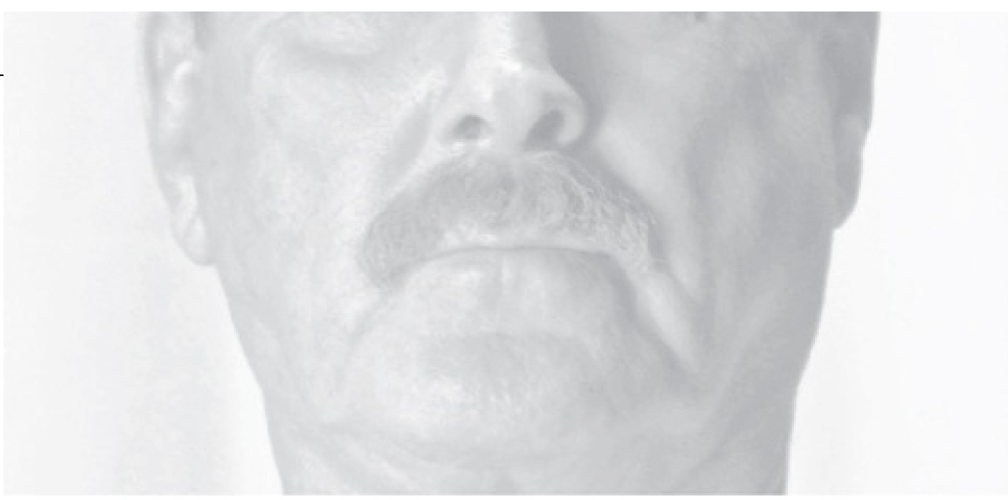
JOHN CLEESE

So, Anyway...



JOHN CLEESE

So, Anyway...

New York

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Published in the United States by Crown Archetype, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Random House LLC, a Penguin Random House Company, New York.
www.crownpublishing.com

Originally published in Great Britain by Random House Books, an imprint of Random House Limited, London.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Cleese, John.
So, anyway… / John Cleese. — First edition.
pages cm
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-385-34825-6 (alk. paper)
1. Cleese, John. 2. Comedians—Great Britain—Biography. 3. Motion picture actors and actresses—Great Britain—Biography. I. Title.
PN2598.C47A3 2014
792.702’8092—dc23
[B] 2014037869

ISBN 978-0-385-34824-9
eBook ISBN 978-0-385-34825-6

Jacket design: Richard Ogle
Jacket photograph: Andy Gotts/Celebrity Pictures

Photograph on this page: Business Wire via Getty Images

v3.1_r4

TO DAD AND FISH

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1

I made my first public appearance on the stairs up to the school nurse's room, at St. Peter
Preparatory School, Weston-super-Mare, Somerset, England, on September 13, 1948. I wa
eight and five-sixths. My audience was a pack of nine-year-olds, who were jeering at me ar
baying, "Chee-eese! Chee-eese!" I kept climbing the steps, despite the feelings of humiliatio
and fear. But above all, I was bewildered. How had I managed to attract so much attentior
What had I done to provoke this aggression? And … how on earth did they know that m
family surname had once been Cheese?

As Matron "Fishy" Findlater gave me the customary new-boy physical examination, I trie
to gather my thoughts. My parents had always warned me to keep away from "nasty roug
boys." What, then, were they doing at a nice school like St. Peter's? And how was I suppose
to avoid them?

Much of my predicament was that I was not just a little boy, but a very tall little boy.
was five foot three, and would pass the six-foot mark before I was twelve. So it was hard
fade away into the background, as I often wished to—particularly later when I'd becom
taller than any of the masters. It didn't help that one of them, Mr. Bartlett, always referred
me as "a prominent citizen."

In addition, as a result of my excessive height, I had "outgrown my strength," and m
physical weakness meant that I was uncoordinated and awkward; so much so that a few yea
later my PE teacher, Captain Lancaster, was to describe me as "six foot of chewed string
Add to that the fact that I had had no previous experience of the feral nature of gangs
young boys, and you will understand why my face bore the expression of an authent
coward as "Fishy" opened the door and coaxed me out towards my second public appearanc

"Don't worry, it's only teasing," she said. What consolation was that? You could have sa
the same at Nuremberg. But at least the chanting had stopped, and now there was
expectant silence as I forced myself down the stairs. Then …

"Are you a Roundhead or a Cavalier?"

"What?"

Faces were thrust at me, each one of them demanding, "Roundhead or Cavalier?" Wh
were they talking about?

Had I understood the question, I would almost certainly have fainted, such a delicate litt
flower was I. (And perhaps I should explain to the more delicately nurtured that I was n
being asked to offer my considered views on the relative merits of the opposing forces in th
English Civil War, but to reveal whether or not I had been circumcised.) However, my fir
day at prep school was not a total failure. By the time I got home I had learned the meanin
of two new words—"pathetic" and "wet"—though I had to find Dad's dictionary to look
"sissy."

Why was I so … ineffectual? Well, let's begin at my beginning. I was born on October 2
1939, in Uphill, a little village south of Weston-super-Mare, and separated from it by th
mere width of a road which led inland from the Weston seafront. My first memory, though,

not of Uphill but of a tree in the village of Brent Knoll, a few miles away, under whose shad
I recall lying, while I looked through its branches to the bright blue sky above. The sunlight
catching the leaves at different angles, so that my eye flickers from one patch of colour to th
next, the verdant foliage displaying a host of verdant hues. (I thought I would try to g
"verdant," "hues" and "foliage" into this paragraph, as my English teachers always believe
that they were signs of creative talent. Though I probably shouldn't have used "verdan
twice.)

Of course, I'm not *sure* it is my first memory; I'm sure I used to *think* it was; and I *like*
think it was, too, because it would make sense, baby me lying in a pram, contented
watching the interplay of the glinting verdant foliage and its beautiful hues.

One thing I do know for certain, though, is that shortly before this incident with the tre
the Germans bombed Weston-super-Mare. I'll just repeat that …

On August 14, 1940, German planes bombed Weston-super-Mare. This is verifiable: it wa
in all the papers. Especially the *Weston Mercury*. Most Westonians were confident the ra
had been a mistake. The Germans were a people famous for their efficiency, so why woul
they drop perfectly good bombs on Weston-super-Mare, when there was nothing in Westo
that a bomb could destroy that could possibly be as valuable as the bomb that destroyed i
That would mean that every explosion would make a tiny dent in the German economy.

The Germans did return, however, and several times, which mystified everyon
Nevertheless I can't help thinking that Westonians actually quite liked being bombed: it gav
them a sense of significance that was otherwise lacking from their lives. But that still leave
the question *why* would the Hun have bothered? Was it just Teutonic *joie de vivre*? Did th
Luftwaffe pilots mistake the Weston seafront for the Western Front? I have heard it qui
seriously put forward by older Westonians that it was done at the behest of William Joyc
the infamous "Lord Haw-Haw," who was hanged as a traitor in 1946 by the British fo
making Nazi propaganda radio broadcasts to Britain during the war. When I asked thes
amateur historians why a man of Irish descent who was born in Brooklyn would have such a
animus against Weston that he would buttonhole Hitler on the matter, they fell silent.
prefer to believe that it was because of a grudge held by Reichsmarschall Hermann Goerin
on account of an unsavoury incident on Weston pier in the 1920s, probably involving No
Coward and Terence Rattigan.

My father's explanation, however, makes the most sense: he said the Germans bombe
Weston to show that they really do have a sense of humour.

Whatever the truth of the matter, two days after that first raid we had moved to a quai
little Somerset village called Brent Knoll. Dad had had quite enough of big bangs during h
four years in the trenches in France, and since he was up to nothing in Weston that was vit
to the war effort, he spent the day after the bombing driving around the countryside nea
Weston until he found a small farmhouse, owned by a Mr. and Mrs. Raffle, who agreed t
take the Cleese family on as paying guests. I love the fact that he didn't *mess around*. W
were out of there! And it was typically smart of him to find a farm, where, at a time of stri
rationing, an egg or a chicken or even a small pig could go missing without attracting to
much attention.

Mother told me once that some Westonians privately criticised Dad for retreating so soo
They apparently felt it would have been more dignified to have waited a week or so befor

running away. I think this view misses the essential point of running away, which is to do the moment the idea has occurred to you. Only an obsessional procrastinator would cr "Let's run for our lives, but not till Wednesday afternoon."

Back to the tree. I revisited the farm many years later, and, just as I thought I remembere there was a huge chestnut tree in the middle of the front lawn, under which I might easi have lain in a pram. In 1940 the farmhouse had been one of a row of houses of medium si strung along a road, with fields opposite; it didn't look very farm-like from the front, b when you walked up the drive and got to the back of the house you saw there was a prop farmyard, with mud and chickens and rusty farm equipment and ferrets in cages and rabbi in wooden hutches.

And it was this location that provides my second memory. (It must come after the fir because in it I am now standing up.) I was bitten by a rabbit.

Or rather, I was nibbled by a rabbit, but, because I was such a weedy, namby-pamby litt pansy, I reacted as though I'd lost a limb. It was the sheer unfairness of it all that so ups me. One minute, I was saying, "Hello, Mr. Bunny!" and smiling at its sweet little face an funny floppy ears. The next, the fucker savaged me. It seemed so gratuitous. What, I aske myself, had I done to the rabbit to deserve this psychotic response?

The more pertinent question, though, is: why was I such a *wuss*? And the obvious answer that it's because I was the only child of older, over-protective parents. I have a memory (N 3) to support this. I'm now about three and am in the Red Cow Inn, the hub and beating hea of Brent Knoll. Somehow I bang my hand, and just before I burst into tears, I hold it up to m father and howl, "Daddy, look! I've hurt my precious thumb!" This, to my astonishment, ge a big laugh. Is my thumb *not* precious, I wonder? Dad certainly thinks it is. When th occasion demands, he always says, "Oh, you've hurt your precious ——— [fill in applicab body part]."

I hesitate to criticise Dad, because what sanity I have I owe to his loving kindness. B there's no doubt that he did pamper me, and such early coddling was one of the reasons embarked on a wussy lifestyle. Throughout my schoolboy days I never felt very manly, strong, or virile, or vigorous, or healthily aggressive. At school I avoided playground "gangs because I didn't understand why anyone would want to behave like that. I loved ball game but was always appalled at how rough, for example, rugby looked, even at the safe distance kept while pretending to play it. When I was seventeen, my assistant Clifton Colle housemaster, Alec MacDonald, finally took me to task for funking tackles. Describing m efforts as "dancing around like a disabled fairy," he ordered me to watch while he gave demonstration of how to tackle properly. He asked a member of the first XV, Tony Rogers, run at him. He closed in on Rogers, and then went in hard, just as Rogers tried to sidest him. The result was that the top of Mr. MacDonald's head came into sharp contact wi Rogers' right hip. Mr. MacDonald was unavailable for teaching later that afternoon; indeed did not reappear for forty-eight hours. When he did, I was too cowardly to remind him th he had specifically told me that "if you go in hard, you never get hurt." So when I s international rugby teams lumbering out at Twickenham, I look at them with awe, but al with a sense of being genetically disconnected from them. I was not born to be butch, and have accepted my innate unmanliness without complaint. Besides, it seems to me th cowards very seldom cause trouble, which is probably why there is a history of them bei

shot by people who do.[1]

None of this, incidentally, is to say that my infant wussiness was in any way admirable. B while I was undeniably a gutless little weed there was an upside: at least I didn't display th habitual mindless aggression of some young males. Better a wuss than a psycho, I say, and am proud that I have never been able to force myself to watch cage fighting.

If part of my weedy outlook on life came from my father's pampering, a fair proportio was down to my complicated relationship with my mother. And in this context another earl memory comes to mind. I am lying in bed, falling asleep, when a noise causes me to turn an see shadows moving on the half-open door of my bedroom. They are shadows of my paren fighting. Dad has been coming into my room and Mum has started attacking him, pummellin him with a flurry of blows which he is trying to fend off. There is no sound—I sense they ar both trying not to wake me—and the memory has no emotion attached, although it is ver clear. Just the shadows which last a few seconds and then … silence. As I write this, m throat tightens a little. The level of violence I'm describing is low: there are no shillelaghs o chainsaws here, just lower-middle-class fisticuffs, with no prospect of Grievous Bodily Harm as English law calls it. Nevertheless, my beloved dad, a kind and decent person, is bein attacked by this unknowable creature who is widely rumoured to be my mother.

Young children have so little life experience that they inevitably assume that what happen around and to them is the norm. I remember that when my daughter Cynthia was very youn she was surprised to discover that some of her friends' fathers did not work in television. S it would have been hard for me to describe my relationship with my mother as problemat because I had no idea what the word "motherly" conveyed to most people. Dad onc described to me how, during the First World War, he had witnessed a wounded soldier lyin in a trench and crying out for his mother. "Why on earth would he cry for her?" I wondere When, over the years, I began to hear friends tell me that their mother was their best frien someone with whom they routinely discussed their daily life, and to whom they looked fo emotional support, I simply thought, "How wonderful that must be …"

Please do not think that I am loftily labelling her a "bad mother." In many ways she was good mother; sometimes a very good mother. In all day-to-day matters she was extremel diligent: preparing good meals, making sure I was properly clothed and shod and warm an dry, keeping the house neat and clean, and fiercely protective of me. Under light hypnosis, once recalled a German air raid, with the sound of the bombers not far away, and Moth throwing herself on top of me, under a big kitchen table. If it was a false memory, it's st what she would have done.

From a practical point of view, then, she was impeccable. But she was also self-obsess and anxious, and that could make life with her very uncomfortable indeed.

Mother (left) and me.

A clue to her self-obsession, I always felt, was her extraordinary lack of general knowledg On one of her visits to London in the late ’80s, a salad was prepared for lunch whic contained quails’ eggs. She asked what kind of eggs they were and I explained that they wer moles’ eggs, and that when we wanted them, we would go up to Hampstead Heath very ear in the morning, as moles laid them at the entrance to their burrows during the night, colle the eggs and make sure we ate them the same day before they had time to hatch. She listene with great attention, as my family’s jaws sagged, and said she thought them “delicious.” Lat that day she caught a mention of Mary, Queen of Scots. She recognised the name and aske me who this was. With my family listening, I pushed the envelope a little, telling her th Mary was a champion Glaswegian darts player who had been killed in the Blitz. “What shame,” she said.

I was being a bit naughty, of course, but I also wanted to prove to my family the truth of comment I had made earlier about Mother, which they had not accepted on first hearing. had told them that *she had no information about anything that was not going to affect her li directly in the immediate future;* and that consequently she possessed no general knowledge- and when I said no general knowledge, I didn’t mean very, very little. Naturally they ha thought I was exaggerating.

And the reason for this was not that she was unintelligent, but that she lived her life such a constant state of high anxiety, bordering on incipient panic, that she could focus on on the things that might *directly affect* her. So it goes without saying that she suffered from a the usual phobias, along with a few special ones (like albinos and people wearing ey patches). But she also cast her net wider. In fact, I used to joke that she suffered fro omniphobia—you name it, she had a morbid dread of it. It’s true that I never saw he alarmed by a loaf of bread or a cardigan or even a chair, but anything above medium si that could move around a bit was a hazard, and any reasonably loud sound startled he beyond reason. I once compiled a list of events that frightened her, and it was qui

comprehensive: very loud snoring; low-flying aircraft; church bells; fire engines; trains; buse and lorries; thunder; shouting; large cars; most medium-sized cars; noisy small cars; burgla alarms; fireworks, especially crackers; loud radios; barking dogs; whinnying horses; nearb silent horses; cows in general; megaphones; sheep; corks coming out of sparkling wir bottles; motorcycles, even very small ones; balloons being popped; vacuum cleaners (no being used by her); things being dropped; dinner gongs; parrot houses; whoopee cushion chiming doorbells; hammering; bombs; hooters; old-fashioned alarm clocks; pneumatic drill and hairdryers (even those used by her).

In a nutshell, Mother experienced the cosmos as a vast, limitless booby trap.

Consequently, it was never possible for her really to relax, except perhaps for the time when she sat on the sofa knitting while Dad and I watched television. But even then she wa active, knitting away against time. I noticed years ago that when people (myself definite included) are anxious they tend to busy themselves with irrelevant activities, because thes distract from and therefore reduce their actual experience of anxiety. To stay perfectly still to feel the fear at its maximum intensity, so instead you scuttle around doing things as thoug you are, in some mysterious way, short of time. But although Mother kept herself busy countless and pointless ways, it did not alleviate her worrying: her pervading sense that sh was keeping nameless disasters at bay only by incessantly anticipating them, and that on moment's lapse in this vigilance would bring them hurtling towards her. I once proposed Dad that we should purchase a large hamster wheel for her, so that she would find it easy remain active all day, instead of having continually to invent non-essential activities lik polishing cans of peas, or stacking cups, or sewing borders on handkerchiefs, or boilin knitting needles, or weeding the carpet.

Her own approach was to write her worries down on a piece of paper, so that there was n chance she would forget one, thus unleashing it. After Dad died, I would drive down Weston to visit her and she would greet me with a cup of coffee and a very long list o worries which she had been compiling during the previous weeks, and we would sit dow and discuss each worry in turn at some length: what it was about, and why it mattered, an how likely it was to happen, and what she could do to forestall it, and what we could do if did actually happen, and whether we would know what to do if it didn't … and after we processed six or so, she'd make me another cup of coffee and we would continue working ti bedtime. And if we hadn't got through them all by then, we'd leave the rest for breakfast. took me decades to realise that it was not the analysing of her worries that eased them; was the continuous contact with another person that gradually calmed her.

Why Mother should have been quite so anxious I simply don't know, but the net effect wa to make her difficult. Actually, "difficult" is not quite fair. There was only one thing that sh wanted. Just one. But that one thing was her own way. And if she didn't get it, that upset he And she was prettily easily upset; in fact I think it's fair to say she had a real facility for i and when something did upset her—and there was a *very* limited supply of things that, in th final analysis, didn't—she would throw a tantrum, or several tantra, of such inconceivab volume and activity that there must have been times when Dad yearned for the relativ tranquillity of the trenches in France.

But Mother would never have seen herself as a tyrant: her trick was to rule throug weakness. Whereas Dad might *prefer* to sleep with a window open, Mother *had* to have

shut, because she *just couldn't cope* with the alternative. Sadly, there was no choice, s negotiation was never an option, although Dad once confided to me that she had been muc more flexible before they'd got married.

It was only in later years that I began to see just how alarmed Dad really was by th tantrums. While he talked occasionally about the need "to keep the little woman on an eve keel," his faux-amused casualness was intended to conceal his fear, for when Mother lost he temper, she really lost it: her rage filled her skin until there was no room left for the rest o her personality, which had to move over till things calmed down a bit. The phrase "besic oneself with anger" could have been coined in Weston-super-Mare.

Mother could be quite charming and bright and amusing, but that was when we ha visitors. Once they had gone, her sociability began to fade. This meant that there was near always tension in the Cleese household because when mother was not actually angry it wa only because she was not angry *yet*. Dad and I knew that the slightest thing—almost anythin —would set her off, so constant placatory behaviour was the name of the game.

It cannot be coincidence that I spent such a large part of my life in some form of therap and that the vast majority of the problems I was dealing with involved relationships wi women. And my ingrained habit of walking on eggshells when coping with my mothe dominated my romantic liaisons for many years. Until it began to fade, women found m very dull. My own unique cocktail of over-politeness, unending solicitude and the fear o stirring controversy rendered me utterly unsexy. Very, very nice men are no fun. I onc wrote a sketch based on my younger self (for the 1968 show *How to Irritate People*), in whic I tried to show just how infuriating this desire to be inoffensive can be:

> JOHN CLEESE: I'm afraid I'm not very good company tonight.
>
> CONNIE BOOTH: No, it's me. I'm on edge.
>
> JC: No, no, no, you are marvellous, really super! It's me.
>
> CB: Look, let's forget it.
>
> JC: I'm not good company.
>
> CB: You are.
>
> JC: I'm not. I've been fussing you.
>
> CB: It's all right.
>
> JC: I have been fussing you. It's my own fault, you told me last time about fussing you too much.
>
> CB: Please!
>
> JC: Look, am I fussing you too much?
>
> CB: A bit.

Although there was little real emotional communication between us, my mother and I ha our moments of closeness, almost all of them when we laughed together. She had quite sharp sense of humour—and as I got older I discovered to my surprise that she also laughe at jokes that were rather dark, if not quite black. I remember on one occasion listening to he as she methodically itemised all the reasons why she didn't want to go on living, while experienced my usual sense of glum failure at my powerlessness to help. Then I heard myse say, "Mother, I have an idea."

"Oh? What's that?"

"I know a little man who lives in Fulham, and if you're still feeling this way next week, could have a word with him if you like—but only if you like—and he can come down Weston and kill you."

Silence.

"Oh God, I've gone too far," I thought. And then she cackled with laughter. I don't think ever loved her as much as I did at that moment.

SO, ANYWAY ... there we were in the Raffles' house, pretty safe from German bombs, with ringside view of a Somerset farmer's life, milking cows and fattening pigs and executi chickens. It was a very small farm, and the only surprising thing was that Mr. and Mrs. Raff didn't speak English. I don't mean that they spoke another language; they didn't spea anything that could be recognised as a language. They clearly understood each other's noise though, and we sensed that while they didn't like each other much, their limited vocabulari precluded unnecessary disagreements. How Dad negotiated our rent with Mr. Raffle I don know. He probably used pebbles, although it's possible that the Raffles' young son, who wa picking up some English at kindergarten, acted as interpreter.

Mr. Raffle owned two sheepdogs, so it was a bit of a surprise when we discovered that h had no sheep. Dad thought he kept the dogs so that people would think he owned shee Mother thought they might be cowdogs. I liked them—they were friendlier than the rabbit although they did spend a lot of time staring into the rabbit hutches. As for the rabbits, I'v never worked out why the Raffles actually bothered to keep any, since they had ferrets catch them in the wild. I can only assume that, having caught them, they liked to keep the fresh and close by until a quick snack beckoned. That could explain why my attacker sank i fangs into me: it was not going to go quietly.

Sadly, just as I was beginning to name all the animals, and to get to know the little villag of Brent Knoll, the Cleese family moved to Devon, to a little cottage in Totnes. Then, for n apparent reason, we moved back to the Raffles', then back to Devon (to Horrabridge, where saw a spider so big I could hear its footsteps), then back to Brent Knoll, and the immediately after VE Day, to Burnham-on-Sea, where we lived in three different houses three years, before arriving in Weston-super-Mare (again) in 1948 so that I could attend S Peter's Preparatory School. In all, we moved eight times in my first eight years.

I was too young to be part of a discussion on the subject, so I can only guess why w moved so often. From a practical point of view, constant relocation caused few problem because it never involved Dad having to change jobs. As an agent (or salesman) with th Guardian Assurance Company, he had been assigned a territory in the West Country which h drove around, selling mainly life insurance, but also a lot of Storm and Tempest cover farmers. Because he was known to be such a decent chap, a lot of the life insurance came him via personal recommendations from Somerset bank managers and solicitors: they kne he was competent and honest, and would not try to sell their clients more cover than the needed. This meant he always sold more life insurance than any of the other Guardian agent

but in a rather leisurely way, never driving off before 9:30 a.m., nor returning after 4:3 p.m. His secret was that, because of his contacts, he never needed to make "cold calls"; ar provided he lived in the middle of Somerset, it didn't much matter where, as the distanc were so small.

If the demands of Dad's job don't explain the constant moves, his worries about mone might. As an insurance agent, his earnings peaked at £30 a week in the early '50s. Given th miners and most footballers got £10, it was not a bad salary and I certainly never sensed th we lacked for anything. Moreover the Cleese family never contemplated buying "expensiv things." They weren't on our radar. For example, it literally never occurred to me that w might go abroad for our holidays; or that we might buy a car that was new; or that we wou have anything for our Christmas lunch other than chicken.

Father (right) with small child.

Nevertheless such outlandish thoughts must have occurred to my father, who was kind ar generous and would have loved to have provided us with a more gracious lifestyle of the kir he had enjoyed while working in India, Hong Kong and China in the early '20s. £1,500 p annum, however, didn't stretch very far, and although he hid his financial anxieties very we I did begin to notice that, now and then, he'd go out of his way to save money on a purchas Mother noticed, too, and we would look at each other as he extolled "surprising inexpensive" stylish Yugoslavian sports jackets, or top-class Libyan shoes, or premier quali Albanian ham that he had bought knowing full well that they would soon lose shape, or prov unwearable, or taste very odd indeed. It's not unreasonable to assume, therefore, that mo of our moves were motivated by the hallucination that they would help cut costs.

But they may also have had an unintended side effect. Research has shown that constar relocation in childhood is often associated with creativity. It seems that the creative impul is sparked by the need to reconcile contrasting views of the world. If you move home, yo start living a slightly different life, so you compare it with your previous life, note th

divergences and the similarities, see what you like better and what you miss, and as you d
so, your mind becomes more flexible and capable of combining thoughts and ideas in ne
and fresh ways. There's also another way creativity can develop: if important people in you
life, especially parents, have different ways of viewing the world, you find yourself trying t
understand what they have in common, and how they contrast, in an attempt to make sens
of their conflicting views. On the other hand, if your parents have a harmonious relationshi
and you grow up in one place where people share the same attitudes as those around then
you are unlikely to be innovative, or even to want to be. I doubt whether there's a speci
creativity faculty at Iowa State University.

So, creatively, I was doubly blessed: constant relocation *and* parental disharmony. Add t
these two gifts the well-established fact that many of the world's greatest geniuses, bo
artistic and scientific, have been the product of serious maternal deprivation, and I am force
to the conclusion that if only my mother had been just a little more emotionally inadequate,
could have been HUGE. I could have been musically gifted, and talented in the visual art
and an outstanding dancer, and an inventor, and a published poet, instead of being goo
within very limited parameters, at writing and acting comedy. Oh well.

Despite these early years spent charging around the West Country, I have only a fe
scattered memories other than the Raffles' farm and the Horrabridge spider. I remember, fo
example, being out on a walk with Dad, and hearing a rumbling sound, and looking up an
seeing the sky fill with large planes, flying towards the Continent. This was one of ou
daytime raids, Dad explained. We were winning the war so we didn't have to fly at night an
more. Once, Dad and I talked to a nice young American airman who let me get up into h
Jeep, where I scraped my precious ankle. On another occasion Dad drove us to the hil
behind Weston, where we looked at a German plane that had crashed in a field. It wa
smaller than I expected. There were lots of sightseers, but they were very quiet.

Best of all were the Sundays when Dad would take me to Brent Knoll railway station. Her
we were allowed up into the signal box, and the signalman would let me move the big leve
that changed the points. Then we would go down on to the platform where there would be
huge wickerwork hamper full of racing pigeons, and the stationmaster would let me open th
lid wide, and the pigeons would fly up and away, in a tightly knit flock, high into the sky
where they would circle round and round three times—always three times—before headin
north to their homes in Widnes and Warrington and Wigan. It was the most exciting an
beautiful experience.

The only direct effect the war had on our lives came when my parents received news tha
our furniture had been destroyed. The day we first moved to the Raffles', my parents ha
moved it into storage in a warehouse owned by Lalonde's, the well-known Westonia
auctioneers, and now an incendiary bomb had overcooked it. It wasn't very posh furniture, o
course, and in a way the Bosch did us a favour, because now we could move house with muc
greater ease, passing between various kinds of furnished accommodation unencumbered b
very much in the way of belongings.

I notice that a lot of my early memories are connected with the war, but this is simpl
because such moments stood out so starkly from my normal, everyday experience. Month
passed in the Somerset and Devon countryside without my being even vaguely aware of th
conflict. In fact, I now realise how glad I am that I grew up in small West Country village

surrounded by verdant foliage and emerald hues. I associate all this with a kind of qui contentment, of effortless, calm mindfulness that I can seldom recapture in cities. Readin years ago what the psychologist Abraham Maslow had to say about “peak experiences,” recognised that these moments nearly always occur in repose, and in my case are neve connected with work. Wordsworth wrote of his favourite flowers:

> For oft, when on my couch I lie
>
> In vacant or in pensive mood,
>
> They flash upon that inward eye
>
> Which is the bliss of solitude;
>
> And then my heart with pleasure fills
>
> And dances with the chrysanthemums.

When I recall moments of perfect, timeless happiness they include: sitting in a deckchair the garden of my house in Holland Park, gazing at two Burmese kittens doing cabare looking at Vermeer’s painting of Delft in The Hague, and allowing it to affect me; playin with a baby kangaroo in Sydney; listening to John Williams playing the guitar; cruising dow the middle Rhine, sipping Moselle; eating fish and chips with my wife at Geale’s two nigh ago; or lying on the grass in the sun, and having my “inward” eye conjure up images of Dic Cheney being waterboarded. Again, none of them seem to be connected with work o indeed, any kind of striving. Explain that to Terry Gilliam.

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[1] The most perceptive definition of a coward is Ambrose Bierce’s: “One who in a perilous emergency thinks with his leg This trait seems to me such a wise response to danger that it explains why generals want cowards dead; if they weren’t, t concept of just plain running away would catch on so fast that the top brass would be out of a job overnight—or at lea would have to do some fighting themselves, which is not part of their job description.

2

My last recollection of the Brent Knoll era is of being visited by a rather short, quiet ar elderly man called John Cheese. He was my dad's dad, and enjoyed a reputation for being th white sheep of his family: apparently he had disapproved so strongly of his father ar brothers that he had left home as soon as he was able, and moved miles away to Bristol t dissociate himself from them. Quite what his family got up to was never spoken of. I believ they were bakers, but that may have been a cover story they used to allow them to be up a hours of the night.

My grandfather must have been in his seventies when I first met him. In those days th was a considerable age and I remember him walking rather slowly with the aid of a stick a he, Mother and I made our way along the Somerset lanes. He was a very formal man- restrained and careful and sedate—though he exuded a kind and gentle air. In fact he looke just like Doctor Dolittle and although I liked being around him, and recall how courteous h and Dad were to each other, I don't remember having much actual fun with him. He had or little joke in his repertoire: he would tell of a pet peacock that flew over the wall into neighbour's garden and laid an egg. Did the egg belong to the peacock's owner or th neighbour? When we'd guessed he would remind us that pea*cocks* didn't lay eggs. This wa not exactly end-of-the-pier, knockabout stuff, and so it did not really surprise me when learned later that he had passed his whole working life as a clerk in a legal firm.

Grandpa was my only surviving grandparent. My mum's mother had died many yea before. Judging from photographs of her she was an elderly, rather ethereal version o Virginia Woolf. Her husband, Marwood Cross, on the other hand, was about as wraithlike a a warthog: a squat, short-tempered, assertive, graceless little man who in his time wa apparently, one of the most celebrated auctioneers in Weston-super-Mare. (Westonian habitually used inflated language to describe each other: doctors' names were spoken with hushed reverence; surgeons and architects were invariably "eminent"; lawye "distinguished"; businessmen "influential"; firms "prestigious"; schoolmasters "respected and tobacconists "renowned.") Well, there were half a dozen auctioneers in Weston, and the were all prominent, notable and self-impressed. When my parents chose my Christian name they took John from Grandpa, and Marwood from this other oaf. Mother told me that in th future when people asked my name, and I said, "John Marwood Cleese," they would loo surprised and say, "Oh! Are you by any chance related to Marwood Cross, the auctioneer' Here's a multiple choice question for you, dear reader: how many times has this actual happened to me during my seven-plus decades on the planet? (a) 5,000 times, (b) Twice, (Never.

Marwood Cross was a celebrated, red-faced bully who ran a tight ship. When the table wa laid for meals, a cane was placed by his cutlery, so that he could swat any of his children their table manners faltered. He was also an eminent coward: when a burglar was onc diagnosed in the basement, he appeared on the balcony outside his second-floor bedroon ringing a handbell, and ordering his children and the maid to go and investigate. His ma

form of entertainment was writing poison-pen letters, which he would get my father to po
from unlikely Somerset villages which he happened to pass through in the course of his que
to sell insurance policies. Marwood was also a past master of the art of auctioneering. If h
fancied the look of anything he'd been asked to auction, he'd knock it down quickly to a
imaginary buyer before the bidding got going, snaffling his prey at a cut-throat price whi
maintaining his reputation as a pillar of the community. I'd like to apologise publicly for th
fact that some of his genes are present in my body. They will be hunted down when th
technology is available.

Marwood Cross, eminent auctioneer.

The final missing grandparent was my dad's mother. She had died in the early '20s, and
know almost nothing about her. This, I now realise, is because her death upset Dad so muc
that even many years later he never talked about her. I discovered this quite by chanc
When I was about fourteen or so, I was rummaging through a tiny, ancient suitcase th
contained all his old family papers, and I found a letter that she had written to him ju
before she died. When I showed it to Dad, a strange look flashed across his face, and he to
me he had not read it again since he had first received it. He opened it and after a fe
seconds started to sob. It was the only time I saw Dad cry. Later he told me that his tea
were not just for her loss, but because he had always felt a terrible guilt that he had bee
away in India and the Far East during the last four years of her life. Communication an
travel were so slow in those days that he wasn't able to get back in time to say goodbye. H
believed that he had let her down; that, in some strange way, she might have felt abandone
by him. He showed me the last page of this, her final letter to him, and how her signatu
trailed away towards the bottom of the page, a long, thin straggly line, which he interprete

as her "giving up." I was able, even at that young age, to realise that he had been carryin
this sorrow inside him for nearly thirty years, and that this was the reason he and Moth
never mentioned my grandmother's name.

Strange assortment of Brent Knoll folk, with Grandpa Cheese at far right, Mother (with squared shoulders), and me (with blunt implement).

Not only did I never see Dad cry again, I never heard him raise his voice in anger, nor utt the word "fuck." This is because he was a gentleman in the best sense of the word: not b breeding, of course, but by acquisition of a way of behaving that was based on a set of valu he admired, those of the "English gentleman." During his time in the army, and after that India and the Far East, he was able to watch some of the finest of this species, and was s impressed by their qualities of courtesy, kindliness, modesty, light-heartedness, courag honesty, and a constant reluctance to burden others with their problems or difficulties, th he tried to model himself on what he observed.

But when he was born in Bristol, in 1893, all this lay in the future because his family w distinctly lower-middle-class. Young Reggie attended a Catholic school called St. Brendan College, not because the Cheeses were Catholic, but because the headmaster was one of h father's best friends. He had a good, quick intelligence but no academic interests whatsoeve and so he left school early and took a job in an insurance office. One of his most endearin traits was his utter lack of ambition, which goes a long way to explain why he remained insurance for the rest of his life. Another reason was that he was very good with figures, an could do quite complicated sums in his head. This came so naturally to him that he had falle out with his St. Brendan's maths teacher, who insisted that he should "show his workings Reggie didn't see the point.

I'm sure Dad was a useful clerk during the next few years. Given his facility wi arithmetic, his excellent manners and his astute understanding of people, he was bound have been. Moreover it was not in his nature to take pay without giving full value for it. B

he was able to combine conscientiousness with light-heartedness. The life he led, full of th
japes, pranks and put-ons that he and his pals perpetrated, sounded just like the one describe
in his favourite book, *Three Men in a Boat*. He and his friends even played tricks on visitors t
the insurance office, coating a walking stick with treacle, for example, so that helpful peop
who picked it up to hand over to them would get sticky hands. Outside the office they wer
more boisterous, but never mean or the slightest bit violent. Weston, as the nearest seasid
resort, was often the setting for their antics. They would take donkey rides, set off i
different directions and then leave the donkeys in people's gardens to eat the flowers. Thei
most spectacular caper involved removing several small plucked chickens from a butcher
shop, smuggling them into the balcony at the Winter Gardens, and then, on a cue, launchin
them all high into the air so that they descended on to the orchestra that was playing whi
gentlefolk were taking afternoon tea.

Dad lived at home with his parents until he was twenty-two. With the outbreak of the Fir
World War in the late summer of 1914, he tried to sign up, but failed the medical because h
couldn't read the fourth line down on the optician's chart. Later in the war the army becam
less picky, but before that happened he volunteered again. This time he asked the man i
front of him in the queue to memorise the line he couldn't read, and to tell him what it wa
on the way out. The subterfuge allowed him to join the carnage in France, albeit under a
assumed name; he was fed up with being teased that he was a fermented curd, so he change
the "h" to an "l." I never understood what he was hoping to achieve; I was always calle
"Cheese" from the moment I arrived at a school. Perhaps his regiment, the Gloucester
lacked the imagination to make the connection.

After he finished his training, he was made a second lieutenant, the lowest commissione
rank in the army hierarchy. He never knew why he was chosen to be an officer, but assume
it was because he spoke grammatical English. Arriving in France in 1915, he was, withi
weeks, wounded in the back and shoulders by shrapnel (the scars were still visible thirty-od
years later). So he wrote a letter of resignation to his commanding officer (the army was
very gentlemanly affair in those days), returned to England and convalesced. Once th
wounds had healed, he enlisted again, this time as a private. A shouting match ensued whe
the army discovered that he had previously served as an officer, but they eventually calme
down and agreed to let him return to France as a mere lance-corporal. I always thought th
was a loveably eccentric act on Dad's part, typical of his lack of interest in care
advancement, until I discovered years later that the life expectancy of a junior officer on th
Western Front at that time was … *six weeks*. Because when an officer led his men over th
top, the Germans looked for the man with a revolver and a whistle, and shot him first.

When, as a young boy immediately after the Second World War, I used to accompany Da
in the car on some of his insurance trips, he would tell me not only stories from his wa
years, but also funny and fascinating tales of what happened to him next. Apparently whe
the Armistice was signed in 1918, his commanding officer asked him what he was going to d
now that the war was over. He said that he planned to return to Bristol and carry on sellin
insurance. "No! No!" cried the colonel. "You must go and see the Empire, young man!" an
promptly wrote Dad a couple of letters of introduction and recommendation. Just a fe
weeks later, therefore, Dad found himself on a boat bound for Bombay where, thanks to th
colonel's contacts, he had secured a job selling marine insurance with a big British compan

called the Union of Canton. And now he began to live quite a posh life. He was no longer a insurance salesman: he was a marine underwriter; and because he looked very presentab and had the right accent and excellent manners and was witty and amusing, he began mixin with middle-middle-class people from “good” public schools, and even occasionally with som real toffs, many of whom proved to be friendly and good-natured and cultivated. Mind yo these folk had a lot to be good-natured about: they lived like micro-princes. When Dad foun a house to share, he discovered that there were fourteen servants attached to it; when h suggested reducing this extraordinary number, the Indians explained, with great charm an regret, that he was not allowed to do this: it was his duty as an English gentleman to emplo at least that number.

The fellow Dad found himself sharing with was called Wodehouse, and he turned out to b a brother of the great PG. Dad thought him immensely likeable: charming, wonderful companionable and considerate, but, oddly, seemingly without any sense of humour. Wh was even odder, though, was the degree of Wodehouse’s naivety. Like Dad he was in his mi twenties, but it was only when visiting a doctor in Bombay that he discovered that h foreskin was retractable. It’s hard to credit that a chap could get through a couple of decad without stumbling upon this fact (about a part of one’s body of considerable interest to mo males) but I think it throws light on PG’s status as a great comic writer. If his brother was a naive as this, is it possible that PG himself lacked a certain degree of worldliness, of th everyday experience of the average man-about-town, of actual, ordinary *savoir faire*? And so, is it possible that this very ingenuousness is connected with the rather simplifie psychology of PG’s characters, which forces me to regard him as a *very good* comic write rather than a *great* one?

Not that I have anything against naivety itself: every single person I really like has a degre of it, and the people I detest the most are know-it-alls, but there is a point at the far end o the naivety continuum where it becomes indistinguishable from ordinary common-or-garde brainlessness. The question that must be faced is: is it more likely that a man would make Nazi propaganda broadcast BY MISTAKE—as PG claimed he did—if he shared genes wi someone who was unaware that his foreskin was retractable? To this, I believe that th answer is a resounding “Yes!”

All in all, Dad had a wonderful time in India (not least because he was not present whe Wodehouse made his discovery), and he always talked of the Indians in tones of tot affection. But there’s no doubt that it was very much a colonial, master-servant relationshi Dad spoke some Hindi, but he once admitted that the only part of a Hindi verb that he eve knew was the imperative. He and his pals were a high-spirited lot—scarcely surprising give the horrendous war they had just endured. (To put this in perspective, it has been claime that more damage was done to buildings in Cambridge on Guy Fawkes Night of 1945 b boisterous undergraduates recently returned from fighting in Europe, than was achieved b German bombers during the whole of the Second World War.) They had a tendency therefore, to behave the way rugby teams traditionally do on Saturday nights. As a rule the were rowdy and naughty rather than nasty, but Dad did recall an occasion when things wer a bit further. Apparently a Welsh friend called Davies invited him for a drive one Sunda afternoon in his open car, and Dad was surprised, as he climbed into the back seat behind th chauffeur, to find a small pile of bricks there. He pointed them out to Davies, who said h

would explain what they were for in due course. Ten minutes later Davies picked one up an lobbed it through the front window of a shop they were passing. The Indian chauffeur foun this as amusing as his employer. Dad was astonished, but reflected that at least it was Sunday and the shop was shut.

Dad's misbehaviour was relatively low-key. He kept a letter, which he treasured, from famous Bombay hotel, barring him from entering its precincts again, and listing at length h various pranks, involving butter dishes, and trays of that classic Anglo-Indian dish kedgere and the launching of other edible projectiles. But, once he became a member of the Roy Bombay Yacht Club, I suspect his conduct improved: he relished mixing with real liv gentlemen, and I can see now that his admiration of them also involved studying the demeanour and habits, and mimicking them. And in due course, teaching some of it to m "Never look startled, my boy. Move slowly. If somebody drops something, and you want look, wait a few seconds, and then turn round in a leisurely way, and glance. Don't stare."

The only blight on Dad's sojourn in India was that he caught malaria, which was to affli him for years to come. When an attack came, all he could do was to retreat to his bed fo several days, trembling and sweating, teeth chattering, feeling so weak he could do nothin but stay there, patiently losing weight.

After three years in India the Union of Canton transferred him to their Hong Kong offic and shortly afterwards he was re-transferred to their main office in Canton. Outside th British Empire for the first time, he saw things that made Bombay look like Cheltenham. H visited an opium den; he got tattoos; and he ate a dog. (I'll rephrase that: he ate a deliciou dish, which he subsequently discovered was "dog.") He also had a clerk working for hi whom he much liked. A Chinese chap who spoke excellent English and was charming an highly competent. One day, however, he did not turn up at the office. Inquiries were mad and it turned out he was in jail. Dad (typically) went straight to the prison and asked to se the governor, who greeted him most courteously and explained that his clerk had been foun guilty of "illegal political activities." Dad asked how long he would be in prison. Th governor said, "I am afraid we are executing him in the morning."

I used to think it was extraordinary that shortly after this, Dad was to be found back Weston-super-Mare. Had he also been engaged in illegal political activities? Was he feelin bad about the dog? (Apparently it was truly scrumptious, so he could have been removin himself from further temptation.) Or was he just tired of excitement? Actually, the answ was simple: malaria. The attacks had weakened him and he was worried that unless h removed himself to cooler climes, he might kick the bucket. As it was, by the time he g back to Blighty, his weight was down to around eleven ounces, which is not much for a ma of six feet: he was the standard "bag of bones." The attacks continued for several years befo they started to peter out; meanwhile he was one of the few in Weston on quinine.

But first he went down to Bristol to visit his father, whom he'd not seen for five years, an stayed there to recuperate while his spinster sister, Dorothy, looked after him. They we very fond of each other and spent a lot of time together, engrossed in their common interes smoking. Dad had formed a habit of forty a day (untipped) and Dorothy matched him, stu for stub. Despite this, he slowly regained his health, and started making excursions to th nearest seaside town, which happened to be dear old Weston-super-Mare. While visiting, h bumped into Mother, they started walking out together, despite Marwood demanding sh

should be home by ten o’clock (she was twenty-six), and fell in love. Within just a fe
months they decided to get married.

My parents, not planning to have a child.

And—here’s the romantic bit—they eloped!

They had to. They came from families of different social class, and there was no way th
Marwood Cross was going to give his blessing to a wedding between his daughter and
commoner. Well, not *a* commoner exactly, just someone commoner. The gap in statu
between Muriel Cross and this dubious tattooed proletarian lounge lizard was unbridgeabl
You see, Dad came from, at best, the middle-lower-middle class; to be exact, he was middl
middle-lower-middle class. Whereas Muriel Cross came from the great auctioneering house
Marwood Cross, who were *almost* middle-middle class; their lowest possible soci
classification was upper-upper-lower-middle class. And so far as Marwood was concerned,
morganatic arrangement was out of the question.

So Dad and Mum eloped to London, to the far-off, urbane, cosmopolitan, liberal-minde
heart of the British Empire, where nobody gave a solitary hoot for an inflated, half-witte
provincial auctioneer with his head up his upper-upper-lower-middle-class arse.

Freedom! In Golders Green, where for two years they lived happily, and Dad acquired
many Jewish friends that he picked up a surprising amount of Yiddish. These fellows too
great pleasure in introducing Dad to their unsuspecting friends, just to see the expression
their faces when this unmistakable goy launched into a volley of Central European demotic.
think Dad was secretly proud of his Jewish connections; in an age when there was so muc
prejudice, he did what he could to work against it, although he was prepared (with Mothe
to make an exception of the Welsh. This is a well-established West Country trait, and rootin
it out will take many generations, I fear.

But then … destiny moved against them. A reconciliation took place with Marwood Cros and so, inevitably … they moved back to Weston-super-Mare, and lived there, reasonab happily at least, until I arrived (also in Weston) in October 1939, a mere thirteen years aft their wedding. It seems that in the world of the Cleeses, all roads lead to Weston-fuckin super-fucking-Mare.

By the time Dad was regaling me with his memories of India, though, we had taken u residence in a small seaside town called Burnham-on-Sea, a few miles down the coast fro Weston. (Burnham plays an important part in British history, because it was here that a be killed Viscount Montgomery of El Alamein's first wife. Monty loved her very much, and ha she survived the sting, he might have settled down to a happy retirement. As it was he we off to North Africa to defeat Rommel.) And the reason for the move to Burnham—assumi there was one—was to allow me, at the age of six, to start at a proper school.

The problem was that my parents picked a real stinker. My recollections of it seem to com straight out of Dickens: two large rather dark rooms illuminated by a fire, with fifteen or s children, all older than me, working in small groups, supervised by a solitary, curt, menaci old crone, who seemed to assume that I should know what I was supposed to be doi without actually bothering to tell me. After a couple of days of bewildered anxiety, thin came to a head. The sour old cow gave me a sum much more difficult than any I ha encountered before: say, a four-digit number divided by a three-digit number. I guessed ho to do it, and got it wrong. Without offering help, she told me to do it again. I failed a secor time; she warned me to try hard; I did; I failed again; and she told me to hold my hand o and, grasping it firmly, she caned the palm three times, hard. My first reaction w astonishment: none of my kindergartens had been Catholic establishments, so I w unprepared for this kind of assault. Then it hurt, a lot! My precious palm! When I first start having therapy twenty-five years later, this was one of the first traumas I recalled, and I w astonished at the power of the feelings that came flooding back: anger—no, fury; self-pit humiliation; a deep, deep sense of hurt; and a pure indignation at not so much the unfairnes but the *insanity* of punishing someone *physically* for getting an answer wrong. It is terrifyi how much of this deeply unkind, utterly pointless, in fact, mind-boggling COUNTERPRODUCTIVE kind of behaviour was meted out to children over the centuries b half-witted, power-crazed zombies like this heinous old bat—a large proportion of su psychopaths allegedly acting in the name of an all-loving God. (A friend of mine attended school run by Carthusian brothers. When one boy in class made a mistake, the prie produced a strap, asked the question again, and raised the strap to strike him if he repeate his error. The boy remarked, "Well, that's not going to help, is it?")

But I may have learned *something* from my brush with sadism. The strongest feeling of a that re-emerged in this therapy session of mine was the final one that bubbled up: a extraordinary, steely determination that I WAS NOT GOING TO LET THIS HAPPEN AGAI Somehow, something stirred somewhere in my precious, six-year-old heart, which suggest that I might have a couple of vertebrae knocking around somewhere, and that one day might get to use them.

So grim was this first experience of school that Dad took me away from the nightma establishment the next day, and enrolled me in Miss Cresswell's Academy, a really nice, kin happy and friendly school, where I coloured pictures of mice in hats and then cut them o

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