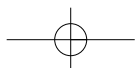
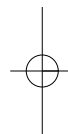
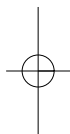
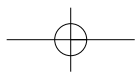




Oh, Carol!





CAROL MCGIFFIN

Oh, Carol!

life, love and telling it like it is

H
HODDER &
STOUGHTON



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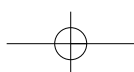
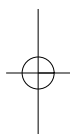
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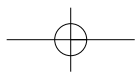
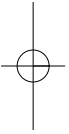
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I am dedicating this book to the memory of Heather, my beautiful, dear, departed Mum. I only wish she were here to read it. On second thoughts, if she were still here, then given some of the content, I probably wouldn't have written it . . .





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First and foremost I want to thank ITV and the programme that I am hugely privileged to be a part of, *Loose Women*. The success of that show has undoubtedly played a very large part in my being able to get a book all about me published by a major publishing house.

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I want to also mention Apple Inc.© here too for making the MacBook Air – the supermodel of laptops – so slim and light. The job of transporting a computer everywhere in preparation for impromptu inspiration has been a joy, not a chore.

Acknowledgements

And finally, Neil Sedaka. Thank you so much for writing the song, 'Oh, Carol'. It is because of that song that I have Carol as my first name and not something beginning with D that is my second (don't ask), and indeed the title of my book.

Oh, and thank *you* for reading it.

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The First Time I: Wrote a Book

(The Introduction)

I always knew I *wanted* to write a book. I always knew I *would* write a book. I just didn't know how, or when, or if I could. I used to buy books about writing books and never read them, and I've got a folder on my computer called 'Books', full of weak, unfinished attempts at novels or memoirs. I've spent hours online looking at websites for literary agents and publishers, and for years, every time I walked by my local bookshop I fantasised about seeing a book with my name on it in the window. My plan was to retire to the South of France and write books in front of a window with a nice view. Whenever we had authors on *Loose Women* I'd question them about their first experience, how they got published, how long it took, where they go to write, at what time of day and for how long. The fascination was there but the trouble was that the drive, the determination and the need wasn't. I obviously didn't want it enough to sit there and write for hours a day, perfecting a manuscript that I was prepared to persuade someone to publish.

Then, somewhere along the line, *Loose Women* became very popular indeed and a couple of the other *Loose Women* brought out their own books. The show itself also had three very successful books, two of them No.1 Bestsellers – all published by Hodder & Stoughton, who then thought it might be a good idea if I wrote one. I agreed and said, 'Yes, I'd love to', but in the way that you do when you're not sure if you can and so you start to wonder if maybe you might have exceeded your limitations.

But I needed that challenge, that deadline, and I needed to scare

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myself into doing something difficult. Something that would inspire me to work harder than I'd had to in many years due to my preference for an easy life and, lacking in drive and ambition as I am, choosing to say no to things that might cause consternation and stress.

This time I went for it because writing a book has been my only real ambition in my whole life. In fact, it's been on my list of New Year's resolutions since about 1979. Trouble was, where did I start? All those words and all those pages – where were they going to come from? 'Don't be afraid to ask for help', they said. 'No', I said. 'If I'm going to have a book out there with my name on the cover, that's all about me, it has to be written by me and not by someone else. It might be the way for others in my profession but it's not for me.'

So I bought myself a Slanket® (blanket with sleeves) that you wrap around your whole body – feet and all – so that if you try to get up to either put the telly on or search for a snack or alphabetise your CD collection in order to procrastinate, you fall over. And all winter I sat there, staring at a screen with the internet turned off in case I was tempted by the class A cyberdrug that is Twitter.

I knew it wouldn't be easy but I hadn't reckoned on quite how hard it would be, and I admit, I was tempted to dial 0800-GHOST-WRITER more than once but I stuck it out and cancelled holidays, snubbed my friends, ignored Christmas and even stayed in on New Year's Eve on my own for the first time since 1973.

Then, while skiing one day, I read something (via Twitter...oops) by Stephen Fry. He was giving notice to his followers that he'd not be around for a while because he was off to write a book. On his blog, he wrote that the only way he could do it was to lock himself in a dark room and speak to no one, and he quoted someone's advice to him on the subject: "*It is almost impossibly hard,*" he told me. "*It is supposed to be. But once you truly understand how difficult it is,*" he added, *with signature paradoxicality, "it all becomes a lot easier."* Now, I have no idea who said that to him, nor did I have the first clue what paradoxicality meant but I loved reading about how writing troubled him so, and it made me feel better. Not that I'm comparing myself

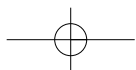
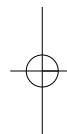
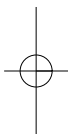
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to the great man himself but surely if that clever dick finds it hard then what chance was there for me with my undisciplined 'alphabet spaghetti' thought processes. As a result, it was probably at least six weeks before I wrote the first word.

I used that time to start familiarising myself with myself. And, of course, my past. Luckily I'd kept boxes of memorabilia – diaries, journals, music and mementoes, which ended up being permanently scattered all over the floor for easy access. And my music collection was a great way of transporting myself back to certain times. Playing vinyl records from the time I was writing about really helped to restore deleted elements of my cerebral hard drive. Because the human brain is exactly like a computer hard drive it can't possibly retain every little event and detail. Like the computer, the mind only has a finite amount of space and when it becomes full, you have to delete stuff to make room for the new stuff. Recovering data isn't always possible though, however many times you find a trigger. It was fascinating realising that even after I'd recalled something, I still had no recollection of it ever happening. So even though my memory isn't too bad, it is, like everyone's I suppose, selective.

Eventually, and thankfully, it became an enjoyable, pleasant and enlightening experience, especially given that I've not had that much misery or trauma in my first fifty years. Although writing about the harrowing experiences I have had, like my mum dying, and surviving the Asian tsunami, have brought me as many tears as the rest of it has laughs.

So, it's done and I did it. The first time I wrote a book. Now I hope you'll enjoy reading about some of the other things I did in my life for the first time, most of which I probably won't or can't ever do again. I'm keeping my fingers crossed that writing a book isn't one of them.



CHAPTER 1

*The First Time I: Came second**(The Family and my Place in it Chapter)*

The first born was Kim. Two years and four days before me, she was born on St Valentine's Day at St Barts in London – within the sound of Bow Bells, which makes her a real gorbliney guvner cockney. Well it would have, but between 1941 when the bells were destroyed in the Blitz and 1961 when they were replaced, no real cockneys could officially be born but don't tell her that, she's proud of her cockney status.

It's rubbish being born second. Especially when you have three siblings where one is the eldest, one the youngest and the other the only boy. Where do I fit into that little list of specialties apart from being the glaringly insignificant 'number two'? Great. I'm nothing but a big old 'number two'. I couldn't even call myself a cockney being born as I was in the Whittington in North London. I can hear my mum now introducing the family. 'This is Kim, she's the eldest. And that's Tracy, she's my youngest. Ah, and Mark, he's the only boy. And that's Carol.' See?

I think I definitely suffered from second or middle child syndrome as they call it, especially as I've now looked into it in detail. So many of the traits explain so much about why I am like I am and why I turned out like I did. I found that the most notable ones were:

S/he will often do almost anything for parental attention, even if that means being naughty. (Spot on.)

They may be the loud, boisterous child in school. (100% correct.)

The second child may feel out of place because they aren't over achievers.

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Instead, the middle child usually just goes with the flow. (Explains my lack of ambition.)

They have a history of starting projects and never finishing them. (My worst trait. Believe me, the fact that I've actually written and finished this book on time is a miracle.)

When choosing a career, most middle or second children would be best suited for something where they could freely express themselves. (Like Loose Women?)

So it's a good job Kim was born first; she was a born leader. Looking at pictures of us when we were little she always has a protective arm around us and a reassuring yet slightly worried look on her face. She was so tall as a kid, Kim. And skinny. Really skinny. Whenever she looked at photos of herself she always commented, 'Bleedin' eck, I look like a right streak o' piss!' Well, she was a cockney. I never once fell out with Kim. I think it was because as the number two, I always looked up to her for guidance; she was like a second mum to me really. Still is. She is extremely hardy, our Kim. She's had quite a tough time with her choices of men, just like Mum. And she's like her in that she never stops worrying about her kids: Daniel, who's now 27 and Emma, who's 25. They are both a credit to her resilience and tenacity. Kim lives and works in Kent for a major supermarket in a freezer, not literally but it is a cold storage facility which makes it feel like one, inspecting fruit. She does 12-hour night shifts, four on, four off, for very little money. But she'd rather struggle and work than not. It's that work ethic that we've luckily inherited from my mum.

Mark was born a mere 21 months after me. He was the cutest baby of all of us. We all had bright white-blond hair to start with but Mark was the only one who retained it. I can still see him in his old-fashioned Mary Poppins pram in the sunshine with his little sunburnt face (a sunburnt baby, when was the last time you saw one of those!?!?). For some reason, aged five, I took a spiteful dislike to Mark. There was no reason for it, nothing behind it, I just 'hated' him. Middle child syndrome again I guess. But how could I? In his little shorts, looking like a miniature replica of my old grandad. I

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felt a bit sorry for him being the only boy, surrounded by girls. He had no real male role models growing up but mercifully he wasn't really affected by that fact and out of all of us was probably the best behaved growing up. He never smoked or broke the law and he did really well at school compared to us girls. In fact, I don't even remember him ever getting told off by Mum. We used to tease him being the only boy, calling him 'Mummy's little soldier' although it was her that coined the phrase. It was never malicious though, we were never jealous of him for it. Mark's a civil engineer/project manager and specialises in the construction of very tall chimneys for power stations. He's been an expat for the best part of 25 years and has worked in some fairly exotic places. The Falkland Islands, Iraq, Ghana, Bahrain, Taiwan, Malaysia, Singapore and now the Philippines – great for cheap accommodation if I fancy a holiday. With the magic of the internet and Skype, I probably talk to him more than if he lived here and I definitely talk to him more than to my sisters, who, compared to him, live just down the road. Mark's the only one of us who has never married, although he has a girlfriend of six years, Nani, whom he met while working in Malaysia.

Tracy is the baby of the family and she always looked like the baby. Every photo that she's in, she has that worried, cute, slightly distressed look. It might have been because she was the last to get the hand-me-down clothes which almost never fitted and always looked so urchin-like. She was born four days after my birthday. (All three girls are February babies 14th, 18th and 22nd respectively – how weird is that?) This meant that when Mum went off to give birth, she disappeared on my birthday, an event that had far-reaching effects on my psyche as you will find out. I also went through a phase of not getting on with Tracy, though it wasn't at the same time as Mark. We would really fight, never more so than when she'd borrow my clothes as a teenager without asking and put them back with her teenage hormonal whiff all over them. Mum never reprimanded her either, because being the youngest Mum quite enjoyed indulging her as she'd not been able to with us. She was the lucky one too because as Kim, Mark and I all went off to work for anything we wanted, as well as needed, Mum had the chance to mildly spoil

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her. She always admitted it was a mistake but she said she couldn't help herself. I could understand it. Tracy's certainly not lazy and is very capable but she doesn't quite have the work ethic that us three have, so hasn't minded spending the last 14 years just bringing up her daughter Holly although she's looking for work now. To her credit, Holly has grown up a very well adjusted and intelligent girl and is doing very well at school.

So that meant that between 14 February 1958 and 22 February 1963 Mum had given birth to four children. I don't know how she did that, she must have been pregnant constantly for almost the whole five years. That was always her plan though. She came from a very stable background – her parents, Len and Mary Ellen, or Nell as she was known to her friends, were together until death did them part. Visiting them was like going back in time and sitting in the kitchen there while Grandma baked cakes and made jam on the 1950s freestanding cooker is a lovely memory. While Grandma cooked and cleaned, Grandad played golf or was in the garden. He loved his garden and should have won prizes for it, it was so beautiful. They married in 1932 and Grandad died in 1986. I remember going to their golden wedding anniversary party at the golf club of the course near to where they'd retired to in Sanderstead, Surrey. One of my favourite photos is from that day – my grandma and grandad at the head of the table, looking so proud, surrounded by their children and grandchildren. Grandma died in 2000.

They did a very good job of bringing up Heather, my mum. She had exceptional manners, was quiet but headstrong and extremely stoical. She was tall, slim and elegant and always took immense pride in her appearance, even if she wasn't working, although at home she was never out of her Dot Cotton style housecoat overalls. And beautiful too, with natural auburn hair and bright blue eyes that lit up the room when she laughed. She loved a good laugh and when she did it, so did everyone else, they couldn't help it, it was so infectious. She worked so hard all her life but she had no sense of entitlement whatsoever and for someone who ended up fairly poor, she had zero wealth envy. It was a truly admirable quality of hers. She so loved my dad that when they got married she described it as 'the

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best day of her life' until of course, it all went wrong. Then, despite having the odds stacked right against her and without ever complaining, blaming or asking for sympathy, and rarely asking for help, she in turn did a marvellous job bringing up her four kids each of whom she was immensely proud of in one way or another. She had a lot to be proud of, my mum.

My dad, John, was from proper East End stock. His mother lived in the City of London all of her life, in an old tenement on the Sutton Estate just off the City Road. He was another one of four children and also a second born. He was a real 'number two' in more ways than one, especially to my mother at one point. He was very tall, dark and handsome and had been in the RAF. He and my mum got together when they were both working at Unilver House, just by Blackfriars Bridge in London, right across the river from where I work now. Mum worked in the typing pool and Dad was the post boy. My grandma never approved of him but then she was a bit of a snob and he was just a cockney Londoner. Mum had her father on her side though and even though he probably saw trouble ahead, he backed my mum because he knew how happy she was with him.

Oh, and then there's me, Carol.