

**Chapter 1**

**We're hard to spot, aren't we?**

Are you one of the drivers?"

That's the first thing said to me. That's the first impression I've made. I've made it on Pat, who's never seen anyone like me on a **Shearings** holiday before. She says that on her first holiday she didn't play bingo the first night because she thought it was for old people, but that she played the second night and realised that either it isn't for old people or she's an old person, one of the two. She's been on loads since. All over the country. She says you meet all sorts. She remembers one meal when she was sat with a posh couple that looked stuck-up and not her type of people at all. In the event, they had a **blast**. 'I didn't think posh people could be funny. Goes to show: you never know who you'll get along with.'

On the M275 eastbound, Pat offers me a cup of coffee from her flask, then tells me she has a flat in Turkey that she bought with the lump sum she got when she retired from the NHS, and that I can use it if I give her enough notice and she's not there. I ask what part of Turkey the flat's in, east or west or whatever, but Pat says she doesn't know, says she doesn't bother with geography. Approaching **Havant**, she tells me to sit next to her so it's easier to talk. About half a dozen get on at Havant. They're chirpy, even at this hour, a bunch of larks or nightingales, saying

hello and good morning to the coach and all its fittings. I don't think I've been as cheerful my whole life, certainly not before 7.30am. An early indication that whoever said that we're happiest as children and elders, with the bit in between made relatively miserable by responsibility and vanity and anxiety and work, might have been onto something. I used to doubt the idea - that we're least happy in the middle. Youngish adulthood is so routinely associated with pleasure and indulgence and excitement that it's hard to believe that - according to the **boffins**, according to the stats- it's the stage of life that **yields** the least satisfaction. Whatever the data, and wherever the **peaks and troughs**, another elder's just got on and immediately sent round a tin of Quality Street.

My nan could get on here, at this pick-up point I mean. She lives just round the corner. As far as I'm aware she's not been on such a coach holiday. I can't remember the last time she went on holiday, to be frank. She mostly busies herself digging up the family tree. She's dug up two **paupers** this week already, while a few months ago she hit upon an **illicit** connection to Henry VIII. She's 81. If this trip goes alright, I'll drag her along to Torquay or Windermere or something. Somewhere nice. She showed me a picture once that contained the outlines of two women in one image. A sort of visual puzzle. I only saw the younger one. "You see,' she said, 'we're hard to spot, aren't we?"

It's hard not to get more interesting as you get older. That's what I've come to think, and that's what's led me here. Some manage it, of course, and manage it well. But as a rule of thumb, one can expect a person over 50 to be more interesting than a person under it, if only by dint of having more **grist in the mill**. And yet for the most part, I ignore this probably-more-interesting section of society, preferring to robotically and thoughtlessly mingle with my own generation, some of whom, indeed many of whom, are about as interesting as margarine on toast.

So over the past year or so I made an effort to shed my millennial skin. I started spending less time online and more time hanging around bowling greens and bingo halls, hoping for chance encounters. Why? Because it appeared to me that my elders had more to offer. Every time I went near a grandparent, or someone of grandparental vintage, I invariably came away from the encounter with some kind of snack and a new perspective on things.

Then a friend told me that his great aunt had been on a coach holiday to Exmouth with a company called Shearings, whereupon she had enjoyed four nights full-board in a period hotel, return coach travel, entertainment each evening, various excursions, a fair bit of wine, and the uninterrupted company of people of pensionable age, all for a hundred

quid. I quickly calculated that I could live on such a holiday for less than the cost of renting a room in London, and I just as quickly booked one: four nights in Scarborough, excursions to York and Whitby, twelve courses of dinner, a quartet of cooked breakfasts, plus the outside chance of being mentally extended and winning the bingo. £109. That's how much my sister paid to get into a disco in Ibiza. My ambition - as you might have deduced - wasn't especially earnest or high-minded. I didn't mean to bridge gaps or get a handle on **geriatric** issues. I didn't mean to examine myself (or anyone else), or take the temperature of anything, I didn't have a quest, or a resounding or convincing **existential** motivation the sort beloved of publishers. I didn't seek wisdom. I didn't seek revelation. I didn't seek vengeance against any baby boomers that might have stolen my future. Simply put, I did it because I thought it might be nice.

On the A3 heading north, Pat says that it's only when she looks in the mirror that she remembers she's 68. She says she's not comfortable with her age, not really. Am I comfortable with my age? With being 32? Not entirely, else I wouldn't routinely tell people I'm 30 or 31 or 29 - whatever

I fancy, so long as it's not older than the truth. There's a film, The Age of Adaline, which is memorable only for its central **conceit**: the **protagonist** doesn't age beyond 29, because she can't stand the idea of being 30. I can relate. I couldn't stand turning 30. I denied it. **Deferred** it. Kicked it down the road. But why? I don't want to live forever. It's not that. I get bored on Sunday afternoons. What would I do with forever? Perhaps it's a **latent** fear of non-existence. I might do a good job of pretending otherwise (a bit grumpy, a bit **complacent**), but the fact is I cherish life, am uncomplicatedly fond of it, and so I shy away from birthdays, from moving on, from running out. I've no time for death, and so I distance to grow up, myself from it, however stupidly, however ineffectively. Time to grow up, Ben?

10.00. London Gateway services at the foot of the MI. This is the interchange, where passengers switch to coaches heading to their respective destinations. Shearings has its own lounge. It's like heaven's waiting room - or your average GP surgery. I buy a coffee and take a seat on the edge of things, the better to weigh up the scene. I don't want to put too fine a point on it, but it's fair to say that this lot are probably

better at playing **bridge** than me. A couple from Reading are off to Bournemouth. Both are retired but busier than ever, don't know how they ever found time to work. She's writing a book about a bear who's made in China and gets up to all sorts. 'For kids, is it?' 'Rather adult, actually,' she confides. Her husband, for his part, is a 'street' photographer. He gives me his card, wishes me a pleasant trip, and then the two of them head off. I stay where I am, wondering what the next pair I chat to will be working on. Everyone's got something up their sleeve, I suppose, and I shouldn't be surprised if sleeves get bigger with time.

11.36. Somewhere on the M1. We're eleven in total but will be collecting another load near Coventry. The driver says: 'We're a small group today, ladies and gents. Average height, five foot four.' It's not a complicated joke but I didn't see it coming so it does a job on me. I'm in seat 13A. More or less at the back, more or less alone. With nobody to talk to, I give Scarborough some thought. I know the playwright Alan Ayckbourn's from Scarborough. I saw a programme about him a few years ago. He was sat in his back garden, which over looks the town and the beach. I remember thinking I wouldn't kick Scarborough out of bed. It used to be a so-called **spa town**, put up in the 1800s so well-heeled folk with broken ankles could dip said ankles in medicinal waters and be, well, healed. It grew to become one of the most popular holiday spots in the world, before easy aviation got Britons in the mood for Spain and Florida. They used to fish for tuna off Scarborough, and the town's in Yorkshire, God's Own County. That's about all I've got.

13.45. Corley. The East Midlands interchange. A dozen climb on. ‘That's better,’ they say, ‘'ere we go then.’ They look younger, this lot. I suppose they didn't have to get out of bed until mid-morning. Unlike the rest of us, who've bags under our eyes as well as under the coach. Our driver suddenly identifies himself, as if he's just remembered what his job

is. My name's Roger. This is the service to Blackpool,' he calls out through his microphone. A few whispers and doubts. 'Only kidding. We're off to sunny Scarborough. Scarbados they call it - the mad ones anyway."

‘That's enough of Scarborough,’ reasons Roger, ‘let's move on to the essentials. You'll get four free alcoholic drinks a night. There'll be no discriminating, Even the oldest will get served. Unclaimed drinks don't carry over to the next night, unfortunately. Given the choice, I'd have sixteen on the Thursday.' Good on you, Roger.

15.00. Yorkshire, England's biggest county. On average, Yorkshire folk are unusually proud of their county. Exhibit A: August I every year is Yorkshire Day, whereupon children dress up as Yorkshire puddings and bat stubbornly until September. Exhibit B: Yorkshire County Cricket Club recruited only from Yorkshire until the mid-90s, decades later than any

other county. YCCC wanted God's own leg-spinners, and nowt else. If Yorkshire is God's own county, then God knows what Hampshire is. Hampshire folk, to my mind, aren't in the slightest bit proud of their county. They might be proud of their village, or their town, or the size of their mortgage - but not their county. Indeed, most residents of Hampshire, as far as I can tell, are unaware they are residents of Hampshire. They probably all think they live in Surrey.

16.20. The land around the A64 seems ancient, medieval, out of time somehow. And when the light goes and a mist comes, it's like we've entered a different genre of book, of story, of land - from old pastoral to neo-Gothic. Out on a limb, is how you feel, and so you might. York's the nearest large settlement to Scarborough and that's 40 miles away.

I like Scarborough's **preamble**, its build-up. Two **colossal** hotels headline the scene, while two bridges make light of a valley, with the illuminations of a promenade below. Roger points out what shops we might pop to, where we might break for tea, where we might rent mobility scooters. A longish climb brings us up to the hotel - the Norbreck, a bit of which fell into the North Sea a few years ago, suddenly providing one guest with an unexpected en-suite. We're up on a headland here, a **promontory.** The next settlement east is a town in the German state of Schleswig-Holstein, while due north, via the Norwegian and Greenland Seas, is the Arctic. And to think this was the spot chosen for Britain's first seaside resort.

I'm in room 312. I've been given my drinks vouchers for the week and told not to photocopy them. A porter, operating on autopilot, insisted on carrying my backpack up the stairs. When I told him not to bother, he said: 'Better safe than sorry, sir.' If he's assuming the incapability of a millennial, I can only wonder what he assumes someone in their 80s

can't manage - 'Need some help with that biscuit, madam? The room is singular: if you had a guest, they'd have to sit on your lap and share your teacup. But it's warm and cosy and done in yellow and green and red, soft shades of each. My curtains bring a fruit salad to mind.

I go down for dinner. I've been allocated table 13, as I was allocated row 13. The table's for four but for now I'm alone. I'm dressed in a new outfit and I'm recently groomed (haircut, shave, etc.) with the result that I look smarter than I have done since my christening, I've made the effort because my nan insisted upon it. She said it wouldn't do to turn up to dinner looking relaxed. She said that her generation wouldn't be seen dead dressed casually in a hotel', which is an interesting scenario to consider.

There must be about twenty tables of two, and half a dozen tables of four, tucking into their meals watchfully, each diner as much aware of the strangers around them as what's on their plate. Everyone in the hotel's on the same holiday as me: four nights, excursions to York and Whitby,

full-board etc. I read the menu self-consciously. I feel like a menu myself, being read and judged. **Anomalies** attract attention. That's just how it is. Oddness is intriguing. The odd or anomalous thing needn't have any special qualities or enviable attributes, they need only be odd or anomalous - a potato among plums, for example. I order the fishcakes.

A man sits down opposite me. He doesn't look anomalous. 'I don't know about yours but our driver was full of it. I wanted to chuck him off the coach,' he says. ‘That wouldn't have got you far,' I reply wittily.

'I only booked yesterday. I fancied exploring. I reckon I've seen enough of Birmingham.’

We talk easily over bread rolls. It seems Alan was married at eighteen, and a father of two at 21. For most of his life he worked in a foundry, pouring liquid metal into a mould, where it adjusted to its cast, filled its boots, and then altered not. Alan tells me he had a couple of heart attacks in 2006 and then retired ten years later. I suggest he might not have waited so long, but he reckons you've to muddle through.

I used to tell the young lads at work who were moaning about the heat or the **tedium** "Don't worry, boys. It's only for a lifetime."

‘I suppose you might have said the same about marriage!’

‘I might have indeed. I divorced at 38-which was twenty years too late, I can tell you.'

He orders the chicken, then adds: The kids take everything you've got. You've nothing left for each other.'

Alan later remarried, but his second wife gets nervous around new people. I ask if it's his first time.

'Oh no, I've had chicken before.’

‘I meant-‘

‘I've been to Eastbourne with Shearings. They've got a nice big place down there. I was sat with a young woman for dinner.'

'Oh yeah?'

‘Well, she was 60-odd. Flirting, she was. I said, "Stop it, I'm married." She said, "Relax, so am I." We had a nice day out in Hastings."

Our puddings turn up. Alan looks at his vanilla ice-cream.

'Getting down to Eastbourne opened my eyes a bit. On the way home, I wondered where else I might have liked, if only I'd been. I got settled where I was and didn't know anything else. Everything just sort of got stuck after a while. I thought West Bromwich was the end of the world.'

We sit longer than the rest, talking about the grandkids he doesn't see enough of, and the amount of gel in the waiter's hair 'He's young,' explains Alan. 'Lad's got bugger all else to do.'

It's three quid to play bingo. The lounge bar is packed - there are more in here than were at dinner. I'm pretty good at bingo. I've only played once, on a ferry from Zeebrugge to Hull, but did alright for myself. There's about a hundred playing tonight, I'd say, but it makes no odds to me - I only go and win again. My triumph doesn't go down well. They don't mean to be rude, I'm sure, but when I go up to collect the cash price, someone tries to trip me up with their cane.

The bingo caller changes his jacket and does a few songs. He's got good range: Roy Orbison, Robbie Williams, The Human League. When he does the latter's 'Electric Dreams', one bloke from Sheffield looks ready to get up on the tables, though he might need a stairlift to do so. '100 per cent Sheffield that is!'

It's not all jolly, mind you. There are a few couples, scattered around the room, who are looking a bit down, a bit left out. After all, not every marriage is a never-ending **Fred Astaire routine**. When Alan calls it a night, I go and sit with one such couple. They're from Corby, Northamptonshire. Dennis and Clementine, or Clem. The former does most of the talking. He wears the trousers and the skirts, I'd say. Nice enough bloke, don't get me wrong, but I wouldn't mind knowing if Clem's got owt to say. When I tell them it's my first time, they've lots of tips for me. I'm to make sure I use all my vouchers; to invest in a travel pillow if I'm going abroad; and to make bacon butties at breakfast and then have them for lunch. And - especially important - I'm not to bother paying extra for a sea view. They did that once and felt like they couldn't leave the room.

Dennis checks his watch. Then he looks at my spare vouchers. He puts two and two together and sends me up to the bar to make use of them. The reason I've got spares is because I've been trying not to drink lately. Edward Albee said everyone's got a certain amount of drink in them,

and that while some spread it out over 60 years, others get through it in ten. I fancy I fall into the latter category. I get back from the bar, Dennis says he's got something to tell me. Oh yeah? He says that he knows my game, that he saw me chatting to your woman at the bar. I hand over one of the two pints (I'm on holiday after all) and tell him, quite sincerely, that I wouldn't dream of it.

**Chapter 2**

**There's an art to eating happily alone**

I slept well. It's not hard when you've bingo winnings under your pillow. And I like single beds. I find the lack of options restful. Boundaries can be good for us when the world's our oyster, it can give us a dodgy tummy.

I go down for breakfast. We're in the same room as dinner, with the wide, west-facing bay window now full of things it hadn't been; namely, a terrace of Victorian houses and part of the North Sea. I've a boundary down here as well: I'm expected to sit at the same table for the duration of my holiday (says a waitress when I try to sit by the window), so

I'd better get used to Alan and table number 13.

As I investigate the buffet, someone says: 'You did well last night.' Then someone says words to the same effect as I'm waiting on my toast. And then someone says well done as I'm sitting down. At first I'm apologetic - 'It won't happen again. I promise.' Then I change my tune: 'Yeah, I'm good at bingo and I'll be good at it tonight as well."

I butter my toast nervously. The feeling of oddness is back from last night. I try to look appreciatively over the talking heads and out the window, but I'm kidding myself, I'm **posturing**. I'm pretending to be at ease, to be nonchalant. There's an art to eating happily alone. I don't have it. Alan arrives and says: **'Aaron Ramsey** has gone to Juventus for silly money.’ I'm pleased to be wrenched from my own **neurotic** half thoughts. I'm pleased to see Alan.

We're off to York this morning. Roger's commentary begins before I've got my seatbelt on. He tells us that **Anne Bronte** came to Scarborough and liked it so much she never left, which only works as a joke if you know she's buried in the church next to the hotel. He tells us that McCain's (of frozen chips fame) are a big local employer, and that the Eastfield estate on the edge of town is about as troublesome as they

come. 'If you want drugs,' says Roger, let me know as I can get you a discount.'

When we reach our destination, Roger puts us down in a carpark and tells us to be back in a couple of hours. People head off in separate directions - like a search party splitting to cover the most ground. I pop into a riverside café and ask the **barista** what's lovable about York, **alluding** to the fact that the city has repeatedly been elected Britain's best place. 'I like it when the river floods,' he says. I ask him what he thinks other, less peculiar people might love about York, suggesting the ancient walls, the narrow cobbled lanes, the elderly buildings, the city's historic relationship with chocolate, or even the Richard III Experience, which has proved incredibly popular with visitors despite involving being taken to a field and shot at with a bow and arrow. The barista says it's probably the city's beauty. I ask him to elaborate. ‘I would, but it's difficult to put your finger on. And to be honest I only notice it when I'm not here.’There's philosophy in that last admission. I bet the lad's not alone in only seeing what's under his nose once it's behind his back, if you'll forgive the impractical construction.

I do a lap of the city's old wall. I join it at its northernmost point, round the back of the Minster. Giving the great church a once over, I think of the art critic John Ruskin, who reckoned the camera was ruining our ability to notice and appreciate things. And this was back in the 1880s. Instead of photographing things, Ruskin suggested we draw them. I'm not in a position to draw the Minster but I do **tarry** to look harder, look closer. It's certainly a sizeable item - the second-largest **Gothic** church in the world, after the cathedral at Cologne in Germany - and is much wider than it is tall, with the effect that if you bunch up your eyes you could easily mistake it for a battleship (albeit a battleship with transepts and lancet windows). Of more interest to me than the Minster, however, is the adjoining **Deanery**, and in particular its back garden. Within the garden, a pair of yellow socks has been left on the grass below the washing line. Perhaps the **Dean** was in a rush when bringing the washing in, or perhaps he was in a real rush when putting it out. In any case, were I to draw the scene before me, I'd be tempted to place more emphasis on the socks, and the small drama they hint at, than the Minster. We each have our own sense of importance, I suppose. I continue clockwise to Walmgate Bar. During the English Civil War, this bar (or gate) was a key **fortification** that saw a fair bit of uncivil action. Now it's a wonderful cafe with an enjoyable roof terrace. During the war, an attempt was made to undermine Walmgate Bar and blow its bricks off, but the plot was discovered and nipped in the bud. Had it not been, whosoever happened to be up on the roof terrace drinking coffee would have been a very flat white indeed. The barista is Australian. When I tell him about Walmgate Bar nearly being blown to smithereens, he says: 'You guys are so lucky to have history'

I drink my coffee on the roof and survey the scene. Of all its elements and there are many it is the non-smoking industrial chimney that holds my attention. Not because it's the most dynamic or curious or **aesthetically** pleasing element of the landscape, but rather because I recently saw a documentary about a steeplejack called Fred Dibnah, who back in the 70s and 80s, when health and safety regulations

were a thing for wimps, would climb such chimneys by a series of conjoined ladders and then knock them down brick by brick, often in the middle of winter, and invariably with a fag in his mouth.

York is better for its wall. It encourages you to think about its historical function, about who it was meant to repel (Vikings, Normans, Parliamentarians), and what it was meant to contain (scandal, cholera, Royalists). To my mind, a walk on the wall has the quality of a ride. It is always a tiny bit exciting to rise above the rooftops, to look down on what is normally above. The change of perspective helps one see more, or see the same things in a different way. So much so that, with a bit of effort, I can just make out, in the garden of the Royal Oak (it's either Royal Oak or Loyal Oat), a crouching figure tying his laces with a fag in his mouth which is unmistakably Alan.

Crossing the River Ouse on my way back to the coach, I remember that book by Graham Swift, Waterland, which goes on about this river. I remember a flow of startling pages that made me see the brilliance and magic and circularity of rivers, of history, of time. The book really got the thumbs up from me, which wasn't something that happened often back

then. Not because I was a tough critic, but rather because I hadn't really read any books. I was in my second year at university, and was to all intents and purposes, and by all accounts, a prat. I'd read only six books right the way through (two of those being diaries of Bridget Jones,) and had about as much interest in rivers and history as a poached egg. The best books can do that though, can take you by surprise, can ambush and capture you, no matter what they're on about.

On the way back to Scarborough, Roger tells us about a couple of local news stories. He says an aluminium rhinoceros was stolen from outside a college a few years ago, and that some penguins at a nearby zoo have been prescribed antidepressants.

Back at the hotel, I order whitebait to start, then hake, then lemon sponge. Alan says I'm naive to double-fish.

Alan's tells me his dad had dementia, and Alan was the only one of his five siblings that was prepared to care for him. ‘He was strict when we were growing up. He wouldn't let us do our homework. He'd give us chores instead. He wouldn't let Mum listen to the radio. And she wasn't allowed to touch the telly.'

'My dad was the opposite,' I say. "We'd go to him on the weekend and it was **carte-blanche** or whatever the term is as far as he was concerned. We lived off Pot Noodles and Kit Kats. I don't think we let *him* touch the telly. That or he shared our taste for *Gladiators* and *Baywatch*."

'Not impossible,' says Alan.

'No,’ I continued. ‘He's a good bloke my dad. Once, I needed a cricket bat but he couldn't afford a smart proper one, so he made one. Me and my brother would play in the concrete garden, three-by-three metres, with a drainpipe for the stumps. I was a decent bowler in my teens and I'm sure it was because I grew up aiming for a drainpipe.'

'Mine didn't make cricket bats,' says Alan. 'Mine was a policeman. He used to come home and play the **harmonica** and tell us about the scoundrels he'd walloped. Then one day, he just stopped playing. I don't remember him touching a harmonica for 40 years. Then when he got dementia, I bought him one and took it to him. He just stared at it for

some time then picked it up and started playing it like it was yesterday.'

I let this sit for a bit. And then a bit more. And then:

'My dad's so cheerful it does my head in,' I say. It makes me look awful. There I am, trying to drag myself out of bed, moaning and groaning like I've got swine flu, and in he wanders with a cup of tea for me, whistling a tune, saying he can't wait to finish the wheelbarrow he's been working

on, then drawing my curtains like Mary Poppins and looking out at the grim terraces of inner Portsmouth as if they were an orchard of cherry blossom trees. I've told him more than once: "Dad, I'm going to stop you coming in here if you're going to carry on like that. You're making r

me look like a right misery."

'Fathers, eh?' says Alan.

I go through to the lounge for the bingo. I sit with a couple who live in Rhyl, North Wales. ‘You did well last night,' he says. ‘The wife's normally very good at bingo but she hasn't won for three years.'

I smile at this idea of normality - that something can still be normal even if it hasn't happened for three years. Then I ask the man why he thinks his wife hasn't won recently. He says he reckons she's got **complacent**. I ask the wife if she agrees with her husband's point of view, but he says: 'You won't get a word out of her. Not until the bingo's over.'

I buy two bingo coupons from reception. One for me and one for the lady from Rhyl - to save her legs. She tries to give me the three quid but I tell her not to bother. 'Well which one is mine?" she says. I hold out the two coupons. She closes her eyes and takes the one on the left, then puts it

back and takes the other.

The lady from Rhyl is off to a good start. She's very focused. Almost possessed. Her feet are tapping away under the table. Her husband says he doesn't like playing but he certainly likes peering over at her card, making sure she doesn't miss a trick. Ten balls have been called and I haven't one of them. It's starting to wind me up to be honest. Then a run of numbers - same both ways, two fat fellas, a pair of crutches - and I'm back in the hunt. Another good run and I only need seventeen. My mind races ahead to the prize ceremony. I'd have to refuse. They'd throw me into the North Sea if I won again.

I don't mind that the lady from Rhyl won the bingo. Not really. I don't

even mind that she didn't think, after collecting her 60-odd quid in cash (lots of cheering for her, by the way, which is ageism in action if ever I saw it), to offer me three quid back, or thank me for presenting her with the winning ticket, or slip me one of her drinks vouchers by way of compensation. Nah, not really. I suppose after a drought of three years, a bingo win is going to cloud your judgement a bit, play a bit of havoc with your manners. She'll probably realise when she's in bed. She'll emit a sigh and put her hand to her forehead, and her husband will turn to her and say, 'What is it, love?' And she'll say, 'That young man. What was his name? Bill, was it? I didn't even *thank* him. I've not won for three years and he goes and hands me the winning ticket and I don't so much as offer him a drinks voucher.' And he says: 'I wouldn't worry, love. I bet he's not given it a second's thought.'

I move to one of the comfy chairs closer to reception. I sit with a bloke called Paul and his two support workers - Doughnut 1 and Doughnut 2, he calls them. One of the doughnuts explains that Paul's has some learning difficulties and that she and her friend take him on holiday twice a year. Paul doesn't think much of her explanation. 'I take you two on holiday, more like,' he says.

Doughnut 1 shows me a picture of her dog and says that she got him after she had a **stent** put in her leg which enabled her to walk again. 'I was walking everywhere!' she says. "That dog's done more miles than a Vauxhall Astra. I know it's a **cliché** but you don't know you've got any legs until you haven't.'

I tell her that my dad had a stent put in his leg to unblock one of the arteries so the blood could get round. The doctor told him that if he doesn't pack up smoking, the other leg's going to block up and they won't give him an operation, because it will be his own sodding fault.

And has he stopped?' she says.

'Nope,' I say.

'Idiot,' she says. 'In a nice way, like.' I explain that I don't hassle him too much because he gets defensive and worried and ends up smoking more, which isn't really what I'm after. Besides, he's an alcoholic who

hasn't had a drink for ten years, which takes some doing, and if he reckons he can't stop, or doesn't want to, then I'm inclined to listen to him, or at least respect his decision.

How did he give up the drinking?" she says. ‘A banjo,' I say.

‘You what?’

'One day after umpteen attempts to stop and not managing it, he comes home with a four-hundred pound banjo.'

‘That's bloody heavy,' says Paul.

'He'd never played a musical instrument in his life. I guess the thinking - if there was any thinking - was that you can't take something away and just leave a hole. You've got to fill it with something'

Anyway, now he plays the piano and guitar and drums as well, and is in two bands, and hasn't had a drink since,'

'Fair play,' she says.

Fair play,' says Paul.

I call it a night. Paul gives me a fist bump. I climb the stairs to the third floor and think: I don't know if I've ever told my dad just how proud I am of him for turning his back on a 40-year addiction, for buying that banjo, for becoming a new man at the age of 57. I'm sure I'll get round to it

one day.

**Glossary**

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| --- | --- |
| Aaron Ramsey | Arsenal player who was signed up for Juventus |
| aesthetically | artisitcally |
| alluding | hinting at |
| Anne Bronte | nineteenth-century novelist |
| Anomalies | things that stand out as being different |
| barista | person who makes coffee |
| blast | good time |
| boffins | experts |
| bridge | card game |
| carte-blanche | complete freedom |
| cliché | an over-used saying |
| colossal | enormous |
| complacent | over confident |
| conceit | idea |
| Dean | person in charge of a large church or cathedral |
| Deanery | where the dean of a cathedral or large church lives |
| deferred | delayed |
| dint | by  |
| earnest | serious |
| existential | philosophy relating to life and existence |
| fortification | protection from invaders |
| Fred Astaire routine | scene from Hollywood musical |
| geriatric | old-age |
| gothic | medieval style of architecture |
| grist in the mill | life experience |
| harmonica | mouth organ |
| Havant | town in Hampshire |
| illicit | illegal |
| latent | hidden |
| neurotic | over-worrying |
| paupers | poor people living in the workhouse |
| peaks and troughs | highs and lows |
| posturing | pretending |
| preamble | outskirts |
| promontory. | cliff |
| protagonist | main character |
| Shearings | a coach-tour company specialising in holidays for older people |
| spa town | nineteenth-century tourist town |
| stent | tube used to unblock an artery |
| tarry | delay or stay too long |
| tedium | boredom |
| yields | provides |