

## The Fall

by Liz Shaw

When I was young I idolised my parents. Dad was sociable, funny, knowledgeable. Mum was the practical one, good at cooking, sewing, and decorating. They were brave too, uprooting the family to a different country to escape increasing unemployment and lack of opportunity in 1970s South Yorkshire. We would compete for Dads attention and looked forward to Mum's Sunday roasts when Dad would return from picking up the Sunday papers accompanied by various friends he had dropped in to see along the way and had invited back. Mum would sling in some extra potatoes, unphased by the additional numbers. Her Yorkshire puddings were the best in the world. My parents were fun, tolerant and easy going. Our friends thought they were great. I trusted their judgment, accepted their view of the world, unquestioned and unchallenged.

It is only natural as you grow up to realise that your parents are only human, but for me the realisation came suddenly and shockingly. I was at university when Dad suffered a catastrophic stroke. Mum had found him on the floor on the bedroom. He had to be airlifted to a specialist hospital and was not expected to survive the flight and subsequent brain surgery. He lost his speech and never fully regained it. He suffered from epilepsy. The family dynamics changed overnight. He gave up teaching and Mum had to work in a betting shop to make ends meet. My self-confident, common sensical mother turned into Chicken Licken, convinced that the sky was going to fall on her head. Never was the phrase 'scared witless' more apt. My father no longer had the language to comfort or reason with her. He chose to ignore her nervousness. Her pleas to take care on the stairs, leave the bathroom door unlocked in case he collapsed again, or have one less beer, went unheeded. He refused to believe that he had fits.

Time did not heal. They came to visit often and spent most of their holidays with us. They were tiresome guests, bickering all the time, Mum wound tight, Dad wilfully misunderstanding her concerns. They were anxious and reluctant babysitters, picky about when and what to eat, and required constant entertainment.

They are long gone and I have grown older and a little wiser. With the clarity of hindsight, I can see how Dad's stroke completely changed their lives and how unrealistic it was of me to expect them to carry on heroically and stoically uncomplaining. They should have had counselling, especially Mum who these days I am sure would have been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. I regret my impatience with Mum's ridiculous fears and my Dad's selfish obtuseness.

I dreamt about them the other night. Dad was in the background, happy with his pipe and pint, Mum still anxious about something.

"It wasn't my fault" she said. "I know" I replied. I felt their arms around me. Not heroes, just my Mum and Dad.