



## THE HAPPY PARENTS

### Michael Bird

It was when they were in their forties and we were living just outside a large city. Our house had three bedrooms and a small front and back lawn. There were no flowers in either garden. The back was empty except for a metal pole with a tennis ball attached to it by a piece of string. My brother and I used to hit the tennis ball with plastic rackets. But it had been two summers since we last played with it, and the ball was ruddy now and had a crack in its shell.

Mum and dad both worked. She was a part-time nurse and he was a dentist. I always thought they were in love because they always used to tell each other so.

But one day small things began to irritate them.

When they slept together in their large bed, Dad began to steal most of the covers. Mum would scream at him. When she took the car out and went to the petrol station, Mum did not remember to put the plastic lid on the oil tank. So Dad would shout at her. When he came into the house, Dad forgot to take his work-shoes off. He failed to rinse out the sponge after he showered. She used his razor when hers had run out. Soon they started to shout and scream at each other all

the time.

So they decided to sit down and talk it through. They both told each other that they were unhappy about their marriage and should see someone to help them.

Mum and Dad had heard about this special doctor from a friend. He was not the usual kind of doctor. He had some interesting ideas and cures. Some of them were so new that they were not available to every other patient. But, to the doctor, this just proved they could be work even better. Some of Mum and Dad's friends told them he was a miracle worker. They had seen his results. All had been good.

When he met them both, the doctor could see what the problem was. The passion that Mum and Dad felt for one another when they first met, all those years ago at school, was no longer there. But it had not gone forever.

'This is not psychological,' said the doctor. 'It is chemical.'

What they needed was a new pill which some of his friends had just developed.

'Don't see this as a pill that lies to you about your feelings, but one that just helps you recover what you once felt,' the doctor added.

'It's like an anti-depressant?' said my Mum.

The doctor frowned at this suggestion.

'It is more sophisticated.' He held up one of the pills. It was round with one red and one green half. 'It excites the chemical functions that govern love.'

My parents were very impressed.

They began the course.

Within only half a week the daily dosage took effect.

Soon the four of us kept on going out at weekends. On Saturdays

we went to a shopping mall. On Sundays, Mum and Dad took us to a funfair. It was fifty miles away. We had seen the adverts on television. But our parents had told us it was too far to travel in one day. Now they changed their mind.

The four of us rode together on a roller-coaster. Mum and Dad in the seat right at the front. My brother and I stayed behind them. As the train prepared to dive into a long dip, Mum and Dad clung onto the handlebars in front, but leaned into each other. Their faces were kissing. My brother and I screamed.

I wanted to go on the ghost train. My brother thought it was stupid. But I just think he did not have the nerve. Dad came with me. As our train drove into the dark tunnel, he put on a deep voice and said it was my time to die. That he was a zombie who was going to kill me. Chop me up into little pieces and suck out my eyes. It was really, really scary.

We travelled to parks and playgrounds in the centre of town. The four of us played on swings together. Even though it was crowded and there were some other kids waiting their turn, Mum and Dad wouldn't let them go. We all stayed out late in pub gardens. I could drink as much sparkling orange as I wanted. Mum and Dad got a little drunk. They made jokes at our expense. But we didn't mind.

As the weekends went on, they began to sleep in. It became harder to make them take us out to places. But they always would. Even if it was far and away into the evening.

In the week days they went to bed earlier. They stayed in their room and locked the door. They never used to do this. It was always open. Before, when the wind was loud or I heard a strange sound in the night-time, I would go and see my parents and they comforted me.

Allowed me to sleep between them in the bed. But now, if I was fearful, I felt weird about visiting them in the middle of the night.

At work they had enjoyed their jobs more. Dad took on more customers. He worked longer hours. Mum took on some extra shifts.

We did not see them so much. But whenever they did make time, they were so happy to see us. They would always take us somewhere beautiful or fun, chat to us and make jokes.

But while Dad was at work one day, his hand slipped and his drill cut into the jaw of one his patients. He apologised and gave the patient his money back. It was not too much of a problem.

A week later, as she was looking after a victim from a car crash, Mum failed to patch up a wound properly. It ended up going bad. The man lost his leg. The guy was poor and a bit stupid, so he did not sue Mum or the hospital. She was lucky. It was covered up. But our parents did not seem sad and they both soon forgot.

Everything seemed to be going so well that, when they visited the doctor for their next monthly check-up, he asked them if they would like to give up the course.

‘Oh no,’ said Mum.

‘We were thinking of asking if we could increase the dosage,’ said Dad.

This was a new drug. It hadn’t been tested properly.

‘I suppose it would be interesting to see how a booster would work,’ the doctor said.

So he allowed my parents to continue taking their daily supplies. For the first couple of weeks they continued as before. They never argued. They were always happy to work. Pleased to see their children, and each other.

But there was one day when I came home with a rash. It was a large red blotch across half of my neck. It appeared from nowhere. Mum and Dad had an argument. Dad said she should drive me to the emergency wing of the hospital. Mum said that she saw these kinds of rashes at work all the time and that in a couple of hours it would disappear. He said he didn't care about the fact that it might clear up. He wanted to be sure. It ended up with Dad driving me to the hospital. She stayed at home. As soon as we entered the hospital, it was clear from a couple of the nurses' behaviour that Dad had been over-reacting.

We waited an hour until the doctor saw me. I was fine. It was the result of my concern about some upcoming exams. The doctor said this is a common symptom of stress among kids as they grow up.

We went home. There, Dad and Mum argued some more.

The next day was a Sunday. We decided it would be great to go to a theme park. Even though outside was pouring down with rain.

It was a long distance from our town and we had to drive on a motorway. About an hour into the journey, our car seemed to suffer from some engine problems. Mum drove into a drive-by. As soon as she parked the car, the vehicle broke down. Mum and Dad started shouting at each other.

'You should check up on the car more regularly,' she said.

'You're the one who uses it,' he said.

'But it belongs to you,' she said.

'That doesn't mean you can shake off the responsibility,' he said.

'I don't know anything about car maintenance.'

'Well,' said Dad. 'If you don't know anything about car maintenance, you shouldn't be driving a car.'

My brother and I sat in the back trying not to listen.

They booked another appointment with the doctor. Both of them asked for the dosage to be increased. The doctor said that he was not sure if this was such a good idea. Mum said it was necessary for the health of our family. That he, as a doctor, should not come between a woman and her family.

The doctor looked at them both and stroked his chin.

Then he filled in the form for an increased dosage.

For a further fortnight, our world was perfect.

But then my father wanted to take us on holiday during the school year. My parents had a fight. Mum said that our education was more important. Dad said there was no greater education than travel. This argument became loud. Mum threw a couple of plates at Dad. They smashed on the floor. Then he threw the broken pieces back at her and a tiny fragment of crockery hit her in the eye. This made the skin above one of her eyelids bleed. She said he was violent. He said she was mad.

That night my brother followed me into my bedroom and held me for an hour. We both cried. I tried to comfort him.

Again Mum and Dad went to see the doctor and asked for more pills.

This time, the doctor refused.

‘Either you should slowly wean yourselves off the drug, with a reduced dosage,’ said the doctor, ‘or go into counselling.’

But both my Mum and Dad started to shout at him.

‘There is nothing wrong with our relationship,’ Mum said.

‘We just need a little help,’ said Dad.

Now the drug had been tested and was available from what Dad

called the right people. Within a couple of days my parents paid to go and see another doctor, a friend of theirs, who owned a private practice. He prescribed the original dose of the drug. Later that day they went to another doctor who they also knew, who did the same. A few hours after this they visited a third, who again gave them the same dose.

I remember how happy I was that night. My brother and I were watching television. Mum and Dad were sitting at the dining table in the same room. Playing cards. It was rummy, I think. I do not know what they were laughing at. It was like they were drunk. Just placing down four hearts and three clubs on the table seemed to make Dad crack up for about ten minutes. And Mum followed.

I remember feeling jealous. They went to bed and started to laugh again. There they made a noisy and animal-like sound. Objects were thrown against the wall and my parents no longer talked, but shouted. It was as though they had agreed to hurt each other. A few minutes later they started laughing again. I put my head under the pillow and tried to sleep.

The next day they forgot to make my brother and me sandwiches for school. Instead Mum just opened up her purse and handed us some money. She told us to buy as many sweets as we liked.

They did not go to work that day. Instead they went shopping for some new clothes, before coming back home and mowing the lawn. In the back garden, they took out the pole with the tennis ball and threw it in the bin. Afterwards, they cleaned up the house. Everything, they did together. A week later, almost in passing, they told my brother and me that they had given up their jobs. Dad told us it was so they would not argue with each other any more. Mum said this was great decision.

Because it meant they would no longer frighten us.

When friends of theirs called and my brother or I answered the phone, Mum whispered to us to say that she and Dad were out. She told us to take down the phone number and say that she would call them back. We had piles of messages from people, even from Granny and Granddad, on my Mum's side. Our parents never looked at them. I don't think they ever called anyone back.

Then they stopped going out in the evening or the daytime. Soon they gave up making dinner. Or cleaning the house. Instead they gave us some money and told us to go out and buy ourselves takeaways.

The next Saturday they did not come downstairs from their bedroom. We went up to speak to them, but found the door was locked. They would not answer. In the evening we went down to get some food from the kitchen. But everything from the refrigerator was gone.

That Sunday, we could hear them in bed. The noise was loud and hard. It went on for hours.

Before the school week began my brother and I banged on their bedroom door. We asked for some money for some food. But there was no answer.

We went hungry that day.

When we came home, we banged on the door again. There was still no answer. We looked through the keyhole, but it was stuck with something. We screamed. We kept on screaming.

We could hear some sounds from the room.

Dad eventually came to the door. He stayed on the other side. And it remained locked. He told us that it would be a good idea if we left to stay with our mothers' parents. They lived a few streets away.

We packed up some clothes and walked around to see our grandparents. The moment we told them what had happened, they said it was a serious and that we should all return to the house.

Granny went upstairs to see my parents. She stood on the other side of their bedroom door and asked Mum why she was doing this to her family.

‘What?’ asked Mum.

‘Being selfish,’ said Granny.

Mum said that she and her husband were only doing what they felt. There is nothing less selfish than obeying what you feel.

Granny said this was irresponsible.

Both Mum and Dad laughed.

A day later some friends of our grandparents came to the house to break into the room. But when they started hitting the door with a large and heavy fire extinguisher, Mum and Dad just turned up the music on their clock-radio. It was useless. Our friends could not knock down the door, as there was something inside blocking the way.

We stayed at our grandparents for the rest of the week.

But Granny still took us to visit our parents. She said that this would help to snap Mum and Dad out of their stupidity.

We stood outside the bedroom and banged on the door. We said we loved Mum and Dad. And that we wanted them to come out of the room. That we forgave them. For whatever they were doing. That we wanted them back.

We did not hear voices anymore. It was like they were not speaking to each other. All we could hear was loud and ugly sounds. When they began to make this noise, Granny told my brother and me to go to our bedrooms.

But there we could also hear the sounds. It was horrifying. Like an animal being hunted and killed. It became so loud, that I found it hard to breathe. My brother and I went downstairs to the living room, to watch the television with our headphones on.

I kept on hearing those noises in our head, long after I left the house.

Then there was the smell. That came out of the room. Travelled down the stairs and filled the whole house. It reminded me of the back alley of a fast-food restaurant.

Soon, on our visits, we began to hear them argue loudly. It was not about whether they should leave the room. But about what they should do. They screamed that they did not have enough pills. That they did not have any food. That they needed to have a plan. There must be a solution. They paced around the room. But they did not come outside.

That night we stayed with our grandparents as usual.

It was about four in the morning when Granny returned from seeing them that last time. We could not sleep, so my brother and I both crept around to the side of the stairs to hear what she was saying to Granddad.

She said my father had kicked something and hurt his foot. My mother screamed and then threw a heavy object that collided with the wall. Soon the windows of the bedroom smashed. My mother fell out of the first floor. Onto the front driveway.

Granny rushed downstairs and into the living room. She looked out of the windows and saw our Mum was naked. Her body was covered in dirt. Blood was spread all over her face, arms and down her thighs. There was filth in her hair.

But this did not bother her. She tried to move to the front door. My father must have been looking out of the broken window upstairs. The neighbours said he was also naked. His body was pale and thin. His face had a beard. There were cuts on his fingers and the palm of his hand. He said he would tear a blanket into strips, tie them together and throw them out of the window, so my mother could pull herself back into the bedroom.

Looking at her, Granny said that her daughter would have taken any chance to get back into the room. That she could not wait to get back. The air and light, she said, seemed to hurt her.

But, as she tried to raise herself onto her feet, one of her legs gave way and she fell on the lawn. Then she screamed.

That was when Granny called an ambulance.

Mum wriggled over the driveway, desperate to walk, stretching her hands out to pull herself up onto a rope of torn blankets. But she fell down again onto what Granny guessed was a broken leg.

She screeched.

People from houses in the road looked out from their living room windows.

My grandmother said she could not leave the house. That she was terrified of her daughter.

In half an hour, the ambulance arrived.

Granny then rushed out of the house and, together with the paramedics, they picked up Mum and put her in the ambulance.

On the way to the hospital, Mum did not talk, just kept on screaming for her husband. Granny said it was the cry of a baby. It continued, kept on getting louder, until its sound became so high that she could not hear it anymore. Then there was no noise. My mother

would open her mouth as wide as she could and then close it again.

The next morning my brother and I went to stay with our Uncle in the capital. He was in a good job and had a large flat. It was okay, but he worked a lot and we stayed in and watched videos. Every morning before he went to his office, we gave him a list of films we wanted to see and he went out to the shops and bought them. We sat watching them. But they were not that much fun. We ate a lot of ice cream in the first week. My brother got sick once. But Uncle said it didn't matter.

A month later, we spoke to Mum and Dad on the phone. They said they were sorry for all the things that had happened. My brother and I said it was okay. But I don't know if it's what we really felt.

A few weeks went by. Our parents both got their own jobs back. Mum bought a new car.

We left our Uncle and moved back to the house.

Granny came to live with us and did most of the cooking and cleaning. She made us sandwiches for school. Took us out to playgrounds in the late afternoons. She parked herself on a bench and read a magazine about cookery, while my brother and I sat on the swings. But they were kind of boring.

On Saturdays and Sundays we never went to the funfair again. Dad never sat next to me on a ghost train and pretended to be a zombie. Never told me he was going to kill me. Chop me up into little pieces and suck out my eyes.

I was never scared again.

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