

PETER. Family, fundamentally, defines what I am. Didn't used to be, used to be little, insignificant little things looking back on them but, and my Mum always used to say I just couldn't. Couldn't click with it but then... It started with her, seemed to, whom I absolutely fell into. She absorbed me, entirely, and we became one floundering, moderately functioning unit. Absorbed me like, like a tree slowly growing out and over, overtaking a. A... Until slowly you can't see but for her. Everything lost importance. Got a house. Then he was born, before his sister.

He's a good Lad, and it's funny because whenever he was at school we'd get told the exact opposite. 'Your son just can't concentrate', at least for the first few years, the first, you know the ones where they 'find' themselves, only not really because they're just going to change again but at least their voices drop. His did, it's funny I remember I was going to wake him up, as I tended to, still do - he's 18 and still needs - I still have to open his door and try and rouse this huge slumbering mass. He's not huge, although not exactly the sporting type either, but you could say that for me I guess. Not like we haven't encouraged that kinda thing but, he's never. Ran around with a cone on his head at football practice, that kinda thing. And you look and just go... no.

I was walking along the corridor to his room and I opened the door and there's just this, well like I said slumbering mass. Snoring against his pillow. And I brace myself for the abuse, walk over, open the curtains. The sun beams in, as it really doesn't tend to in the North but. You know south of Stockport isn't exactly a prime holiday location, so it was a nice surprise I guess. I think my footsteps have roused him slightly anyway, because I hear him grunting behind me. Face down in the pillow still, so it's not like. It's weird because he used to be such a cute child. Used to crawl into the bed next to me each morning after his Mum had got up. Grow up and out through the duvet, fall asleep again where she'd been.

His sister is far more -- decadent than he is. Netball team, which is kind of like basketball only when you have the ball you can't move for some reason. Like that makes a good sport to watch. And it's called Netball but it's a basket that you're throwing it into, so in my mind netball was always a far better name for football because there's a proper net in that. Football has your, they kick it with their feet so yeah I guess foot makes far more sense. Football. I've watched far more Netball than I ever thought I'd have to, shouted far more enthusiastically at Netball than I ever thought I'd have to, but life hits you in funny ways like that.

It's our fault really because she's always been good at throwing. Always very accurate, oddly so. On our honeymoon, her mother and I, we went to the Seychelles. Sat on the beach, soaking in the sun.

Sometimes we'd throw a ball between each other though, and, I swear we'd miss by a good 10 feet every time. Every time. She.

He wakes up, head lifts off the pillow. And I can see him, it's like the light is burning his skin, like a vampire. He turns to me, almost yellow in the sun and, I can tell he's surprised by it too, and he opens his mouth to throw this torrent of, well, abuse at me and. It's never inventive, just a 'leave me alone' or something, not really Shakespeare. Not really swearing yet either, we haven't reached 'fuck off' yet which I'm making the most of. Can't wait to put on my shocked face when that emerges, we're edging closer to it though I think. I think, we'll see. But he utters this noise and his face just drops. His whole, being just falls because. His voice is about two octaves lower than it was before and. His face, I'll never forget his face because an embarrassed teenager, a truly embarrassed teenager is a sight to behold. Their whole world just.

We walked through the town, Victoria. It's the capital city but in the Seychelles they're so small anyway you may as well call it a town. I'm buying some nail scissors because we were messing about the night before and I managed to scratch her all the way down her arm. Quite fantastic really. We didn't think to pack anything like that, far too excited. We thought we had but, you don't think about your nails. I remember being told that nails are just hair glued together which freaked me out because. Imagine if they were just.

There's this monument, it's called 'bicentennial'? I don't know, I thought it was for the Millennium but apparently not. This monument, I don't think anyone knows what it is. My wife thought it was crescent moons but that's stupid because. That's illogical, because it's a fishing village, or city. A Fishing community, like something out of popeye. And I just found it so funny because these tails sticking up from the ground, imagining these fish buried deep, must be about 15 foot long just stuck. She said they could be doves but whatever they were they're stuck, you know? Cold steel. They're the middle of a roundabout now, I think.

We bought his sister a Netball kit, came with a backboard though so it's interchangeable. She'd said she wanted to do basketball but, it was my wife actually who turned to her and just said "no, Netball is for girls" and that's. So backwards now because of course she should play Basketball but. And it was her that said it so. Time was different. It didn't feel weird to say.

Am I getting fat? I've been eating a lot of meals on rotation recently because I've never had to really think about it before. Settled on a rotation of three, fish and chips, carbonara and chili and they're all very carb heavy and I just can't quite tell. But at the same time you can't have them without the carbs.

Especially not carbonara because otherwise it's just egg, you know. And it's the pasta that cooks the egg so it's not, it's just raw egg and cheese and that's not. I mean it's not a meal.

She caught it once. We were on the sand running around and the ball we were throwing. Silly little tennis ball, should've got something else from in town which would've been so easy because it's so tourist heavy they've always got those big inflatable ones but. I lobbed this ball and I'm a terrible thrower and like always it veered off. And I'm wearing these swim shorts. Baywatch style, was years ago though so I was hopefully more youthful than now and I go to run after it. Like you know when you've made a bad throw and it's almost like an apology? Even though it's so much closer to them, kind of an 'I'm sorry I was so naff here let me get it'. My foot gets stuck in the sand and I, I fall flat on my face. But when I look up, there it is. Lodged in the palm of her hand. Might as well have been my heart because I just fell all over again and dear God did she envelop me. Does. She still does.

When we got married, we planted two trees, saplings, either side of our path. Intertwined them. As they grew they bonded together, two halves becoming one. They're still there, they're strong now, I can hang by my arms from them and they bare my weight. Pushing into each other. I'm thinking of getting the kids to plant apple cores next to them, but I don't know if that'll work. I don't really have anyone to -- I might just do it anyway. And if it's shit I'll just go out and buy some more saplings. He'd like that.

That morning, when his voice broke, he's embarrassed as hell and I think it coaxes him downstairs the fastest I've ever seen him because. Even at 13 they prefer their mother's pity and it's kinda cute I guess. And my wife and daughter are there and they've got their cereal.

Morning routine, coffee, granola and orange juice. No matter where we are in the world, you know I could be off. I have to go to America sometimes, 5 weeks at a time because I. Wherever I am, we keep connected because we all have coffee, granola and orange juice.

And he freezes. And I think it's because he doesn't want to speak so I go off to get myself some water. You know this is a moment that he's going to remember for the rest of his life so I don't want to bully him into it. I get my orange juice. The carton is cold, and a bit wet.

Amanda's skin is yellow in the sun. He says 'Mum, your skin is yellow'. And I turn and I think it's just the day. First thing that comes to my mind is a Simpsons joke and I say it. Right to her face. I look at her eyes and he's right they aren't white. They're like.

The backboard that came with the Netball kit broke because. I threw this. Caught me off guard because I've never been able to throw but. Made this almighty crash as it fell. My mum always used to say I couldn't deal with... I'm far more of a lone, kinda. Person.

She went to the Doctors, and they said it was probably her Gallbladder that was blocked up. Gallstones. Bile dissipating into her skin so she's yellow. Easy job. Just, remove them.

He goes to school that morning and he's shaking and I can't tell if it's his voice or if, like me he's walking on a cushion of air. The ground beneath is so delicate it's almost not there.

It wasn't gallstones. It was.

It's funny, I remember lying in the sand with her after she'd caught that ball. It was hot, and I hadn't put enough sunscreen on so I could tell I was going to burn. When she smiles her eyes just open and I swear it's like the universe is there. It's right there. I reached across with my hand and hold that little bit of someone's head, behind the jaw and below the ear. Fingers in her hair, losing myself because it fits so perfectly.

It'd grown across the duct. Blocking it. Not just that either, everywhere. The room in the hospital was dark, so we could barely tell anything was wrong looking at her. I remember my daughter staring at the floor. Looked across at her brother and just told him it was going to be okay. Like they knew this was their battle from now. Like... my wife and I, we.

3 weeks. 3 weeks can go by looking at the tv for God's sake. It's nothing. You can't do anything in 3 weeks, can't meet anyone.

My daughter was at a Netball game. Her Grandad had taken her and oddly enough when you've been feeding you mum water off a sponge on a bloody stick. You um.

She won that match.

I was so proud. I could tell her mother was too when I told her. They say even when they're not responsive they can hear and I swear I saw her mouth twitch.

Her breathing had changed though.

I sent my daughter a text. She didn't get there in time. Not that it mattered.

*Beat.*

Did you know that you can't close the eyes of someone who's died? Not after a while. They get locked in place. Her eyes were like.

We all sat down the next morning, had orange juice and granola. I couldn't face coffee.

My son slept in my bed that night. Where she'd been. Like a final drop of innocence.

*By Patrick Swain*