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My Dear David,

I found a parcel of photos today I'd long forgotten about. They were in a shoebox, isn't that where all old photos are discovered? Just a handful have managed to escape the ranks of albums in the sideboard, but together they are a story, a passage through the years. I can see why they've been left out of the official family portfolio; they are the times we prefer not to remember and the images that aren't choreographed. Moments from behind the big smiles and the structured happiness. Now all the more precious for their lack of polish.

1966 - we're outside of St. Cuthberts. It's not one of the official wedding photos, but rather a view from the restricted seats, the colours somehow faded and garish at the same time. My brother is leaning against the church wall. He's wearing his army uniform and has spurs on his boots! He's chatting up one of the bridesmaids. I don't recall her name; someone I haven't seen for decades. One of those friends who slip into the ether somewhere along the way.

I'm in the foreground looking into the camera, my Nana Mouskouri glasses, terribly fashionable at the time, look so dated. You're looking straight at me, somewhat shy, I can see the small boy within. And there's my granny, starched and smart, wispy hair lifting in the breeze, dainty as an iced cake. Long gone now. She cut the fat from her ham at the wedding breakfast and heaped it onto your plate, certain she was giving you a rare treat.

1969 - a banquet with dancing and a Tudor-style feast; chicken drumsticks and the obligatory pig's head with an apple in its mouth. We're side by side at a long trestle table amongst other couples and I'm turned toward you laughing. You have your head tipped back and a man in an apron is pouring a stream of wine into your mouth from a glass receptacle held high in the air. You're wearing a leather jacket, stiff with newness. I'm wearing a polo neck underneath a corduroy dress; I must have been sweltering. We're having such fun. I note my glasses have improved slightly.

1974 - Madeline has arrived. We're sitting together on the bed holding her between us, our hands overlapping on her small, solid body. The image is a touch out of focus. She's wearing a tiny white cardigan and bonnet which I think your mother knitted. We're delighted and relieved, it seemed like it wouldn't happen for us and then it did. It's the sort of happiness that cuts through sleepless nights. Our family is growing and we're in it together, as always.

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1978 - I'm tremendously cross with you. You were out getting up to high jinks with your awful friend Eric and you had a car accident. In the photo your face is covered in cuts and bruises. Madeline is scared of you because of the way you look. It's Christmas and there's wrapping paper strewn across the sofa. Eric skidded on the ice and careered off the road into a field. There wasn't a mark on him, but you look like you've been to war. I shouted at you, called you selfish. Looking back, I can see you were letting off steam, that it was unlucky, no seat belt laws in those days, and Eric most likely over the limit.

1989 - a long interval since the last photo was taken. We look different in this one. Your sideburns have gone, and I have contact lenses. We look more attractive although you've always made me feel beautiful in real life. We're sitting in the garden on the white plastic patio furniture, it's all the rage. The brick barbecue you built is behind us and we're holding up wine glasses in a toast. I don't know what we're celebrating, perhaps nothing. We'd had Kerry by then, she was nine and Madeline fourteen. We'd lost a baby boy, so it was just the two girls for us, and we were grateful to have them. Although there is always the sadness of what might have been and I still cradle my grief like a bird's egg and imagine what his role would have been – teasing his sisters, being the proud brother, a handful, a good boy. Never forgotten.

1990 - Madeline holding up her GSCE results letter. She has passed her exams a year early. We could burst with pride. Kerry doesn't achieve academically but can sing like an angel and draw the likeness of anything and anyone. We're delighted with our girls and the steps they're beginning to take; the kindling of their dreams sparking into life.

1999 - you and me sitting on a wall at the beach. One of the first selfies I took on my mobile phone. I used to send them to Madeline to print out until I realised there would be photos of everything in this age we live in. It's the day of your mum's funeral and you're struggling. We walked and we sat in quiet contemplation, holding hands, words unnecessary. Not a happy photo but one that speaks of togetherness and solidarity. The times we make ourselves unwaveringly strong so we may hold the other up during their darkest hours.

2006 - Kerry and that awful boyfriend. We laughed about him at first and then we prayed he'd go and finally he did, taking his overbearing opinions and disturbing politics with him. How she cried and how we knew with certainty she would be just fine. She had a narrow

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escape from the sort of man who would repress her free spirit instead of encouraging it to soar. Now we have Jim who is perfect for her and understands her, better than we do if I'm honest. The old expression about giving your children roots and wings, I hope we've done that, I like to think we have.

2007 - your retirement party, us wearing those daft glasses and moustaches and laughing with John and Mike your work friends. The awful woman I could never stand but you said it would be unfair to leave her out. Arguing about it because she was always so snooty toward me. She called herself your work wife, goodness how I wanted to wipe the smirk off her face.

It was such a change having you at home all the time. It took a while to settle into it. We rubbed each other the wrong way for a while didn't we my darling, until you discovered gardening and golf. John retired too and something of a boy's club developed at the pub on Thursday afternoons. We started booking holidays, taking long, leisurely walks, and enjoying the view a little more.

2018 - me during chemo. This one escaped the album because I look ghastly. I've been well for a few years now, but they were bleak times. We were frightened and tried to hide it from each other, but it was impossible. We came out the other side, stronger for it but sharply schooled in the fragile nature of life. You were by my side every step of the way, even when I was horribly angry with the world. There were many times when you carried me, and I valued nothing so much as the friendship at the core of our marriage. Cancer offers no glamour, no romance, just cold, wretched facts, the future clotted with fear. That's when you need more than a partner or a lover, you need a friend and a comrade.

I've finished looking through the photos, I look across at where you're dozing on the sofa. Older now but still my very own. These images represent a world we've built together; layer upon layer of birthdays, moody teenagers, promotions, Christmases, a few big rows, hugs, impromptu dancing to the kitchen radio, the time you flirted with a waitress, the time that builder took a shine to me and you got in a huff. A lifetime of growing together until here we are, the heads of this family, bigger now than when we started it. Time has gifted us lines and grey hair, but we still hold hands, and we still roll toward each other as we fall asleep at night. In a while when you wake up, you'll look across at me and ask if I'd like a nightcap and I'll nod my head. Tomorrow when it's your birthday, your 80th year, I'll give you this

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letter with these photos and we'll read it together and remember all of the times and know how lucky we are.

Happy birthday my darling,

Jen x