



Speak

#TRUTH **Lies**

A MEMOIR
ON HEALING
FROM FAMILY
ESTRANGEMENT

Vig Gleeson

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Family Estrangement

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The First Three Chapters

Speak #Truth Lies is a work of nonfiction. Names and identifying details of certain individuals mentioned in this book have been changed in order to protect their privacy.

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For my husband and daughter.
I love you more dearly than the spoken word can tell.

Foreword

Through the seven and a half years of writing this memoir, I've come to know TRUTH as silky smooth, like liquid gold, something to cherish and treasure. I've also seen how fluid truth is, and how many forms it takes. We each interpret the truth through the veil of our beliefs, emotions and experiences. This gives truth many forms and perspectives. When I say this is my truth, I mean, this is how I saw, felt and processed what happened. As Jacques Lacan famously said;

“I always speak the truth. Not the whole truth, because there's no way, to say it all. Saying it all is literally impossible: words fail. Yet it's through this very impossibility that the truth holds onto the real.”

This story is real, to me, it is my truth. To craft a good story, for readers who don't yet know me, I have used some creative license. Some names and identifying characteristics have been changed to protect the privacy of people who appears in these pages. I don't remember exact words spoken from years ago, so I have reconstructed some conversations, but I stand comfortably by my narrative as it reflects my memory of place, time and the people in my life. Their perspective, no doubt, differs from mine, as seen in the relationship with my Mum. Some scenes are condensed and composite of actual events. I make no claim that the way I remember things is precisely how they occurred, only that this is how they occur in my mind.

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Arrival 2018

I lift my head and let the sun kiss my face. The sea breeze cools me down after a long day of driving, from my hometown Ålesund, in the summer heat. My daughter Ruby is beside me telling funny stories. Her jumping jack shadow – black against the white ferry deck – stretches taller than her in the early evening sun. I inhale the fresh salty smell of sea from the highest passenger deck. Ahead lies the island of Atløy, only a short fifteen-minute crossing from Askvoll, not enough time to contemplate what will greet us when we get there.

It's been fourteen years since I was last here, the only time I visited my father, The Captain, on his island. That time he was waiting for me with his van parked behind the boathouse, out of view. As soon as he released me from his bearhug he tossed me the keys and with a grin said, "You're driving." The smell of booze hung in the air between us.

"Why?" I asked. "Did you lose your licence?"

He grinned, so I kept asking and eventually, he admitted it was indeed the case. He never told me how he lost his licence, but it was easy to guess why.

We started calling him The Captain when Ruby was small and wanted to know where my Dad was. She was too young to understand why I didn't have contact with my father. So, I told her he was the captain of a ship on the big sea. At the time, her favourite book was Astrid Lindgren's *Pippi Longstocking*, which I read to her over and over. Her imagination ran wild with the possibility that her granddad was a pirate, with superpowers, like Pippi's dad. It wasn't a lie, not back then when she was only three

or four. It was more like silken threads of truth spun into fairytales. The truth wasn't age-appropriate at the time. Today on the ferry, she's eleven-and-a-half, and the image of a superhero-grandad has faded behind the truth.



As the ferry nears the port, the boathouse he once parked his van behind comes into view. A farm sits just above it, nestled into the mountain. I see him now, in my mind's eye, waiting for me on the dock, grinning.

When we roll across the ferry ramp onto dry land, he's not there, of course. The Captain is gone. What's most heartbreaking is that he left without saying goodbye. I wonder why he didn't reach out, didn't let us know his end was near. What was so terrible that he didn't want to tell us? *What stopped him from giving us a call?* Dying, it's so final – why leave with so much unsaid? Could it be that he thought he had more time? Or was he still angry with me for something? Did he blame me for not keeping in touch? Was I to blame? All week, these questions have been spinning around in my mind, churning up guilt and regret.

For now, I let the thoughts go and instead focus on steering Mum's hybrid Toyota Yaris on the narrow bendy roads. Up the hill from the ferry port we pass Bunnpris, the only grocery shop on the island. He must have shopped here, many times, I'm thinking, and I hope I will meet someone with a good story about him, someone to tell me he was a good man after all.



For years I've wondered what it would be like when my father died. Would I even be told before he was buried? It was Christian, my brother, who rang me – on 18 July – a week ago. He had just spoken on the phone with Nora, The Captain's companion for the last twelve years. She was there, in the hospital with him, when he took his last breath, close to three o'clock in the afternoon. I rang her right after speaking with Christian. I didn't know how I felt about the news of his death, only an urgency about what to do next. I was still on the phone with Nora when Shane came home from work with an enormous bouquet of flowers. He'd forgotten our twenty-third wedding anniversary the day before and was making up for it with an abundance of roses. He raised his brows and shook his head, when I didn't acknowledge the flowers straight away. My phone conversation was in Norwegian, and my Irish husband didn't understand a word.

Shane and Ruby were both in the kitchen when I hung up. Bewildered more than sad I had to take a moment, first to fuss over the flowers and then... then I had to tell them: my Dad just died. Ruby drew a shocked breath and slapped her palm over her open mouth. Her eyes wide, she studied my face as Shane embraced me, saying sorry. It was a long hug before his brain switched into action and he started making calls and checking flight schedules out of Cairo, to get Ruby and me to the funeral on time.

It was mixed emotions I felt that day. A sense of release mixed with anger and sorrow. Some emotions echoed the lament in Ruby's voice when she asked why she had to go to a funeral for a man she had never met.

“He was your grandad,” I explained. “He was my Dad.”

“Yes, a grandad who didn’t want to meet me.” I didn’t blame her for her bitterness, but was she right? Had he really not wanted to meet her?



We moved to Cairo a few years ago for Shane’s posting at the Irish embassy there. With no direct flights to Norway, the journey takes twenty-two hours. After an overnight flight we landed in Ålesund, where we stayed with Mum, in her one-bedroom apartment. Twenty years after their acrimonious divorce, Mum has no interest in going to The Captain's funeral. Even if she wanted to, she is too frail, still recovering from a serious autoimmune disease that struck her down in January.

“You and Ruby can take my car,” she suggested, when Christian and I were planning our trip to the island and wondered how we’d all fit, with our luggage and provisions, in one small car. He drove his own Toyota Yaris. Ruby and I followed on his tail, something we were grateful for when we saw sparks fly from his car as he had a slight collision with a roadside barrier. The drive from Ålesund took much longer than the six hours Google Maps predicted. We hit several roadworks and waited in queues for many ferries, then Christian got a puncture. Now, he is stranded, two hours away, in Moskog, awaiting roadside rescue.

On the narrow roads on Atløy, I slow Mum’s car to a crawl at the top of the hill, where the church sits on a cliff looking out over the sea.

“Look,” I point out to Ruby. “This is where he’ll be buried.” We strain our necks to get a glimpse of the three-hundred-year-old stavkirke before it disappears from view. The speed limit varies

between fifty and eighty but we snail around the tight bends at thirty. I make mental notes of the pockets of passing places should we have to pull in or reverse for oncoming cars. The road – the only road from the ferry port at Gervik to the fishing port of Herland — on the other side of the island — is too narrow for two cars. In places, it's dug into the side of the mountain with a dramatic drop into the sea, like here, just past the marina. How did The Captain make this arduous journey all these years, from his house at Herland to the ferry port, without a licence to drive, I wonder.

My breath catches when we reach the top of the mountain, where we get a full view of Herland with the open vista across its fishing harbour and the many islands beyond. And then – stretching into the horizon – the North Sea. This is coastal Norway at its most spectacular, bathed in warm sunshine. The sea, a reflective mirror of the cloud-free sky, is blue – royal blue. From garden flagpoles, pennants in the Norwegian national colours of red, white and blue, wave a lazy welcome. Red farm buildings and white houses dot the green and rocky landscape. As we descend towards the fishing harbour seagull cries float through our open windows. I turn off the radio to hear their calls. The clear fresh smell of the sea crystallises my senses. It was among this beauty The Captain, my father, lived, for seventeen years.

It's busy around Herland; the yearly Krabbe Festival is on this weekend. The ticket seller on the ferry had asked if we were going to it. "I'm here to bury my father, but I hope to taste the crabs too." I told him. He didn't know what to say to that. I have forgotten where the turnoff to his house is, but I see the house from the new pub and holiday rentals, where I stop, at the harbour. It makes it easy when I ask for directions to Perh

Perhland's house and point to the red building at the top of the hill. The young man I stopped to ask points back in the direction we just came from. "Take the first left and follow the road up the hill." I thank him and get back in the car.

I remember it well now, the steep incline that snakes around the bend and crawls up to where his house, which he named Knausten, comes into view through the massive garden hedge. There is a new lean-to by the living room veranda. It looks good, a greyish-white that doesn't match the faded red paint on the rest of the house. I turn up his weed-green gravel drive and park behind what must be Nora's car.

The neighbour is hanging up washing next door. I go over and introduce myself. She gives her condolences. I thank her and hint at an apology for any inconvenience it's caused them, living next door to 'a grumpy old man'. I smile. We start chatting and her husband joins us. It's Marta and Harald. They've lived next to The Captain for – what – fifteen years? They haven't seen much of him in the past two years.

"He kept himself to himself, indoors mostly," says Marta. She'd guessed he was sick but didn't know it was this serious.

The day is still hot and Nora has waited hours to meet us. When Ruby rings the doorbell an electronic bird-chirp chimes above us. I open the door and we laugh and call out our hellos as we walk up the narrow steep stairs. Laminated in a ship-deck imitation, each step is reinforced with a lip of steel, nailed down just like on the ferries and ships he'd worked on. The top of the stairs, where there once was a door, opens directly onto a ramshackle living room.

"Oh my god," I whisper.

"Jesus," Ruby echoes. "Did he live here?"

“Hello,” says a familiar voice I’ve only heard on the phone before. Around the corner by the kitchen is Nora. She is short and round with cropped light brown hair. A towel hangs around her neck covering her expansive bosom. She sways when she walks towards us. I bend to hug her. It’s our first meeting, but after hours on the phone during the past week, it feels like we’ve known each other always. Our embrace is one of welcomed recognition.

“So you made it then?” Nora giggles and opens her arms wide to Ruby, who awkwardly steps forward and accepts her hug.

“Look at you.” Nora takes a step back and holds Ruby at arm’s length, drinking her in. “Aren’t you beautiful and tall?” she says in Norwegian. Ruby shrinks under the compliment without understanding a word, nor does she have a word in reply.

“Yes, she’s growing up beautifully,” I reply to Nora in English. The big smile I give Ruby is met with an eye-rolling ‘shut up Mum’ look so prevalent for her pre-teen age.

“Why don’t you have a look around?” I suggest, giving her a way out from feeling awkward. She slinks off to explore the ramshackle little house.

“Oh look,” I say. Two large gilded framed photos hang on the wall where we have stopped for our embrace, “my confirmation portrait.” Nora and I laugh as we take in the large photos printed on canvas to look like paintings. In the first frame is me, at fourteen, wearing my national costume, looking longingly into the distance, away from the lens, all Lady Di-like. In the second is my little brother at seven, with a bright cheeky smile, complete with brand new front teeth. Eyes fixed on the lens, he’s looking proud in a navy blazer, thumbs nonchalantly in the pockets of his beige chinos. He was such a gorgeous boy. There is a sizeable tear in the canvas of my portrait.

“What happened there then?” I stick a finger straight through it.

“Yes I saw that,” giggles Nora. “I have no idea, but the walls were so bare I thought the photos would brighten the place up a bit, so I hung it up anyway.” *So, he didn't have the photos hanging on the wall.* I follow behind as Nora slowly moves past the large fireplace into the sparse living room, chatting about the cleaning and straightening out she's been doing, in preparation for our arrival. I had told her not to clean the house, that I would do it, but I'm grateful for all the effort she's made.

“I wasn't going to do it but your Aunt Una insisted. She reminded me about Christian's allergies, and then Emma, the daughter of a friend of mine, said she'd help me out, and...” Nora's voice blurs into silence as I let the state of the house sink in. Stripped of paint and wallpaper, the naked drywalls are stained with black soot as if licked by fire, the ceiling just the same. In the middle of the room sits a large La-Z-Boy, red once, greying now, threadbare and tired with the worn-down indent of a man no longer here. I picture him sitting there, watching his large flatscreen TV or looking out of the frameless, undressed windows, possibly dreaming up ideas for how he'd do up the place.

The old sofa suite with matching bookshelves – bought more than three decades ago – and the unfinished renovation projects transport me back to my childhood homes. The Captain always had a house improvement scheme on the go. Projects that often left our home stark and hollow, though never as bad as this. Back then, Mum was there to create *hygge* (a cozy comfort) in the rooms he left intact.



The year before my confirmation — I was fourteen — after he finished renovating the basement, complete with storerooms and a snug den, he stripped bare our living room, threw out the wall-to-wall carpet and started rewiring the electrics.

“I’ve never seen such shoddy workmanship.” He complained about the building contractors. Our house, recently built with only one previous owner, was part of a huge housing estate. The hundreds of timber frame houses were mass-produced and shot up in record time. I was giving The Captain a hand running cables through the plastic pipes we’d laid the day before, through the loft, from one end of the house to the other. He’d also left me in charge of making dinner – bangers and mash. I was in the kitchen with a crime novel and the potatoes on the boil, waiting for him to holler from the loft.

“Vigdis, pull the black cable, slowly, till I tell you to stop.” Back and forth from the kitchen to the stripped living room – where piles of wood planks for mouldings and flooring were stored under thick sheets of plastic – I darted.

“Pull, pull, pull,” he shouted from the attic, “all right, that’s it. Stop.” I drained the potatoes and started to mash, adding a dollop of butter and a splash of milk.

“Vigdis Vigdis! Are you there? Pull the red one. Do you hear me? Pull the red one. Now!” His shouting jolted me and the splash of milk turned into a pour. Milk splattered on the counter where I quickly abandoned the carton and rushed to the living room, yanking and pulling the cables, as he instructed.

“That’s it. It’s through, you can leave it now.”

Back in the kitchen, I held the potato masher above the pot. “Oh, shit!” I muttered under my breath, when I heard him clomping down the attic ladder, tool-belt jingling. Entering the

kitchen he headed for the sink, next to the worktop where I pretended to mash the drowned spuds. He opened the tap and with a square of green soap started scrubbing his hands, all the way up to his elbows.

He looked into the pot. "What the fuck?"

"Yes, sorry about that, potato soup, right?" I tried to be brave.

"I'll give you potato soup!" Standing right beside me and still he was shouting. "You have one thing to do, one fucking thing, and you can't even get that right." He shook his hands with vigour, water droplets landing everywhere, before tearing the hand towel off the hook inside the cupboard door below the sink.

"I'll boil some more potatoes and add them in," I suggested. "It won't take long, it'll be fine."

"I'll give you fine!" He slammed the towel down on the draining board. "Your mother is about to walk in the door, do you think she wants to wait another hour for dinner? Fucking useless you are." His nostrils flared. "Get the fuck out of my kitchen!"

I just stood there, frozen to the spot, as he grabbed the pot and slammed it in the sink, hot potato soup flying everywhere.

"I said get out of my sight!" His face was bright red.

I leapt out the door and down the stairs to my room. Diving onto the bed, I burrowed into my pillow to muffle the tremendous roar as it erupted from my chest; *I hate you, I hate you, I hate you.*

Shortly after the failed potato soup incident, he went back out to sea, leaving the living room suspended in mid-DIY chaos, much like he's left his house now. Only this time, he's not coming back.



“Are you all right?” Nora gently strokes my arm and brings me back to the present.

“Yes, yes.” I blink the mist from my eyes. She smiles. I scramble for something to say. Lost in my thoughts I hadn’t heard a word she’d said.

“He’s had that a long time,” I nod towards the old sofa suite. A large coffee table sits in front of the dejected tufted leather sofa pushed up against the soot-stained wall.

“Oh, yes, it’s seen better days,” Nora says. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I’m fine,” I nod, “it’s just strange, you know, being here . . .”

“I know,” she says, stroking my arm again.

“Can we bring in my suitcase, Mum?” Ruby steps through the veranda door from the garden.

“Yes, of course,” I say, glad of the interruption.

“Where do you want us?” I ask Nora.

“I thought you two can take the bedroom downstairs on the right, and Christian can have Perh’s room upstairs.” Perh, is The Captain’s real name.

With Nora’s instructions, Ruby and I head back down the ship-stairs and out to the car. The boot and back seat are full of bedding, suitcases, and bags of food, thoughtfully curated to make our stay in his house as comfortable as possible. I’m glad of my foresight to bring our bedding from Mum’s place. I was right in thinking The Captain didn’t have spare duvets and pillows.

“Let’s make the bed first,” I say, and load Ruby up with our duvets and pillows. “Watch where you’re going.”

“I’ve got it, Mum.” Her Birkenstocks crunch across the gravel drive as I hoist out our suitcases and follow her inside.

“Which side of the bed do you want?” I ask, stretching two single sheets breadthwise across the queen-size bed, tucking the ends taut under the mattress.

“I want to be by the window,” she says, throwing our pillows onto the bed. I roll out our two single duvets and smooth them down before I hoist her suitcase on top, unzip it, and leave it there, open for her.

“Ok then honey, I’ll let you unpack yourself.” I peek into the small wardrobe. “There’s no space in the wardrobe, so we’ll just keep our clothes in our suitcases like we do at my Mum’s place.”

“I’m good with that,” Ruby says.

I look at her and smile. “Is there anything else you need?”

“No, I’m good for now,” she replies, and I go back to the car for the cooler boxes and bags of food.

In the kitchen, Nora helps me put away the food we bought in Ålesund, knowing that options on the island would be limited. There is lots of room in his fridge and cupboards, but the freezer is full.

“He used to cook up big batches of fish and meat, even vegetables that he froze in dinner-size portions.” Nora chats as we work. “I said to him, ‘Would it not be easier to get some ready meals instead and save yourself all this work?’” Knowing what’s coming, I start to laugh and butt in:

“Oh god no! Ready meals?! They’re pure junk, not worthy of human consumption.”

“Yes,” chuckles Nora, “that’s exactly what he said.”

The Ring

With the food put away and a fresh pot of coffee brewed, Nora and I bring our mugs to the two leather armchairs in front of the large south-east-facing windows in his living room, with the view of the front garden and Tvibyrgen island in the distance. Nora opens her phone and shows me photos of The Captain, dead in the hospital bed. A blue cloth is tied around his cranium to keep his jaw closed. The bow on top of his head makes me think of the story of 'The Velveteen Rabbit'. Except, The Captain hadn't been loved into this scruffy state. Love, I think, as I look at him on the small screen, seemed to be something he rejected from his life. Now, in death, he looks tiny compared to the formidable man of my memory. I take the phone from Nora and pinch my thumb and finger on the screen to zoom in on the photograph. How did he get so small? I've thought of our estrangement as his loss. That he was the one missing out on my life and his granddaughter growing up. Now I realise I've missed out on seeing him growing old. I haven't thought of him as an old man. In my mind, he's stuck as I remember him when I last saw him, in his 50s and 60s. But time has not stood still for either of us. Why, I wonder, is she showing me these photos, why did she take them? Is it normal to take photos of dead people?

"Thank you for being there with him," I say, handing back her phone.

"Of course I was there for him," she says. "He was peaceful then, at the end."

"Did he tell you why he didn't want us to know he was dying?" It's a relief to finally ask the question out loud.

“He didn’t want anyone to know the cancer was back until he could post it on Facebook,” Nora explains. “It was his last wish.”

“But why?” I clench my jaw and frown, this whole Facebook excuse sounds ridiculous, and we’re not just anyone, we’re his kids, for Christ’s sake. After everything we went through with our father, did we not have the right to some kind of closure? I feel robbed of an apology I think was owed. I take a few deep breaths, for showing anger, I know, is futile.

“He had been following Ingrid Bjørnov’s Facebook posts about her cancer journey,” says Nora. My mind goes blank.

“Who?” I ask.

“You know, the singer, she was in that band, Dollie something, they won the Eurovision Song Contest.”

“Dollie de Luxe?” I’m thinking out loud. “She’s dead?”

“No, no, she’s not dead, but she has cancer and Perh’n — she uses the familiar affectionate form of his name as she speaks. — followed her on Facebook with great admiration. That’s why he wanted to post about his own cancer journey.”

“So why didn’t he?” I feel myself getting hot.

“Well, I don’t know, I suppose he didn’t get around to it.” Nora smiles. My next question sticks in my chest. Why didn’t she tell us he was sick and dying? I wimp out of asking, not because I don’t want her answer, but for fear of a possible accusation. If I had reached out and gotten in touch with him, I would have known. He was an old and sick man, maybe his reasons for shutting me out had evaporated in his final years.

A heavy tiredness settles in my bones. It feels like a lifetime ago since I packed my suitcase in Cairo and thought of bringing

Farmor's (The Captain's mother's) ring. His sisters, Una and Oda, who are coming to the island for The Captain's funeral, gave me the ring on the morning of my confirmation, the only time I remember them visiting us in Ålesund. It had been cut off Farmor's finger after she died four years earlier. She was only sixty-four. It was a terrible blow to them all. She'd worn the ring every day since The Captain gave it to her, around the time I was born, I think, but I might be wrong about that.

"I have something for you," I say to Nora, and stand to fish the ring from my jeans pocket.

"Oh, yes?" She sounds surprised. I want to be closer to her and sit down on the side table between our chairs. I take her hand in mine and put the ring in her palm.

"What's this?" She gasps, looking at the ring. Two pearls set between two lines of six blue sapphires on the gold band, now smooth after I had it repaired decades ago.

"It belonged to his mother," I say. "He bought it for her." I tell her the story about how I came to have the ring, and the little I know about Farmor.

"He didn't make it to her funeral," I say, "he was out at sea when she died."

"I know," says Nora. "It was very hard on him, he loved her very much. I don't think he ever got over losing her."

The Captain was just short of his fortieth birthday when his mother died. I was eleven, the same age as Ruby is now. I remember Mum mentioning Farmor had died. She said it so casually that her words didn't affect me. Not until months later, after The Captain had returned from the sea, walking home from

school one day in the rain, with my friends, I suddenly burst into tears.

“What’s the matter?” they asked.

“My Farmor died.” I remember wailing, but when they asked me when she died and how, I didn’t know. It was a weird delay of grief. A kind of grief that didn’t seem to belong to me. Like I was just acting. Later I felt embarrassed about my blubbering outburst, especially because my friends showed such concern for me. Now, sitting here with Nora, looking at Farmor’s ring, I realise grieving for The Captain doesn’t seem to belong to me either. I push the thought away and focus instead on how hard it must have been for The Captain to not have had the chance to say goodbye to his mother before she died, not even making it to her funeral.

We never spoke about Farmor. I only met her a few times when I was very young. Her only visit to Ålesund was for my parents’ wedding, and our visits to The Captain’s family in Lofoten were rare. I shake off the thought of how he carried his grief in silence half his life, and lift my gaze to look into Nora's smiling eyes.

There is a softness to her that reminds me of Farmor, though *how* eludes me. Memories of Farmor have pretty much faded away. The twelve years Nora spent as The Captain’s companion couldn’t have been easy. I feel the ring belongs to her. For me, it somehow symbolises the connection between these two women, the one who brought him into life and the one who stayed with him when he departed. It came to me while packing to leave Cairo: the ring was not my inheritance. I was only its caretaker until I met its rightful owner.

Nora folds her fists around the ring. She smiles, then laughs and says thank you like an excited child at Christmas. Nora always laughs. It's a relief – I was worried she might cry. I return her smile and think of Mum, the woman he married and had his children with. The woman who gave him a family of his own – my original family.

Love's Beginning 1965

They met on the high sea, on a merchant ship. Mum was the sparkling, petite brunette in the latest fashion, he the dashing officer in white uniform and gold striped epaulettes broadening his shoulders. Oil discoveries and a big upturn in Norwegian shipping in the 1960s meant plenty of work for Norwegian seafarers looking for adventures abroad. Mum's first North Atlantic crossing took her through the lakes of Canada to Chicago. Before this voyage, she had made it as far as Denmark, on a summer hitchhiking trip with her two roomies from Bergen – Inger and Bjørg. Then, in their early twenties, the three of them moved from Ålesund to Bergen – a day's travel south along the coast on Hurtigruten – for a change of scenery and much longed for independence. It was the start of the swinging sixties and they lived life to the max during the four years they shared a tiny two-room loft apartment. Mum was a shop floor assistant, the only previous experience on her resume being the years, since she was fifteen, she worked for Ranes, the haberdashery in Ålesund. They were young, free, and fabulous. Weekends were partied away while weeknights were spent painting nails and sewing clothes. Only the highest fashion would do. These girls were all about glitz and glam, as far as their minimum income would stretch. Many of their photos are with curlers in their hair, smoking a cigarette while doing the twist. They drank cocktails bought by the young men they flirted unapologetically with, inviting some back to continue the party in their loft. The three young women collected shoes, makeup, and fashion magazines. They had the skills to

make a pound of coffee last for weeks. They were the epitome of the Swinging Sixties'.

When Bjørg and Inger accepted marriage proposals and got swept into family life and motherhood, Mum, still single at twenty-six, moved back home to her old room in the loft, on B. Berntsens Street. Her parents, my Mormor and Morfar, bought the two-bedroom apartment when Mum was eighteen. They were first-time homeowners. Back in the old routine, living at home and working for Ranes, it wasn't long before Mum got itchy feet. In search of a new adventure, she applied to every employment notice for female ships' crew. In November 1965 her prayers were heard when she was hired as a chambermaid on a Norwegian ship that sailed abroad.

Her first time on an aeroplane was from Oslo to Heathrow, where she met Valerie, the other chambermaid she'd be working with, and four of the other new crew members. On the train from London to Swansea, where the ship was docked, the first officer and chief purser travelled first class, while Mum, Valerie, and a deckhand from Tøyen crammed into a third-class carriage. Starving, without a single pound for the sandwich cart – exchanging currency had not occurred to her – Mum's mind was on the apples nestled in her travel bag. The young fella from Tøyen, visibly awkward in the company of the two women – dressed as if they'd just stepped off the catwalk – soon took off for the dining cart. Relieved to see him go, Mum fished out the apples, one for her and one for her new friend Valerie, and that's how easily their friendship was made.

She arrived at the dock in Swansea in the early hours of a cold autumn morning, bleary-eyed and ready for sleep. There was no rest for new recruits. As soon as they boarded, the chief purser

handed Mum and Valerie their uniforms and work orders. “Det var harde bud,” (They were tough demands and high expectations), Mum always said at this point in the story. She wanted me to know she worked hard as well as played hard. She always was a good worker and I’m guessing she didn’t mind the gruelling work for all the adventures that came with *this* job.

The reason she wanted to work on this particular boat was because it docked in England, not too far from Ålesund should life at sea make her homesick after the first tour. It was a working vessel with cargo hulls and four-passenger cabins. When they left the port of Swansea, Mum and Valerie shared a cabin, until one of the passengers disembarked at the next port and Mum moved into one of the guest cabins.

“Having my own cabin on that boat,” she reminisced, “was a special kind of freedom.” It might have been a tiny cabin, but it was all hers.

Docking back in Swansea, in the early parts of 1966, a new second officer boarded. “Look, Inger, there comes your husband,” Valerie laughed, teasing Mum. From a deck up high, the two of them watched the new crew shake hands with the captain before boarding from the dock below.

“No way!” squealed Mum. “Will you get over yourself.” Their laughter caught the attention of the young second officer, who’d just stepped onto the swaying gangplank three decks below. He looked up and with a cheeky smile caught Mum’s eye.

In my childhood, I loved hearing the stories about how they met. Mum told it over and over again. That Valerie’s prediction came to pass as if Cupid himself was there with his bow and arrow sounded like a fairytale. When the movie *An Officer and a Gentleman*

came out, I imagined my father looked just like Richard Gere, and Mum could easily pass for Debra Winger.

I'm sure people who met my father back then gravitated towards his good looks and outgoing charm.

“One of his best talents was dancing,” Mum recalled. “I liked that about him. He was such a great dancer. Unlike most other men he would always ask me to dance.” A perfect gentleman for Mum, who still enjoys dancing the night away.

Soon after my father arrived onboard, the ship set sail across the Atlantic. They docked in ports along the South American coast, where they spent bright-light-nights under the Argentinian starry skies, before turning north to New York, and from there, back south to Buenos Aires.

Mum loved telling these stories. I listened as though they were fairytales of faraway places and harbours in distant lands, which to me they really were. Her tales of the shops and the jewellers, of perfumeries and bakeries, the pavement cafes and the sparkling lights of the nightlife were all made real by the gold and gems she brought home from her time abroad. Gold and gems we both wear to this day.

She had a zest for life and knew how to live it, to the tunes of Rock and Roll and showtime jazz. She was twenty-six, he'd just turned twenty-seven – they were young and free. They were having the time of their life, and sure as hell they fell in love – or so I want the story to go.

“It wasn't love at first sight,” Mum told me, “he was a bit podgy when he first came onboard, but he soon lost the weight, and by the time we started going steady he was slim and handsome.”

When their ship made land in faraway ports there were exuberant dinner dances, and tables with white linen, adorned by

fresh flowers, silver, and crystal. While back in Europe, Mum paints pictures of jazz clubs in English basements with cocktails, and cigarette smoke hanging thick under low ceilings. Nights ashore would last till dawn, partying till the small hours, leaving just enough time to change for work that started early every morning. Their journey across the Atlantic would have lasted weeks, and I wonder what it was like, for Mum and my father, far out at sea, with the horizon as their only view for weeks on end.

It wasn't just crew members and cargo that changed when they docked back in Swansea again. The ship changed owners and got a new name. Mum and Valerie spent a pretty penny on shoes and dresses for the extravagant christening ceremony of *M/S Salvador*. A celebration, Mum says, she will never forget.

Next Chapter

Hey, thank you for reading the first three chapters.

How was it for you? What were you thinking as you read?

Would you like to read more? The eBook will be available on Amazon from 24 June 2023, but I'm very happy to send you more free chapters. Please email me and let me know your thoughts about what you read, so far. I'll also be thrilled, if you are happy to give it some stars and a great review on Amazon or Good Reads.

I can't wait to hear from you.

Vig 

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About The Author

Vig Gleeson is a Norwegian-Irish writer, memoir mentor, editor and publisher. Passionate about excavating our human truths, through observing our behaviour, beliefs and emotions. She has studied physiology, neuroscience and cognitive behaviour extensively. Her work, in this field, lead her to excavate the lies hidden in her own limiting beliefs. She now helps women do the same for themselves. Speak Truth Lies is her first memoir, she is currently working on her second memoir, which is published in instalments to subscribers of her Circular. To get her Circular and read her next memoir, visit her website at viggleeson.com.