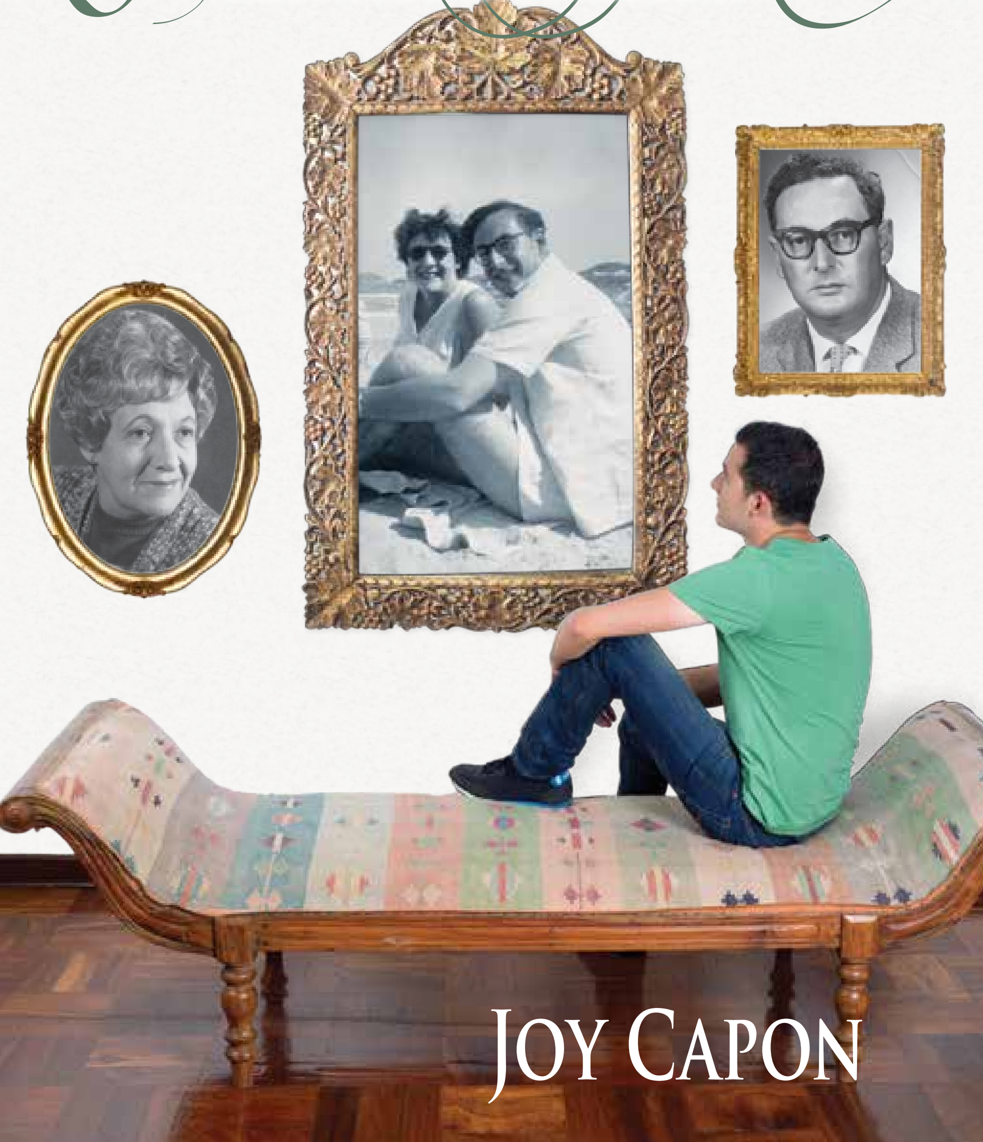
For all time

Memories of my Parents



JOY CAPON

For all time

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Kevin, for your boundless support, which is treasured.

Joy Capon lives and works in Johannesburg, South Africa.
She is the proprietor of language and editorial services company Edit SA, partner to a Manchester United fanatic, and mother to five fur children.

In memory of my parents

Beryl Capon (née Milunsky)
23 November 1928 – 15 October 1999

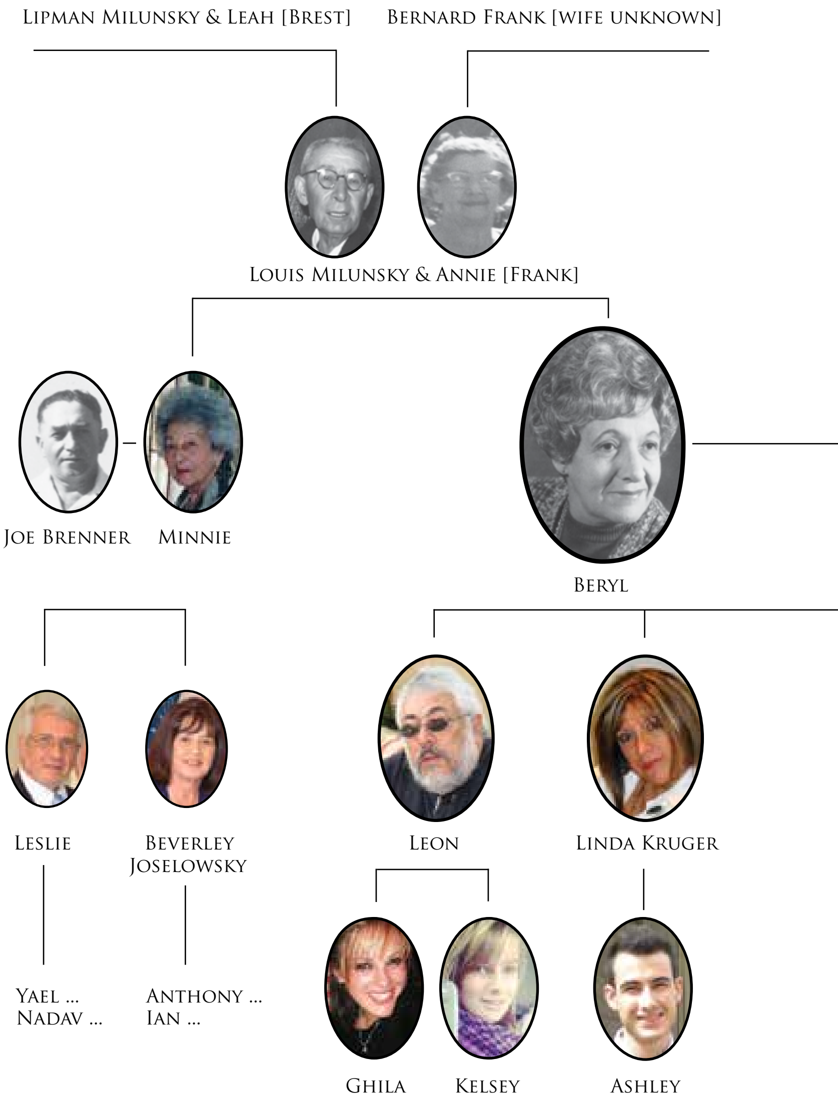
and

David Capon
11 December 1926 – 27 April 2009

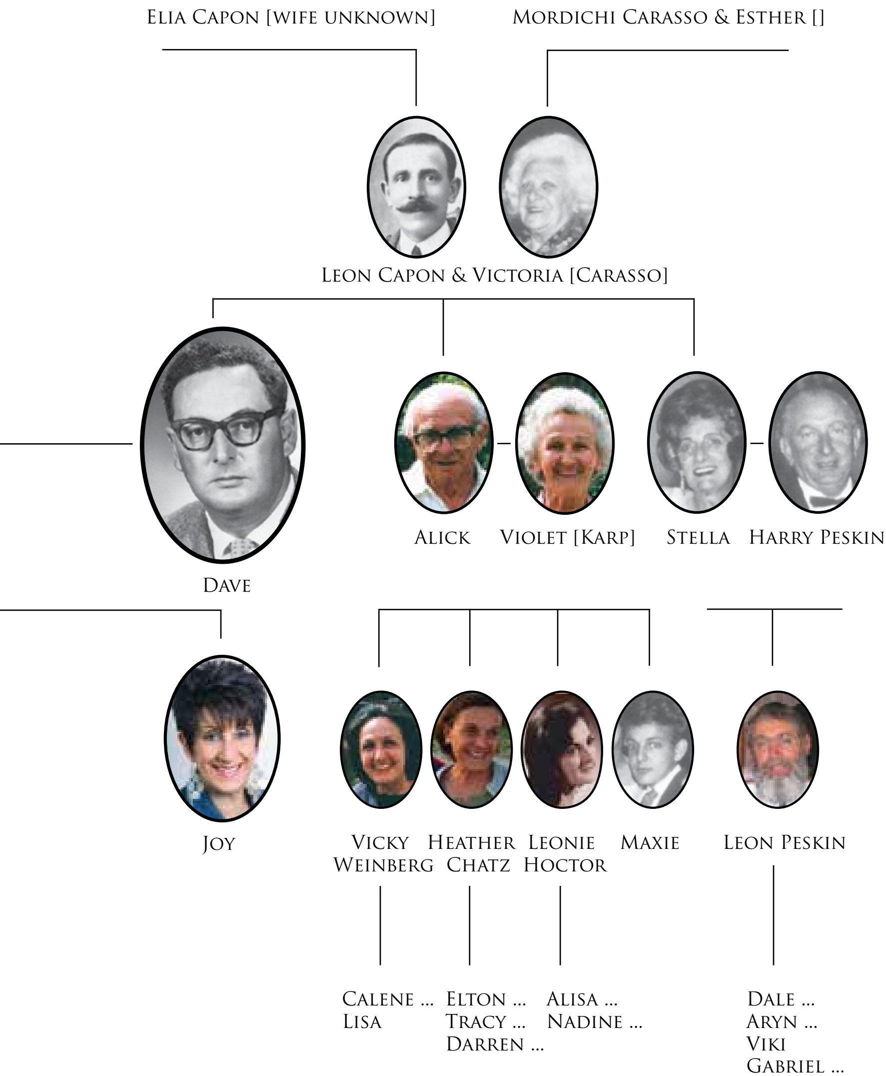
**Life is good,
but it has never been the same.**

The engagement, Johannesburg, November 1949

THE MILUNSKY/



CAPON FAMILY TREE



The honeymoon, 1950

Introduction

Some time after the passing of my mother, Beryl Capon (nee Milunsky), it came to me that I should write a book. Not a novel (I always figured myself as a poor chess player, as I'd never been able to see a plot, or more than one or two moves ahead), but a documentation, in a way, of the life of an incredible human being. I wanted to put it on paper, record all the information I carried in my heart. I romanced about it, thought how amazing it would be to get it all down, but I didn't get round to it. Then 10 years after my mother died, my father, David Capon, followed. And suddenly it was time.

One thing I've learned, time doesn't heal, despite what people express in an honest, but ultimately vain, attempt to ease that emptiness in your soul. I sometimes feel the pain as intensely as I did on the day they died. Truer would be to say that the distances between these moments of intense grief grow longer with time, and in this world, with the day-to-days and life's many distractions, you learn to deal with things in your own way.

What I didn't anticipate when I finally decided to sit down and write was how hard it would be – and how long it would take. I couldn't muster the energy on a regular basis; the emotion was overwhelming. Each time I sat down to put some more of my thoughts on to paper, I had to update myself on what I had done before, as it had been so long since I'd opened the pages last. Another exhaustingly emotional day.

I don't deny that the writing of this book has been cathartic, but its purpose was something else.

My parents may not have been famous beyond their own circle, but to my siblings and me, to their true friends and family, their contribution to the world was incalculable, their guidance invaluable and their wisdom unparalleled. I couldn't let it all dissipate as their life on earth came to an end. In time, who would know that two such humble people had led such significant lives?

Of course I've wondered who would want to read about Beryl and David Capon. They weren't what you would today call "celebrities" (although I'm sure my mother would have loved to have been a *shleb*, and had met a few in her time), except to us. They weren't well known beyond their home town of Kimberley – from where they had come, in 1989, to Johannesburg, to be with their children who had made their own lives there. And they didn't, in the true sense, contribute to all humanity, as in finding a cure for cancer. But I know that their influence was felt far and wide, and that their humanity enriched the lives of many.

I hope that there are those beyond my own circle who would want to get to know them through reading this book. But if nobody but Leon, Linda and I read it, it will all still have been worth it.

Where they are, I hope they read it too. Certainly, there are things in it that I never said out loud. Maybe there are things in it that I shouldn't have said at all. But now that I have, it's there for all eternity.

Chapter 1

One month before my 49th birthday, I became an orphan. When the realisation hit me, I felt an incredible desperation and sadness. I felt bereft, and although I wasn't alone, I felt that way. I'm sure we all did.

The Polyanna in me reflected on how much harder it would have been to have lost my parents when I was too young to understand the cycle of life. I fancy that I understand things a bit now. I believe there is a better place to be when life can no longer offer the joys it once did. I know that my parents are pain-free, age-free and at peace. And I know, without doubt, that they are together.

I felt the desperation for so many others too – orphans many years younger than me. But I recognised the one obvious and immense difference between them and me: privilege. Not in the way we usually understand the word, as ours wasn't a childhood of financial wealth. Our privilege was our parents' unconditional and unceasing love.

We were sitting shiva for my father at Linda's. Not religious people, and perhaps not very observant either, we'd followed the guidance of the learned men when my mother had passed, and discovered why people do sit shiva. At that time, Linda had gone through a book of mourning that the rabbi had left us to read, and we'd tried, in our own way, to follow the process. In the end, through the profound sadness, we'd found comfort in it.

I remember the visitors to the flat where my parents lived, and where we were sitting shiva after my mother died. Friends of theirs, mostly, and some I didn't even know. I don't think we took much of it in. The days went by pretty much in a haze. There was my father to take care of. Losing his soulmate after almost 50 years of marriage, he wasn't coping too well. And of course, we'd never done this before. We went from day to day. It was incredibly hard.

I remember packing away my mother's things, which had been a request from my father. Putting the clothes into different parcels – some we thought Auntie Minnie would wear, and some for charity. Undeniably the hardest of all was disposing of my mother's hairbrush. It was such a personal thing. Mom had beautiful hair – a silver-grey that no bottle could recreate. I cried like a baby.

Recently, I saw a movie in which just such a scene played out: a young woman had come home to the funeral of her mother and seemed overcome, sitting on her mother's bed, touching her hairbrush to her cheek. Many years on, I knew exactly how she felt. I felt her sadness as if it were my own.

Should-haves, could-haves, maybes are never a good thing, but I sometimes wonder if I should have kept that damn hairbrush – to touch, feel or smell when I was having a bad day. Overall, I think I did the right thing. Although I did keep the dressing gown.

Mom had a thing for nighties, dressing gowns and slippers, always with a new set tucked away in the cupboard (in case she had to go to hospital). But although many a disreputable gown would be tossed out in time, never the fluffy blue one. She lounged in it, cooked in it, even slept in it on the occasional freezing night. Eventually, so shabby was it (with one or two inevitable cigarette burns) that I hid it, pretending I had thrown it away. She only half believed me. In time I relented and she was thrilled to have it back. Initially, the dressing gown followed the hairbrush into the bin. Why, I'll never know, but a little while later I retrieved it and took it home. I did wash it, so my mother's smell has never lingered, but it still lines one of the shelves in my clothing cupboard. I'm sure she'd be amused that the cat finds comfort on it from time to time. Asthmatic her whole life (and never without her Tedral, until they took it off the market), she didn't do cats as a rule.

On the night of her prayers, we were all just holding it together. It had been an awkward couple of days, because we'd had to wait out Shabbos for the funeral. But when I looked up to see Jackie Sussman walking through the door, I burst into tears. He hated leaving Our Parents Home, where his footing was sure and he felt secure. But he had come. Mr Sussman was an old Kimberley friend of my parents whom I had befriended during the time I had spent reading to the elderly at the home. For some reason, I had connected with him as perhaps the grandfather I hadn't had much time with.

So it was, in that week of mourning, that we sat around the table one lunchtime, laughing and reminiscing. At the time, I thought it perhaps inappropriate under the circumstances, but then it all became so clear. What else would you have expected? That was my mother: a really funny, dramatic, irreverent, larger-than-life kind of lady. Sit around morbidly going through the motions? Not likely.

But this time, with Daddy, it was a little different. We kind of knew what to expect, and we made our own rules as we went along. There was no Dad to take care of anymore, so mostly we just sat and talked things out. Linda, particularly, was feeling some strain. My father had lived with her for over a year, and had only four months prior gone to live at

Sandringham Gardens. His presence was still in the house, one of the reasons that we were sitting shiva here.

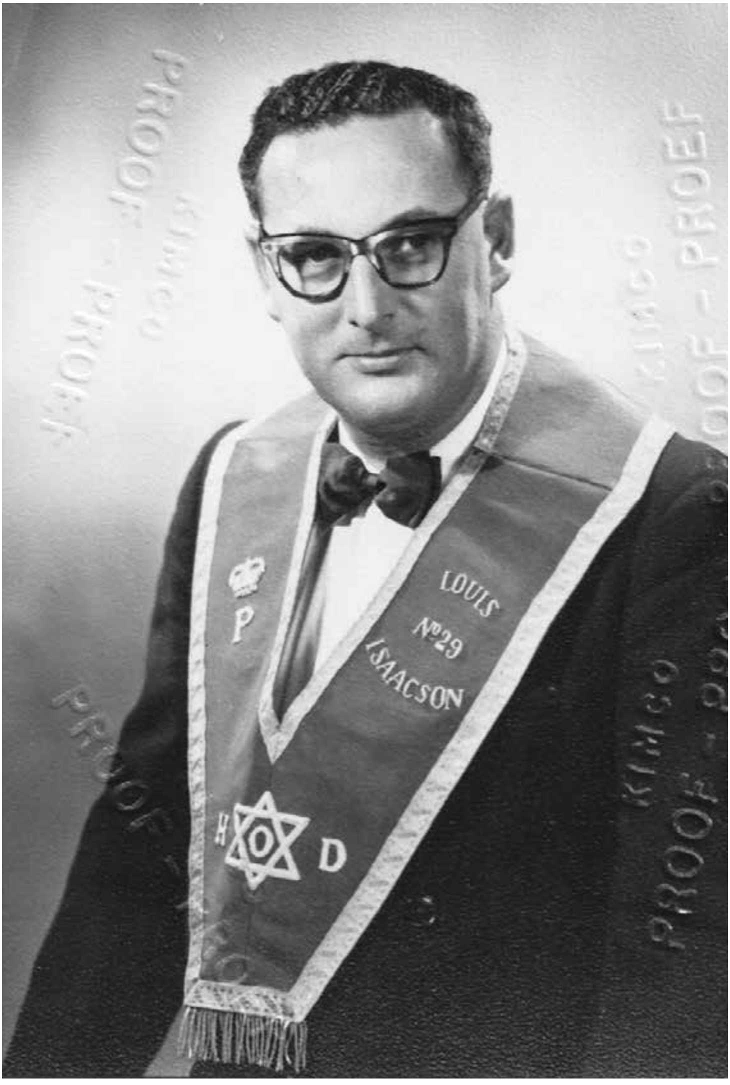
There was an unbearable void – in her home and in our lives. There was much discussion around the meaning of life, and the roles we all play in each other's. And certainly there was some guilt: should we have moved him to Sandringham Gardens? If we hadn't , would he still be with us?

I'm sure the psychologists would have a field day with why we torture ourselves so. Asking ourselves if we did the right thing (when, clearly, the options were limited). Asking ourselves if we had tried hard enough (when our lives had been defined by it). Asking ourselves if we'd been good enough daughters (when he'd always told everyone what wonderful daughters he had).

Beverley came by most days, bringing us chocolate. Lots of it. The flavour was irrelevant. Leon was with us in the afternoons. This time, the visitors were mostly our connections. Linda's friends were very attentive, and I was touched that some of my colleagues had made the time.

But what was really heart-warming was the support of the old crowd. By that I mean the ex-Kimberlites, friends from the old days who, like the Capons, have made Johannesburg their home. We've had good times and rough, but we're always there for one another. At the funeral, at prayers and during shiva, they came to reminisce about my father, about my mother, and about life in the old town. We talked a lot, wept a little, and smiled. It was a lot gentler this time. My dad was that kind of man.

And that gets to the heart of the story: it begins for us all, apart from my father, in Kimberley. We were all born there, and educated there, even my mother.


P
LOUIS
№29
ISAACSON
H O D

Chapter 2

My father was born in East London, attending school at Selbourne College. It was only in latter years that I had pieced together some of this early history. He claimed that he remembered those times much easier than he did what he had had for breakfast that morning, and in the last couple of years, he told me many little stories of his life growing up there.

I gather from what he said (and perhaps also from what he didn't say) that his upbringing was a little unconventional, inasmuch as his siblings, Stella and Alick, were 12 and 14 by the time that he was born. He thought, in hindsight, that his parents – immigrants originally from Thessaloniki (under Turkish rule then) – had been a little unequipped to deal with a *laatlammertjie*, visiting their Greek friends in the evenings to play cards, dragging him along without really supervising whether his homework had been done or not. Of course it hadn't.

His father, Leon, had been born in Salonika in 1882, and emigrated to America at around the age of 15, to escape the military. Trading as a merchant in jewellery and Persian carpets, he reportedly lost everything in the San Francisco earthquake of 1906. Leon Capon married Victoria Carasso (born 24 May 1889, whose parents had also come to America) in New York on 21 June 1911. They immigrated to South Africa shortly after.

The story goes that, after my grandmother had left for South Africa, all correspondence had been withheld from her (presumably by my grandfather), and that she had come to believe that her family had forgotten her. While in the months before he died, my father had disputed the tale, and while the details are certainly unclear, the following letter from a nephew, Max, in New York, dated 15 May 1936, is enlightening:

Dear Auntie,
We have been worried over not receiving a letter from you, and Aunt Flor, in fact, is almost frantic with anxiety.

During the [interval] you have not written, she has sent you two letters, and I sent you the pictures.

As you know, Aunt Flor is getting old, and it is not well for her to be upset like this; you are her favourite sister, and she thinks of you much of the time. Please write to her in your own hand, as Stella, in her last letter, promised you would, and let us know how the entire family feels, and how Lieto is getting along.

From our side, we are all in good health, and otherwise things are about as satisfactory as could be expected with times as they are.

Love to all from Fannie, and
Your loving nephew, Max
Love and kisses from Aunt Flor
Love and lots of little kisses from the little [shrimps], Renee and Estelle

P.S. Please address letters in care of me, at
1505 Walton Ave, Bronx, New York

In time, Leon and Victoria were to make their way to Kimberley, where in 1949, my grandfather died, the year before my parents married. His grave is to be found in the first row of the "new" Jewish cemetery in West End. While I visited it many times while "doing the rounds" of the family graves, it was more in the sense of understanding history than building any family attachment.

I understand that Grandfather Leon had quite a strong personality; what he said went. My father was quite the opposite: sensitive and unassertive, he must have swum upstream at times. I imagine it must have seemed a great idea at the time to convince his father to sign the papers that would allow him (at the tender age of 16) to go into the service of his country at war.

Working it around in his head, Dad had come to his own conclusion as to how his father had died. Whatever that was, it was incredible to me that he'd never actually been told. Though 23 when his father had passed, the issue was never discussed with him. And he'd never asked. In latter years, I'm not even sure that he would necessarily have accepted the diagnosis from anyone who may have known. Vicky believes it was a bleeding ulcer. Dad probably thought it was a conspiracy.

What I do know is that the elder Capons spoke Spanish and Greek (probably Ladino), and mixed in the Greek community. They had many Greek friends whom we grew up to know, such as Louverdes and Zouves, and Granny read the Greek papers and magazines that Dad collected from the brothers who owned Pan Pan Café on Du Toitspan Road, when they were done with them.

Victoria was an imposing woman with a shock of white hair and a penchant for Turkish coffee – the mud-like mix she brewed on the stove in a tiny copper pot. She lived in a little flat in Park Road, my only recollection of which has to do with a story recounted many times during my childhood: Dad, quite a heavy smoker, had one day walked out of his mother's flat in a coughing fit. Frustrated, he angrily threw the packet into the garden, and that was it. He was very proud of the fact that he never smoked again.

Victoria died in 1978, when I was 18. She was my last grandparent to go, understandably bringing some relief to both herself and her family, having endured nine years of senility – and much indignity – in a facility ironically named Harmony Home. A grotty place, I thought, but with the wisdom of age, probably more harmonious than most. The howls of "Mama! Mama!" from a cot in the room opposite, and the image of an old "infant", cuddling her teddy as she rocked in a chair in the room alongside, nevertheless took hold in my child brain, and have endured.

Dad was nostalgic of his time in East London, talking about schoolfriends and mischief – dropping a lit match into someone's postbox and throwing water down someone's passageway. Chuckle chuckle. It was sweet.

One of his schoolfriends was Esther, and she and her husband Sam Cohen remained friends until the end, visiting him at Sandringham Gardens when many others had long forgotten about him. I've no doubt this beautiful friendship continues today – a tea party somewhere in heaven.

Above: The Kimberley Shul, 1970s
Left: Johannesburg, 1999
Below: Ashley, the light of their lives – on a visit to Kimberley, 1987/88, with Linda and Candy the maltese

With tons of love from David 18/4/44

Chapter 3

He was so young when he went into the airforce – only 16, making the trip with his unit to (then) Northern Rhodesia. Why a father would let his son lie about his age to be allowed to enlist I've never been able to fathom. But many were doing the same – and worse. The world was at war. By all accounts, there were some juicy stories to come out of his airforce days (of officers, trucks and girls).

Thankfully, he didn't see active service, and went no further north. For him, the lasting legacy of the time was the malaria that would plague him in bouts for the next few years, and probably weaken his system for a lot longer than that. It was to resurface inconveniently at the time he was to marry, but nothing would stop that in the end.

It was after the war, when he was working for the airforce in an office at the fire station in Kimberley, that he met Beryl. Exactly how, where or when I'll never know now, and that's just one of a million questions I wished I'd asked. As far as we were concerned, they had always been together.

Helen Carmichael met Mom when they worked together in the stores department at the Kimberley Hospital, and they would be friends forever. Helen and Alistair had come from Scotland years before, and had never lost their accent. As a child, I was fascinated with it. They met Dad for the first time when Mom brought him along as her date to the cinema one evening. It would have been the Astra or the Plaza. Of course, going to the cinema would become regular Saturday evening entertainment for my parents; often the Milunskys went along too.

Mom came from a very close-knit family. Her parents were immigrants from Lithuania and I'm told they loved me to bits. Unfortunately, I can't confirm that, as Annie died (virtually blind from glaucoma) in 1964, when I was just four. And when Louis went in 1971, I was only 11. Kept away from the "unpleasantnesses" of death, I don't recall a significant personal impact. He had been ill for some time.

In the years after Mom went, Dad and I chatted a lot about times long past. As he spent more time each day just sitting in his chair, watching sport on TV or doing crossword puzzles, he'd tell me that he had a lot of time to think. "Sometimes I sits and thinks, and sometimes I just sits," he'd quote AA Milne. So it was, not long before his death, that I learned a few uncomfortable facts. One of these was the rocky relationship he had had with his father-in-law, the elder treating him with some disdain. Most of it, I gather, had to do with money – which my father didn't have.

I never knew that things weren't good between them. I never knew how many times he'd had to swallow his pride. Sometimes I wish I didn't. I feel sadness – and not a little anger – that this gentle man, who would never give in to the bitterness that could have had him badmouthing his inlaws, was just not good enough.

But Mommy loved him, and looked after him for 49 years, until the day she died.

It doesn't take a genius to work out that a Capon was perhaps not quite what Louis had in mind for his daughter. While the family history has always seemed somewhat exotic to me, there was surely the possibility that it was more than a little mysterious. It certainly didn't fit the mould.

The details are sketchy, but it would appear that my grandfather Leon had come into the country as some sort of "dealer in Oriental goods". There's no way of knowing just how accurate that was or whether it had any truth at all. But their history was clearly very different from that of the rest of the Jewish immigrants to arrive in South Africa in the early part of the 20th century.

In a letter dated 2 September 1911:

> *LEON CAPON, ISAAC CAPON, LEVY SALEM AND ALBERT SALEM*
> *The Chief Immigration Officer, Pretoria*
> *On the S.S. "Armadale Castle" arrived four Turkish Jews named respectively as above with varying degrees of education and in two cases possessing Turkish passports, one of whom first declared himself to be an American citizen but subsequently admitted that that was not the case.*
>
> *I had the gravest suspicions as to the characters of these men and detained them for the whole of a day while they were closely questioned as to their business in this country. They had no business references of any kind but the truth seems to be that they are in a sort of partnership for selling and hawking various fancy goods, principally female clothing. They style themselves "The Parisian Art Fabric Company" with headquarters in Mexico. They appear, however, to have wandered about in almost every part of the world, hailing in the last instance from Honolulu.*
>
> *Eventually I gave them the benefit of the doubt and passed them. Subsequently, however, I ascertained from the Customs that certain of their baggage had been seized as containing contraband and I should think*

it well worth while notifying the Johannesburg Police of their expected arrival as they have quite sufficient brains to engage in illicit traffic of various kinds. At present I believe they are in Cape Town and they can give me no address in the Transvaal but I will endeavour to telegraph to you the train on which they leave. I somewhat regret that I ventured to pass them but it is still possible that they may intend to carry on a lawful business and I had nothing definite against them beyond my own somewhat unfavourable impressions as a result of my enquiries.
(Signed) Chief Immigration Office (Cape of Good Hope)

And then a note dated 10 April 1912:

Headquarters C.I.D. Johannesburg 10/4/12
Criminal Investigation Department
No. 20/3487/ 1st April, Johannesburg
Sir,
With reference to the attached correspondence I have the honour to report that the four Turkish Jews in question were until recently carrying on a business known as the "Parisian Art Fabric Co" at the Royal Arcade entrance, Pritchard St. It was a large concern but it did not pay and they accordingly relinquished same. Their present whereabouts are unknown but I am informed they are still in the Transvaal.
I have the honour to be,
Sir,
Your obedient servant,
E. Clayroy Det. Probr.

Above: Fancy-dress time - Dad in East London; Mom is the Ovaltine Girl
Below: Mom (second from left) and the dancing girls

Kimberley, 18 November 1950

Chapter 4

My parents married young. Mom was 22 and Dad 24. With the world enjoying the sunshine after the war, a new era began, as they danced their wedding waltz to *Fascination*. As was the custom of the day, the details of the wedding, on 18 November 1950, were carried in the *Diamond Fields Advertiser* on Monday, 20 November:

> *The marriage was solemnised in the Memorial Road Synagogue, Kimberley, recently between Beryl, younger daughter of Mr and Mrs L Milunsky, and David, younger son of Mrs L Capon and the late Mr Leon Capon. Rabbi AR Abrahamson, assisted by Rev CH Goldberg, conducted the wedding ceremony.*
>
> *The bride, who was given away by her father, wore a model gown of witchcraft lace and tulle, with a ruched bodice forming a high neckline. A new feature on the frock was a lace flounce over the very full tulle skirt, cascading in folds down to the floor. Her waist-length tulle veil had a deep lace edging and an unusual sheath of roses, falling over her right ear. She carried a semi-crescent bouquet of silver-sprayed white gladioli, agapanthus and lilies.*
>
> *Miss Shirley Melunsky, a cousin of the bride, as maid of honour, wore an attractive petunia-shot watered taffeta dress with a deeper shaded off-the-shoulder*

stole. Her fan-shaped bouquet was made of blue agapanthus and salmon pink gladioli, and her headdress comprised matching flowers.

The two little flower girls, Vicky and Heather Capon, look sweet in pale mauve and pink frocks respectively, with Victorian posies and fresh flower headgears.

My Hymie Seidle acted as best man and Mr Solly Odes, Mr Aubrey Sacks, Mr Leonard Horwitz and Mr Harry Goldes were the canopy bearers.

Mrs Milunsky wore a smart emerald green moss crepe gown cut on classic lines with beige accessories. She carried a flame-coloured and yellow bouquet of gladioli. For the occasion Mrs Capon chose a chic Blacke lace and georgette dinner frock trimmed with gold and black. Her bouquet was made of flame and gold-coloured gladioli.

The story is told that Hymie Seidle stepped in as best man at the 11th hour, as Dad's friend Sammy was sadly laid up with a case of the hiccups. So serious was the infliction that he was unable to leave the hospital to perform his ceremonial duties. In time, apparently, he recovered.

And the friendship with Hymie was to last a lifetime, though they found themselves at opposite ends of the country: my parents with their children in Joburg, and Hymie and Doreen moving to Cape Town.

In the early part of their marriage, they lived at the Crescent Hotel. Many entertaining stories came out of there, and many enduring friendships. Leon arrived in 1952 and Linda in 1954. Fortunately, I made my appearance only in 1960. By that time, Leon and Linda had pretty much covered all the angles of childhood. I had an easy time. I'd caught the childhood diseases, such as chicken pox, along with the other two – and was too young to remember. And I more or less got whatever I wanted.

I never managed to get my parents to admit that I was a "mistake", so I accept that it was all planned and I was a much-anticipated gift – hence my name.

We lived at 22 Ophelia Street, Herlear, though my memories of this house are second-hand. I've heard stories of a little Leon jumping out of the window, in his vest and underpants, when Mommy thought he was taking his afternoon nap. He'd motor up the road to the Brenners in Hesperus Street in his pedal car, with his clothes under his arm. Leslie or Beverley would dress him. The story gets embellished with each telling, I think, but the basics are there.

My earliest recollection was at the age of four. My mother had taken me on the train to her cousin Lorain's wedding to Charles Manushewitz in Brakpan. I remember standing at the railing of the stairs that went down from a porch – whose house it was is unclear. I can't say it was significant at the time, or that it had any bearing on my life thereafter, but I see it so clearly in my mind. It was on this trip, I believe, that Mommy took me to see *Mary Poppins*. I've never seen it since, a little afraid, I think, to dispel the magic of the time. My mother would always make me laugh when she "did Mary Poppins", hopping off the pavement with her umbrella when it rained – even when I was big.

What is significant is that it was 1964, and 1964 was a defining year in our lives. It was the year my mother's mother, Annie, died, followed very soon after by the death, at the age of 16 in a motorcycle accident, of my cousin Maxie, the only son and youngest child of Alick and Violet. Maxie's death totally shattered the Capons – Dad included – changing life forever for each one of them in their own sad way.

Vicky is "a doll", my father said. In later years we were often to spend holidays in Cape Town with her and her family. Heather was "impossible", he said with a smile, recalling the day, at the age of three, when she simply refused to come out from under the bed. But it was Leonie, who would come to see "My Uncle Dave" from time to time, whom he felt had taken the hardest knock when Maxie died, as they had been very close, emotionally and in age, and she had "never come right".

And so the year 1964 was etched into the family's collective mind. Whenever one of us talks about Maxie, we'll remember: it was 1964. You may remember it as the year that *Fiddler on the Roof* opened in New York, the Olympics were held in Tokyo or Martin Luther King Jr won the Nobel Peace Prize. For us, that was the year Maxie died. Though it's impossible for me to remember him, even vaguely, his photo joins all the others on my dining room server. And most of us have only one photo of him – the same one, which bears a remarkable resemblance to both a picture of my father in the airforce and a very recent snap of my nephew Ashley at his graduation.

After Granny died and Oupa Milunsky moved in with Auntie Minnie and Uncle Joe in Hesperus Street, we moved into my grandparents' house in Milner Street.

My mother ran a kosher home. Although the options were limited in our small town, and there wasn't the range you can get today, I don't recall it ever being an issue. That was what we knew. Our Pesach products we got from Auntie Ethel's shop in Beaconsfield, across the square from Brenner's. Pickled cucumbers, matzos, whatever was available. Whatever wasn't we did without. It was only eight days, anyway. No big deal.

Every Friday The Farmer arrived. Whether my parents knew his name or not, I can't say. Certainly I didn't, and never thought to ask. He would pull up his van in the street outside our house, raise the sides and display his produce. No Pick n Pay or Checkers for us. This is how we bought our fruit and veg.

A little while before Rosh Hashanah, The Farmer would bring us a turkey. A live one. She'd be kept in the *hok* in the yard, and Mom would take me out to feed her. Of course we didn't know the sex, but she was always a she, because Mom would give her a she name: Jemima, Georgina, Petronella ... The names were recycled over time.

When she'd been fattened up, one of our domestics would haul her up Synagogue Street to Rabbi Werner, where she'd be *schlached*, and brought back unceremoniously to have her feathers plucked by Ester, sitting on a bench in the yard with an enamel bath on her lap.

Inevitably, one Rosh Hashanah, when my mother was cajoling us to eat our food, Linda's wail of "I can't, it's Petronella" put an end to the ritual. From then on, turkeys came frozen.

Milner Street had an Aga stove. It was so warm in the kitchen in those freezing Kimberley winters that we even did our homework there. Long before the phrase became a cliché, the kitchen was the hub of our home.

I helped Mommy to make kichel there. Anyone will tell you that she was a baker extraordinaire, and her kichel was legendary. She rolled it out so thinly on the formica table that you had to scrape the blocks up with a very fine knife. Many a baker has tried the recipe and failed, but perhaps one day Beverley will get it right. Her son Ian will forever be grateful.

If the truth be told, I always whined when she wanted me to help her in the kitchen, although she usually got her way. Now I wish I'd paid a little more attention. When she passed, I became the custodian of her famous handwritten recipe books, but I've only tried a few of her recipes. "Add a little rum." "Some sugar to taste." It doesn't taste the same. Besides, whenever I see her handwriting, I get emotional.

We all have our favourites. Her cheesecake was exceptional, all soft and creamy when it came out of the oven. And the turkey wings she made for Linda's 40th birthday party – a most unusual combination of flavours. I once tried to replicate her chocolate fudge fingers for my cousin Anthony. He was a big fan. Unfortunately mine didn't match up, I was told.

Linda and I have also tried the ginger caramel pudding – Leon and I had been known to finish it off in the early hours of the morning. It wasn't bad. Not Mom's. The next project will be lekach, those gingery biscotti I never quite appreciated until years later when ginger became my thing … and they weren't there anymore.

The big event to come out of that kitchen was when Mom severed the tendon in her finger, cutting biltong. She had quite a selection of rather lethal knives (the butcher's knife had me running for cover) and wasn't afraid to use them. According to the doctor after the fact, her liberal use of a sticky Friar's Balsam was a genius choice, and she didn't lose the finger. But straight it wasn't, and never would be again. Not that it impeded her at all, but it was the butt of many a joke, and Leon, in particular, was known to tease her when she wagged her finger at him in admonishment.

There's quite a tale to her ginger beer, too.

Sullivan's Ginger Beer was a household name – not only in Kimberley, where it was made and bottled at the well-known Sullivan's Bottling Company, but across the country, it's said. We were all very partial to it. So it was typically Mom to attempt her own. She may never make it again, but she would take great pride in knowing that she had conquered the culinary challenge. It was this competitive streak that had her trying her hand (and generally excelling) at making stuffed teiglach, spun sugar and ptsah (brawn – urgh). The latter was made for their 25th wedding anniversary. She took out a piece for herself every couple of days, to be relished with mustard, and the rest hung around in the freezer for months until it had to be tossed. No one else was game.

So, one day, someone gave Mom a ginger beer culture, which started the whole fireworks display, so to speak. Apparently this culture "grows", and then you have to divide it, and then each part grows more, and you divide it again. Well, it's easy to figure out that, eventually, you will have more ginger beer than you can use. It was coming out of our ears. So it sat on the pantry shelf for a while – until one day, when we were sitting in the kitchen, we heard a rather loud pop. Then another. And another. Before long, the pantry was drenched in sticky syrup.

The good news: that was the end of the ginger beer. But strangely, I retain a fondness for that sweet, burning taste. And on the rare occasion that I take one of those sodas, they somehow all taste like Mom's.

Equalling her talent in the kitchen was her substantial knitting prowess. A master knitter was my mom. Even now, many years after her death, Linda and I each still keep a couple of her jerseys in our cupboard. We haven't worn them in years, but we won't part with them. Mom seldom knitted the two of us jerseys from the same pattern, as we were quite different teenagers, but we did have one the same, bar the colour, and ironically, without knowing it at the time, that is one that we have both saved. I recently wore the other: a quite spectacular fair isle creation of the head of David. It never fails to draw attention, and when it does, I take great pride and pleasure in pointing out her amazing skills.

Once, on a trip to Joburg, she'd visited her favourite haberdashery and discovered labels to sew into these works of art. And from that day on, all our jerseys were "Handmade with loving care by Mom". When we were packing up some of Dad's after he passed, we found the distinctive labels sewn in at the neck: "Handmade for a loving husband".

It was at Louise Sherman's haberdashery that Mom also picked out embroidery patterns more beautiful than any Kimberley could provide. And with the colourful yarns in myriad shades, she'd transform stiff calico with outline drawings into spectacular table creations. Satin stitch, leaf stitch, cross stitch. While she taught Linda and me, starting with the requisite tray cloths, she built up our trousseaux with magnificent table cloths, which she had interwoven with lace in Johannesburg, at great cost. Our Shabbos cloths are identical: with images of candles, kitke and wine. I keep mine in plastic – I don't know why.

Inevitably, it came about that Mom would finish one of my school projects for me. I wasn't bad at knitting, but it took so long, I was lazy, and of course I'd left it until the last minute. My turquoise cardigan had to be handed in and I was nowhere near finished. Mom to the rescue. Trying really hard not to be too professional about it, and taking care to knit the normal way, into the front of the stitch – for Mom had her own distinctive style, always knitting into the back of the stitch, which Linda and I both adopted as we became more proficient – she whipped up the cardigan in no time. The teacher was most impressed at my efforts and even selected the cardigan for display on the Kimberley Show. There presented a moral dilemma for Mom, but she never let me down.

Not then, and not ever.

In Std 3 I finally got my bike. I'd begged and begged, but it was quite a big purchase and it wasn't coming without a little bribery. You see, if I came in the top three, I'd get my bike. Well, a girl's got to do what a girl's got to do. My green bike was my pride and joy. It wasn't long after that that I was hauled over by a cop and given a ticket for riding on the pavement on my way to school. All day I panicked about what my parents were going to do, and when I finally got up the courage to tell them, they were annoyed with the cop. As Memorial Road was such a busy road, they'd told me not to cross it on my bike, and rather to take the shortcut around the corner on the pavement!

In Std 3, I also took up netball. I wasn't much of an athlete, but netball seemed fun. The problem was, I had to have a tracksuit. That green helenca tracksuit was quite expensive, but if it had to be, it had to be – and it was going to be big enough to last for a while. And last it did. I remember still wearing it at Rhodes University 10 years later.

I hated school – high school, I mean. You'd never have guessed, as I actually didn't realise how much I hated it until I got to university. The reason for this was that my mother always brushed my moans aside, saying "No, you don't. You LOVE school. Besides, if you work just a LITTLE bit harder, you'd come first, instead of second." Today it would be a different story. You'd be lugged off to guidance teachers and psychologists. Then, you just needed Mom. She had it all worked out. If she said you loved school, you did. Oddly enough, she wasn't that keen on coming to Kimberley Girls' High either, although she knew it well, having matriculated there herself. She certainly never attended PTA meetings, and was just as nervous, all those years later, talking to Mrs Baer, our brilliant but imposing headmistress, as I was.

I think it was some time after Leon dinged the little grey Morris Minor into the back of the mayor's car that Mom got the little white Mini. Everyone knew it. She would fetch my friends and me from a party, crammed in with no space to spare, and stop to ask one of the guys if he wanted a lift. Of course she knew he wouldn't fit in, but she stopped to ask him anyway because she knew we'd be embarrassed. She could be such a tease.

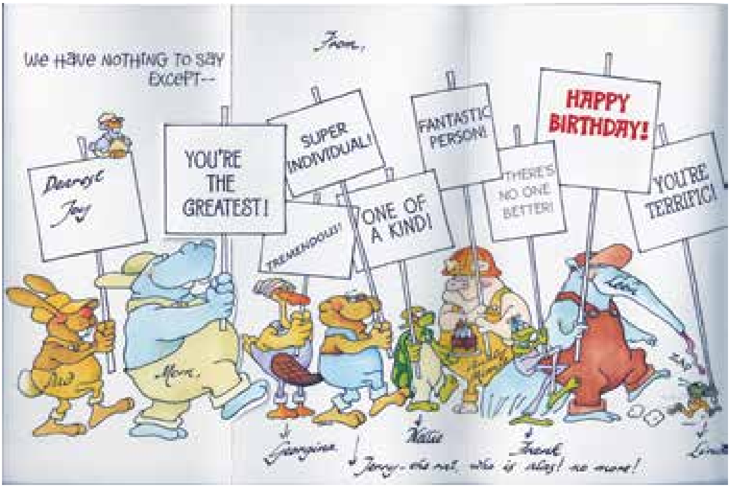
One afternoon on my way to Speech lessons with Ray Sack, we saw some of the Christian Brothers College boarders walking down Du Toitspan Road on their weekly treat into town. In their uniforms with boater hats. I wanted to see who they were, but not that they should see me, of course. We were quite shy. Just as we got abreast of them, Mom gave a tap-tap-tap of the brakes that caused the little car to hiccup and jerk, and innocently declared: "Oh dear, I've run out of petrol."

The white Mini was famous, and started quite a love for the little cars. Eventually Leon would have a blue one and I a yellow. But everyone remembered the little white one.

Today 29 Milner Street is Milner House, a popular guest house. On one of our trips back to Kimberley in the late 1990s, we'd stopped by and asked the new owners if we could walk through the old property. They were very welcoming and accommodating, as they knew the history of the house, and had known our name. Of course, time and money had changed the house, and it was so much smaller than I remembered. Life was large when I was growing up.

Mom with her retinue: Shirley, Vicky and Heather

Above: In Kimberley, 1980s
Left: The kids - Joy, Linda and Leon, 1965
Below: On my birthday, with typical additions



Chapter 5

All my childhood memories are wrapped up in that house. Granny's heavy furniture in the lounge, which boasted a bay window where Dad kept his little bar with its interesting gadgets and accessories: the fancy swizzle sticks we'd walked East London for one holiday, the bird which rocked itself into the drink and then lifted its head to rock some more, and the sealed champagne glasses with coloured liquid that tricked you when you thought it would spill. And the hundreds of little white plastic horses that Dad collected from the White Horse whiskey bottles.

"*Nommer asseblief,*" came the voice down the line when we sat in the passage to make a phone call. We knew the names of the operators and they knew us. Sometimes, they even knew where you were when you weren't at home, and would enlighten anyone who happened to call looking for you. Life changed forever when we went onto an automatic exchange and our number expanded from 6179 to 26179.

When TV finally arrived in 1976, it transmitted only for a few hours each day, but we sat glued to the box in the lounge. Dad liked *The Villagers*, and Mom and I fell about when we first saw professional wrestling.

My bedroom was always a mess. Mom tried a million things to get me to pack away my washing, which piled up on the spare bed from week to week. I mean, who needed a wardrobe? She once even resorted to neatly laying out my newly ironed clothes in the passage so that I couldn't easily get to my room, but I perversely hopped over them for two days, to reach the toilet at the end of the passage, before I relented.

From this passage was a door leading to the breakfast room. Not that we ever ate breakfast in it, but everyone had a breakfast room then.

The dining room was the place to be when the fire was lit in the winter. We'd close the doors to keep the heat in, and then make a dash down the icy passage if we needed something elsewhere in the house. It was quite a long passage (for a child), and I disliked going down there when everyone else was in the dining room. It was scary, as the floorboards creaked in places, but even more so when, as the youngest, I was despatched to open the front door for Elijah at the Pesach Seder. I just hated that. There's something very eerie about opening a door for no-one to come in. And what if someone did? Mom found it highly amusing.

She loved being in the garden, just as her father had done, and she continued to nurture dahlias, just as he had done. I'm sure dahlia was the first flower I ever learned to identify. Sometimes she'd pick a few for a vase in the entrance hall, but mostly, like her father, she preferred them where they were most at home – in their beds.

To a little girl, her rose garden was huge, and I knew all the different roses by name, colour and smell. They were beautiful.

Dad, perversely, only wanted to know snapdragons. I think he liked the name. When you pointed to a rose (or lily, or gladiolus), he'd say "snapdragon". When you showed him a snapdragon, he'd say "carnation". I found it really funny as a child, and still as he carried on the joke in older age.

Along the wall was a honeysuckle from which mom often picked sprigs in season, watching me cover my cheeks in stickiness as I licked the sweet nectar off the flowers.

But the most unusual part of the garden was the greengage tree, on the other side of the house not far from the budgie cemetery. I never knew anyone else who had a greengage tree, and certainly not one visited most summers by Cammy the Chameleon. Mom loved that little creature, and it was a time of great celebration when we noticed that he was back for the season.

Of course, our garden was most well known for its two large palm trees, standing sentinel at the front of the house. Very handy they were at Succoth, when some of the leaves were cut for the succah at the shul. No-one had their own succah then. We all went to the shul.

And long before it became a kitschy feature of curiosity, Mom had a garden gnome. Living in the garden, as a gnome does, it will lose its shine over time, so every now and then, Mom and I would sit on the step of the stoep with our little paint tins and brushes, and spruce up the little guy. Green jacket, red hat, black shoes.

In my early childhood, Mom went back to work, helping Oupa and Uncle Sam at their outfitting shop opposite the post office on the Market Square. Officially called Post Office Outfitters, Mom always referred to it as the Poo. Oupa was quite a businessman, I gather, though of the old school. I'm not sure his sales methods were quite on the up-and-up. Legend has it that he could sell ice to an Eskimo in winter, pinching in the back of the jacket for the purchaser looking in the mirror, if it was too large, or tilting the hat on the side of the head, if it was too small. The jury is out on whether he would sell one size 7 shoe and one size 8 ...

And sometimes I'd go along in the afternoon, sitting at the large desk in the office in the middle of the shop, colouring in. It was the happiest of times when Mom wasn't busy and would sit next to me, colouring in the right-hand page while I did the left.

I guess the upstairs of the shop was a storeroom. I seldom went up there. But what a treat it was to have a prime viewing spot on the balcony when there were military parades on the Market Square. With the square crowded with onlookers, how lucky we were to have our own box! Mom particularly loved the Scottish regiment with their bagpipes – it's a love that's endured for me.

Sunday mornings, we'd drive down to the cemetery in West End so that Mom could visit her parents' graves. Every Sunday. Of course, I was never allowed onto the cemetery as a child, but I did sit in the car outside, waiting for her, in time reading the Sunday papers. It was beautiful in the car in the winter. My first invitation onto the cemetery came in the summer of 1977. I had just matriculated and was soon leaving home for a year in Australia as an exchange student. It was time for "the tour". Grandfather Leon's grave, Granny and Oupa Milunsky, Maxie, Colonel Sir David Harris, friends of my parents I'd known. My first experience of a funeral there was at the age of 21, when Uncle Joe died. I remember Leon holding me up, as I became painfully aware of my new adult status.

Lunch on Sunday was chicken. Always. With Spanish rice and peas (my pet aversion), and Coca-Cola. When Dad came home from bowls, he'd first take a plate of food down to Granny at Harmony Home.

Bowls was big for Dad. He played every week, and sometimes in competitions. As a Skip I'm told he wasn't half bad, and the move from Consolidated Mines to Beaconsfield West Bowling Club went off quite well. Without being privy to the details, we were left in no doubt that there were some considerable politics involved in that!

After lunch, particularly in winter, he may read the newspaper in the car, parked in the yard in the sun, but mostly he'd have a nap. Naps lasted from 2pm to 4pm – exactly. Then, if we were lucky, he'd take us for a drive in the red Valiant, with its red seats and their overpowering smell of vinyl. Sometimes to Ritchie to the little café at the river; on rare occasions to Riverton, but that was "far".

On Saturday night, we may get a treat: supper at the Tom Cat with Auntie Minnie and Uncle Joe, or perhaps a quick bite at Ideal Fish & Chips with Auntie Girlie and Uncle Herman. The latter weren't related to us, but all our parents' friends were "uncle" or "auntie" then. How liberating it was, 30 years later, to call them by their first names! Linda and I were impossible; we always got the giggles.

They sold the house in 1978. When I came back from Australia, it was to a different home – a townhouse near Queen's Park. It didn't have much of an atmosphere, but it was compact, and I came home only at vacation time anyway.

I had dreamed of being an exchange student since one of Linda's friends had done so years before. It wasn't a secret, and we'd worked towards it. I know it wasn't easy for Mom and Dad, as they'd had to come up with the airfare, but when I was finally selected, they were very proud. No-one prepared us, though, for the incredibly difficult separation. I sobbed all the way to Sydney.

I was only 17-and-a-half, and a year is a long time, but the letters came every single week. Mom was a prolific letter-writer, and the aerograms were crammed with news. She made sure I never missed out on anything at home. She'd taken to writing really small so that she could get in as much as possible, and she took great pride in neat script. The lines were always straight and there were no scratchings-out or addings-in. She never missed a beat, and she never missed once.

And only once was she the bearer of bad tidings: Granny Capon had died. A sad day, but a blessed release.

Script was important to Mom. I figure she placed some significance on what a neat handwriting said about you. Around the age of 11 or 12, I decided pen-pals were a good idea, and set about collecting a few. Mom used to check the letters I'd written to them (not the content, of course), and if she thought they weren't neat enough, I'd tear them up and redo.

More to the point, she herself enjoyed writing, and showed off her skills quite magnificently each year by diligently copying all the poems I would need to learn for my Speech and Drama lessons into a hard-back notebook. As we'd work through them, Ray Sack and I would make notes alongside, or mark the words and phrases that would need specific emphasis in my delivery.

And eventually, once we were all out of the house, Mom decided to take up a hobby: calligraphy. She'd spend hours practising the art and produced some beautiful work.

Above: The travellers - Auntie Minnie and Mom in Trafalgar Square, 1966
Below: The bowlers - John Grant, Dad and Uncle Joe

As Abby in Arsenic and Old Lace, June 1972

Chapter 6

Quite the actress was my mother, and quite the celebrity in Kimberley. Everyone seemed to know her, and from all I know, everyone loved her. Certainly I swore as I got older that some of my friends would pop by to see her, rather than me.

Anyone who knew her would know that she was a Kimberley theatre professional. If life had taken a different turn for her, I'm sure she would have been a "real" professional. She was drawn to perform, revelled in being on stage, and took her roles extremely seriously.

Outside of her family, theatre was everything to my mother. On stage, backstage, front-of-house, programmes, bookings … she had a finger in every pie. She liaised with theatre management, organised or participated in auditions, and involved herself quite heavily in the inevitable Reps (Kimberley Repertory Society) politics. She was also the local representative for Capab, the Cape Performing Arts Board, which brought "professional" productions to Kimberley a few times a year. The complimentaries (perks of the job) were appreciated, and we saw opera, ballet, the lot.

There was a rich theatre life in the town, and we were immersed in it.

Opening night was a huge thing. Lots of activity around the dressing rooms (if you were the star, you had your own), with flowers and telegrams arriving at regular intervals at the back door. No way would we have let Mom go on without a telegram from us, but they rolled in too, in large numbers, from friends, fans and the theatre crowd. Backstage, it was such a vibe: a mixture of costumes, makeup, excitement, busyness, nerves …

Always looking to take it up a notch, she was thrilled when Kimberley got its very own professional director. Her work with Irishman Ernest Spillane was of the best she ever did.

Personally, I found helping her learn her lines tedious (and was often extremely impatient when she didn't get them right), but I became a little more obliging when she paid me per page. As a result, and because there were only three parts to the play, all of whom were on stage pretty much the entire time, I knew *The Old Ladies* from first line to last, and became quite handy, prompting from memory in the auditorium during rehearsals.

And who can forget *Arsenic and Old Lace*, *Gaslight*, *Becket*, *The Aspern Papers*, *Waiting in the Wings*, *No Time for Fig Leaves* … And perhaps her defining role, Yente the matchmaker in *Fiddler on the Roof*? We all came down from Joburg to see her in that, bringing our friends along. Minor point that she never could sing a note. Nobody noticed; she mimed her way through it in style.

Sometimes the fact that she couldn't sing came in useful. Some of her favourite theatrical endeavours were the playreadings they did from time to time. Usually staged in church halls, they could be put together in a flash with a willing team, as there were no words to learn and no real direction to follow. You read the lines as you went along and made sure you didn't mask anyone on the stage when you moved. I got roped in on more than one occasion, particularly when the cast called for a young nurse or student.

The *Mrs Hooper* series was very popular. I remember one with a Christmas theme, and a rousing – totally and deliberately out-of-key – rendition of *Good King Wenceslas*. I have been known to sing it on occasion since.

Needless to say, some of the best scripts could be interesting for a Jewish actress, and one of the stories my mother liked to tell was of the time the Rabbi came to the show, watching her, as a nun, kneel in prayer. To my mother, life was a stage.

She particularly loved the Old Fashioned Music Halls. They were played with much enthusiasm and to great acclaim at a number of venues around the city. A place with such history, it was never difficult finding a spot: the old Constance Hall, the recreated music hall at the Kimberley Mine Museum at the Big Hole, and even Jeff Geller's Star of the West, the oldest pub in town and still a popular drinking hole to this day. She mimed those too. But her acting made up for it.

As time went by, she also tried her hand at directing, certainly with some success. She would plot the moves on a cardboard model of the stage on the dining room table. I was amazed at the amount of time she put into it. *The Admirable Crichton* was a personal favourite of hers. She even took it on the road, to the Bloemfontein Theatre.

As involved as she was, it was unlikely that any of us would escape.

Mom had sent Linda to Speech classes with Mrs Sack quite early on, and to ballet. "A beautiful dancer," my mother always said. Linda later progressed to the Kimberley stage, too, and often reminisces about *A Flea in her Ear*. There was quite a vibrant theatre community at the time, and she fitted right in.

Apparently, at around the age of five, I had nagged to be allowed to tag along to Linda's Speech classes, so Ray let me sit in. I was a sponge, and my mother's party trick from then on was to have me recite poems for her friends. My particular favourite was *Requiem* by Robert Louis Stevenson. Heavy stuff, and it had everyone in stitches.

Requiem
by Robert Louis Stevenson
Under the wide and starry sky,
Dig the grave and let me lie;
Glad did I live and gladly die,
And I laid me down with a will.

This be the verse you 'grave for me:
Here he lies where he longed to be;
Home is the sailor, home from the sea,
And the hunter home from the hill.

Apparently my cuteness didn't translate well into ballet. "Two left feet," was my mother's summation of my efforts.

What followed for me were many years of real Speech and Drama training, poetry readings, diplomas and a little stage work. I backed down at the thought of taking it on as a career, and always told my mother I couldn't handle all the kiss-kiss, hug-hug. She was amused.

The most unlikely of us all to grace the stage would have been Dad. A quiet, gentle and unassuming man, he was never one to court the limelight, yet had dutifully lent his hand to all of my mother's projects, as stage manager. But even he gave in eventually, taking the part of Mrs Ferd-Ganif, the groom's mother, in my mother's production of *The Mock Wedding*. With all parts of the Jewish wedding ceremony played by the opposite sex, Dad struck quite an elegant woman – bearing an uncanny resemblance to his sister Stella.

So we thought Leon would be odd-man-out. Not so. Many years later, he popped up for three seconds as an extra in a local movie production called *Fair Trade* (aka *Fire with Fire*), starring Oliver Reed and Robert Vaughn. We all went along to see it in Johannesburg. I almost missed the famous scene during one of my dozes, and afterwards we sent Leon a bill for pain and suffering.

Such was the world into which we'd been born. Mom had often told me how she'd taken me to rehearsals in my carry-cot, leaving me to sleep in the wings. There's nothing to indicate that this story isn't true. And as I got older, I was often to be found selling programmes in the foyer of the Kimberley Theatre on opening night, or ushering folk to their seats before the performance got under way.

Mom was the theatre, and the theatre in Kimberley was my mom. I always believed that, once my parents moved up to Joburg, the Kimberley theatre scene was never the same again. But my mother never changed. One night, when my nephew Ashley – then a little tot in a cot – was proving difficult to get to sleep, Mom and I crept into the room and performed for him a rather sweet (though tuneless) rendition of *We all Stand Together*. Two little froggies, moving from side to side: *bom, bom, bom – bom, bom, bom – we all stand together!*

So defining of my mother's being was the theatre that, when we sat down to discuss the headstone for her grave, Leon's suggestion of adding the iconic theatre masks (one happy, one sad) was unanimously adopted. When we thought about it, how could we not?

I find the cemetery a restful and pleasing place to visit.

Not only do I visit the graves of family and friends, but I walk down different paths from time to time, and I like to read the inscriptions on graves I haven't seen before. I have been to the military graves, the rabbinical graves, the infant graves. So I had voiced my desire to say something on the headstone that would tell someone taking the time to stop at the grave a little about who my mother had been.

The masks were ideal. They were a personal note of admiration, a warm tribute to a love of life, but also a documentation that would serve as a record for the world for all time.

Over the years, Dad had a few different jobs. It was never easy making a living. Leaving school so young, he'd never acquired any qualifications. For quite a while he worked for Uncle Joe at Brenner's, his general dealer in Beaconsfield. Mom and I would pop down to pick him up at 5 o'clock, and she'd buy me a packet of crisps there. I'd then go to the cashier with my 5c, always measuring my growth by how I fitted under the ledge at her window. It wasn't long, of course, before I could see into the cubicle and hand the cashier the money myself.

On the odd occasion, Mom would buy a packet of hot chips from the Apple Box Café next door, and we'd share. That was a real treat!

But for what seemed the longest time, Dad worked at Tattersalls with his brother. Alick had come to Kimberley from Bloemfontein around the time of my parents' marriage, selling up his thriving bakeries there to become a bookmaker (a business he knew nothing about), to fulfil the dying wish of his father who, having tried his hand in the game, did not want Goldman to be the only bookmaker in town.

I'm not sure Dad was ever really happy there. But in those days, you did what you did. Mom also worked there on Saturdays, and when I was old enough (to use my head), so did I. I was entrusted with the accounts – paperwork that entailed the use of carbon. I hated the place. It was dirty, noisy and the patrons were creepy. After every race day I declared it my intention not to return the next week, but my father cajoled: "We NEED you. We can't trust ANYONE else to do the accounts properly."

Ironically – or perhaps because of it – Dad didn't bet much on the horses. A few rand here and there, but nothing of any consequence. But he did like to try his luck on the Durban July. Of course, that was their busiest (dirtiest and noisiest) time of the year.

On the odd occasion, when word got out that there was a fafi game nearby, Dad and Uncle Alick would put a couple of bob on that too. No one seemed too bothered by the fact that it was illegal. I'm sure that was part of the charm.

They were two very different people, David and Alick. A rather short man with a volatile streak, Alick wasn't the easiest to work with. Certainly, Uncle Alick loved me, and I him. But in latter years, Dad would reflect on the overriding influence of Auntie Violet in the brothers' relationship. A domineering personality, she would be the one to take issue with him on matters, with Alick a man of little courage, my father said.

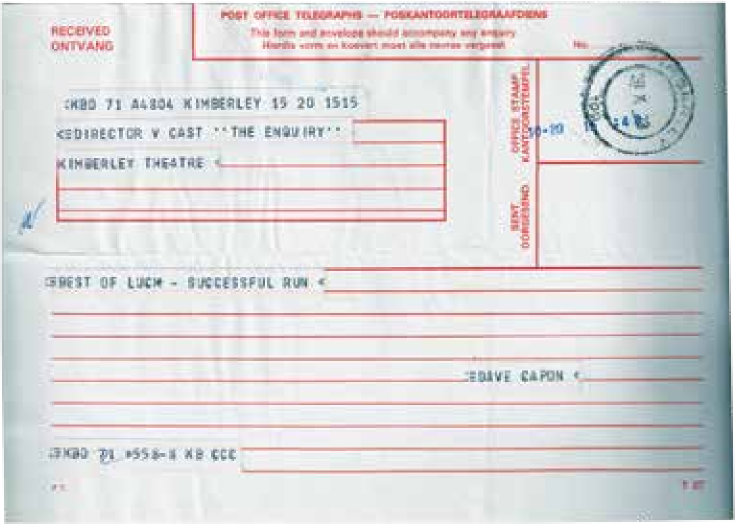
And at the stage of his life when the one thing he had plenty of was time to think, Dad would often express regret – for a number of things, but mostly for allowing his brother to have such influence over his life. And it was this regret that made me absolutely certain, the night Linda, Leon and I sat down, as we'd done 10 years before, that Dad's tombstone would not carry a defining reference, as Mom's had – and certainly not of the horses.

In time, Dad would turn his back on Tattersalls and move on. He would go on to work in a liquor store and at a garage. How is it possible that we never knew how difficult it must have been?

Well, I suppose it must have been at around that time that Mom found a new interest: tour-guiding. It was a job made for her. She was outgoing, loved being with people, performing – and she was a born-and-bred Kimberlite. She got stuck into the studies and learned the history, got a special licence to transport people in her car, and immersed herself in the Big Hole, Magersfontein, the Duggan Cronin Gallery. She loved it. And, I gather, at least one tourist loved her – she would tell of the day an American lady gave her a R100 tip! Big pickings.

And it was quite surprising that she suddenly developed an affection for – and an emotional attachment to – goldfish. The little swimmers had pride of place in the lounge, where she could sit and watch them for hours. Sadly, they never lasted very long and were quickly replaced, but when it seemed their lifespans were getting shorter and shorter, Mom called it a day. After the last Goldie had its toilet funeral, we debated the possible causes of their untimely deaths, and while I still hold this view, Mom would never countenance the fact that her chain-smoking over the bowl could have had anything to do with it.

The Mock Wedding - Dad as Mrs Ferd-Ganif, the mother of the groom, February 1975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KIMBERLEY THEATRE

BEST OF LUCK - SUCCESSFUL RUN

DAVE CAPON

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Above: No self-respecting actress would go on stage without one
Below: The Old-Fashioned Music Hall

Chapter 7

Many years before scrapbooking burst onto the creative art scene, my mother was already a pro. She had kept mementos from every theatrical endeavour, arranged on thick pages in a sketch pad, interwoven with tissue paper. Her character of each play was recorded, newspaper articles clipped and preserved. Photographs, programmes, telegrams, cards that had been attached to the flowers she'd received on opening night.

In those years, I'd never shown much interest in those books, their being personal memorials of her own achievements. But in time I would be grateful for the wealth of information they contained.

And in time, I would come to realise quite what a documenter of information my mother was. When she died, we found her diary – though not one as defined. In Mommy's diary were the dates of anything that seemed important to her at the time. So it was on such-and-such a day in such-and-such a year that Joy bought her microwave. It was on such-and-such a day that they moved house, and it was on such-and-such a day that she fell and broke her wrist. Now there's a story in itself.

Leon and Linda had moved to Joburg in 1981, and I arrived in 1987. So it was inevitable that Mom and Dad would follow suit, and did so in 1989. It was great having them close by, but it wasn't a particularly easy time for them.

Quite an adjustment after a forever in a small town. Money was short. Dad found a job at Sanlic, a family store in those days dealing in locks, security products and the like. It was incredible, really, how he used to drive that clapped-out white Renault 9 down to Village Main every day, how he found his way around the city bustling with huge trucks and taxi drivers. I was impressed. Mom wasn't inclined to drive. Joburg drivers made her nervous.

We'd found them a flat in Yeoville, not far from Linda. It was quite a cold space, situated as it was above the underground garage, but it did the job for a while. Buying the *Sunday Times* in the little café around the corner one day, Dad saw a man come in dressed in bowling gear. As he was keen to start bowling again, and this man "looked Jewish", he went up to ask him about a bowls club in the vicinity. There began my parents' lifelong friendship with Meyer and Marcia Peimer.

So workwise, Dad was sorted. But there was little for Mom to do until one day, in the publishing company where I worked, we had a need for a copy typist, a data capturer of sorts – and in a hurry. We'd just acquired these new gadgets called personal computers and had no-one to input the copy. As Mom had been a hot-shot typist in her day, I called her up and said: "Do you think you can still type?"

"Yes, I'm sure I can," she said more quickly than she realised she should have, because I think she thought I meant on a typewriter – and a manual one at that.

"Don't worry about the computer, Mom," I said. "It's a piece of cake. We'll show you how it works."

Once she sat down at the PC, she learned the relevant DOS codes, wrote them down on a piece of paper that she stuck to the side of the screen for reference, and off she went. It wouldn't be long before she became quite indispensable. She sat down at the computer each morning and typed away till afternoon. What good therapy this would prove to be! In the quiet times, she had a book to read, a crossword puzzle on the go, or her very favourite: the Target (the nine-letter anagram in *The Star*). In time, she had everyone else hooked too.

Everyone loved her. She was friendly, she was wise, and she was your archetypal yiddishe mama. Whatever you had a need for, she had in her drawer. "Beryl, do you have a biscuit for me?" "Beryl, do you have a tissue?" Sweet? Chocolate? Band-Aid? Oddly, when she died, I became the office supplier – of dental floss, an emery board or chewing gum.

And of course, she was quite Mrs Personality. Linda and I were often to remark: "She's on stage again."

So on the day in question, for some reason or other, she was mincing down the office, taking off some poor soul who had recently joined the team – and who shall remain nameless – when she tripped (either on the carpet or over her own feet), and headed quite heavily to the floor. It was really something to see.

Sheepishly, she made her way to her desk and sat there for some time, typing. Then my phone rang on the other side of the office. "You'd better come and take a look. I think I've broken my arm." I dashed back up the office to find a rather swollen wrist and an embarrassed, but highly amused, mother.

Sitting in the waiting room at the Rosebank Clinic, Mom was still laughing. She recognised the irony of it all, and said: "You see what happens when you're nasty?"

Dad didn't think it was so funny, though. He cried. But there came about a rather fascinating transformation. Dad learned how to make tea. Dad learned how to make toast. Dad helped her to fasten her bra. Mom was very pleased.

The good news was, the doctor said she should keep typing. It would be good for the arm. So life more or less returned to normal rather quickly.

When they weren't at work, Mom would sit at the dining room table and paint her nails. She had beautiful hands, and she had taught me the simple art of manicure around the age of 16, when I'd finally kicked the nail-biting habit. I credit her with my obsession for elegant hands. She'd cook and bake, put chicken feet in the soup and make *lokshen* pudding. She loved *'Allo 'Allo*, and took to walking into the office each day with a jaunty "Good moaning".

Dad would watch sport, cartoons, pretty much anything. How he laughed watching *Laurel and Hardy*, starting to chuckle as soon as the little dot appeared at the opening credits. You could often hear him talking to the TV, giving some rather loud advice to our cricket team when they weren't performing their best, or shouting "Crap!" if one of the politicians thought he could pull the wool over his eyes.

Or they'd read. A lot. Mom was into the girls' books, and Mills & Boon. Rosamunde Pilcher taught us all we needed to know about Cornwall. And we'd never be patient enough for the latest Jilly Cooper to come out in paperback, so we'd "go halves" as soon as the hardback hit the shelves. Dad was into Westerns. I'm sure he'd read every Louis L'Amour known to man – more than once. And we shared an interest in true crime. He declared the most gruesome thing he'd ever read to be *Psycho*, the story of Ed Gein, which a colleague had lent us.

And Dad would talk to Kevin about soccer. He loved cricket, rugby, boxing – anything, except motorsport and watersport – but when Kevin came along, a real Manchester United fanatic, Dad took enormous interest and pleasure in discussing the week's fixtures and results. It was an outlet for him, especially after Mom passed.

It was in Joburg that I became a master packer. I (with Linda, of course) must have moved them three or four times. For quite some time they shared a home with Linda, first in a double-storey house (Linda on the top floor with Ashley and her poodles, and Mom and Dad at the bottom) and then, when Linda moved, in a cottage alongside. It was in the double-storey house that Mommy developed a love for Candy and Cola, Linda's two little maltese who'd crept into all our hearts. They'd pop down every night for a Good Boy Choc Drop before turning in upstairs, a routine that made them – and Granny – very happy.

And it was in Joburg that I developed a small talent as a hairdresser. For a while I used to do Mom's hair every Sunday morning. I tried to get the curl in, but I didn't have power in the wrist. She professed the "do" to be very professional – as good as the hairdresser's.

It was at the unlikely venue of the hairdresser that the meeting between Kevin and me was hatched. As life works, sometime in the winter of 1995, Mom and Eileen were using the same beautifier in Highlands North. Mom had a wonderful daughter and Eileen a wonderful son. A perfect match. And so it came to pass that my telephone number was given to Eileen on the back of the little piece of white paper that came in the cigarette box (my mother always had one of those at hand).

I was none too impressed with this development. Her track record in arranging blind dates for me wasn't good. But understanding how the Jewish dating scene in Joburg worked, Dad came to the rescue: "Don't worry, doll. He's got to phone first."

Life entered a new phase. Kevin joined our kaluki school on a Thursday night – a high-stakes game that required a stash of 5c pieces and some volume of jelly beans. "I'm losing my boots," Dad would declare when he had to pay out anything more than 20c. Or when anyone else would rake in some winnings: "So now it's broken out in a new place." You could do in R5 on a bad night.

When Kevin and I told my parents we were moving in together, they were surprisingly relaxed about it, although I never doubted its import: at this time, Mom felt the need to pass on Granny's wedding ring, a sure indication that she hoped we'd marry. I was honoured.

After we moved to Fairmount, I bought a little flat in Waverley where Mom and Dad could finally stay put. No more moving. Dad was working in Orange Grove now (much nearer) and Mom was still working with me. Two years went by in a flash.

One day, driving to work with Mom, she asked quietly if she could tell me something. She said she couldn't tell anyone else, because they'd think she was nuts. "Of course, Mom," I said, with not a little trepidation.

The previous night, it seemed, Oupa had come into her room.

I won't deny I was shaken. While Linda and I have both visited psychics in our time, my mother, though unconventional, was a lot more traditional in her spiritual beliefs.

"Oh?" said I, slowly and calmly. "What did he say?"

It appeared he'd said nothing – he'd just stood there.

"Okay," I ventured further. "So what did he look like?" It was a test – as much of my own belief systems as whether what she had seen had been "real". "Did he look sick, like when he died?" I prodded.

It appeared not. He look smart, dapper, with his hat – "in his prime", she said. So it was true. Oupa had been there. She hadn't been scared. But "I hope he hasn't come for me" was very disconcerting. I assured her vigorously that I didn't believe such things, that our loved ones come to us in our dreams, but they certainly don't come to "fetch" us. I told her that I was sure he'd just come to give her a message. To let her know he loved her.

Sadly, in less than six months, I was forced to reassess the message he'd brought. Now I understand that he'd come to tell her that she needn't be afraid. When her time came, he'd be there waiting for her. It was very comforting, and an affirmation – if I needed one – that our lives together do not end on earth. Some 10 years later, this reassurance would once more bring me peace. I'll share it with you at the end of the book.

So, on Friday, 27 August 1999, at around lunchtime, I rang Mom from the office for a chat. Fridays were her day off. But she wasn't feeling great. A headache from hell, she said. When I asked if she needed me to take her to the doctor and she said yes, I knew there was no time to waste. She never went to doctors.

But when I got to the flat, she was in no hurry to go. She was cooking brisket in ginger ale, preparing for Rosh Hashanah, and she was not leaving until it was done. So she lay down for a while, and I paced up and down for, I'm sure, an hour at least. The more I pressed her to get up and let me take her to the hospital, the more she said: "Don't panic, Joy. We'll go just now when the brisket is done." It was hard not to panic when she added: "I just hope I don't need an operation."

Finally, at the Linksfield Clinic, after tests and more tests, the outcome was terrifying: Mom had suffered a cerebral aneurysm and needed surgery.

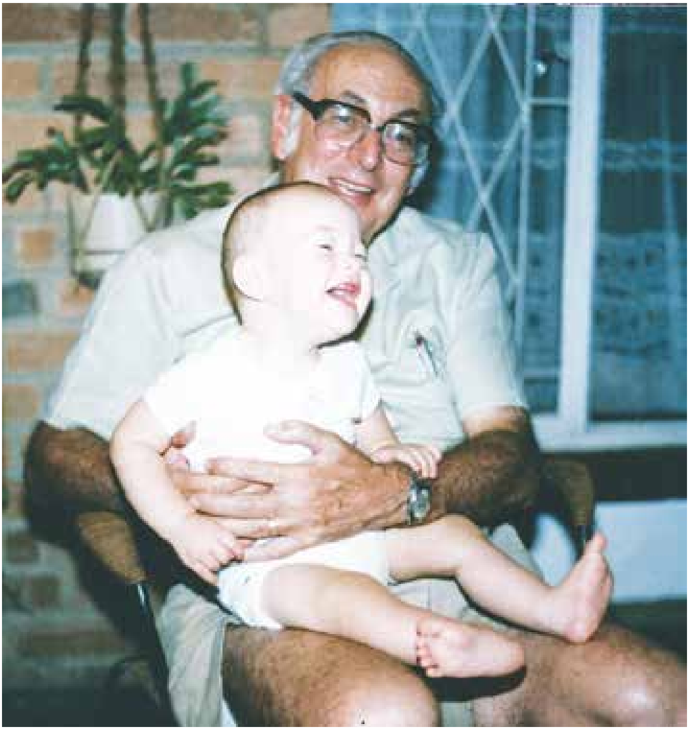
My mother was scared. She'd never been in hospital, except to have her babies. My father was broken. We children were making life-and-death decisions we were just not prepared for. Our lives were to change forever.

A seven-week nightmare of surgery, coma and ICU visits began. We befriended family of other patients in ICU and took strength from each other. We took turns: Linda the morning session at 10, Auntie Minnie and I at 3, Dad and the three of us (and often Beverley) at night. We settled into a routine of phoning the hospital as soon as we woke each day, to get an update of her progress (or lack thereof) during the night. “She’s the same. Did sleep, didn’t sleep. Had a quiet night.” Going to work really early so that we could leave for afternoon visiting. Supper in a rush so we could make the night visit. Crashing into bed in a haze of exhaustion.

We allowed no one in to see her, except the family. She would have hated any of her friends to see her like that. She would have hated us to see her like that. We tried to wake her. We talked to her, put headphones on her so she could listen to music. Let the smell of a Sweetie Pie waft under her nose. But she didn’t wake up.

And, on another Friday afternoon, 15 October 1999, seven weeks to the day, Mom took her last breath, Auntie Minnie at her side. Linda and I had stayed there overnight, with minimum sleep. In a plastic chair in the passage, and when one of the nurses took pity on us, on a bed in an empty ward. We hadn’t been curled up on the couch in the reception area for more than five minutes when the nurse came to call us. I’m convinced Mom did it on purpose. Protecting us, even at the end.

As the Archduchess Ferdinand of Styria in The Sleeping Prince, November 1968



Above: Ashley and his Zaida *Below: At my graduation, 1982*

Chapter 8

Linda and I were very proud of Dad. A man whose wife had been his rock, he was now alone. He'd relied on her completely, and she'd done everything for him. Made his porridge in the morning, his afternoon tea, his dinner. She'd shopped, planned, made the decisions. He was lost.

But he was amazing. He learned to do, to go, to be. And he never complained. Never wanted to be a burden, a nuisance. But I'm sure, like me, when he was all on his own, perhaps in his bath or in bed at night, he cried buckets. Sometimes I still do.

Friends are funny things. I saw how they gave up on him. I finally understood that my mother had been the one to keep the friendships going – that she was a much better friend to her friends than they were to her. Few bothered now, to call, to take him out, to visit. Save for Jenny and Brian, who always made an effort to come to him on their visits to South Africa. It meant the world to him. Jerome, his much younger friend, for whom he had a real affection. And Ester and Sam, a friendship that lasted a lifetime.

Perhaps his greatest bitterness was reserved for the brethren of the Hebrew Order of David, an august association of which he'd been a member for 40 years until he came to Joburg. A brother, worthy brother, treasurer, past president of the Kimberley order, who had opened his home to many a member of the brotherhood on their way through town, or offered a home from home to those attending the annual conventions and installations, now he was of no consequence (or perhaps no use) to anyone. Bitter? Yes, he was bitter. I found it hard to argue the fact.

But Dad was brave. He worked and drove until he was 79. He filled his time. Tea was at 4 o'clock. Never before. He looked forward to his whiskey at 6. Only one and only at 6 o'clock. He stored the special bottle of Chivas 10 Year Old that Jerome had given him for his birthday, for the occasions when Jerome would stop by.

He lived for our Saturday morning breakfasts out and about, a routine we'd started many years before when they'd moved to Joburg. Shopping centres and nurseries, near and far, exploring the big city.

Dad never liked to miss those Saturday mornings with his girls, even in later years when he struggled to walk and had to accept the wheelchair he'd so resisted. What a treat to share a slice of cheesecake with whichever one of us wasn't on diet at the time! And he wasn't as fussy as we were about which cheesecake it was. After years and years of a strict sugar-free routine, cheesecake was cheesecake, and good enough as a treat.

After 20 years of this family routine, one many of my friends have envied, Saturday mornings just aren't the same anymore.

And he'd think. A lot. About the past. About the present, the way things could have been different. And certainly about the future – without Mom. We missed her, of course, but we had families and friends to occupy our time, and jobs and chores to make the days go by. His emptiness was primal. He would never say so, but we knew. He was so much stronger than we ever gave him credit for. I wish I'd done more.

But he never lost his sense of humour – an innocent sweetness that was hard to resist. Swallowing another daily mouthful of pills, he's often say: "How do the pills know where to go?"

And he'd seldom talk ill of anyone, preferring to follow the principle that if you don't have something nice to say, it's best to say nothing at all. On a rare occasion, he would allow himself to express the harshest epithet of all: "Bitch!" Chances are, she probably was.

I've often thought that he coped better than Mom would have if the roles had been reversed. And there had been a time, years earlier, when she had faced the real possibility. Dad had ended up back in the Milpark Hospital, a week after a hernia op, with hepatitis and septicaemia. Weak beyond words and hallucinating from incorrect medication, one night, after having been dosed with copious amounts of Lucozade, he nearly didn't pull through. I can still hear those dreadful wails – the same sounds that would be heard again, many years later, as his real time drew near.

I know it was around June. There were beautiful sweetpeas that year and we filled his hospital room with their soft aroma. I love sweetpeas.

My mother was a wreck. When they finally thought to check his sugar, he was diagnosed with diabetes too. Finally, after another battery of tests, the culprit was identified as the gallbladder. Once it was removed, he was fine.

Ten years is a long time. Ten years was a lifetime for him to live without his Beryl. Linda and I took turns to stop in on a daily basis, making sure he had something for supper, and just breaking the boredom.

In retrospect, Mom's broken arm was a blessing in disguise. Dad was now able to make his own porridge for breakfast, and tea or coffee during the day. Expecting him to cook was pushing things a little far, but the microwave was a cinch!

Thank God for TV! The endless gore on the crime channel and the continuous seasons of rugby, cricket and tennis. Silly me to think I was doing him a favour by ringing up every night. "Ok, darling, I'm just watching CSI."

And thank God even more for TV when he finally had to admit that working and driving were getting a bit much. Twenty-four hours is a very long day.

Then, just as with Mom eight years earlier, life for Dad took a very sudden dip – one evening, which had started like any other. When the phone call came from my father that he'd had a bad fall, but had managed to crawl to the phone to make his cry for help, I ran, picking up Linda on the way and getting to the flat, 10 minutes away, just after Hatzolah.

There began a difficult period of about a year-and-a-half, in and out of hospital, pneumonia, infections and immobility. He was weak. His legs just wouldn't hold him. And he had to swallow his considerable pride to allow an aide to bath and dress him. But I know he found comfort living with Linda. He wasn't alone anymore.

Funnily, my hairdressing skills were called into action again. He thought it a good idea for me to give him "a little trim". How hard can it be? Well, I did try it – once. I bought a shaver, had a two-minute lesson from my own hairdresser, and got to work. Try as I may, I couldn't get things even. There were chunks out here, *lochs* there. "It's fine!" he said. It was dreadful.

Sadly, when we could no longer manage, frail-care became the only option. It's a horrible end to living, but I try to remind myself that they have the experience and the necessary equipment on hand. And I will forever be grateful that there are people in this world who fulfil this vital function, perhaps many rather badly, but some with real caring and compassion.

We tried to make it a "home" for him – as much as was possible in an environment that smelt so of a hospital. I brought him a potted rose on Valentine's Day and he loved to admire the blooms. And we'd all have lunch at the café there on a Sunday, sitting in the garden with the other residents and their families. Leon, Linda, Kevin and me.

Then finally, after one last dreadful bout in the Linksfield Clinic, in isolation with a virulent infection, I am grateful that he could at least return to his room at Sandringham, where he was comforted one afternoon by Rev Matzner, and where, with a nurse assigned to his bedside fulltime, he passed. He'd been there only four months.

It was Freedom Day: 27 April, the day South Africans celebrate their path out of the dark days of apartheid into the bright light of democracy. For the Capon family on earth, forever will Freedom Day mean so much more.

A few days before, on one of our afternoon visits, he'd said to me: "Joy, I feel so tired." Of course, I said: "Lie back and have a little rest, Dad. *Shloff* a little."

To which he said: "Not that kind of tired." We knew he'd decided it was time.

1988: "*Zaida! Zaida!*" were Ashley's first words, the little toddler gripping the bars of the security gate, jumping with excitement as my father approached the door.

The end of an era

It was the last night of shiva and we were all having supper at Linda's: Leon and Linda, Ashley, Kevin and I.

In a way, I was sorry shiva was coming to an end. I'd found some purpose in the week, and didn't feel quite ready to step back into the reality of work. Meeting all my colleagues, who would obviously come into my office to offer condolences, was sure to bring its own set of difficulties, too. In addition, back into the daily routine would inevitably highlight the gaps that had now appeared in mine.

Where would I go after work in the afternoon? That time between work and dinner was usually Dad time, spent organising supper for him at his flat, visiting him at Linda's or, more recently, popping in at Sandringham Gardens, making sure he ate something – whatever it was. He wasn't wild about the food, especially the fish, but we tried to get some mouthfuls down. Going straight home would be something of a novelty. I'd have so much time on my hands.

We were in the spare room, "ordering" things – putting things in order is a speciality of mine. I was helping Linda to "tidy up", in anticipation of sorting through my father's things, obviously a task neither of us was relishing. Not only would we have to sort through the clothing and pack it up for charity, which was too personal and emotional a chore for today, but eventually we'd have to go through the numerous little *boksies* Daddy kept "things" in – papers, medals, gemclips, photos. There were cigar boxes, little suitcases, cigarette tins. Everywhere. And one inside another.

I figured if we could get some order, it would be a starting point. I found some empty cartons and threw them away. I moved odd things of Ashley's into his cupboards. I shuffled the furniture and emptied Linda's cat carrier. We were going to use that as a collector of things we would send along to Little Eden. Perhaps some ornaments ...

First into the carrier went two radios. Dad had had a thing about portable radios and over the years had collected a few. Linda and I were forever buying batteries. But by now, these crackling companions had seen better days, their handles broken or missing, and their loose battery covers held in place with sticky tape.

Unfortunately, we were forced to abandon our project, interrupted by the buzzer and another set of visitors. Then we sat down for supper.

Now, while there are conceivably different interpretations to the story that follows, the facts are undisputed.

Talking quietly at the table, we suddenly heard two voices down the passage. Our cutlery halted mid-air, we looked questioningly at one another. The conversation was in a vernacular we didn't understand, and as they didn't speak for long, we weren't able to identify it. As Linda and I got up to investigate, the voices stopped. We called Linda's housekeeper in the kitchen, but she'd already left for the night.

We looked around the house. No-one there. But in the spare room, the little light of a radio switched on, glowing in the dark. With a calmness that makes everything seem all right, we smiled, and Linda leant into the box and switched it off.

"That's got to be Mommy," I said, recalling the light above my bathroom mirror that had always seemed to have a mind of its own. Switching off when I was at the basin, brushing my teeth, or switching on when I stepped over the threshold to wash my hands. I'd long since come to terms with the events (which Kevin ascribed to a "loose connection"), and found it comforting that my mother was watching over me.

"I think it's Daddy," Linda said, as we made our way back to the dining room.

Ashley was disconcerted, declaring that there was no way he'd be sleeping there that night if there were spooks in the house.

One by one, everyone around the table tried to solve the mystery. Perhaps the radio had been on since my father had lived there? "Wouldn't the batteries be flat by then?" suggested Linda logically.

Perhaps it was switched on when it was packed earlier? "Surely I would have heard it," added Linda, "or noticed the light go on." Besides which, it had made no sound for hours.

Ashley suggested that we check whether the radio indeed had batteries, because the thought that it might not presented further challenges he couldn't bear to contemplate. We did. It did.

Finally, after sitting through most of banter in silence, Kevin entered the fray. "Where is your cat?" he asked Linda prosaically. Linda and I laughed, our spirits lifting. Tic-tac had been in Linda's bedroom cupboard all afternoon.

While our witnesses felt the need to find a logical explanation for the mysterious event, Linda and I felt at peace. We knew in our hearts that our parents were together again at last.

They may not have been famous beyond their own world, but their humanity enriched the lives of many. A heartfelt tribute to two wonderful, humble human beings.

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