

Some friendships are formed by a commonality of interests and ideas: you both love judo or camping or making your own sausage. Other friendships are forged in alliance against a common enemy.

David Sedaris

To Make a Friend, Be a Friend

Preface

Vice Chancellor's Office
November 2019

For the first time in all my years at the university I find myself struggling to write a decent contribution for the newsletter. There've been few highlights this semester, certainly nothing newsworthy, and not much on the horizon for the Vice Chancellor's Office nor the institution as a whole, not like last November, when I was able to trumpet the VC's OBE, and his broadcast for BBC Radio 4's *Thought for the Day* in which he pondered the benefit of year-round crop availability: 'Is it good for us, or bad? And might waiting until June for strawberries and falling gratefully on asparagus in May make us better people?' Plus there was his involvement with the new staff bicycle initiative. Joyce Ho, our head of Human Resources, had had to *cut* words in order to fit in details for the Christmas lunch. The year before that, the VC had come second in a national punning competition, we'd been among the first to be awarded TEF Gold after a lightning-strike inspection, a visit from celebrity smallholder Dick Strawbridge had made the ITV news, and the VC's monograph *The Bovine Imperative* had been published to rave reviews.

It seems to have been all lowlights this term; starting

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with disastrous student recruitment and dropout statistics, a death threat to the VC leaked to the press, a cyber-bullying incident when a member of staff was sent a photograph of Thora Hird with the message ‘*Bobbly cardigan crime*’, and all culminating, yesterday, with the news of our Deputy VC’s freak accident at a stately home. On top of all that, my plan to mention a new collection of articles for and against mega-dairies, *Farmageddon*, has just been ruined by a review in the *FT* describing the VC’s chapter as ‘worthy, verbose, old hat’ and mocking him for using the term ‘cowshed’. Again I have to wonder at his wife not stepping in to improve his written vocabulary, her an award-winning poet, known for being pithy and germane. Out of curiosity, I search for the book reviewer and find him on Instagram, @PeteDwight, tall and handsome in buckled gaiters, kissing a horse on the lips, 250K followers, and make a note to invite him to the centenary gala dinner. Finally, with no other option, I write two hundred words on the subject of *next* semester and leave campus for an appointment with my GP. Driving to the other side of town, I reflect that it hasn’t been a great time for me, personally, either. My husband Roy and I have been at odds, starting when I accidentally called out the VC’s name during an unusually playful moment. All I can think is that I somehow got the names ‘Roy’ and ‘Professor Willoughby’ muddled. I have never had sex with Professor Willoughby and have never wanted to, unless deep in my subconscious (which doesn’t count), but it has to be said, we do have a laugh, the VC and I, and that, I think, is the problem. Roy and I stopped having any fun in 2012. I

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made it up to him afterwards (Roy) by watching him play table tennis against another veteran, but on the way home it turned out I'd cheered every time the opponent won a point.

'Ping-pong is a fast game, Roy,' I said. 'I can't always follow what's happening.'

And he said, 'Please can you stop calling it "ping-pong".'

It's not just that. I was looking after a neighbour's dog while she took a bereavement cruise of the Rhine, and though Roy was used to me fostering via the Blueberry Trust and perfectly taken with the dog, he was offended at my having agreed on this occasion without his consent (talk about looking for trouble), so much so that he came home for lunch to discuss it.

'I'm the bottom of the pile these days, Sue,' he said.

And I replied, 'I hate it when you call me Sue,' and he looked at me with such sad eyes that I said, 'Well, if I'm not allowed to say "ping-pong", I don't see why I should put up with being called Sue.'

And with that he went back to work without eating his quiche, slamming the front door so hard that the bell rang of its own accord, and Honey came crashing downstairs thinking it was her Depop delivery.

'No, it was Dad going off in a huff,' I said.

That reminded her that her counsellor had asked to meet me.

'Meeghan thinks it would be good to chat with you,' was how Honey put it.

'Who?' I said.

'My counsellor.'

'What about?' I asked.

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‘I don’t know – things, you know, about me, and you and Dad, I don’t know, she’s a counsellor,’ she said, looking down, picking at her nail varnish. ‘So, is that cool?’

‘No,’ I said, ‘it’s not cool.’

And I’m now examining twenty-eight years of parenting *and* marriage, wondering which particular aspects of either Meeghan the counsellor might want to take me to task for. The time I cut a picture of Helen Mirren out of the paper and asked my hairdresser for the same style, and then, in front of Honey, criticized the actress for saying she found childbirth ‘disgusting’. My habit of smoothing Honey’s hair down and suggesting baggy tops with tight bottoms, the year I served meals on portion plates. The time, twenty years ago, she fell over and I asked about the toy horse she was holding before checking she was OK (it was antique). The times I deliberately sound clever, like yesterday, when I said ‘Byzantine art’ for absolutely no reason, and all the times she’s heard me say ‘As an English graduate . . .’ which I’m not. Anyway, I’m now thinking I should have agreed to meet Meeghan the counsellor, even though I’m wondering what in the name of God the world has come to, that people are indulging this nonsense? I mean, shall each of us haul our parents over the coals for every tiny retrospective thing? For our congenitally thick hair, our fear of giraffes, the amount of amalgam in our molars, their failure to teach us card games? I could sue my mother ten times over but I don’t. I mean, I could literally have her thrown in jail, right now, today, but I don’t.

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Veg-wise, Roy will only eat baked beans and iceberg lettuce and I honestly thought it would be the least nice thing about being married to him, and, believe me, it has rankled, watching the rest of the world tucking into char-grilled asparagus and green beans with garlic and herbs. And then, when he started his quest for longevity, I thought *that* would be the worst thing, and now, to cap it all, he's started putting his fingers in his ears when I speak.

I'm telling Dr Z. Tang the above, intermingling it with our discussion about my dry cracked hands (which I've presented with) and I expect her to be aghast, and sympathetic, especially about the veg, knowing first-hand how keen she is. She's on the Board of Governors and I once had to pick her up at home and while waiting I noticed, on her granite worktop, an array of vegetables – broccoli, cauliflower and celery – all immersed in water, like cut flowers.

'Oh,' I said, 'veg in vases?' and she explained that storing vegetables in this manner keeps them fresher, and more vitamin and mineral rich, than dry refrigeration, and more like they were when newly harvested.

Now at the surgery, waiting as she searches the database for an ointment, my eye is caught by an encapsulated diagram of the human ear, and I realize it's an exaggeration to say Roy 'puts his fingers *in* his ears' – what he does is press the *tragus* into the opening of the ear, which has the same effect but can be achieved quite subtly if you're looking at a device of some kind. Simply rest your chin in your spare hand and stretch your middle finger up and close out all unwanted noise.

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‘Should I be concerned, do you think,’ I say, ‘about my husband blocking his ears when I speak to him?’

Dr Tang doesn’t respond; she’s lost the cursor and after moving the mouse about frantically for a few moments she gives up, swivels to face me, suggests an over-the-counter hand cream, and a blood test to confirm menopause, which she reckons to be the underlying culprit.

‘A lot of women suffer epidermal dryness,’ she says.

I accede to the diagnosis but decline the test and when I start to say, ‘But my husband—’ she interrupts.

‘No, I wouldn’t worry, I frequently put my fingers in my ears when my husband speaks, it doesn’t mean I don’t love him, it’s just because we’ve been married so long.’

‘*Really?*’ I say.

‘Yes. Also, women’s voices hurt men’s ears – fact.’

‘*Really?*’ I say again (thinking what a whizz she is).

‘Yes, unless very childlike or gravelly,’ she says, ‘hence Marilyn Monroe.’

‘OK – but he wants to live to a hundred,’ I remind her and describe the breath-holding exercises every morning that make the mattress quiver ever so slightly, as if he’s being asphyxiated by an assassin crouching beside the bed, the running backwards up hills, the sloping block in the bathroom for ankle strength, the stool-stool for total bowel evacuation, the vitamins, the nagging worry as to where it all might lead (extreme old age, cryogenics, journalism).

Dr Tang laughs. ‘Don’t knock it,’ she says. ‘I have women coming to me exhausted, wishing theirs were *more* that way.’

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‘But he won’t eat veg,’ I remind her, and immediately regret saying ‘veg’ again.

‘That’s his problem,’ says Dr Tang. ‘If you want to eat vegetables, eat them.’

For a moment it feels slightly as though Dr Tang is on Roy’s side, and making me seem unreasonable, and if only I’d chargrill some courgettes, and stop talking in such a high voice, everything would be fine, but then it occurs to me that a broken marriage must be as financially burdensome to a medical practice as unwanted pregnancy, smoking and loneliness, and I agree.

‘You’re right,’ I say. ‘I’ll get myself some broccoli.’

I leave via the pharmacy and buy a hand cream recommended by the Norwegian navy. I do not apply it in the car, in spite of the fast-absorbing claims. I eat my lunch and give the newsletter piece one last proofread before sending it to Joyce in HR.

NOTES FROM THE VICE CHANCELLOR’S OFFICE

We’re looking forward to 2020!

The VC’s Office has been fairly quiet this semester, though preparations continue apace for next year’s centenary events. A week of activities and celebrations, commencing mid-March, will include:

- ‘One Hundred Years of the University of Rutland’ lecture, delivered by [a person]
- Games afternoon including a tug o’ war against staff from the University of Leicester

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- UofR collection of essays, poems and anecdotes by staff and students, past and present
- Charity Gala Dinner Dance, music by Happy Days Jazz Band

In other news, the new Arts in Society module has got off to an interesting start with its striking mural visible from the VC's Office, splendid anticipation of greatness to come. Our stronger links with the Confucius Institute have meant many interesting ideas flowing, and, to avoid further accidents, the wall-mounted hand-dryer in the female staff toilet has been moved to a more sensible position.

PART ONE

Friendship

1990–2000

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I

I met my husband Roy Warren for the first time at the Two Swans café in the town of Brankham, in late June 1990. I'd always thought of it as a place of romantic encounter because of its wall-sized mural featuring a pair of swans, beak to beak, with amorous eyes and whose necks formed a heart. I'd finished my first-year exams and had come home to work for the summer at the haberdashery where I'd been a Saturday girl, but arriving at the shop that Monday morning found it locked and a note on the window reading '*Late opening due to power cut*' and so went across the road to the Two Swans to watch from the window for developments and have a cup of tea.

Almost immediately after I'd taken my seat Roy Warren, not then known to me, tried to enter through the wrong door, causing both to open noisily at once, and came in smiling with his hands in the air, apologetic and charismatic at the same time. He ordered breakfast at the counter, sat down at the next table but one to me, and waited until I looked at him before saying, 'Good morning!' and it turned into a conversation. He was handsome, wiry and very pale, with purplish shadows around his eyes. Cafés were an extravagance back then and to be in one without a good excuse seemed wrong, so I began by

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giving my reason for being there, and then Roy stated his. First, he liked a fried egg before work but his landlady had banned pan-fumes since having a baby, and only allowed cereals first thing, which didn't satisfy him after years of straight-up protein. Second, he was early for work after dropping the same lady's cat at the nearby veterinary surgery, and I don't recall the other things, but altogether he had every right to be there. I asked what was ailing the cat. He didn't know, he'd only taken the basket as instructed and left the landlady to describe the symptoms to the veterinary nurse over the phone. Once we'd got the cat out of the way, our conversation was wide-ranging and impressive – him mentioning the Serengeti plains, and me the white horses of the Camargue – and I liked him. Everything was a high score except when we exchanged opinions about the greatest living writer, after I'd said Graham Greene with him in mind, and he'd said John Fowles, whom I detested, and I had to object.

'I'm afraid I'm not a fan,' I said, putting it mildly.

'I suppose he's more of a bloke's bloke,' said Roy, which I felt a reasonable recovery, and we agreed I probably knew best, being an English undergraduate.

His breakfast arrived and I watched him attend to his eggs, placing a sprig of watercress in the ashtray and generally moving things about on the plate. He was such a pro, that's what hit me, knowing to pierce the yolks before attempting to sandwich them, and his buttering the eggs *not the bread*, it being just-baked and too fresh to butter. And asking, 'What's the biggest effect on salt intake?' as he tipped a tiny pile into his hand.

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I worked it out on the spot, and said, ‘The size of the hole in the shaker?’

‘Correct,’ he said.

Normally, I’d consider all this fuss a bit much – it might put me off a person – but at some deep unconscious level I suppose I was sizing him up as a husband and father because I very much required someone with high self-esteem and analytical skills. And, goodness me, that chirpy ‘Good morning’ followed by this egg-and-salt performance was impressive indeed – for a man wearing tracksuit bottoms, and with chipped front teeth.

Before I left the café, which I wouldn’t have, except I’d seen the sign turn round on the shop door opposite, I found I had butterflies in my stomach. How apt! I thought, given the earlier mention of John Fowles.

‘I have to go – my boss is opening up,’ I said.

‘Well, Susan, it’s been lovely chatting,’ he said, offering his hand.

I shook it gently, ‘I hope all goes well with your landlady’s cat.’

He nodded solemnly. ‘Let’s hope so.’

‘I shall think about him, or her, all day now,’ I said, and I meant it, but as it turned out, I had other fish to fry.

I ran across the street and entered the shop, as usual calling out, ‘Morning!’ and went to put the milk with the coffee things, but before I could slide the door across, a stranger blocked my way, thinking me a customer, and said, ‘I’m afraid that’s a private area, madam.’

And it turned out the reason for the shop’s delayed

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opening was nothing to do with a power cut, it was because the Pavlous' daughter, Norma, had, unbeknown to me, taken over as manageress, and, finding herself to have overslept, stuck the note up while she got dressed. I don't know if I thought to myself that morning, wow, it's not even ten o'clock and I've already met my future husband and my best friend for life. But I should have, because I had.

'But I work here,' I told the woman, and held up the carton; it being UHT proved my identity because no one had UHT in those days, only the Pavlous having no truck with perishable foodstuffs.

'Goodness!' said Norma. 'Are you Suzanna?'

And I said, 'I'm Susan, yes, who are you?'

And she said, 'Gosh, I was expecting someone a bit older. I'm Norma Pavlou – daughter of the proprietors.'

In all my time at the Pin Cushion I'd never set eyes on Norma-Jean Pavlou, so this was quite something. I'd heard a lot about her, of course, from Mrs Pavlou; in fact, Norma-Jean had been one of her favourite topics of conversation and I used to wonder why she'd given me the job when she had this daughter available. I soon heard that Norma-Jean was not permitted to work in the shop, and because no explanation was proffered as to why this should be the case, I imagined her to have extremely poor manners, a hatred of the public, an allergy to lint, to be bedridden, insane, a figment of the imagination, a rehabilitating juvenile delinquent, or even dead, and I longed to catch a glimpse of her.

It wasn't for some months that I finally understood:

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Norma-Jean was being protected from the drudgery of shop work on account of being a scholar and needing every hour for her books and experiments and not to have her brain fuddled with dressmaking concerns. Her subject was geology, with a specialism in sand, and in particular non-tropical silica. I knew it all backwards, and Mrs Pavlou was in constant awe of Norma-Jean's brilliance and the extraordinary nature of sand. I knew also that she had passed her driving test first go after only twelve lessons and now motored all over the county, even venturing into Lincolnshire to take samples and photographs of certain rocks and soil (and sand) on her own, with nothing but a sausage roll and a few screw-top jars.

Mrs Pavlou never had a moment's worry because of Norma-Jean's innate common sense, and so, frankly, it was a bit of a shock to meet the girl. I'd imagined a younger, bespectacled version of her mother – small, warm and kind, a funny old hippy with twinkly eyes – but Norma (she shortened her name to just that) was tall, aloof, and her wary eyes were always hunting for clues in your face as you spoke, and then never seeming satisfied. 'Really?' she was fond of saying, and thrusting her head back, and exaggerating a long blink.

Norma explained the situation. She was about to graduate (as above) and the plan now was to switch to the arts. She just couldn't see herself as a scientist, she said, and though I very much could, I kept the observation to myself because if there was one thing I'd learned in my first year at university, it was that scientists like to appear creative, and artists to appear relevant. If, she said, it

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turned out she'd done well in her exams, her tutors (at the University of Leicester) would railroad her onto their MSc course.

'It'll be difficult – nay, churlish – to turn them down,' she said. 'Academics take it personally when you don't choose their course.'

'I suppose it's like being rejected,' I said.

'Whereas,' Norma continued, ignoring me, 'a mediocre result will at least slightly justify a swerve to Bloomsbury, Manderley, and –' She paused, struggling to come up with a third literary setting, so eventually I offered, 'Or the Deep South,' just to move us along, and she said, 'Exactly.'

The above conversation took place before I'd even got the milk away, as if it were the most important thing in the world, more so than the customer who'd come in and stood at the counter, moving her head about, trying to get our attention.

'And so, why are you here all of a sudden?' I asked Norma.

'I need a new horizon,' she said, and we both glanced out of the window, where we saw Roy Warren exiting the Two Swans and lighting a cigarette.

After selling some fat squares to the customer, I watched as Norma crouched over the worktop to prepare our beverages in the utility area. The kettle not quite having come to the boil before she poured it and consequently undissolved granules swirled like tiny oil slicks. I reached for the teaspoon but she got to it first, stirred her drink vigorously, and then plopped it into mine quite abruptly. Even so I thought it impressive, a manageress making

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coffee, and reflected that old Mrs Pavlou never lifted a finger in that department, and thinking that prompted me to make mention of her.

‘Your mother is really nice,’ I said, or something bland and friendly along those lines, and Norma paused to take in what I’d said before replying, ‘My parents are an idiot,’ like that, as if they were a single entity. She wiped up a little spillage with a sheet of kitchen roll and flung it into the flip-top bin.

Norma looked older than twenty-four, partly because of a height-disguising stoop, and a habit of holding her hand at her throat in a defensive gesture, as if slightly aghast at the world, but mainly because of her awful clothing, in particular the home-made poly-cotton dress she wore that morning, the bust darts so sharp and pointed, and ill-fitting, and all ironed shiny so that the hemming showed up in relief like a wax rubbing. It took me some weeks to appreciate that she was attempting to dress like the 1960s in an approximation of her mother at that time, who, by her own account, had been very attractive, eccentric and arty, carving ornaments (mice, clogs and tulips) in a miniskirt (the first outside London) to sell to the tourists of Amsterdam. The shop had one of Mrs Pavlou’s original works outside – a giant painted wooden bobbin, with a hole in the top for a plant pot – which had to be heaved inside every evening to stop men peeing into it as they stumbled home from the Brankham Arms on the corner of the street.

There was a lot to see in Norma’s appearance and it took the whole day to process it all. Black hair piled up

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into a sort of beehive effect that, like the dress, was incredibly ageing. Her inward-sloping incisors were from most angles in shadow, giving the impression of a mouthful of black teeth, but a well-placed beauty spot on the left side above her chin was pretty and, when not smiling, she was all in all the healthiest-looking person I'd ever seen, her bare arms and shoulders quite muscular, and I could easily image her working a geologist's hammer and scrambling about looking for the Precambrian crust.

'Who would you say,' she said, 'was the greatest author?'

Here we go again, I thought.

'Living or dead?' I asked, and she said, 'Greatest of all time,' and I said, 'I think that would have to be John Donne.'

And Norma said – and I'll always remember this – 'But I thought he was just a poet.'

'*Just a poet?*' I gasped, and, realizing she'd said something against the laws of literature, she grabbed my arm.

'You see, Susan, I really need your help – imagine if I blurted that out in an interview.'

And so, there it was – she wasn't after a new horizon, she was there for literary conversion, and though it was never quite spelled out, from that day forward it was my job to prepare her for interview. It was perfectly pleasant playing teacher to such an attentive and well-behaved pupil, but I can't deny I did miss discussing the history of Harris Tweed with Mrs Pavlou as we unfurled a new bolt of shirting, or wondering why the Americans will use the term 'haberdasher' to mean gentlemen's outfitter or hat maker, or the chance to run up a simple beach robe on the

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Bernina with an offcut of towelling and then question the wisdom of trimming it with a nylon zigzag binding in a contrasting colour, with shrinkage in mind, as I had in the time before Norma.

Now it was all, 'Is Woolf considered anti-Semitic or misogynist?' 'Is Flaubert too fond of metaphor?' 'Should I read *Petals of Blood*?'

This was a time when three years of learning, if you include A Level, gave you the edge on others and I disliked admitting I didn't have all the answers.

Once she asked me, 'What writer was it who compared women to empty museums filled with men's art, Susan? Because whoever it was I hate them.'

And I said, 'Oh, I believe that was John Fowles.'

I don't recall every one of her questions that first day, but she seemed to be writing things down, and I do remember telling her quite firmly, 'The thing is, Norma – you have to read the books yourself, it has to be at least partly your own interpretation. I mean, it's not like science, there's not a right and wrong.'

'I know it's subjective, thank you very much, Susan,' she said. 'Give me credit for a bit of intelligence! I'm being interviewed for university courses, not to host the *South Bank Show*.'

Later in the day, I made reciprocal enquiries about her specialism. 'Sand is so fascinating,' I said.

'Please let's not talk about sand,' she said. 'I'm sick of it.'

'But it's very literary,' I said.

'Is it?'

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‘Are you kidding? Metaphorical sand is sprinkled all over literature!’ I said. ‘To see a world in a grain of sand . . .’

‘Oh, yes,’ said Norma, urging me to continue. I mentioned the hourglass – sand falling from the upper chamber to the lower – and she got it straight away. ‘The inexorable passing of time,’ she said.

‘The sands of time,’ I said, ‘a footprint in the sand, sandstorms, burying one’s head in the sand, the rare and ever-changing beauty of the dunes, the cleansing tides that wash away marks in the sand – this is what you say when you’re asked how your degree in geology is relevant.’

She wrote all this down, and then, bang on five-thirty, turned the sign round on the door and said, ‘Very good,’ as if it were the end of a school day.

It had been almost impossible to find a Saturday job in my home town, back in those days. Every position was filled, before it was even vacant, by nephews and offspring of the management, and the only jobs advertised were in warehouses or pubs where you’d be run ragged or mauled at by drunks. My problem was that I came from one of the few outsider families, only unlike other outsiders, I had nothing to commend me. Not like the Jacksons, who’d arrived from London and were cockneys and so confident, in-the-know and charismatic they were soon running the place and the dad was known as ‘Del Boy’ and everyone loved him in spite of his noisy motorbike and mean streak. There were the Warrens (Roy’s family) and the McNamaras; both families had come from Corby,

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Northants, to start a new life but within striking distance of family, and having authoritative Scots accents (Corby, Northants, being at that time over 30 per cent Scottish) were in great demand for jobs that involved speaking. There were the Patels who got everyone onto fresh herbs, and the daughter, a solicitor who championed the underdog, and the brother, easily the handsomest boy in town, who sang and danced by the Corn Exchange to fund his place at drama school, and now you see him on TV in all the medical soaps. And there was us, the Cohens, my parents, my brother and I, who had come from High Wycombe after my mother's accident in 1978. We'd been settled in Bucks with friends galore, and a much-admired front garden, but she'd insisted on a move, dreading that folk would witness her slow decline, and she held a peculiar grudge against a neighbour called Cynthia, and so we'd come to Brankham, a well-appointed, bombproof market town seventy minutes from St Pancras with rolling countryside and affordable housing. Practically everyone else, back then, born and bred – no tourists and no big industry, no ego.

The Pavlous arrived after us. Greek Mr Pavlou and Dutch Mrs Pavlou and their extended family scattered around the area offered many services, including bespoke tailoring, made-to-measure ceremonial gowns, property surveying, and non-domestic veterinary services. J. & T. Pavlou set up their haberdasher's shop, the Pin Cushion, in a pretty double-fronted premises with deep bay windows either side of the door. It wasn't in the busiest location but a haberdasher doesn't have to be, customers

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find you and then come especially and soon, because the Pin Cushion was there, a florist sprang up in what had been a dentist's and crowded the pavement with buckets of blooms, and a long, narrow table against the window crammed with jam jars of grape hyacinths and violets and *Alchemilla mollis*, and then a shop selling modelling paraphernalia, which had a railway running all around the walls at eye level, that didn't mind people just looking – in fact, encouraged it. This quaint industry was all very good for the Two Swans café which had previously been a bit of a run-down canteen above the hardware, but now, on account of the increased footfall, had splashed out on a job lot of rustic furniture and changed their menu to include salads and pasta. And, because they lent their ovens to Roy's landlady, who was trying to launch a catering company and needed to roast meats and birds after a failed marriage, and in a too-small oven, Roy had come to hear of it and went there for egg breakfasts, as you know.

I remember noticing the haberdasher's for the first time, where the Snuff Box, an old antique and bric-a-brac shop, had been, and it seemed perfect, with its painted wooden bobbin outside and, inside, the dresser with a hundred tiny drawers and each drawer handle being one of the beads or buttons contained inside. The reels of ribbon in every colour, and thread in forty-six shades, and the six-foot-deep shelving along the entire back wall groaning with rolls of fabric. The spinner bedecked with zippers, poppers and all manner of needlework accessories, the sewing table with an electric Bernina machine which customers were welcome to use. I'd gone home to

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change and get my hair shipshape and then called in. The bell tinkled merrily and out came Mrs T. Pavlou and I said to her, 'I'm looking for Saturday work and she said, 'Here, in the shop?' and I said, 'Yes,' thinking to myself, where else? And she said, 'Yes! How fortuitous, we need someone.' We discussed the terms and conditions and she said she'd prefer I wore home-made garments, it being so encouraging to customers. I explained this would be difficult and she said she'd run something up and measured me on the spot. I started the following Saturday wearing a dress with actual smocking at the neck, in a chequered pattern with roses, and it was most nostalgic, a feeling reminiscent of my mother before the accident, brushing me down, straightening my collar and generally sorting me out with such tender care, and it was all I could do not to burst into tears.

At the end of my first day with Norma, I'd been rolling the ornamental bobbin back into the shop when I saw Roy Warren, leaning on the wall outside, hands in pockets, like someone out of a black-and-white film, but in colour, and in sports clothing. Men hadn't quite stopped wearing proper clothes back then and a sporty look usually meant a sporty life, which his was. He ground out a cigarette with his training shoe, holding the smoke from the last drag until the job was done and then exhaling through a small gap between his lips, like someone whistling for a trusty dog.

'Hiya,' he said, 'just wanted to let you know, the cat's OK.'

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‘Oh,’ I said, ‘thank you, that’s good news.’

‘Yeah, home and lapping at a saucer of milk,’ said Roy.

‘What’s its name?’ I asked, for something to say, but Roy couldn’t quite remember.

‘Timmy, Tommy, Jimmy, something like that. Anyway, do you fancy a drink?’ he said, nodding at the Brankham Arms across the road.

And I said, ‘Yeah, OK, a quick one, but I’ll have to just see if my colleague wants to come.’

He shrugged.

Back inside, Norma was gone but there stood Mrs Pavlou.

‘Oh,’ I said, ‘hello.’

And she said, ‘Hello, ducky, how did the day go?’ She looked eager and anxious with her hands clasped at her breast.

‘It was great,’ I said. ‘I really like Norma.’

‘And you can help her with the English literature?’ she asked.

‘Oh, yes, she’s so keen.’

‘And bright, yes?’ said Mrs Pavlou.

‘Yes. I was just going to ask her to come across to the pub for a drink with me . . .’ I gestured outside, and was quite taken aback by the reply.

‘Thank you,’ she said, ‘but I should tell you straight away, I don’t think you and Norma-Jean will be friends in that way.’ And with that, she waved her hands and shoed me out into the street.

At the pub I was impressed to see Roy speak confidently to assorted people, about football and golf and the

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likelihood of rain at the weekend, and that he had his own set of darts. I drank enough shandy in an hour to become quite inebriated and Roy drove me home in his car, because men still did in those days, even if they'd had three pints.

'Thank you for letting me know about the cat,' I said, outside my house, and we went on chatting for a while until my brother, James, tapped on the passenger window with one finger. I alighted from the car and looking at the house, saw my mother peering out and through the gap in the curtains I could see she was in her underwear.

Roy leaned right over and looked at us both through the open door, and James said, 'At least park round the corner next time, can't you,' and, to prevent Roy replying, I slammed the door shut, and the car moved slowly away.

James was dubious about Roy. 'Isn't he a gardener at the golf club?' he said.

'Yes, but he's planning to take over the running of the place, in due course,' I said and laughed at the pun.

Roy called for me at the shop almost every weekday night over the summer, for beer and kissing and home early, so as not to be too exhausted for work the next day (him) and not to upset my mother who liked to lock up at nine. I was sorry for Norma going upstairs to her parents every evening, but, quite honestly, a whole day with her was enough.

Norma had come in above me, as manageress, in spite of having no idea at all how the shop worked, or how to cut fabrics – how, with some types, you can make an initial snip with the scissors and run them along, half-cutting, half-tearing, for a good line, and how satisfying that is, the noise, the sensation of the rending, the slight dust remaining on the scissor blades. And how you must always let the customers have a few inches to play with, and never reveal that we keep rolls of fabric in the toilet and sometimes dry our hands on it. Norma was actually hopeless except for measuring, and in her authoritative manner with the customers, not caring what they thought of her. She once told a lady trying to buy snow-washed denim for a sexy trouser suit, ‘I don’t understand the fascination with this fabric – it’s uncomfortable, expensive, scruffy, unwieldy to work with, a faff to wash and dry, it shrinks, wears badly, and is worn exclusively by idiots.’ The customer took it all in and switched to a cotton moleskin in a silvery brown. I wasn’t unaffected myself and soon shared her attitudes about cheesecloth and, for a while at least, loved anything spotty, until she went off it and said people who wore polka dot had something wrong upstairs. I came to sympathize with her squeamishness regarding velvet; the way it felt cool then warm to the touch, changed colour at a

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stroke, its tendency to baldness suggesting decay, and though I'd loved it as a child, I joined her in rejecting it, to the extent that we never had it on display, even at Christmas when customers went mad for it.

Norma telephoned me at home every Sunday evening, at seven on the dot, to read me the rota for the following week. This became a ritual for us.

'Hello,' she'd say, 'how are you?'

And I'd reply, 'Fine, thanks. How are you?'

And she'd reply, 'I'm ringing with the rota, do you have a pencil?' and then she'd begin, always ending on a forecast. 'It's the Harborough show a week on Saturday, so I expect they'll all be in for fancy-dress materials.' Or, 'It's going to be hot, we'll probably have the sun-dress crew in.'

As the summer went on Norma and I had a lot of fun, and if Mrs Pavlou hadn't said on that first day that we wouldn't be friends I'd have thought we very much were. Norma didn't laugh easily but if something amused her properly she might need her inhaler. Such as the time I'd pluralized the word 'bust' to 'busts' and she almost died of oxygen starvation and I'd had to turn the sign round on the door until she recovered. Or the time I realized that when Norma said 'Lippety Print' she meant Liberty Print, our stock being 'slight seconds', the selvedge smudged and the B looking like a P. I knew the brand not because I was a fabric expert but because we had curtains at home in *Strawberry Thief*, and my mother was always collecting nick-nacks to match (handkerchiefs and an egg cosy). And the time I'd thought Norma's gloved hand was

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a pin cushion and tried to stick a needle into it and, hearing her scream, a customer knocked the spinner over in her dash for the door, thinking a violent robbery was under way.

Or the times customers dragged husbands in to choose trouser fabric and Norma would ask them, ‘Are you sure the inside leg measurement is *accurate*, madam?’ before she’d take them seriously, and the wife might say, ‘I *think* so?’ with a tiny note of doubt in her voice, and Norma would grab the tape measure and say, ‘Shall I just . . .?’ and the wife would step away from the man and look at the sequins out of decency, and we’d hear Norma ask, ‘Which side do you dress, sir?’ And the man would say, ‘Oh, um –’ and have to imagine the precise location of his genitals, at that moment, in relation to the crotch seam on his trousers, and slightly shift his weight from one leg to the other, to make certain of it, and then he’d sometimes say, ‘To the left.’ But more often, ‘To the right,’ and Norma would bob down, all the time looking him in the eye. Once she’d said, ‘Oh! I thought you said the left, sir,’ and the man said, ‘Sorry, I get mixed up with my left and right.’ And Norma insisting there was nothing remotely amusing about this procedure when I’d have the giggles afterwards, asking, ‘What’s so special about men that you fall about laughing? Perhaps you’re not suited to haberdashery.’ A rebuke I’d throw back at her when she failed to be at all delighted by our matrimonial fabrics and appurtenances.

Weddings were laughable to her: ‘Spending hundreds of pounds to get trussed up like a virgin, it’s idiotic,’ she’d say and the fact that our white and ivory silks were double

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the price of silk in any other colour seemed to corroborate this. She refused to wear cotton gloves to handle the ceremonial fabrics, and, when a bride-to-be stepped up onto the bridal stool to have the proper adjustments made to an unfinished dress and Mrs Pavlou, talking through pins, might say, 'Oh, yes, this is really so beautiful,' with the mother-of-the-bride in tears, lips trembling, hands fanning her hot face, Norma would clear her throat and move around noisily to make the moment mundane and ordinary. But she also used to claim not to believe in sex before marriage.

I asked her one day, 'When are you going to have sex then, seeing as you're so against marriage?'

And she said, 'I'm all for marriage, I'm against the absolute nonsense of weddings.'

One day a middle-aged man came in, on his own, and that was unusual – him a man and old and in a business suit – and he was looking at sewing patterns for glamorous nightgowns and we were assuming they were for his own use and sniggering, because back then, I'm sad to say, people were prone to laugh at things of this kind, it being a mainstay of television comedy etc. and he left the shop and Norma, overcome with shame at our behaviour, had run out after him to apologize, and had caught up with him in the butcher's, waited behind him and while the butcher sliced him a quarter-pound of ham, wafer thin, she told him we stocked all sizes and could advise on fabrics, etc. and invited him back to browse. And then, finding herself at the front of the queue, unable to avoid it, bought some lard. The man (known as 'the Ham Man')

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