

Chapter 1

I am wondering, slightly, how I ended up in this state. Me, Cally Parsons, career ace, solo mum, general all-round team player and Wonder Woman (minus the bustier and tiara), suddenly redundant/let go/restructured.

Well, that's not what I'm wondering about. I'd have let me go too. It was probably quite clear to everyone that I didn't care very much any more about marketing, or re-branding old stuff to con people into thinking it's new stuff, or, in fact, anything to do with Newell and Deane and the thrilling world of industrial latex (it's not what people think, really, despite the sleazy sales team; it's backing for carpets and the like, not rubber outfits and condoms...).

What really mystifies me is my mental state. I know that one is expected to be in a befuddled mental state when being 'let go'. You're meant to think, "well, it might not be personal to you, HR bitch, but it's bloody personal to me!" Fear crushes you from above, while self-doubt floods up your legs so your whole future prospects become sandwiched between hell and the handbasket in huge coagulating depression and worry.

Not me.

No. I'm redundant and happy about it. Not just okay with it, but kiss the HR Bitch in Gallic fashion, whirl my spineless manager who never even spoke during the suddenly called 'meeting' around in his chair, and can-can out the door ecstatic about it. Work out my notice? You have to be kidding. I am OUTTA here.

I guess it's been a long time coming. For quite a while now, I've known that something is missing. I've always loved my job, almost as much as I love my daughter, but recently... well, I suppose it's some kind of mid-life crisis. Do I want to look back at the end of my life and count the shonky Newell and Dean awards for the Lickit and Stickit range? No. Do I want to have watched my daughter grow up into a reasonable human being with less than three points on her license and her own teeth? Yes. And do I want to add that to the big ball of self-satisfaction that envelopes me whenever I see the wonderful creative thing that I've done with the latter half of my three score years and ten? Yes oh yes oh yes.

Just one small problem. I don't know what the thing is. The thing that's missing – the black hole of creativity, the yearning to do something that satisfies and expands and motivates me. I'm sure that's what's missing...just can't, you know, put a label on it. But that doesn't matter. I'm assured in *The Artist's Way* (and the thirty other personal development books that everyone's suddenly giving me) that indulging my need to blart on about anything and everything by writing in a journal will release my 'inner artist'. I will be fulfilled! Whole! Creative!

Okay. Well, I can't think of anything artistic to write about this morning, and Julia Cameron who wrote said book seems to think that any old crap will do, so I'll go on to something else. Another momentous occasion: Paige's birthday...

Wow, she looked adorable teetering around on her roller-blades, legs shooting out from under her like Bambi (well, not shooting as in SHOT, I don't mean like what happened to his mum, because that's...eww, too awful to contemplate).

Anyway. There she was, hauling herself up the side of the table so she could actually reach to blow out her candles without her feet slithering backwards into the fireplace. Bunty grabbed her under the armpits so I could take the obligatory dozen-or-so parental photographs, including the top-of-the-head-alight-with-candles and the lovely nostril-filled-with-pink-icing shot. Paige, giggling and slightly delirious from the red Fanta she'd made me buy, puckered up obligingly, and we all shouted 'Make a wish, Paige!'

So she did.

Out loud.

Ow, ow, ow, ow, don't even like to think about it, but there it was, ringing out for all to hear.

"For my birthday, I want to meet my dad."

The silence afterwards was so extreme I thought it might burst a window. Everyone looked at me, then Paige, then me, then at each other, and then down at the table which seemed to have developed mystic runic writing on it, judging by how interesting it suddenly became.

I cleared my throat. "Oh! Most girls your age want a pony."

"Most girls my age know their dads though, Mummy," said Paige, with the withering glance that only your own child can master so artfully. My insides caved.

"Well, I'm not sure that's true any more," I said, holding the carving knife aloft. "Don't you want a pony?"

"Cally, where would you keep a pony?" asked my mother, sensible as ever. "In the shed? Or would it roam the streets like they do in Dublin?"

"I'd find somewhere. We mustn't let a tiny obstacle like the lack of a paddock stand between Paige and her wish for a pony. It's her birthday, Mum. Anyway, when have you ever been to Dublin? Was it the Rotary club trip? Or something else – that weekend away with Maureen."

I paused. Even I knew that I was guilty of monstrous, heinous subject-changing. Somehow Birthday Mommy, shiny-haired and bright of smile, had disappeared. In her place stood some kind of latter-day Margaret Thatcher, brandishing a Sabatier serrated-edge bread-knife instead of a hatchet, preaching privatisation of the maternal state and answering questions with more questions of an increasingly tangential nature. "Slice of cake, everyone?"

And then everyone stared at me with such sorrow I felt like throwing myself on the knife. Mum and Dad, empathetic and curly-browed. Bunty and her daughter Charlotte, embarrassed and blatantly in cahoots with Paige, respectively. Kat, upset, perhaps for me, or perhaps because this little family intervention had slowed down the arrival of the cake. And Paige, questioning, luminous with tears, disappointed. So disappointed.

Well, what could I do?

"You know he lives in New Zealand, don't you, sweetheart?"

She had it all planned. "Yes, but you've just got all that money from your old boring job, to buy tickets. We could go in the school holidays. You don't have a new job to go to, not yet anyway, so you could even get one there. And Charlotte will look after Fernando for me."

"Oh, Charlotte will, will she?"

That was Bunty. It took her a while to cotton on, if you ask me. Quite clearly her daughter had been coaching my daughter in what to say for days, maybe weeks. My sweet, unassuming girl could not have thought all this up on her own. No, no, no. It takes an eleven-nearly-twelve-year-old with her own mobile phone and her first truncated vest of a bra to cook these things up.

Paige was still being held up by Bunty, dangling from the armpits with cross-knees and splayed ankles like some poor, dejected Pinocchio. I put the knife down, sat in my favourite Laura Ashley armchair, and pulled Paige onto my lap. Jesus, she's getting heavy.

"Mummy?" she pleaded.

"Paige, my sweet." I smoothed down her glossy honeyed hair. It's the one thing I'm glad she got from her father, going rather nicely, as it does, with the bits she got from me - pale skin, freckles and pointed nose. "It's New Zealand. On the other side of the world. He's probably stranded on a farm with no communications for miles. Just sheep. And mountains. Maybe the odd hobbit. How would we ever find him?"

“We Googled him,” sparked up Charlotte. “He’s in Auckland. Right in the middle. Auckland has a million people in it. And Vodafone.”

I’ve never before been tempted to gag someone with a Ladybird trainer-bra, but there’s a first time for everything. Paige grinned goofily from my shoulder. “Auckland’s got an airport and everything.”

“I’m sure it has. But he’s a man, Paige. A man. They’re pretty useless, you know. Do you know, when ever any of my friends have split up from men, what are the two things that they worry about having to do for themselves? The only two things that men can do for them?”

“Oooo, security and self-esteem?” asked Kat, swiping a sneaky finger into the icing on Paige’s birthday cake.

I snorted. “What have you been reading, Kat? Cosmo’s getting very behind the times, isn’t it? No. The two things they do that women think they cannot do for themselves are one, change light-bulbs, and two, put out the dustbin. Bulbs and bins. Both of which requiring the huge skill of being able to extend your arms. That is what men amount to. Bulbs, bins, and long arms. Apes could do it just as well. Sorry, Dad.”

My father shrugged nonchalantly. Deep down he probably agrees. I’m sure both he and Mum would far rather it was bulbs and bins than all this new-fangled security and self-esteem rubbish that Kat’s clearly seeking. They come from a simpler age, my mum and dad: when men brought home the bacon and women were housewives or school secretaries; when husbands did odd-jobs and handiwork and cleaned cars on Sundays and only thought about taking the kids to the park twice a year, when the in-laws were visiting; when the world was not totally kid-centric but revolved around them, the adults, and the word ‘parent’ was still a noun and not a label or even a verb. I could see that working for Kat, actually. Something a little more ... traditional. Maybe it explained why she’d never found anybody – she should try looking for Handy Andy instead of this impossible-to-find reconstructed male/Celebrity Chef she thinks will suit her down to the ground.

“That’s not all though,” said Charlotte belligerently. Darn. What happened to children being seen and not heard? Not that it applies to Paige, of course. Just other people’s kids. “It’s not just bulbs and bins. They provide sperm too.”

“I’m sorry, Charlotte?”

I patted my daughter fondly. Sperm? Did I know about sperm when I was eleven? I very much doubt it. I was still hoping I might get my first kiss before my first proper job (and I don’t mean the Saturday job at the local newsagents’). Paige looked slightly mystified too, I was glad to see. Clearly I have been delivered of an angel instead of the devil-spawn that Bunty has had to deal with all these years.

Charlotte, however, was all prepared. “Men provide sperm. Paige’s dad gave you some sperm and so he’s half of Paige too, so she must be really like him as well.”

“Ah, Charlotte.” My laugh came out with an odd, seal-like hollowness. “Pity you’re too young for the ‘nature versus nurture’ argument.”

Her pale, mutant eyes blinked rapidly. “I could Google it.”

“I’ll Google y...Never mind. Look, Paige, I know it’s your birthday wish, but...”

“I just want to meet my dad.” My daughter’s bottom lip contorted like a jelly snake. “Is that bad?”

And of course, it isn’t. It isn’t naughty, or unreasonable, or even slightly silly. I just thought, for some reason, that we’d escaped it. She’s never really asked about him before, although I’ve told her the odd thing here and there when I’ve noticed her eyes go a little glassy at Christmas events and the like, when there’s only ever me to cheer her on, or school shows where I go two nights running because there isn’t anyone else for her to wave to at the second performance if I’m not there.

And of course, I've said that "he's your father and I'll always love him for giving me you" thing, when she's asked why I'm not with her father, even though it's absolute bollocks. No, really. If I'd conceived with a sperm donor and a turkey baster, would I have always loved the clinic who organised it? No.

Well, maybe that's a little harsh. I did love him at one stage. For years, in fact. I loved Alan when I first met him at the estate agents he worked in, and was all Kiwi and interesting and new. I loved him when he sold me my first flat (a cute conversion in South Wimbledon, reasonably priced because of the gross over-inflation and onslaught of negative equity sales of the late eighties) and then moved into it with me. And I loved him through several years of my management training scheme and his partying his life away on the inflated bonuses of London property dealers.

We were quite a couple, I guess: Alan so brash, full of his University of Life and School of Hard Knocks philosophies, and me, so uniform and by-the-book, and reasonably successful. So handsome together. We seemed perfect for each other, in that 'opposites attract' kind of way. We never did tie the knot, though. We were proud Dinkies. That's it. Dual Income No Kids.

We split up when I became pregnant, though, and he disappeared completely after a very short while. And Paige had never seemed at all interested in him, which was a relief, as he never seemed particularly interested in her, either. But I should have known the time would come. And here it is. The second huge change in our lives in as many weeks. Aren't these events meant to happen in threes? Bloody hell. What could the third be? I'd better run outside with a torch and check the foundations...

Anyway, my answer to Paige was the only one it could be – no, it's isn't silly to want to know the other half of your make-up. Which is why, later this morning, I am off to the travel agent's. After I've done some Googling of my own. Amazon, I think, for some more self-help books. Apparently I'm going to need to know what colour my balloon is... and I wasn't even aware I had one.