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Making It So

A MEMOIR

PATRICK STEWART

GALLERY BOOKS UK

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Chapter One

We called it t'bottom field, never wondering where, in relation to "t'bottom", t'middle field and t'top field might be. Reflections of this kind were pointless in our working-class corner of Northern England – not just to us kids, but to the whole community. They led you nowhere, and had you been foolish enough to articulate them aloud, you'd have been given a belt round the ear and a lecture: "Who the bloody hell does tha think tha art, asking stupid bloody questions like that? Ya want to get a grip, lad."

All of us lads lived either on Camm Lane or the street with which it intersected, Towngate. Enough mystery in those names alone to attract several ear-belts. What the heck did "Camm" mean? I had no idea then, but I have since learned that the word is English of Norman ancestry: a habitational name for someone from the French city of Caen. "Habitational." The mere utterance of such a mildly erudite word would have got me kicked off to bed without any supper.

And what about "Towngate"? There was no proper town or gate to be seen anywhere. It was a little cobbled lane with a short row of houses and, behind them, a triangular lot with houses on two sides. Like the dwellings on Camm Lane, these houses were small and austere, mostly "one up, one down". Those of us privileged to live on Camm Lane looked down upon the Towngate kids because, compared

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to us, they appeared slovenly and their environment coarser – there always seemed to be a lot of yelling coming from that direction. Nevertheless, two of my friends lived there. My pal Fred's family was so hard up that he wore Wellington boots to school, without socks, every season of the year.

Mirfield, my hometown, sits in what was known as the West Riding of Yorkshire: the westernmost subdivision of Yorkshire, the United Kingdom's largest county. People who know me from my stage work or as *Star Trek*'s Captain Jean-Luc Picard are often surprised to learn that I come from the North of England. I often have to explain to American friends that the North, as we call it, is analogous to the industrial Rust Belt in the United States: blue-collar and tough, with cultures and attitudes distinct from the snootier South, and London in particular.

During my childhood, Mirfield had a population of around nine thousand. Along the river stood several weaving sheds, a humble term for what were, in fact, textile mills that rose four or five storeys high. My mother, Gladys, worked in one of them. The rest of our local economy was agricultural, with farms that grew corn, wheat, Brussels sprouts and kale. This kale was not destined for fancy salads. It was grown solely to feed livestock, which must have been why the Mirfield cows always looked so healthy. Their milk was delivered not in cartons or bottles but in large pails on a rickety cart drawn by an old horse. The dairyman ladled the milk by hand into my mother's large kitchen jug. It was often still a little warm when it arrived, and it was delicious. I don't believe pasteurisation was a part of the process.

T'bottom field, my refuge, was one of several fields in the area that were left unplanted, reserved for occasional use by grazing cattle and sheep. This field was also the site of parish church festivals, summer bring-and-buy sales, brass band concerts, and football and cricket matches. In September 1945, when I was five years old, it was where the town's adults held a V-E (Victory in Europe) picnic celebration for us children.

In certain corners of t'bottom field, the grass grew tall. One of my private pleasures was to lie on my back among this grass and watch the clouds drift across the sky. At times they formed recognisable shapes: animals, castles, sailing ships, mountains. These were a marvellous tickler of my imagination and afternoon dreams.

I had many flying dreams. I loved them. All I had to do to get airborne was gently flap my arms up and down. I would rise slowly and vertically, higher and higher, never fearful, until I reached a point where I manoeuvred myself into a horizontal position. From there I would swoop down, levelling out and flying fast, just above the ground. Then I'd suddenly lift my head and climb back up again until I was flying between the clouds. For some reason, I never went above the clouds in these dreams. Maybe this was because Mirfield boys like me weren't expected to have lofty ambitions. Certainly none that would ever take me into outer space.



I was born on 13 July 1940, on a Saturday afternoon around five o'clock. My father was away at war. My arrival was slightly delayed because my mother's midwife, having examined my mother that morning, decided that I was not yet ready to appear and declared that she was going to a film matinee at the Vale Cinema, half a mile away in the centre of Mirfield.

But not long after the midwife's departure, my mother's water broke and I was on my way. I suspect that, having heard the midwife say that she was going to the pictures, I had decided that I wanted to know what film she was seeing, who was in it and who directed it. A neighbour of my mam's volunteered to go to the cinema to fetch the midwife. But my mother, a kindly soul who loved the pictures, refused this offer, saying that she could hang on until the midwife got back.

So, there I was, eager to get out but delayed by my mother's determination to let the midwife enjoy her film until the end. I like to think that it was then, patiently waiting in the birth canal, that I came to understand that films are important, and that acting was to be the main purpose of my life – that is, as soon as it could get started. In any event, my mother and I held on. The midwife arrived

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in due time and out I came: not exactly camera-ready, but after a slap on the bottom and a quick hosing-down, I was ready for my close-up.

I was named after my father, sort of. Though his given name was Alfred, his army buddies called him Pat. This was because he had a temper, and where I grew up, "throwing a Paddy" was slang (and an anti-Irish slur) for blowing your top. On account of my father being English rather than Irish, "Paddy" got Anglicised to "Pat". He embraced the nickname. Before he went away to war in 1939, he instructed my pregnant mother to name me Patricia if I was a girl and Patrick if I was a boy.

Though he was a stranger to me in my early life, I learned that my father was a fierce, formidable man. In the 1920s and '30s he served in India as a member of the King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry: the KOYLIs, as they were known. He rose in rank from private to sergeant, earning a row of ribbons that he wore proudly on his chest. By the time of Britain's entry into World War II, he was already in his forties but nonetheless an eager founding member of the British Army's esteemed Parachute Regiment.

Though he was arguably too old to be jumping out of aeroplanes, the regiment used my father's age to their advantage as a recruiting tool. He had a small, defiant moustache and, like all the men in my family, a prematurely bald head. The recruiting officer would have Dad stand beside him. At a crucial moment in his recruiting speech, he would nod at Dad, who then whipped off his red beret to reveal his hairless pate. The officer scornfully addressed the young soldiers, yelling at them, "What's wrong with you lot? If an old man like this can jump out of planes, shouldn't you be doing it as well? Or are you all too lily-livered?" It worked; the conscripts queued up to become clones of my father, Sergeant Stewart.

Years later, my father explained to me why the soldiers in the Airborne Divisions were such outstanding fighters. Twice during the war, he had jumped, under fire, into German-held territory. Every soldier who boarded the transport plane was initially fearful, he said. But once they survived the experience of jumping out and their parachutes opening, they became utterly fearless. Dad said he had heard

men singing and whistling, playfully calling out to their fellow parachutists as they floated through the air. And those who made it safely to the earth, freeing themselves of their parachutes without getting shot, became unstoppable warriors.

Well, after hearing this, I promised myself that I would also become a parachutist. Like my father, I, too, would boldly see the clouds from above! The only difference was that I would never have to worry about being shot at as I floated down. I was downright impatient for this experience as a boy. But somehow, it . . . just hasn't happened. Not long ago I read a news story about an eighty-year-old grandmother who jumped out of a plane while tethered to an experienced parachutist. She landed safely on the ground and had the time of her life. Good for her – but what I've come to realise is that I prefer to live in my dreams.

My father did not live long enough to see me become Captain Jean-Luc Picard. I have often wondered what he would have made of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* – the spectacle of his son, who strongly resembled him and was forty-six years old when cast, commanding an interplanetary spacecraft. Would he have been proud? Would he have wanted to have been aboard the starship *Enterprise*, standing over my shoulder, nudging me when the moment came for Captain Picard to say "Engage"?

In fact, he was very much with me. But it would take me years to comprehend this.



My wife, Sunny, loves to tell friends that I had a Victorian childhood. In many respects, she is right. One of my earliest memories is of sitting atop the steps that led to the yard in front of our house, 17 Camm Lane, and watching the lamplighter light the gas lamps along our street. He came around every day at dusk. With one pole he opened the hinged pane on the lamp. Then he turned on the gas, and with another pole lit the flame. I used to shout "'ello!" to this man, and he would respond

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with either "Ay oop!" ("Look out!") or "Ow do?" ("How are you?"). How much more Dickensian can you get?

We spoke with heavy Northern accents, in a Yorkshire dialect nearly incomprehensible to Londoners, let alone Americans. "Hello" was rendered in our tongue as "ow do". "Nothing" was "nowt". "The window" was "t'winder". "Leave me alone" was "Geroff!" If I wanted to ask a pal to come out to play, I would say to him, "Ata laykin aht?" "Ata", descended from "art thou", meant "are you". "Laykin" is a very old word for playing; in Shakespeare's day, actors were sometimes called lakers. "Aht" is "out".

Our house, and four others just like it, were arranged around an elevated yard set back from the street. It was eight steps to the top, a number I clearly remember from a game my pals and I played, hopping up and down the steps while counting. The yard was a big rectangle of crushed cinders and dirt bordered by large slabs of stone in front of each house. In front of each door was a boot scraper to help you get the cinders off the soles of your shoes before you entered the house. I am still unaccustomed to the American usage of the word "yard". Our house in Los Angeles has both a front and a back "yard", but these, to me, are more like lovely gardens.

Just to the right of my childhood home were two air-raid shelters known as Anderson shelters. They must have been put in place right around the time I was born. They were made of corrugated steel and half-buried in the ground, with curved roofs. These shelters were meant to serve all five houses in the area, but I don't recall them ever being used. When the sirens went off, which was a rare occurrence, we hurried across the road in our pajamas and dressing gowns to the big stone cellar of my Auntie Annie's house.

The only function the Andersons ever served for me was as a private spot for an innocuous age-nine kiss and cuddle with a girl. But not quite private enough: one afternoon, as I was taking shelter, as it were, with my female friend, our moment of intimacy was interrupted by our next-door neighbour, Lizzie Dixon. Lizzie was an otherwise kind woman who, like my mother, worked in the weaving sheds, as did her husband, Gilbert. She just happened to poke her head

through the shelter's opening at an inopportune moment. When she caught sight of what this girl and I were up to, Lizzie told us off in no uncertain terms. To her credit, she never grassed on us to our parents.



17 Camm Lane, as I have said, was a classic "one up, one down". The ground floor had a front door – there were no others – that opened straight into the living room. This room was square, with a large window to the left of the front door that looked out onto the cinder yard. Upon entering, you came upon two stone steps with another door above them, which opened to a flight of steps, also stone, leading to the upper floor. Below this staircase was another door and another flight of stairs, leading downward to the cellar.

Let's start there, in the cellar. Everything was bare stone or brick. Against one wall, and attached to it, was a stone table. On that stood what my parents called the "safe". Its contents were not precious valuables but food: fresh meat, bacon, vegetables and milk. The safe's door was covered in mesh so that the cellar's cold air could penetrate it, but not the creepy-crawlies. I remember Sunny's shock when she asked me how we kept things cold, and I told her that I grew up with no refrigeration of any kind.

The cellar was divided in half by a brick wall, and behind this wall was a coal chute coming down from the yard outside. Our coal arrived in bags carried on the backs of deliverymen, who dumped them next to an iron lid in the stone pavement in front of our house. These bags were then tipped over so that the coal could empty into the cellar. This process created a lot of coal dust that the mesh in the safe couldn't keep out, so every item of food that was brought up from the cellar had to be washed.

In the centre of the ground-floor living room stood a large wooden table with four wooden chairs around it. There was no upholstery on these chairs. There was a sideboard where cutlery, plates and glasses were kept, as well as my jigsaw puzzles and board games.

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Well, I say "games", but there was only one, Monopoly, which I loved to play.

It's strange now to reflect on a game about money and property being the primary source of entertainment in a household as poor as ours. I loved owning Mayfair and Park Lane, though I had no idea what those names represented except wealth. I also loved owning the railway stations, all four if possible, which doubled the fines of other players landing on them. If I was playing with pals, I always insisted on being the banker, but if I played with my brothers or parents, I was considered unqualified for the job.

I still have this Monopoly set. The original box is long gone, but the cash, cards and game board, while faded and dog-eared, have survived from my youth. Occasionally, when I visit the homes of friends these days, I will see a Monopoly box sitting on a shelf, and the urge to play almost overwhelms me.

The floor of our living room was covered in ancient and cracked linoleum, with a smallish handmade rag rug set down in front of the fireplace. Ah, the *fireplace*. It was the centrepiece of our house. It was made entirely of black iron, but my mother cared for it as if it were made of marble. She polished it every week with a paste she called "blacking", and when she was done, it shone.

In wintertime, you would find me sprawled on the living-room rug in front of this fireplace, usually in the company of our family dog, a handsome Border Collie named Rover. I firmly believe that Rover recognised me to be the youngest Stewart and took it upon himself to cosset and cuddle me. I was only ten when he passed away, and I missed him dearly thereafter.

In the fireplace's centre was a grate in which we burned the coal from the cellar, or, if times were hard, coke. I loved this fire, though I was never allowed to touch it. The first and only time I picked up the poker to have a go, my father, who happened to be home at the time, grabbed it from my hand and said firmly, "*Never* touch another man's fire." I have passed on this lesson to my children and grandchildren.

To the right of the grate was a hot plate, heated by the coals underneath, on which it was possible to boil water or heat up soup or

broth. To the left of the grate, also heated by the coals, was the oven, in which my mother cooked joints of meat. But the fire's main function was to heat the room, which it did beautifully. For years, that fire was the only source of heat in the house, though by the time I was in my early teens, a small fan heater had been purchased.

To the left of the fireplace was a shallow stone sink with a cold-water tap above it. That was it for us – no running hot water. To the side of the sink was a small gas ring burner, where water could be boiled if there was no fire.

Up the stone steps was a small landing with a door into my parents' bedroom. To the left of their door was a narrower, flimsier door behind which was a double bed that I shared with my brother Trevor, five years older than me. I suppose that this would have made our home, technically, a "two up, one down". But in name only – the bed took up almost all the space in the room. There was barely enough clearance to open the door, and behind the door stood a very small wardrobe where our few clothes were kept. The wall that separated the two bedrooms was very thin, and sounds in one room could be clearly heard in the other, which led to some uncomfortable though intriguing situations.

Above one side of our shared bed was a double-paned window. Throughout the winter or in wet weather, it was kept closed. But on summer evenings, after I had been put to bed, I opened the bottom pane, and the sill was exactly level with the bed. I could hear the voices of my parents and our neighbours as they sat on their doorsteps gossiping and passing the time of day. They kept their voices quiet, as there were several other children's bedrooms overlooking the yard. But occasionally my ears could make out a laugh, or the sound of a match being struck to light a cigarette. I loved those warm evenings and friendly, reassuring sounds. I felt safe and protected by all the adults down below.

That was our home.



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"Hang on a minute," I hear you say. "What about . . . the facilities?" Here I must make a confession: The future twenty-fourth-century commander of the *Enterprise* grew up with neither a toilet nor a bathroom in his house.

Around the side of 17 Camm Lane stood a squat brick building that had two toilets at one end and two more at the other. In between were the dustbins. Each toilet was assigned to a specific house. (The fifth house in our row, I believe, had an indoor toilet. Ah, luxury!) These toilets had their own individual stalls and doors, but no electric light, heat or sinks for washing one's hands. No toilet roll, either – just old newspapers. At least they had rudimentary plumbing: a water tank mounted above, equipped with a pull cord for flushing.

Lurking in every bedroom, however, was a chamber pot known as a "gazunder", because that's how Northerners described something that "goes under" a bed. The gazunder was strictly for peeing. If you had to go "number two", you were compelled to hold it in 'til sunrise.

The Stewart family toilet served a separate function for me as my reading room. When there is only one social room in your house, where else might you go for a little bit of peace and quiet with your novel or comic book? Not the upstairs bedroom. For some reason – don't ask me why – it was considered out of bounds by my parents until bedtime. And while we had no TV or record player, the radio was always on, which made concentration tough. I spent hours in that toilet. In the depths of winter, I would wear an overcoat and a woolly hat. There was no lighting inside, so I took a candle with me, which provided illumination and warmth to my fingertips.

And I read and read. We had barely any books in our house – just a big medical directory, some war-related books and a Bible. But the Mirfield public library had a very good children's section, and as I got older, the library's selection of American literature became my obsession. Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Steinbeck, Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe detective novels – I read them all. You could only take out two books at a time, so I spent part of every Saturday morning at the library. There were often references and actions that I

didn't understand, being way outside my life experiences, but that didn't matter, except for me desperately wanting to understand them. Yet the narratives kept me going. It was then and there, at the local library, that my love of storytelling began.

So that explains the lavatory setup. Now, to complete the picture of my early home life is – ta-dah! – bath night. This occurred but once a week, always on Friday. Because we had to boil the water for baths, there was a tightly scripted schedule that could not be messed with. My father, when he was home with us, always took the first bath because Friday evening marked the beginning of his weekend rounds of the local pubs and workingmen's clubs.

First our gas boiler, which stood between the sink and the fireplace, had to be filled with water, several gallons' worth. This was done by attaching a hose to the cold-water tap. Then the gas was lit beneath. While the boiler was heating, my father lathered up his brush with soap and shaved with hot water from the kettle. He used an old-fashioned straight razor, and I was always the one Dad called upon to shave the back of his neck. I became very good at it, largely because I was terrified of what he would do if I cut him. When I was a little older, I sometimes (for reasons you will soon understand) had to overcome the urge to move the razor to the front of his throat.

This was a perilous and scary job, given his short temper and insistence on looking immaculate when he left to meet comrades and drink the evening away. But in time I became very proficient at it and speedy, which I know he respected. I was paid threepence ("thruppunce", in Yorkshire) for this work, which was, in time, increased to sixpence (a "tanner", probably named for John Sigismund Tanner, the eighteenth-century chief engraver of the Royal Mint).

Hopefully the bathwater would be hot by the time Dad had finished shaving. Trevor and I were tasked with carrying up our old zinc bathtub from the cellar. It was positioned near the boiler's tap, which, once the coal dust had been cleared out, we opened to fill the tub. At this, we were all sent upstairs so that Dad could undress and bathe in peace. He never took long, and soon he would come up the stairs to dress for his night out. This was the cue for Trevor to take his turn

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and go downstairs to bathe in the same water that my father had used. (Immediately upon being emptied, the gas boiler was refilled to heat up water for my mother's bath and mine.)

My father was out the door at 7:30 p.m., dressed in grey flannels, a white shirt, his Parachute Regiment tie and a blazer accessorised with his KOYLI badge on the breast pocket. He looked magnificent.

Trevor was a fast bather, and as soon he had dried himself off and dressed, he, too, was out the door to meet up with his pals. But before he left, he was duty-bound to empty the bath. This involved bringing up a rubber tube from the cellar, putting one end of it in the bathwater, and then sucking hard on the other end to coax the water up the tube, whereupon it was emptied into the old stone sink. This was not a pleasant job, and Trevor always cleaned his teeth afterward. Trevor joined the Royal Air Force when he was eighteen, so I inherited the task of emptying the bath. I don't recall ever swallowing any bathwater by accident, but the process filled my mouth with an awful taste, simultaneously soapy and dirty. Needless to say, I followed my brother's custom of always cleaning my teeth.

Next came my bath. Mam would find some nice music on the radio. I changed into a dressing gown, a hand-me-down from Trevor, and passed the time reading until the boiler was ready and it was time to fill the tub again. I loved climbing into the bath and lowering myself chin-deep into the warm water. I just had to be careful to keep away from the side of the tub nearest the fireplace, as it got a lot hotter than the water in the tub. At different times, we all got nasty burns from touching the rim of the bath.

My mam always had a towel warming for me before the fire. When I was done, she wrapped me up in it and dried me off, which I always enjoyed. Then I climbed into my pyjamas – also, at one time, Trevor's. Finally, it was my mother's turn to bathe. I kept her company, my head buried in a comic book in order to afford her some privacy. After a while, she got into the habit of asking me to scrub her back with a flannel. This did not in any way make me uncomfortable. I loved my mother so much, and helping her wash seemed to bring her so much comfort and contentment: feelings that, alas, she all too rarely experienced.



For the first five years of my life, with Dad off to war, my mother was my only parent, and she was a happier person then, though I recognised this only in retrospect.

Life was mostly bliss for me in those very early years. My parents' bed was a large double that took up a lot of space, but there was room beside it for a small cot. That was where I usually slept. Having my mother always so close – when I fell asleep and when I woke up – made me feel so reassuringly *safe*. She had a soft, round, pretty face that shone like the sun.

The guardrail on the side of my cot could be pushed down, and one of my earliest recollections is of rolling out of the cot onto my mother's mattress. As soon as I was in place beside her, she would throw the covers over us both, and I found myself in a cotton cave warmed by my mother's body. I would tickle her and she me, and we would laugh and laugh, until, exhausted, I would collapse into her arms, with my head buried into her neck, her hair around my face.

We sometimes played this same game of snuggling and laughing in an armchair, or on the rug, or even when the rent collector came. As noted, times were hard, and often my mother didn't have the rent. So when we heard the knock on the door, we always knew who it was, and we hid underneath the big table, where the rent collector couldn't see us through the window. He would knock repeatedly and shout, "Come on, Mrs Stewart, I know you're in there! Open the door!" I would giggle, and my mother would hush me with her finger on my lips. Then, when we knew the man was gone, we rolled out from under the table, hysterical with laughter.

It was a serious situation, but my mother never let me feel the gravity of it. It was all just fun and games to me. What this was costing her psychologically, I never knew. But surely there must have been a price.

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My parents had a complicated relationship well before I entered the picture. Trevor and I had a much older brother named Geoffrey who was, despite being born out of wedlock, our full brother. My unmarried mother gave birth to him in September 1923. My father quickly acknowledged the baby as his. But shortly after Geoffrey's birth, Dad joined the army, went into training and was shipped off with his fellow KOYLIs to India.

Geoffrey had a ribald sense of humour, and in his adult years, he derived pleasure from introducing himself to my young girlfriends by saying, "Hello, I'm Geoffrey, and I'm a bastard." Every time I heard Geoffrey say this, I laughed. You have to understand how funny it sounded in a Northern accent, though I suppose I should have been more sensitive to the shock that my girlfriends expressed. I never really understood why Geoffrey did this, but if it was his frank and direct way of saying, *My dear, I want you to know everything about Patrick's family*, that was fine by me.

I have often wondered where Geoffrey's conception might have occurred. Certainly not in my mother Gladys's home, as she lived with her parents, Freedom and Mary Barrowclough, and her sister, my Auntie Annie. And probably not in my father Alfred's home, because he was still living with his mother, Mary Stewart. I can't imagine that my parents splurged on a hotel room because they couldn't have afforded it. When I asked Geoffrey where he thought it happened, he replied, with characteristic tartness, "In a ditch behind a hedge."

Geoffrey also harboured a theory that my father, whom he loathed, was not his biological father. It is true that Trevor and I bore little resemblance to Geoffrey. And Geoffrey's surname was not Stewart but my mother's maiden name, Barrowclough. When Mam died in 1977, Geoffrey, only half in jest, suggested that our dad had murdered her, smothering her with a pillow in the council house in Mirfield where they lived out their later years together.

Highly unlikely. What is true is that Geoffrey was disinclined to

like my father from the very beginning of his life. When Alfred Stewart joined the army, my maternal grandfather went to the county court with my mother to seek a judgment compelling Dad to pay for child support. Gladys won her case – I have seen the pertinent court files – and Dad sent along the money, though it didn't amount to much. Geoffrey and my mother lived with my Barrowclough grandparents, who, though they were of modest means, provided a cosy and secure home.

Freedom Barrowclough was, by all accounts, remarkable. He was a short, stocky Yorkshireman with a bald head – I get it from both sides – and a large moustache, who served as an elected councillor for his district in Mirfield and, in time, was elected in a unanimous vote to be the Mirfield Town Council leader. He was much loved by his neighbours and constituents for championing the rights and needs of working people.

My mother had fond memories of growing up as a Barrowclough. When her father came home on a Friday or Saturday night from his local workingmen's club, he often brought a few friends with him, all in high spirits. Freedom would come up to her bedroom, Mam said, scoop her up and carry her downstairs. My grandparents had an old upright piano, and my mother was a proficient self-taught pianist. Sometimes, Freedom would ask her to play something for the gathered men. Other times, he would sit her atop the piano, and Mam happily led the party in singing songs.

The most interesting aspect of Freedom's life, to me, is a position he held outside his duties as a councillor. Adjacent to t'bottom field was a pie-and-pea shop that he ran for a time, serving classic Northern takeaway: savoury meat pies accompanied by mushy peas and gravy, all prepared by Freedom himself. My mam sometimes assisted her father in the shop, and she told me that the food was "right good". My grandfather was generous of spirit, and if a local family was struggling with health or money problems, he personally delivered pies and peas to them, never asking for payment. Freedom died in 1937, three years before I was born. I so wish that I had known him. My son, Daniel, carries the middle name Freedom in tribute to his great-grandfather.