Smile Though Your Heart is Breaking

Pauline Prescott
with Wendy Holden

Published by HarperCollins

Extract

Pauline PRESCOTT

Smile Though Your Heart Is Breaking

PAULINE PRESCOTT
with Wendy Holden

HarperCollins*Publishers*

Smile, though your heart is aching
Smile, even though it's breaking
When there are clouds in the sky
You'll get by
If you smile
Through your fear and sorrow
Smile and maybe tomorrow
You'll see the sun come shining through
For you
Light up your face with gladness
Hide every trace of sadness
Although a tear may be ever so near
That's the time you must keep on trying
Smile, what's the use of crying
You'll find that life is still worthwhile
If you just smile

(John Turner and Geoffrey Parsons)

Prologue

I LAY ON MY NARROW METAL-FRAMED BED, HANDS ACROSS MY TUMMY, AND felt the life inside me stir. Relishing the silence of the dawn, I knew that Sister Joan Augustine would burst into the dormitory any minute, clanging her bell to get us up and bathed for morning prayers.

It was 25 December 1955. Enjoying a few more seconds' peace, I allowed my mind to drift back to the fifteen Christmases I'd already known or at least those I could remember. Each year, my mum and dad would roll the carpet back and dance across the living room to the songs of Fats Waller or the Ink Spots playing on the gramophone. Under dangling paper chains Dad would waltz me laughingly around on his feet, clinging to the back of his legs until I was giddy.

The best part was when my brother Peter and I were allowed to open the presents my parents had placed either side of the fireplace for us. Apart from the usual apple, orange and banana, there would always be some special gift they'd saved especially hard for – like my brother's bicycle or the sleeping baby doll I'd coveted ever since I'd spotted it in Garner's Toy Shop window. When the doll was replaced by another just before the school holidays, I cried all the way home. To my astonishment, there she was on Christmas morning, batting her long eyelashes at me. From Mum's wages as a part-time cleaner and my father's as a

bricklayer a little money had been put into a savings club until there was enough.

Now aged sixteen, I was about to give birth to my own baby doll, the one I prayed would bring back its airman father from wherever he'd returned to in America. I'd written and told him about our child but he hadn't replied yet. Maybe once the baby was born, he'd divorce his wife and send for me to marry him as he'd always promised he would.

I thought back to Christmas two years earlier, the first that Mum, Peter and I had faced a few months after we'd watched Dad's coffin being lowered into the ground. That Christmas, I was invited to a party at the local American airbase for children who'd been orphaned or bereaved. A scrawny fourteen-year-old, I'd stepped nervously into that mess hall and thought I'd been transported to Hollywood. The scene was like something in the movies that transfixed me every Saturday afternoon at the Regal Cinema in Foregate Street, Chester. The hall was filled with clowns, balloons and entertainers. A trestle table groaned under over-sized platters of exotic food. There was cream and frosted icing, the likes of which I'd never known because of rationing. Smiling shyly at the handsome men in uniform who reminded me of Rock Hudson or Clark Gable as they handed out gifts, I was star-struck.

Had that Christmas party only been two years earlier? Before my brother got sick? Before my widowed mother had her accident? Before I met the father of my baby? It seemed like a lifetime ago. The words of my favourite song, 'Unchained Melody', sprang unbidden into my head.

Smile Though Your Heart Is Breaking

Oh my love, my darling,
I've hungered for your touch a long lonely time.
And time goes by so slowly and time can do so much.
Are you still mine?
I need your love … God speed your love to me.

The bell ringing in Sister Joan Augustine's hand snapped me from my reverie. Her long black habit making her seem taller than she really was, she stood in the doorway of our dormitory as she had every morning for the three months that I'd been a resident at St Bridget's House of Mercy, a home for unwed mothers in Lache Park. Apart from Mother Superior, whose office I'd tremblingly approached with my suitcase that first day, Sister Joan Augustine was the nun I feared the most.

'Come along now, girls!' she cried, clapping her hands together impatiently. 'Stop dawdling.' Dutifully, and in various stages of pregnancy, we twelve teenagers heaved ourselves upright, grabbed our wash bags and formed an orderly queue for the bathroom. With one bath shared between each dorm, we were only allowed a few minutes each before we had to dress and troop down to the chapel.

Because it was Christmas, the nuns had decorated a small tree in the room where we'd be permitted to greet family and friends later that afternoon. Its sparsely decorated branches were a bittersweet reminder of happier festivities beyond the former convent's walls. There would be no traditional gatherings by the family hearth for any of us that year. No pile of presents. No oranges or cute baby dolls. Instead, we'd quietly eat our breakfast cereal in the refectory, each lost in memories of Christmases past. Then we'd fall in for normal duties: peeling potatoes in the kitchen, working in the laundry or scrubbing the cloisters' floor. We

were young, some the victims of sexual abuse, others (like me) too innocent to understand the consequences of what we'd done. All of us were waiting for babies we were expected to take home or hand over uncomplainingly for adoption.

In a few days' time, my turn would come. Excited and terrified in equal measure, I dreaded the birth but fervently hoped my baby would arrive before those of two other girls in my dorm whose babies were due imminently. Sister Joan Augustine had promised the first child a beautiful Silver Cross pram that had been donated to the home by a well-wisher. That pram was gorgeous, with its cream enamel paintwork with a silver flash and its grey cloth hood. Not since I'd spotted the doll in the toy-shop window had I wanted anything quite so badly.

What I longed for even more, though, was to gaze into the eyes of the infant whose steady heartbeat matched mine. I ached to hold its tiny fingers. I wanted to kiss its cherub face. I was convinced that one look at those innocent features would change my mother's mind. Setting eyes on her first grandchild, she would announce (I felt sure) that we couldn't possibly give it up and that somehow – even though we both worked full time and couldn't afford help – we'd manage.

Kneeling in the chapel that cold December morning, my swollen tummy pressed against the pew, I bowed my head. 'Please God, let me keep my baby,' I whispered, my knuckles white through the skin of my hands. 'Don't let them take it away.'

If my prayers could only be answered, that would be a million times better than any doll or any pram. It would be the best Christmas present ever…

One

I DON'T KNOW WHAT MY MOTHER'S CHRISTMASES WERE LIKE WHEN SHE WAS a little girl, but I don't suppose they were much fun. Christened Minnie Irene Clegg but known to all as 'Rene', she rarely spoke of her childhood except to tell me that her father Joseph had died of war wounds when she was three, leaving her mother Ada to raise four small children.

From a devout Salvation Army background, Ada met another man and had six more children by him, making ten in all, although some died along the way. Sadly, the man Ada ended up with was a violent and abusive drunk, so my mother, her younger sister Ivy and her two brothers were sent into a children's home and then into service. Auntie Ivy, who was known as 'Little Titch', was much taller than my mother who stood at just over five feet. Despite her diminutive height and the fact that there was only a year between them, Mum was 'the boss'. The two women were so in tune with each other that they could sense if the other was unwell or in trouble. If one had an accident, the other seemed to a few days later. We named them 'the Golden Girls'.

When Ivy moved to Southampton to take up a position in a country mansion owned by a lord, Mum had no choice but to remain in Chester where she had a job as a maid in one of the old houses owned by the Welsby family of wine merchants. She missed her sister terribly, even

more so after Ivy married Len, a bus conductor and later had a daughter, my cousin Anne. In the privacy of her attic bedroom, my mum would shed tears for the sister from whom she'd never before been separated. Looking mournfully out over the rooftops, she'd wonder where Ivy was and what she was doing. On one such day, her eyes fell upon a good-looking young man clambering about on the roof of a hotel across the street. Spotting my mother in the window, he smiled and waved.

From that moment on, my mother's mood lifted. Every chance she'd get, she'd run up to her room, heart pounding, to see if the handsome bricklayer was still working on the roof. Each time she saw him, she'd wave happily and he'd wave back. Eventually, he waited for her by her employer's back door to ask her name. His was Ernest Tilston, and within a year they were wed.

Ernie was the youngest of twelve children, ten of them boys. Their father George, who was originally from Wales, became a Regimental Sergeant Major in the Cheshire Regiment during the First World War and sported a splendid waxed moustache. Ernie was such a good football player as a lad that he'd been offered a place with Tranmere Rovers but his father, a builder and master scaffolder, wouldn't let him take it up and insisted he got a trade. Ernie's brother Fred was a world-class boxer known as 'Little Tilly'. Ernie worked for his dad and lived with his parents but once he and my mother were engaged, they began saving for their first home, a red-brick terraced house in the village of Boughton Heath, in the suburbs of Chester. They married when they were both just turned twenty.

A few years later in 1937, my brother Peter was born. I came along twenty months after that in February, 1939. My timing was just right because when I was seven months old, war broke out. I was very young

but I can still remember bombing raids in Chester; hiding in 'the glory hole' under the stairs with Mum and Peter; eating emergency rations by torchlight. As a pupil at Cherry Grove School, I'd run to the concrete air-raid shelter with my Mickey Mouse gas mask with its sticking-out ears whenever the sirens sounded. I hated that horrible-smelling rubber mask. It made me feel sick every time someone clamped it to my face. After the school day was over, I'd play on the bombsites with my brother and his friends, using wooden doors that had been blown off their hinges as makeshift slides. It was all good fun until I got splinters in my bottom and my mother had to pluck them out.

My father enlisted in the Royal Marines and was posted to Scapa Flow in the Orkney Islands where many of the British battleships were based. Albert, one of my mother's brothers, lived in Glasgow with his wife Nan and three sons so once, when my father was given leave, we took a train north to meet him there. German bombs rained on Glasgow too, especially the area round the river Clyde, but there was never a suggestion that we shouldn't go and what a time we had. Being in Scotland felt like being on holiday and we'd never had a holiday before. Dad brought us enormous duck eggs from the Orkneys, which were such a luxury after years of powdered egg. In the local sweetshop he treated us to pear drops, strips of liquorice and humbugs that changed colour as you sucked them. Because of the sugar shortage, these were things we'd rarely had except as a monthly treat from the family ration book. One of my happiest memories is climbing the hills outside the city with Dad to pick some heather for Mum, my small hand swamped by his as he lifted me squealing above the carpet of purple flowers.

People couldn't help but love my father. When he was in the Marines, he used to MC all the dances and shows, and was a popular member of

their football team. He bore more than a passing resemblance to a young John Wayne and was a natural joker whose favourite comedian was Al Reed. Occasionally he'd repeat some of Al's jokes, which could be a bit naughty. Mum would nudge him then and scold him with: 'Ernie!' When the war ended and we knew for sure that Dad was safe and coming home, we celebrated at a street party held locally for VE Day. There was bunting and cakes and jellies. Trestle tables lined the lane at the back of our house. A few days later, Dad came marching proudly down the street to the music of the band of the Royal Marines, which still moves me to tears each time I hear it.

After the war, Dad was offered a job as a master bricklayer for British Insulated Callender's Cables, in the works' maintenance department eight miles away in Helsby. They not only wanted him for his bricklaying skills but for their football team. Each morning, he'd put on his overalls, pick up his haversack with his sandwiches, and whistle to himself as he got on his old bike and set off to work. On Thursday nights he'd come home with his little brown wage packet and wander into a corner with it, my mother peering over his shoulder. If she wasn't looking, he'd slip us a tanner each, especially if we'd done something to please him.

Once a month, Mum would check his pay packet and say, 'But you've already opened your wages.'

'Yes, Rene,' Dad would reply. 'I had to pay my union dues to the agent.'

Mum would nod and put the rest of his money away. I never knew what union dues were but I knew they were something my parents both took extremely seriously.

Although he seemed to like his job and got on well with his colleagues, my father preferred nothing more than to spend time with us. Every Saturday night he'd take us to the pictures. We always had to get there

early and queue for the cheapest seats, right in the front row. He'd always buy us an ice cream in the interval and then we'd go home on the bus. Dad's hero was Fred Astaire, so we saw all his films like *Three Little Words* and *The Belle of New York*. My favourite star at the time was Elizabeth Taylor, who at seven years older than me was the most glamorous young woman I'd ever seen in my life. I think I saw *National Velvet* three times.

We never went to church as a family so every Sunday Dad would switch on the wireless to listen to a pianist called Charlie Kunz who played Gershwin, Fats Waller, and Cole Porter songs. The carpet would be rolled back and Dad and I used to tap dance or waltz across the living-room floor, laughing all the while. Dad loved to dance and would copy all the steps he'd seen at the pictures. I inherited that passion and his love for swing music. His favourite song was 'Ain't Misbehavin'' and even now when I hear it, it makes me smile:

I know for certain the one I love;
I'm through with flirtin', it's just you I'm thinkin' of.
Ain't misbehavin', I'm saving my love for you.

My brother preferred modern jazz, which he'd play in his bedroom. Listening to those songs drifting through the walls, I soon fell for artists like Gerry Mulligan, Dave Brubeck and the MJQ or Modern Jazz Quartet. I remember loving one song in particular by the Tommy Dorsey band which was called 'A Sinner Kissed an Angel'. For my birthday, Peter would buy me Ella Fitzgerald or Sarah Vaughan records. Being nearly two years older than me, Peter had his own friends and I was often just the kid sister who got in the way. It wasn't until we were grown up that we became much closer and now we're the best of pals.

Since I didn't have a sister to play with, my closest companion was Joyce Ashford, who lived in the same street. She and I used to put on dance and puppet shows in her garage. Her younger sister Barbara sometimes joined in, but she once spied on us rehearsing and put on her own version of our show before we could. I don't think we ever quite forgave her.

I never felt poor but in comparison with our family Joyce and Barbara were definitely better off. Joyce's father was a bookie who owned a car, a television and a garage, none of which we possessed. My dad only had a bike and we all used the buses. If ever I wanted to see something on television, I'd go round to Joyce's after school. We loved *Muffin the Mule* and watched all the important public events, including the Coronation in 1953. I remember holding my breath as the glittering crown was placed so solemnly on the Queen's head and thinking how incredible it would be to meet her one day. Aged fourteen, I never thought my wish might come true.

A tall, skinny kid, all I wanted was to be a television 'Topper' when I grew up: dancing in a troupe of glamorous girls in support of a main act. I couldn't think of a finer job than to be paid to dance. A proud member of Miss Eve's Morris Dancing Team, by my early teens I was touring all over the Midlands, Wales and the North to compete in regional finals. Mum would travel with me on the bus and we had such fun getting me into my costume each time, with its little skirt and frilly knickers. At Christmas, I'd put on my 'Fred and Ginger' outfit for the family (I was always Fred, in a top hat) and do a little routine bursting balloons with high kicks and the splits as Mum, Dad and Peter all laughed. I have such carefree memories of those years.

I was thrilled when my parents found the money to send me to the Hammond School of Dance on the Liverpool Road, which was the best

in the North of England. There was a price to pay, though. When Peter was given a new bicycle one year I was told I couldn't have one as well as my classes. I didn't mind. As far as I was concerned, I had the better deal.

I loved school and there were several subjects I was good at, especially drama. I even played the Virgin Mary in the school nativity play. Having a vivid imagination, I was also good at English and would make up little stories in my head. Because of my dancing, I was sporty and my long legs were ideal for running and the high jump. I was always in the middle of my class academically, and only ever came top in needlework and cookery so I guess I was destined to be a housewife. It wasn't that I was thick, I just didn't apply myself. When I failed my eleven plus, which meant I couldn't go to the City High School in Handbridge with my friend Joyce, I was devastated. For the first time I felt the stigma of being labelled 'stupid', something my brother (who'd passed his eleven plus the previous year) took great delight in rubbing in whenever he could.

I was sent to Love Street secondary modern school instead, where my party trick was to do handstands against the wall with my skirt tucked into my knickers. I threw myself into athletics until I was made sports captain and finally felt I'd achieved something. Then, when the rest of my class voted me house captain I decided that I should try harder to live up to the little badge I proudly wore on my lapel, and – with a little application – I came second in the class that year.

Coming home on the bus with all the posh girls from Queen's School and City High, I was painfully aware that my differently coloured uniform defined me as 'not one of them', so I did all I could to blend in. I'd slip off my navy-blue blazer and try not to draw attention to myself. One day, I watched in horror as my father stepped on to the bus in his overalls, his haversack slung over his shoulder. I was sitting halfway down

and shrank into my seat. Dad didn't see me so he sat right at the back, legs apart as always, chatting and laughing with everyone around him in that real working-class Cheshire way of speaking that he had. To my eternal shame, I can remember thinking, Please, don't embarrass me! I still hate myself for that, because the one thing I can't stand is snobbery.

I was thirteen years old when my father began to complain of feeling unwell. He had a bad back and other ailments and used to take all sorts of herbal remedies when the medicines the doctor prescribed didn't work. Unusually, he took time off work but he never seemed to improve, even with bed rest. I think, like us, he assumed that an aching back was something that went with his job. After a year of pain which nothing seemed to ease, he discovered a lump on his neck. Mum, who'd taken on extra cleaning to make ends meet by then, told us a few days later that Dad would need an operation to remove it.

'First of all, though,' she said, 'we're going on holiday!'

I couldn't believe it. We were to spend a week at the Middleton Tower Holiday Camp near Morecambe, Lancashire. Dad was to be admitted for surgery soon after we got back but I didn't worry about his operation in the slightest. All I could think about was our impending break, which was the first proper holiday we'd ever had. The camp was like nothing I had ever seen. Set in sixty acres with nine hundred chalets, its dining rooms and cafeterias could feed three thousand people. The main building, which had a theatre and a dance floor, was modelled on a Cunard cruise ship called the SS *Berengaria*. We were joined by my mum's mother Ada – or 'Nanny' as I called her, who was a traditional cuddly grandmother from Ellesmere Port. Then there was Aunt Bessie, who brought her daughters, my cousins, Barbara, Linda and Janet. My brother Peter, who was sixteen, brought along a couple of friends.

Even though my father wasn't very well he still drew people to him and he and my mother were so lovely on that holiday – like newlyweds. They danced together most nights and I can remember watching them on the dance floor and feeling a little jealous. Later, my lovely dad made sure to dance just with me. Best of all, he won a bingo prize of sixty pounds which more than paid for the holiday. He was so happy.

Soon after we came home, Dad was admitted to Chester City Hospital where he was expected to stay for two weeks. We were planning to visit him one night after school but Mum said there had been a complication and that he needed peace and quiet. 'He'll be home soon,' she told us, sensing our disappointment. I couldn't wait. The house felt so empty without his laughing presence.

The day he was due to be discharged I hurried back from school, excitedly skipping along in front of our row of terraced houses, the gardens of which sloped to the road. As usual, the other mothers were standing by their gates or leaning across their garden fences, chatting to each other as they waited for their children to come home. But on that particular afternoon, something unusual happened. One by one, the women stopped talking, turned, and walked back up their paths without saying hello to me. I remember thinking how strange that was as I danced on by.

Dad wasn't waiting at our garden gate as I'd hoped he might be. Swallowing my disappointment, I ran inside and found my mother in the kitchen. 'Is he home?' I asked breathlessly.

She bent down and took my hands in hers. 'Yes, Pauline, but he's in bed. He's still not very well. Why don't you go up and see if he recognizes you?'

I ran up the stairs two at a time wondering what Mum meant. Of course Daddy would recognize me – he'd only been away two weeks. But

the man lying in my parents' bed hardly even looked like my father. The shock froze me halfway across the room.

'Dad?'

His eyes flickered open and he turned to look at me, but didn't respond. Taking a step forward, I reached for his hand. It lay limply in mine.

'Daddy? It's Pauline.'

He closed his eyes again and I stood stock still, uncertain what to do. If only he'd open them and say, 'Hi, baby.' He often referred to me as 'baby', which I loved.

My mother came into the room and sat on the edge of the bed. 'Something happened during the operation,' she said. Her voice was strange. 'It's left Daddy a bit confused.'

He remained 'confused' for the rest of the day and by evening Mum was so worried that she summoned a doctor, who called an ambulance. I stood silently on the landing as two men manhandled my father past me on a stretcher.

'Where are you taking me?' Dad asked them, his eyes fearful.

'To a lovely hotel, Ernie,' one of the ambulance men replied, giving his colleague a conspiratorial wink.

I was furious. How dare they talk to my father as if he were stupid! I wanted to push them down the stairs and out of the house.

Visiting the hospital over the next few days wasn't at all as I'd imagined it would be. When we got there we had to sit quietly at the side of the bed while Mum gently woke my father. Sometimes he would recognize us but often he didn't. The doctors said he'd suffered a blood clot on the brain during the operation. Only once did he seem to know who I was. He looked at me, turned to my mum and said, 'The baby's too skinny. She's doing too much dancing.'

He never called me baby again.

When Auntie Ivy came up from Southampton with her husband Len and daughter Anne, I knew things were serious. A week later, on 8 July 1953, my father died. We didn't have a telephone but they somehow sent word from the hospital. He had a type of cancer known as Hodgkin's disease, the doctors told my mother, although it didn't really matter that it had a name. His death certificate also cited cerebral haemorrhage as a secondary cause of death.

Dad did come home then, but in a wooden coffin that rested on trestles in the middle of the living room so that friends and family could pay their respects. I was terrified of that open box with the white gauze cloth draped loosely over my father's frozen expression. I was only fourteen years old; I'd never seen a dead body before. The room had a sweet, sickly smell, which I suppose was to mask the formaldehyde. All I knew was that the cloying scent stuck to the back of my throat.

For three days, people came and went. Whenever I was summoned by my mother to say hello to our guests, I would creep in and cling to the walls, walking around the edge of the room and averting my gaze. My mother finally asked me, 'Why won't you look at your father, Pauline?'

I hesitated before whispering, 'I'm frightened.'

Mum sat me down. 'He never hurt you when he was alive,' she told me, 'and he certainly won't hurt you now that he's dead.'

Dad had been a choirboy at St Mary's in Handbridge, so his funeral was held there. Mum bought me a lovely new skirt and top and everyone kept hugging me and creasing it. The church was filled with flowers and people, including fellow Marines and colleagues from the BICC factory where Dad had worked. The vicar, who'd known my father as a

boy, said that he'd been an excellent footballer, a model member of the community and a good family man. My mum was more upset than I had ever seen her and kept dabbing her eyes behind her spectacles with a white lace handkerchief. I didn't know what to do to stop her crying. Peter was as white as a sheet and didn't say a word.

Dad was buried in the family plot at Blacon on the other side of Chester. As I watched clods of earth shovelled on to the lid of his coffin, I thought to myself, Well, he was forty. That's *really* old.

Going home to an empty house felt stranger still. No more coffin; no more sickly smell. People didn't come to pay their respects any more and it was just the three of us with no Dad bursting in from work to put on a record, roll back the carpet and pull my mother or me into a laughing waltz. It was peculiar going back to school without even Peter for company. I was the only child who'd lost a father in my class and that made me feel very different – older, I guess, and more lonely.

My mother had one really good black-and-white photograph of my dad, which she cherished. A few weeks after he died, she took me with her to Will R. Rose's, a famous photographer's studio in Chester. 'I'd like this hand-coloured and enlarged, please,' she told the man behind the counter, handing him the precious photo.

'Certainly, madam,' he said, studying the picture of my smiling dad. 'Tell me, what colour are his eyes?'

My mother faltered. 'He had the most beautiful blue eyes …' she said, trying to hold herself together. After that, she couldn't say another word.