

# INTERPRETERS

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# relatively speaking

*In the third part of our series about people whose ways of living have challenged our definition of the family, Marcus Howe talks to Susanna Thomas and Max Rosenthal.*

SUSANNA THOMAS, 26, spent her early childhood in rural West Africa with her mother, anthropologist Dr Julia Rosenthal, before choosing to come back to England aged 11 to live with her uncle, Max Rosenthal. She now runs a batik business in London.

MAX ROSENTHAL, 53, is a Steiner school teacher and artist who has lived in communities in the West Country for nearly 30 years. During the past 20 years he has cared for over 35 foster children and young adults at risk.

## *Susanna Thomas:*

THE FIRST time that I remember meeting my uncle Max, I was about four and we'd flown back to England so my mother could go to a conference. It was the middle of winter and freezing cold. I remember watching him out of the window, skipping with his pupils. I should have been out there but I was wearing a pair of really cosy blue pyjamas that Max had bought for me which I liked so much that I wouldn't take them off, and it was too cold outside for pyjamas. My mum was standing out there with him, bundled up in one of his old jackets, laughing. I remember looking at Max surrounded by all those children

and I just so wanted to be a part of it all.

In lots of ways, my first ten years living in Cameroon were quite idyllic. A mother who was always there for me. To whom I could tell absolutely anything. Who loved me more than anything or anyone in the world. And no school, no homework. I must have really hurt my mum

**“When my mother refused to let me go, I decided to starve myself to death.”**

when I told her I wanted to go back to England and live with Max, not just stay with him from time to time. She'd done everything she could to give me a fantastic childhood – the perfect childhood really – and all I wanted to do was get away from her. Not her exactly,

but that intense relationship where everything was always out in the open, where it always seemed there was nothing we didn't know about each other.

When my mother refused to let me go, I stopped eating. I decided to starve myself to death. I was only about ten or eleven but I was pretty stubborn and in the end she gave in. It's funny what children think

of as normal. I never thought my life in Africa with my mother was particularly unusual. Nor Max's various set-ups in Dorset. And for a long time I thought everyone's grandmother was like mine. She comes across as a very normal, rather reserved elderly lady. But what a traveller!

*Continued overleaf >*

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# Chapter One

I think I was about six when my mother tried to kill me, though I didn't know it at the time. It was probably somewhere around here – where the privet hedges give way to barriers of *leylandii* and high wrought-iron gates. I don't suppose it had anything to do with the hedges and gates, though they can't have helped. This place could induce a yearning for death in even the most optimistic.

To be fair to my mother, it wasn't me she wanted to kill. But she wasn't going to kill herself and leave my brother and me behind. I'm sure she would have succeeded at her attempt at oblivion, she was very good at whatever she did, except she hadn't anticipated my brother refusing to get in the car with her to fetch me from my friend Jackie's house. And she couldn't kill herself because she couldn't leave one of us behind. So here I am. Forty-five years later.

'So why *didn't* you get in the car?' I asked Max once. 'You were the good child. Obedient. You liked to please people. You must have known she was planning to do something terrible.'

'I can't remember anything much from that time, Julia. And anyway, what's the point in going over all that?'

'But you do remember you used to sleep in your cupboard,' I persisted. 'Curled up on the top shelf. With your little white blanket.'

'So?'

‘Well, do you think sleeping in cupboards is particularly normal behaviour for an eight-year-old?’

‘Who’s talking about normal? What was ever normal? The cupboard just felt like a nice, safe place to be. More people should try it.’

Did *I* guess what she was trying to do? I don’t think so. I remember her sitting in the kitchen with Jackie’s parents. I think she was crying. I remember that they shut the door and wouldn’t let us in. And that Jackie’s father drove in front of our car, very slowly, all the way home.

The next day when I came back from school my mother had gone.

I’m getting closer now. Finally there is something I recognise. A pair of mock-Tudor mansions set high above the road, their lush front gardens – planned to the last designer shrub and exotic tree – sweeping down to the pavement. In one of the gardens there is a massive pond. Koi carp can live for years. I wonder if they remember the time, perhaps about thirty-five years ago, when the owner of one of the houses hired a helicopter and flew over the next-door garden. Then, having circled above it a number of times until his neighbour came out to see what was going on, he aimed a hunting rifle at the neighbour’s head and shot him dead. That’s what happens around here if you annoy people by erecting concrete nymphs and dryads and spotlights and fairy-lights, thereby detracting from your neighbour’s ornamental pond.

Actually, it doesn’t. That was the only time anything remotely like that happened during my childhood, but, whenever I passed these houses after that, I’d keep a good lookout for low-flying aircraft. I think the whole event was considered a little vulgar – both the erecting of the classical antiquities in the first place and the assassination of the householder who was guilty of such bad taste. I see that whoever lives here now has removed the statuary. The fashion seems to be more for bamboo. Less irritating altogether.

I indicate left at the end of the road and head south. I am aware that I am driving very, very slowly. The person in the car behind me keeps edging out, flashing his headlights, trying to overtake, but I can't seem to go any faster. The more familiar the streets and houses, the shops and churches become, the more I want to stop and go back. I pull up abruptly outside a church hall. The driver sounds his horn and passes me, screaming, 'Cunt!' as he does so. A group of pensioners look up in surprise. I'm a little surprised too.

Strangely, it was here, outside the church hall where I came to Brownies on Monday evenings, that I first heard the C-word from the boys hovering around outside, waiting for the infinitely more alluring Guides to arrive. When I was about eight, probably. And *rape*. A word that Caroline Statham – fellow Brownie and fount of all essential knowledge, particularly pertaining to the facts of life – told me meant having wire coat hangers stuck up your bottom. Something that would inevitably happen to you if you ever ventured off the open common land opposite her house and into the gorse bushes that harboured gangs of crouching, wire-wielding deviants. It was years before I learned the real meaning of the word, but it kept us out of the undergrowth.

I get out of the car and follow the elderly women into the church hall. I breathe in the familiar smell of damp wood, sweaty plimsolls and disinfectant. I wonder if the plaster of Paris toadstool is still in the cupboard next to the upright piano. Do eight-year-olds still dance around such things? I can't imagine it, somehow. Like those yellow scarves you had to spread out on the floor to fold in a particularly complicated way, it'll have been replaced with something altogether more practical. Some sort of fibreglass homage to world peace and multicultural harmony. Is that something else Susanna holds against me: a Brownie-free childhood? I wonder if Brown Owl remembered a Brownie with long fair plaits, very skinny legs and sticking-out teeth. An enthusiastic member

of the Little People – a Sixer, no less. There’s only one thing I remember about Brown Owl, apart from her tightly permed grey hair and fat calves – how she humiliated me in front of the whole pack when I listed the foods one might find on a well-stocked English breakfast table.

‘Don’t be ridiculous! No one eats *cheese* for breakfast!’ she shrilled, her grey curls quivering with indignation. ‘Tawny Owl! Did you see what Julia Rosenthal put on her breakfast list? Cheese! I *ask* you!’ And, with that, my coveted Homemaker badge was left to languish in the box in the toadstool cupboard.

Brown Owl must be long dead so I should forgive her. But I don’t. Nor, for that matter, Miss Pearson, the nursery school teacher I had when I was four, who made everyone on my table look at the way I held my knife and fork, and then told me to behave like a big girl and eat properly. Even now I can’t do that thing where you mash bits of food on to the back of your fork. And I rarely eat peas. At least not in public.

‘Can I help you?’ one of the women asks. ‘Are you interested in signing up for our Friday Crafts Club? We’re always on the lookout for a bit of young blood. You’d be most welcome to join us.’

‘Thanks,’ I say. ‘But I was just passing and wanted to see what this place looked like. I used to come here to Brownies. *Years* ago. In about 1967.’

‘Well, I never! You’ll know Margaret, then. Margaret! You’ll never guess! One of your old Brownies is here to see you.’

And there she is – over by the piano. Brown Owl. Not dead at all. Taking a plastic bag of brightly coloured knitting wool out of the toadstool cupboard.

As I leave and head back to the car, I hear someone say, ‘Well, she was here a minute ago, Margaret. How very strange.’

It’s funny, the things you don’t forgive. It’s not the big things like your father drinking a bottle of whisky a night and



walking into doors, or your best friend getting off with Nigel Blenkinsop in the fourth year at the St Peter's School Disco when she knew perfectly well that you really fancied him and had done for months. Or your daughter telling the whole world that the person she loved most as she was growing up was not you; that it was a kind of life entirely different from the one you had created for her that she'd craved.

It's the little things. Like being made to unpick the zip your mother had helped you to sew in for your handwork homework. I cried then. The only time I ever cried at school. I cried out of humiliation, not grief; because my mother had sewn it in for me beautifully, 'but not the way we do it here'.

Or maybe it wasn't humiliation. Maybe, I think now as I sit in the car outside the church hall, it was failure that made me cry. Failure to protect my mother from a hostile world which didn't recognise that she tried her best. Because she did. Whatever she did, she did as well as she possibly could, including being a mother. I wonder how many hundreds of miles she must have driven over the years, taking us to swimming lessons, skating lessons, music lessons – anything we wanted to do, she found a class, a teacher, a way of getting us there, a way of persuading my father to pay. Anything we became interested in, she bought us books or equipment for and never commented when we gave things up. When Max left his violin on the train, she drove to every station on the line to see if it had been handed in – which it hadn't. And then she somehow managed to buy him a new one.

Of course, at the time, I didn't appreciate any of that. I think that what I wanted more than any of those activities was an evening at home, all of us together, watching one of those old black and white films on TV or something, my parents sitting side by side on the sofa, looking happy. But that never happened. Not once.

My mother expressed her love for my brother and me in actions, definitely not in words and rarely in gestures, and so

we seldom sat still. I remember – it must have been around the time of the moon landing – asking my mother what would happen if Max and I went to live on the moon – how would she visit us? This was a quite a worry for us, as we knew how much she hated heights and flying. And she said she'd visit us *wherever* we went to live, even if it was on the moon. And we knew she meant it and we knew then how much she loved us. I don't think I've ever felt more loved than at that moment.

It's hard to hate someone whom you know would literally go beyond the ends of the earth for you without feeling like a traitor. And that's what I felt like all those times during my teenage years that I hated her – a traitor, a deserter. And then I hated her even more for making me feel like that. I wanted pure untainted hatred – the kind of straightforward, uncomplicated, cold hatred that most of my friends felt for their mothers – without the devastating guilt.

We went to Sunday School here too, Max and I. I remember, on our first day, Max carefully spelling out our surname to the elderly man in rather tight trousers who introduced himself as 'Mr-T-in-charge-of-under-sevens'.

'Are you sure that's right?' asked Mr T, squinting down at what he'd written in the register.

'Yes, R-O-S-E-N –'

'No, sorry, don't worry. I've got it,' he interrupted, flustered. I thought it was probably his trousers that were making him feel a bit uncomfortable. 'Go through to Miss Everett's class, Max. You're going to be making simply gorgeous collages of the Garden of Eden today, I believe. We've just had a new consignment of pipe-cleaners that'll be perfect for the serpents. And the crêpe paper! All the colours of the rainbow, and more besides. And you come with me, little Miss R. It's finger-painting for us. Joseph's coat is going to be the talk of the town. Danny La Rue will be spitting with envy.'

I didn't know who this Danny person was, but I felt rather sorry for him nevertheless.

I wonder why we went to Sunday School. I once found our baptism certificates while rummaging through a drawer in my father's study, but I don't remember either of my parents ever expressing an opinion about religion. I suppose we must have wanted to go, even though, for about a year, I used to cry until I was allowed to go into Max's class, where I'd sit very close to him, cross-legged, my fingers creeping towards his leg until I felt his warm, comforting skin. He never minded, but I got the impression that Mr T was rather hurt by my refusal to remain in his class of happy under-sevens.

Despite my accumulation of all the gospels for good attendance, God lost His appeal when Miss Everett gave us some sweet william seeds and a yoghurt pot ready-filled with potting compost.

'That's right, children, press the seeds right into the earth and then cover the top of the pot with the see-through plastic and put an elastic band round it. Max – help your sister, can you? There's compost going absolutely everywhere. There! That's lovely. Good boy, Max. Now all you have to do, children, is watch and see how God will make the seeds grow from the earth. *For it is fed and watered by God's almighty hand*, isn't it, children?'

By the next day, there was no sign whatsoever of God's greatness so I threw the pot away and embraced atheism, to which, apart from a brief flurry of religious fervour in my early teens, I have held ever since. I don't know if my brother believed in God then. I don't think he did, even though his patience resulted in an irritatingly impressive crop of deep red and purple flowers. And I don't know if he does now – though now he seems to be quite comfortable with all the tree-hugging and saint-veneration that goes on at his Steiner school in deepest Dorset.

I sit in the car and watch a parking attendant as he walks slowly up and down the road, checking out his reflection in the shop

windows, adjusting his cap and tie, looking at his watch. I glance at the clock on the dashboard. My appointment isn't until four-thirty. I woke up before dawn this morning with Susanna's words dancing round and round in my head and a wisp of a dream of her and Max playing strange, dissonant sounds in front of a huge orchestra of faceless musicians. I got out of bed and went and sat in the garden watching the sky lighten, then got dressed, packed my bag and set off. And now I've mistimed my day so badly that I have several hours to kill and nowhere to go.

'Look, it's no big deal,' Max said on the phone the day the piece came out.

'Not for you, perhaps,' I said. 'It is for me. A massive great deal.'

'It hardly says anything about you.'

'Well, maybe that's the point.'

'What's the point?'

'That it hardly says anything about me.'

'But it's not about you. It's about Susanna and me.'

'Well, that makes it *so* much better.'

'Come on, Julia. It's called *Relatively Speaking*. It's not called *Mothers and Daughters Speak to the Nation about their Relationship with Each Other*. The journalist was looking for unusual families – stories about people choosing different ways of living.'

'Susanna could've chosen *me*. I chose a different way of living, didn't I? All those years we lived in Africa. Just her and me?'

'But she didn't. Maybe because she didn't feel she had to. Because you brought her up to be her own person, who makes her own decisions without worrying about what anyone else thinks of them. She didn't need to agonise about upsetting you, because she knows how strong you are. That's a good thing, isn't it? You can't have it both ways. Though that's never stopped you from trying.'

‘But what do you think it looks like? That Susanna’s most significant influence is her *uncle*. Not her mother.’

‘That’s not true, and, even if it was, what’s so bad about that?’

‘You’d know if you’d had children.’

‘I have had children,’ said Max quietly. ‘Lots of them.’

If I were to get out of the car and walk past the row of shops where the parking attendant is still lingering, I’d pass the church where the gap-toothed vicar used to smile down at the Brownies and Cubs on church parade and hand out daffodils for us to take home on Mothering Sunday. I’d get to the privet hedges where Max and I used to pick food for our stick insects as we dawdled home for Sunday lunch. Amazingly, there’s still a farm here, its entrance at the far end of the shopping parade. We came here on a Sunday School outing once and were made to sing hymns in the fields. The farm labourers stood leaning on their rakes and pitchforks, smiling in a slightly embarrassed way as we sang ‘All Things Bright and Beautiful’, Mr-T-in-charge-of-under-sevens’ joyful contralto carrying in the autumn breeze. I feel my ears reddening just thinking about it. I should put some money in the parking meter. I should walk through those fields again now. Walk fast for a couple of hours until I feel better. But I don’t get out of the car. I fumble in the glove compartment for one of the compilation cassettes that Susanna made me, years ago. *Happy Birthday, Mum*, it says on the label in her teenage handwriting. *I love you. Hope you love this*. There is a little heart above the *i*. I push the cassette into the player, then pull away from the church and set off towards our old house.