

Them
Rosen
Girls

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'What you put into fiction isn't the things that happen to you, it's the things that happen to you make you think up.'

Kingsley Amis

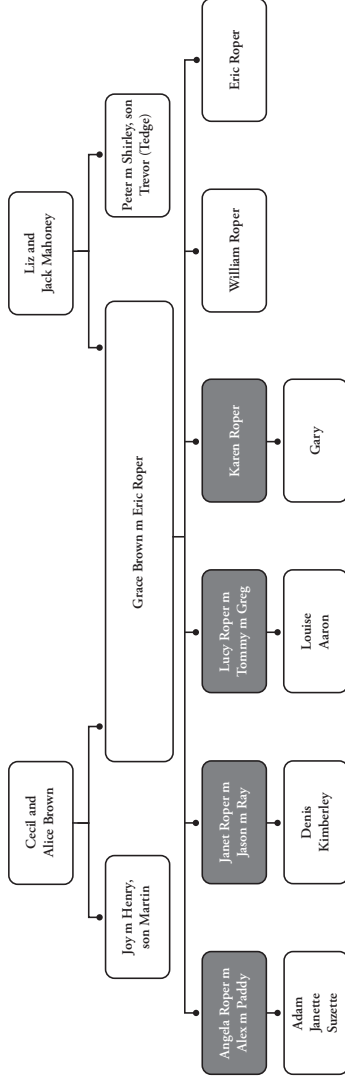
To Wendy,

*You never read me, and read me from the start; yet loved and feed me,
I hold you in my heart. With the best of my love, always.*

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Them Roper Girls' Family Pretty Tree



1

Angela

Me and Jan. My first memory, left on our own in the house, me and Jan. Aunt Molly from next door – not a real aunt, you know what I mean – is supposed to look after us. Mum had to be taken into hospital pretty sharpish for the birth – maybe she didn't have time to make plans, and Dad is away.

But Aunt Molly won't have us round her house to sleep. She's all right though, that's all right. She sees us up to bed with a broom in her hands and leans it against the wall. Says we can use it to bang on that same wall, it must go through to her house, if anything happens. Jan is still in nappies, but I swear I get up a hundred times in the night to make sure I don't pee the bed for Aunt Molly to find out in the morning. I do anyway though. I do still pee it.

I always tell my sisters they had it a lot easier. For one thing, I was the one who was always looking after them. They say I was a bit hard on them. They never seem to think it was a bit hard on me.

I haven't thought back to those years in the longest time, but lately Paddy has been stirring up memories, wanting to know about my childhood, drinking only tea between us. That makes me sound like a lonely old bat with her carer, and I'm not – not lonely I mean, and Paddy's not my carer neither if it comes to that. If I'd had a whole house to myself and just whoever else I want to invite in to share it when I was younger, what a luxury it would have been.

Dad was a soldier when our mum Grace met him. He'd tell us war stories

which, if we'd realised, was as good a proof as any that he was never in the war. Perhaps he was doing national service – they had that in them days you know. They got married within six months of meeting, best man an army pal of his who Mum said she never met except on that day, and I got born within six months of that.

I suppose Private Eric Roper – in some of his stories he was a captain, but he would wink when he gave himself that rank – must have had to accept some kind of discipline in the forces. Maybe he used his whole stock up then. I would *never* use the word discipline to talk about Dad.

They may have been a bit previous about having me, and Janet was born within the next twelve months – did you know they call them Irish twins when there's that short a space between them? Longer than real twins, but Jan and I have always been close.

He didn't have an accent or anything but there was some talk of Dad being from Ireland. That's what I thought they meant when I first heard them talking about us as Irish twins. Not that they didn't call us worse things than that. I wouldn't have minded gypsy – has a kind of romantic ring to it, you know, the gypsy prince (not Gypsy King like that boxer, that is a bit much) – but they hardly used that word, nor travellers. Sometimes gyppos, more often vanners or diddicoyes (I don't think pikies had been invented yet), all ugly words.

Lucy's arrival while I was left babysitting, I think we were living in a village somewhere near Thetford but can't be sure, was a year and something after Jan. I remember we would fight about whether she was mine or hers to play with. Mum was more than happy to let us look after her. Three kids was a lot to handle, I learned that early.

Whatever rumours you may have heard, all I can tell is I never knew Dad to say my third sister Karen, born another couple of years down the fifties, wasn't his. Mum had a wicked tongue, so if she did say that sometimes, that was her all over – probably just trying to get Dad to bite.

Others sometimes say they notice a difference in our looks, but I don't think kids care about that sort of thing, if they notice it at all. They might be cruel plenty of other ways, but not like that. Know what I think? It's cos they see so many supposed-to-be brothers and sisters on telly who look nothing like each other. In them days it would have been just *Crossroads* and *Corrie*, now there's *EastEnders* and *Emmerdale*, *Doctors* and all the rest – they just take it for granted. I've already said Dad was away sometimes. Maybe Mum got lonely. Who knows?

In any case we wouldn't all have to be the same, because while Dad was quite dark complexioned, black hair and sideboards when they came into fashion, Grace was more your classic blue-eyed blonde. That in itself didn't make her a beauty any more than it made her stupid, but I always thought it was a pretty good start. That she *was* a beauty her worst enemies never denied. She would complain about her nose being too small – Dad used to call her Pug sometimes, and I wondered why she didn't mind being compared to a dog as I thought he meant. She also made the best of her looks most of the time. It was a real shock to see her with straight hair later when she was suffering more than we knew.

I don't know about Jan with hers, but I would definitely have swapped my big hooter for Mum's little button. His first two girls had Dad's fleshy nose and his colouring, while you could have argued that Karen was similar to Mum except she had brown eyes, which stood out more against her fair skin. It was only Lucy among us girls who seemed to be a real joint project between our parents – his chunky build (I wasn't the first to call Luce thunder thighs) and her blue eyes, the hair a fudgy brown. Not that any of us ever got accused of falling out of the ugly tree and hitting every branch on the way down, like I heard Alex say about my best friend Sally Gregory. I know I shouldn't have laughed but I did.

Billy was definitely a Roper as they used to say – nobody would dream to deny he was Eric's son. Our parents were still together, or perhaps back together. I honestly can't say if Dad did time. I wouldn't say he favoured Billy – tell you the truth, he was less and less around by the time he was growing up – just for being a boy, named after Dad's dad, who we never knew. Probably some old Irish tinker, that's what I used to think when I was feeling mean about our dad. Billy was Mum's favourite from day one, then to be fair he come to dote on her as well. You've heard them talk about a man's man? I wouldn't say Billy ever got to be one, and if there even is such a thing I wouldn't call Mum a woman's woman. I'm not saying she was man-mad either though. Don't go thinking that.

Like I said they didn't call us travellers much, but Mum and Dad must have done quite a bit of moving around in their first married years, mainly East Anglia outside the big cities. What big cities, right? I suppose I mean Peterborough or Norwich although that, Norwich, was where Grace's family was from in the first place. Not so much villages either, they seemed to favour the little market towns. Just like I had no early memories of Swaffington where

I was born, Jan wouldn't of Washtown until we ended up back there.

I don't suppose Mum was in hospital long before she brought Lucy home. When she did, Dad's parents were there with us – Grandad and Nana. His stepfather really, but we always knew him as Grandad, not Grandad Jack any more than she was Nana Liz.

From Mum's side of the family, all we knew of was her sister, Aunt Joy. We'd all get birthday cards with a postal order from her. Mum would let us pick out a bar of chocolate or bag of sweets when she went to cash them in.

Mum was never what she used to call house-proud. I remember Nan, when Karen was born or some other time, cleaning ours 'from top to bottom' she told Mum, who thanked her, saying lucky it was only a bungalow then. 'I was going to do it before you came, but I knew you'd still go over it again, so I just put my feet up and had a fag instead.'

Grandad wouldn't dream of doing anything like housework, any more than Dad would. He stood outside our place near Thetford, smoking a Woodbine and looking sort of miserable that there wasn't more garden for him to get stuck into. Only a little bit of lawn by the garden path we shared with Aunt Molly, and various bits of that bald from where toys or house rubbish had been left on it too long.

Her husband Fred – we never called him 'uncle' for some reason – kept their garden very smart, separated from the path by a fence so little it wouldn't have been any obstacle to kids only a bit older than us. He had mowed our lawn once or twice with Aunt Molly standing guard, hanging out clothes or something, making sure he wouldn't be lured into a cup of coffee by Mum, though he was a lot older than her. Or *because* he was a lot older, know what I mean?

We kind of assumed Mum had fallen out with her family, because she never said much about them. Perhaps Aunt Joy years later would have told us a bit of their story if I'd have thought to talk to her about it. Lucy was the one for that, the family historian, at one time she was into doing one of them online research things, family trees and stuff. She got a bit mardy cos I laughed when she told us she was going to do that. Good luck to her – I didn't mean to be taking the mickey or anything. I just somehow had a picture in my head of a pretty tree, us all falling off it and landing on our feet, all the better for kissing a few leaves on the way down.

We hadn't seen much of Dad's folks either, for whatever reason. East Anglia is big but not so big that we'd ever been that far from Washtown, close

enough for Jan to be born there during our travels though we only moved into the town itself later. All of us came to think of it as home, I suppose because it was the first place we'd ever been really settled. We started off living with Nan and Grandad, but that wasn't going to work for long, especially as our family continued to grow.

We were always in council houses or flats of one kind or another, like everyone was back then. I think Mum got pretty expert working the system so we were never without a place. She had good cards to play, a nap hand of children. It would have looked ugly if the council put us out on the street, grizzling and making a nuisance of ourselves.

I suppose they had family allowance at the least and perhaps some other kind of benefits. All us kids knew about money was that there wasn't much of it about and we had to be careful with what we got. We never had pocket money. Try telling that to today's lot and they look at you gone out, but we didn't notice. I know I'm starting to sound like Nan myself – nothing wrong with that being as I am one – but I don't mean to moan. I'm happy enough, really I am.

Grandad was a lorry driver, and Dad did some of that too. He was great with cars – always had one outside wherever we were living, never new, never ours. He didn't work from a garage, except he would go to one sometimes, to help out a mate he'd say. It was as if he never wanted to be tied down to a steady routine. Sometimes he did have plenty of money in his pocket, the best times. Even when we were real young he was never ashamed to take us all out to the club with him. It was Mum who preferred to make us stay at home while she went out with him, which I can understand better now.

He was a right one for clubs was Dad, more than pubs. He always said the beer was cheaper, the company better and the fruit machines paid out more. They were generally more welcome to children than proper pubs as well. There was a British Legion wherever we went – I suppose he got free membership there having been a captain an' all, ha ha. In Washtown our favourite place was the ex-servicemen's club, the Service, down near the library. Our uncle Pete kept it, a proper uncle. We knew we had to be quiet whenever there was anyone playing on one of the half a dozen snooker tables, unless it was only Dad against his brother when business was slack.

When we weren't bickering with each other, which was a lot of the time, Jan and me was very close. We never thought life might not be all that easy for Mum. She didn't go out to work regular after all like some of our friends'

mums. I say friends, but we didn't have many, we always had each other's back in the outside world. At school we were the bookends, that's what Mrs Lawrence called us when we first joined her class at Rambert Road Primary – the oldest and the youngest in our same year. Irish twins, remember.

Mum and Dad maybe had mixed feelings about moving back to Washtown. If he'd made a bid for freedom from his parents it had obviously failed, and she wasn't one to stop needling him at any sign of affection he got from them. Not that she had to worry about that with Grandad, but when Nan would talk about what a good footballer he'd been as a boy, always reminding us that he 'had trials for the Town', my mum knew he would end up looking at her and that's exactly when she would mouth 'mummy's boy' at him, out of Nan's eyeline. He wouldn't say anything straight away but it would most likely spoil the day later.

It wasn't as if Grace didn't get on with Nan, not really. They had that solidarity women always manage to find when lined up against men, cos let's face it, they're all a pain. I don't know how many years it took me to realise that – maybe not till these last few when Paddy helped set me straight, ha ha. I'll be fair to Nan because I did love her, she never said anything *outright* bad about Mum, but there was always that little niggler. However young we were, girls are good at picking up on that sort of thing, like men never do.

We must have enjoyed being at Nan's because we would always stop on our way home from Rambert Road, trailing the younger kids with us as they gradually joined us at school. She was always at her kitchen sink looking out onto the road the time we came by, perhaps she saved her washing-up till then. We knew we had to be a bit quieter if Grandad was upstairs 'catching some kip'. She would sometimes be getting his tea ready, we hardly ever stayed to eat a meal but she was usually good for a jam sandwich. Strawberry was my favourite. We didn't have to fight over it because Jan preferred marmalade, and Nan always had both.

At least I didn't have to look after Billy so much as I did the younger girls. Mum kept him closer to her than she did any of us, then there was Karen – sometimes we thought Billy was the only one in the whole family she could stand – and Luce liked to mother him a bit too. Anyway, he hadn't hardly started primary school when I was getting near leaving.

I was all right at Rambert Road – I'm not a complete thicket just because I haven't got any qualifications. I was in the group that took the eleven-plus our year, like not everyone was, they knew it would be a total waste of time for

some. I thought they did away with the whole thing for comprehensives, but now I heard some kids are taking it again.

I didn't do very well myself. I get tense when I have to sit quietly and do something on my own. With homework, we always used to go through it together, Jan and me. I was double upset because Jan wasn't in the gym where they set up the chairs for the exam – not that we would have tried to cheat or anything – and we would be separated whether I passed or not. I think she would have sailed through it, even as youngest in our class, but someone had decided she would be better with another year at little school before moving to one of the big ones.

In the summer holidays we all did our bit to earn some extra money, or help Mum to by going out to one of the villages around Washtown with her. Dad had a lorry-driving mate whose family owned plenty of land. Enough to keep us going right through till school again between picking strawberries, redcurrants, raspberries, blackberries, no problem getting our five a day but to be honest you soon got fed up with the very sight of them. Us kids weren't allowed to join in on apples, because of climbing the trees. When he wasn't away, Dad would take us down there in the morning, all five of us plus Mum, except sometimes Luce would cry off and manage to stay at Uncle Pete's. Otherwise it was the bus.

Dad would sometimes fetch us late afternoon as well. He had a go at picking strawberries when he arrived early one day, full of (I heard Mr Sealey say this, he probably didn't mean me to) 'piss and vinegar'. He lasted half an hour tops before going to sleep in the back of the van until we were finished, telling Mum he didn't know how she did it, his back was aching already. I don't know about the vinegar but I reckon he had definitely been on the piss that day.

Not too many summers were like that. We wouldn't always have been within reach of Mr Sealey's land, Dad wouldn't have known his son Bob, Mum would have been too pregnant to go fruiting some years. It's probably the one when I'd just left Rambert Road that sticks in my mind because it was nearabouts the last we would be properly together as a family. As a more or less happy family, anyway.

They say if you can remember the sixties you weren't there. The druggies and pop stars say that. I was there and I remember them too well sometimes: my first baby, first marriage, first suicide attempt (not necessarily in that order).

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