
Opening Extract from...

The Living Years

Written by Mike Rutherford

Published by Constable

The Living Years

Mike Rutherford

Constable • London

Constable & Robinson Ltd
55–56 Russell Square
London WC1B 4HP
www.constablerobinson.com

First published in the UK by Constable,
an imprint of Constable & Robinson, 2014

Interview extract on pp55–6 reproduced by kind permission of
East Grinstead Courier & Observer.

A copy of the British Library Cataloguing in Publication
Data is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-4721-0981-1 (hardback)
ISBN 978-1-4721-1619-2 (trade paperback)
ISBN 978-1-4721-1035-0 (ebook)

Printed and bound in the UK

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

PREFACE

I was in a hotel room in Chicago when the phone rang at 3 a.m. It was Angie: 'I've got some bad news – Dad's died.' Time really does freeze at moments like that and your heart plummets. Mum had called her: 'Angie darling, Dad's dead. I've poked him with my stick and he's not moving: he's definitely gone.' Mum was in a wheelchair and very immobile – she and my father slept in twin beds – and the phrase was exactly like her. I could almost hear her voice.

At that moment I couldn't think of anything to say or even discuss arrangements. I was too much in shock. After I hung up I stood by the hotel window and looked down at the car headlights. I was on the thirty-fifth floor and it suddenly seemed incredibly quiet and very lonely. I felt very distant from anything that was happening down on the street – I just didn't feel part of the world.

We were in the middle of a six-show run in Chicago playing to 20,000 people a night and were less than a month into our year-long tour. If I'd wanted to fly back to England I knew that the band and our manager Tony Smith would have supported me, just as we had always accommodated each other musically. But I also knew that there was nothing I could really do in Farnham. Mum had Angie and my sister Nicky to look after her and my father had taken care of all the funeral arrangements. So Tony Smith and I sat down and made a plan. In two weeks' time I would fly overnight to England for the funeral and after the service I would

fly straight back by Concorde to California for a show at the LA Forum.

The next two weeks were surreal. I found I could go on stage and get lost in the music for two-and-a-half hours, but then the show would end and the realization of what had happened would hit all over again. There was a sense of security, of safety, playing with Tony and Phil but my own emotions and my father's death were something we didn't discuss.

There were times in my life when I felt guilty not talking about my feelings, but that was just how I was brought up. I think public school was a large part of it but it was also generational: my father and I belonged to a time when sons didn't tell their fathers they loved them. I'd never told my dad that I loved him and my biggest regret was not telling him what a wonderful man he'd been in my life.

I arrived in England on 13 October 1986 and went home briefly to see the children. I then drove with Angie to the funeral service in Aldershot. The night before I'd been on stage in front of thousands of people, and now I was in a car on the way to an English church to say goodbye to my father for the last time. After that, I would be flying back to LA – I knew then I needed some help. I asked Angie if she would fly back with me just for one night. Someone drove to our house to pick up her passport while we were in the church and then it was straight to Heathrow, where we boarded Concorde for the first leg of our journey. Angie was still in her funeral dress and only had her handbag.

We arrived in New York and a car was waiting on the tarmac to take us to the private jet that would fly us to LA. I think it was then that the enormity of it all really struck me. As we flew west, keeping up with the sun, the day seemed endless and yet all the time I was aware of leaving that church in Aldershot further behind, while LA was getting closer. It seemed very still on that plane – it was just us and a couple of crew – and the sun still wasn't setting. I felt as though I'd lost my compass point.

I found out later that two of the people in the audience that night in LA were Elton John and Gary Farrow, his PR. They both knew what was happening and spent the time before the show discussing whether I was going to make it back or not. The band were trying to decide which songs they could play without me or even if they would have to cancel the show. I arrived with twenty minutes to spare thanks to a police escort from the airport.

It may sound self-serving to say that I played that show for my father but when I heard those eerie chords to 'Mama', that primal, basic beat, that's what I felt I was doing. My father had always taught me that if you had an obligation, you fulfilled it – it was as simple as that. That night I was giving something of the right spirit, and I think he would have approved.

When I went to bed and Angie eventually fell asleep, I couldn't stop thinking about how bizarre the whole thing was. I'd buried my father in the morning and then travelled backwards in time to play the show. Somehow I also felt that my father had gone on a journey too – I wasn't quite sure where either of us were at that point.

★ ★ ★

My father's death hit me the most six years later, following my mother's death in 1992. My sister Nicky cleared out their house and sent me three weathered, leather-bound trunks belonging to my father.

I was still reeling from my mother's death and the fact that we had to sell my parent's first and only home in Farnham. It was the end of an era and I didn't really feel ready to look into the trunks in case they stirred up emotions I wasn't sure I could handle. I've always been one to keep my emotions hidden away. I put the trunks in the attic above my studio and that's where they remained untouched for a few years.

I'm not sure when the time is right to deal with the past but it wasn't a calculated thing – I was in my studio a few years later having a writer's block sort of day, and my mind started thinking about the trunks. The next thing I was up there wondering which one to open

first, as there was also one belonging to my grandfather. I decided to open my grandfather's trunk and one of my father's at the same time. The thing that startled me the most when I lifted the lids was the military precision – the way everything was so neat and tidy. In my grandfather's case all of the papers and files were bunched together with elastic bands, while in my father's case all of his paperwork was neatly put in plastic folders. I had a shock of recognition as I've always surrounded myself with plastic folders – and I've never even been in the military.

In these folders was a mixture of naval histories from Dartmouth, memorabilia from the wars, his medals, CBE, Distinguished Service Order certificates and his medical history, and his sword was also in the trunk. In my grandfather's trunk there was similar stuff but I also found two of the books he had written: *Soldiering with a Stethoscope* and *Memoirs of an Army Doctor*. There were great reviews amongst his papers, praising Colonel Rutherford and the publishing deal he had landed. My father's trunk contained a manuscript of his own memoirs along with a very positive and generous letter from David Niven, from whom he'd obviously sought an opinion (my father was a fan of Niven's memoir, *The Moon's a Balloon*). However, there was also a publisher's rejection letter saying there was 'not very much demand for military history these days and so I am sorry we cannot accept it'. I felt my father's disappointment.

Last year my sons took my father's manuscript and had it made into a beautiful leather-bound book. They gave it to me for Christmas – I was completely overwhelmed. I may hide my emotions pretty well but it was hard on that day. I sat down and started piecing together my father's life, and read his memoir from cover to cover. I felt so proud not only of my father's naval career but of the legacy he left me.

CHAPTER ONE

In May 1906 I was born in a London nursing home, my father then being stationed in Chelsea Barracks as Medical Officer. Having joined the Royal Army Medical Corps from private practice, he had gone off to the South African War, at the end of which he had married my mother who belonged to one of the old Cape families, the Cloetes, who had arrived in 1652 in South Africa and had lost no time in increasing their numbers.

My father was born into the age of empire: archdukes, emperors, a map of the world that was coloured pink. The seas were ruled by Edward VII's Navy, which 'had countenanced no rival since the Battle of Trafalgar', and households like my father's were ruled over by iron-fisted nannies.

My father's travels began aged ten when his father, my grandpa, returned to South Africa. Nanny came too – although I'm not sure how happy she was about it:

We arrived at Durban and, disembarking, I had my first delighted ride in a rickshaw, a two-wheeled vehicle drawn by a Zulu between the shafts. He wore decorative clothing, though not much of it, and a headdress of horns. From time to time he leapt in the air with a blood-curdling yell, almost spilling his passengers over the back. I could not have enjoyed anything more but Nanny, who shared the general

national view in those days that the black races began at Calais, was most put out by such goings on.

Three decades later my father was back in Durban again, which is where he met my mother, Anne: at the time he was Acting Captain of the heavy cruiser *Suffolk*, which had docked there for a refit. He saw my mother at a charity dance and they got married six weeks later: given that my mother was always the impulsive one, it seems odd that it was all so quick. In any case, the happy couple enjoyed a six-day honeymoon before my father sailed off again, this time for Trincomalee in Sri Lanka. They didn't see each other again for ten months.

My parents were reunited in England after VE Day, my mother having sailed over on a troop ship and my father having been appointed to a position in the Admiralty, which was situated on Horse Guards Parade in Whitehall. However, by the time my mother was expecting my sister, Nicolette, in 1947, my father had been appointed Chief of Staff to the Naval Representative of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in Australia. It was decided that my mother should go back to Durban for Nicky's birth and only travel the rest of the way to catch up with my father afterwards. This meant that Dad didn't know he had a daughter until a cable message was rushed up the gangway of his ship in Adelaide.

When my father's term of duty ended in 1949 my parents and sister moved back to England. My father returned to his job in Admiralty and found a house to lease in Chertsey, Surrey, and that was where I was born on 2 October 1950. They chose not to go for the less is more option when choosing my names, so I was christened Michael John Cloete Crawford Rutherford. Less than two years later Dad was off again, this time to the Korean War.

My father was eight years old when he watched his own father go off to the First World War carrying field glasses, a sword and a revolver. Being eighteen months old I don't remember what Dad was carrying

when he left for the Far East but I do remember the day, two years later, when he came back: he asked how many teeth I had and then let me crawl all over his car – both good opening moves, I thought.

In fact, it was all going well until bedtime, when I began to get a bit suspicious: where was this strange man's home? Surely it couldn't be with us?

Apparently, it was.

I can clearly picture my father coming into my room at dusk to say goodnight to me, his silhouette at the end of the bed. He was a big man – not quite as tall as I ended up, but big – yet he didn't seem scary.

I still had my doubts about whether he would disappear again overnight, though, and so kept getting up to check on his whereabouts. Eventually my parents gave in and moved my bed into their room so that they could get some sleep.

My father was always smart and he always had good posture: even out of his Captain's uniform it was his posture, his presence, which impressed people about him. Wherever he went – into a restaurant or a shop or a stationer – he commanded respect: people were polite and courteous. He was also always punctual, methodical and orderly.

As a boy I mostly took after my mother.

My mother had wanted to go to art college but girls didn't in her day; she'd also wanted to be a ballet dancer but had grown too tall. She was very aware of sounds and energy, and a sunset or a blue sky would set her off every time: 'Darling! The colours!'

She was a wonderfully, beautifully dotty woman. I think my father enjoyed the way she was her own person but he was also quite long-suffering: when they were living in Melbourne, for instance, my mother had got carried away collecting wattle flowers, which she loved both because they were bright yellow and reminded her of home in South Africa. What she didn't know was that, unlike in South Africa, wattle was a protected species in Australia. One day she filled my father's car with wattle equivalent to a £200 fine. He

had to drive to the beach in the middle of the night, dig a hole and bury it.

Mum was a widow, although her previous marriage wasn't something that my parents spoke about. It wasn't until I was thirteen and we were on a family holiday in Italy that I began to wonder out loud why every single piece of silver on our dining-room cabinet at home had the name 'Captain Woods' engraved on it. There was a startled hush and Mum went completely white. In those days there was still a stigma attached to being married more than once; plus 'Captain Woods' had died of cancer, which no one ever talked about. I think it must have been Mum's idea to sweep her history under the carpet because my father was too direct to hide things.

Maybe they also kept it quiet because they were genuinely worried that it would have an effect on me – although if they were really concerned about it, perhaps they shouldn't have had all that engraved silver lying around. Of course, it made no difference to me whatsoever.

I was five years old when my father was appointed Commanding Officer of Whale Island in Portsmouth Harbour. Dad had trained as a naval gunnery officer there twenty years earlier; now, in 1955, he was returning to take charge.

It was the pinnacle of his naval career and he was soon installed in the Captain's house, as were my mother, Nicky and I. The arrangement was a bit unusual. Until the end of the Second World War, the Captain's house had been very much bachelor territory (wives and families were expected to stay at home on shore). Also, most officers, by the time they reached the rank of Captain, had children who were grown up and at university. My father, who was forty-nine in 1955, had a seven-year-old daughter and a five-year-old son – although it seems that Nicky and I learned to fit in pretty quickly:

> *Both children took their appointed station in the establishment and there was no child psychology or anything like that. Their tricycles, when*

not in use, were placed between their own little white lines in the tricycle park outside the Captain's house, gear was replaced in a seamanlike manner after every playtime and if they ever asked: 'Is that an order?' and the reply happened to be: 'Yes – right turn – double march!' that was all there was to it.

Like my father when he was a child, I had a nanny, at least while we were living on Whale Island. She was the daughter of a Lieutenant and could run like the wind, which came in handy whenever I cycled off. My aim was always to get to the beach – rumour had it there were pieces of eight buried there – but I never got very far. What's more, on the rare occasions when I did manage to out-pedal Nanny, I was thwarted by the island's public address system, which would inform everyone that I was on the loose: 'Anyone sighting the Captain's son is requested to report position, course and speed, intercept and return him to base.'

Disappointingly they always did.

I still managed to have plenty of adventures on Whaley. I delivered the pigswill with the head stableman, Mr Brown – a clean bin was kept on his horse-drawn cart so that if it rained I could be put inside and the lid put on. In our second year on the island I also joined the HMS *Excellent* boy cadets. I was five by this time but still underage; however, my father was the Commander so no one was going to argue. According to Dad's book, I fell in a goldfish pond before one parade and bawled my eyes out in a 'most unseamanlike manner' when I wasn't allowed to carry on in my wet trousers. I do wonder if he came to regret bending the rules.

There was also the time when one of the island's guns was fired unexpectedly:

Michael was riding Joey the pony on the upper lawn supervised by Mr Brown. At the sound of the gunfire Joey bucked and unseated Mike who hung upside down suspended by one leg and held up by the stirrup.

When remounted his morale was quite unaffected as he assumed that it was all part of riding and that to hang upside down occasionally like a Cossack was quite normal.

A highlight of our time on Whaley was the time a Russian naval squadron visited Portsmouth and my father was given the job of looking after a Sverdlov-class cruiser and its crew. After the Captain had been for tea at our house, I was invited to spend the next day aboard his ship in return. I duly came back loaded with presents so it was a great success from my point of view, although I think my father was a bit disappointed that I hadn't also managed to glean some cold-war secrets while I was at it. In the end the only thing I learned was the Russian word for 'thank you': I realized that the more I said it, the more chocolates I got. They were enormous things – about the size of my hand – but I still thank you-ed my way through six of them. Then I went home and was sick.

What I remember most about Whaley is how big everything was: the pageantry was huge, there were vast spaces to run around in, the parade ground seemed to go on forever. And at the centre of it all was my father. Every ceremony revolved around him, everyone saluted him wherever he went. (I loved saluting, it seemed very grown up: something only men did. I would always be trying to get away from Nanny and my sister because nobody ever saluted them.)

Walking around the island with my father, I can remember puffing out my chest to be as big as possible, feeling the importance of being by his side.

★ ★ ★

It was a letter from the Admiralty that changed everything for my father. Instead of bringing the news that he was promoted to the position of Rear Admiral, as he'd hoped, the letter told him instead that he'd be expected to retire from the Navy in two months' time.

At the time this letter arrived Dad had been in the Navy for

thirty-six years, gained two Mentions-in-Despatches in the Second World War and a Distinguished Service Order earned off the coast of Korea in the early fifties. Suddenly he was out of work. With a wife and two young children to provide for, retirement was out of the question. For the first time in his life, he had to go job-hunting and the signs didn't look good:

> *I was […] given an official booklet giving advice upon the transition to civilian life. This I read one evening. It was the most depressing thing I have ever read and by the end of it, I needed a couple of stiff whiskies to restore my morale. It appeared that I was virtually valueless to the labour market and must adopt a humble and low profile ready to accept a modest job in the hope of climbing the ladder once more if I was lucky enough to get on the ladder at all.*
>
> *In the words of today's young people it was dead dreary.*

Quite a few rejections followed but then my father applied for a job working on the Blue Steel missile defence system that was being developed by Hawker Siddeley (which later became part of British Aerospace). He was successful, but the job meant moving to the opposite end of the country, Cheshire, where Hawker Siddeley had their headquarters. My father always believed in the right outfit for the occasion and on the day he left for Wilmslow, he did so in his new uniform: a bowler hat, rolled umbrella and pigskin gloves.

Mum, Nicky and I followed not long after and moved into a Manchester hotel, the Dean Water, while my parents were looking for a house. The hotel used to have dances on a Saturday evening and my sister and I, dressed in our pyjamas, would look over the banisters at the dancers going past in their smart evening gear. It was like a glimpse into another world: very exciting.

Far Hills, the house that my parents found, was a detached, brick-built 1930s house about four miles from the Hawker Siddeley base. This meant that whenever the black, triangular Vulcan Bombers flew

overhead, the whole place shook, which impressed any guests we had staying. I was more impressed by the fact I could use the base's runway as a go-carting track.

I had a yellow 30 cc go-cart – very cool – and we would put it in the back of our big red-and-white Austin and drive to the base with it sticking out of the boot. My main memory is of me trying to start the damn thing, but when I did get it going, I went flying.

Mum would always drive me to the airbase and she'd also drive Dad to work each day. Her style was probably best described as colourful. On one occasion we were late going to the train station and we hurried to the car, which was parked in the garage. Nicky and I in piled into the back and were looking out of the rear window in anticipation when Mum went full throttle straight through the garage wall in front.

Driving up to visit our relatives in Scotland was also a drama. One year we hired a caravan and Nicky and I went with Mum to collect it the night before. By the time she'd negotiated it back through our narrow gates into the driveway I was already hoping that Dad would take the helm the next morning. We would be manoeuvring out straight on to a main road which, with Mum at the wheel, was the kind of thing that left you afraid for your life.

Mum's objection to Dad's driving was that he did it as though he was steering a ship. He'd leave the garage as if he were leaving the harbour, set sail down the road at a very respectable pace and be totally unaware of fellow motorists flashing him, shaking their fist and trying to overtake. He'd be completely in his own world, which would drive my mother to distraction. Mum, by contrast, didn't have a problem with speed: we'd hit the motorway and she'd hit the gas, pushing the car to the limit of the maximum speed it could do. It would shake and rattle, and my father would hang on to the loop above his window with white knuckles. He knew that if he attempted to despatch any orders, he would be ejected immediately. Reaching our destination intact was always a relief.

I particularly enjoyed Scotland and visiting my Great-aunt Jean (from my mother's side of the family). The Biggars had three farms and bred Galloway cattle and I think it was there that I developed a desire to become a farmer. I loved the lifestyle, the open spaces and especially being around the cows: they felt kind and safe, and hearing them munching their hay in the quiet of the evening was very satisfying.

Generally, though, there wasn't much love lost between my parents' families and siblings. There was an Aunty Rosie who lived in Southsea and was artistic and slightly eccentric – especially when helped along by a glass of wine or two – but we only visited her a couple of times. Strange, given that on Whale Island we'd been so nearby. It didn't end well between Aunty Rosie and me: Mum rang me one day when I was in my twenties and told me that Auntie Rosie had recently got married. I told Mum to give her my congratulations, as you would, but that didn't go down too well.

'Not married, darling! *Buried!*'

I saw even less of my mother's brother, Uncle Berners – in fact I only met him once. When his name was mentioned it was always in lowered tones when my parents thought I was out of earshot. This might have been because he'd acted badly and opted out of looking after his mother, my 'Jean Granny', as we used to call her. But it might also have been because Uncle Berners, who was the vicar of Eton for many years, changed his name later on in life to something double-barrelled, which really bugged my parents. My father wasn't very tolerant of pomposity.

Because of Uncle Berners, Dad ended up paying for the upkeep of both grannies – Jean Granny and his own mother, Granny Malimore – who both lived into their nineties. Granny Malimore (who was called Malimore because that was the name of her house in Farnham) was very bright but not very active. Jean Granny, meanwhile, was very active but not very bright. They'd meet at family occasions and Jean Granny would always find some stairs to rush up and then say

things like, 'Oh, am I going too fast for you, Roberta?' And Granny Malimore would get her own back by memorizing all kinds of historical facts and embarrassing Jean Granny by asking her questions she couldn't answer.

I don't know how Jean Granny managed to live so long but I think Granny Malimore did it by refrigeration. You'd go to her house in Farnham, breathe out, and see your breath in the air. And her fire would be on. It was one of those little smokeless fires, the size of an acorn. The minute a glow got going and a bit of heat started coming out, she'd jump up, bung on a scuttle-full of coal and nearly extinguish the thing.

Granny Malimore had a TV – quite rare in those days – which she'd been given by a wealthy cousin from Cape Town. She watched everything but preferred it if you thought that she only ever read *The Times*. We would go into the room and find her feigning to read the newspaper but if we put our hand on the telly it would always be boiling hot. It probably gave off more heat than the fire.

Meanwhile, Jean Granny lived in a slightly threadbare 'residential hotel for the elderly' called Morris Lodge Hotel in Farnham. Morris Lodge played a big part in our family life. While my father had been away during the Korean War my mother had moved there with my sister and me, and I'm sure it was one of the reasons why she was able to cope. Nicky and I were always under surveillance, usually by some colourful character or other. It was run by a Colonel and Mrs Crosse, accompanied by a couple of rather bossy sisters. It's probably why *Fawlty Towers* later became a favourite of mine: I felt I could identify.

Even after we moved to Cheshire we'd often go back to Morris Lodge for holidays. We'd also spend occasional weekends fishing in the Derbyshire hills. I loved being outdoors and even today rivers move me.

The river at Hartington has a beautiful meander that was always serene and calm, although generally became less so after the Rutherfords and dog had descended. The serious fisherman that used

to go there were appalled, not least because my mother had a top-of-the-range Hardy rod but still used a worm for fly-fishing.

Dad wasn't a great fisherman at all and I think I caught only two fish in my entire career, but Mum had more of a feel for it. When she was young in South Africa she'd been quite sporty: she'd ride horses and sail in races, and she used to shoot too. But those days were gone by the time I appeared.

★ ★ ★

Mum was game for anything and would try to loosen Dad up, but there was a stiffness and a formality about my father. He always had a sense of humour – it was very dry and lots of people missed it but it was definitely there – but as far as I was concerned Dad was very reserved, although I always felt loved and secure.

My father had grown up with my grandpa's tales of the Boer War but he never told me a single war story, although he clearly had plenty to tell. When war was declared in 1939 his first mission was to sail to Canada with a million pounds of gold bullion, which was being sent from France for safekeeping. In 1940, after France had fallen to Germany, he'd been in charge of seizing two French ships in Plymouth harbour, and in 1941 he'd been on the *King George V* when it helped sink the *Bismarck*. But as a child I always sensed that he didn't want to talk about the war and it didn't feel appropriate to ask.

Ours was never an unhappy household but it was serious. I had seen my dad practising yoga, which he'd picked up while he was in the Far East, but he would never kick a ball on the lawn with me and we'd never just chat. From a very young age I was also aware that he had incredibly high standards: I knew that his job on Whale Island had been to decide who passed exams and who failed.

One image I have of us together doesn't quite fit: my dad and I used to share baths when I was very little. I would have a plastic submarine – one of those funny things you got in a cornflake packet and put baking soda in to make it go up and down – and I'm sure

Dad, watching me play with it, thought it was only a matter of time until I started my own naval career.

We weren't really together very much. By the time he came home from work I would often be in bed and then, when I was seven-and-a-half, I was packed off to boarding school. Maybe it was because my father wasn't a big part of my everyday life that the occasions when we were together felt so important.

As for my mother, I have no idea what she did all day but, whatever it was, she always seemed to be in a rush – my main memory of Mum is of her rushing into a room, smelling of the cold air she'd brought in from outdoors, dropping something off and rushing back out again.

Neither of my parents had many friends and, thinking about it now, I can see what a shock it must have been for both of them having to learn to deal with the real world outside the services at quite a late stage in their lives. Not only had my father never owned a house before – as a Captain, he'd always been on the move and wherever he'd hung his cap, that was home – he'd never even paid a bill. Nor had Mum ever needed to cook a meal or worry about domestic chores: Captain's wives didn't.

Perhaps that was why they didn't quite know how to make a home for Nicky and me. We didn't really have friends, either: my best friend was our cleaning lady's son, who I used to play with on the landing at Far Hills.

While we were on Whale Island, the naval carpenters there had made me a beautiful wooden trunk full of oak bricks, which the cleaning lady's son and I used to make forts from so that we could then fire things at each other. It was great fun but one day I must have thought he was cheating because I threw a brick at his head. There wasn't much blood but that was the only time my father ever slippered me.

It may sound like a lonely life but I didn't feel lonely. I was quite self-sufficient. I even provided myself with my own pocket money: half-crowns which I would take off my father's dresser. They were

big, chunky things – they looked substantial – and I'd generally spend them on sweets or model kits: planes, not boats, which I thought were a bit dull. Talk about adding insult to injury. It was only when I got to prep school that I realized what I had been missing out on socially. And there was another discovery, too: music.