretaries & Strippers

*"You don't lose friends, because real friends can never be lost. You lose people masquerading as friends, and you're better for it"* (Mandy Hale)

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Part 4 - Growing older: the penultimate chapter?

*"At this stage of my life, if it doesn't make me happy, make me better, or make me money, I don't make time for it"* (Anonymous)

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Epilogue

*"Life is short, live it. Love is rare, grab it. Anger is bad, dump it. Fear is awful, face it. Memories are sweet, cherish it"* (Anonymous)

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*"Before you act, listen. Before you react, think. Before you spend, earn. Before you criticise, wait. Before you pray, forgive. Before you quit, try."* (Ernest Hemingway)

Synopsis:

This is the story of life. It is about love and relationships; about the importance of family; about how real life and human emotions invariably mess each of these up. It looks at death, divorce and dating; losing loved ones; family feuds and other intertwined issues; grief and stress and how we seek to cope (or spectacularly fail to do so) with all that fate and fortune throws at us on our journey through life. It is a series of personal anecdotes intertwined with the author's view of the world, both then as it happened and especially now he is older and hopefully much wiser. It is written with the benefit of hindsight. If he had had such clarity and understanding at the time, much of it would never have happened. But he didn't. As we all

know:  
*wise, you must first be young and stupid"* (Anonymous)

*"To be old and*

Look out for future planned instalments in this series:

THE LIFE, LOVES & PSYCHE OF A MALE MID-LIFE CRISIS: Volume 2 — A working life: Bullshit, Egos & Parties

THE LIFE, LOVES & PSYCHE OF A MALE MID-LIFE CRISIS: Volume 3 — Family, Love & Relationships

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