

LISA WILLIAMS



real life

Time to feel empowered and embrace the new year

And breathe. That's that. Over for another year. Christmas is done and dusted. New Year has come and gone. Down comes all the sparkle and tinsel. Gone are the weeks of merriment, excitement, happiness and joviality. Farewell to warming glasses of spicy mulled wine and cheeky gin and tonics. The kitchen cupboards are chock full of random and weird food stuffs, like milled pepper and anchovy encrusted gruyere flaky butter crackers and chilli-infused chocolate cherry truffles. The royal jelly smelling gift packs get shoved to the back of the bathroom cupboard. On goes any article of clothing with an elasticated waistband. Out comes the new gym kit, dusty exercise bike and rusty weights. And a cloud full of the new year gloom and despondency hangs in air. Sigh. Before I totally kill your mood on this first Saturday of 2014, this isn't going to be really all that bad. Honest. I love Christmas loads and loads but there is life beyond presents, port and pine needles. It's true. So, things to look forward to. Here we go.

On goes any clothing with an elasticated waistband

The shortest day is behind us so it will be getting lighter in the mornings and the evenings some time soon. Any day now it'll stop feeling like you're getting up for work in the middle of the night. It's time to feel empowered, face challenges head on and work on those New Year resolutions. A real test of the old willpower.

Dry January is in full flow for a booze-free month but I'm ditching that. Take my weekend wine away from me and I may well become a snivelling nervous wreck. Diets, detox and an all-round health kick are on the cards though. Well, that may be shortlived because another chocolate fest is imminent. Easter is lurking and will be upon us quicker than you can say Cadbury's Creme Egg. That's a good thing though, it's a long weekend.

The weather will get warmer... no guarantees on the rain shifting and the threat of snow could linger right up until April. But even if it shows no signs of being a balmy summer, then it's time to think about planning a hot and sizzling beach getaway to foreign shores. Holiday countdown time.

Downton Abbey will be back on television, in autumn, but it will return. Yay! Will Lady Mary still be playing hard to get? And who will be the goner? (Julian Fellowes must be itching to kill someone off, he's gone a whole series without death, apart from that valet chap).

See, there's plenty to smile about and let's face it, before you know it, it'll be Christmas. Only 354 days to go and I can't wait.

LKWilliams_star

One last thing

Please stop. Please stop phoning me Mrs Call Centre Worker and telling me that your records show that I've been in a car accident in the last three years.

It's very generous of you to inform me I may be entitled to some compensation. But here's the thing, and it's a biggy; surely I would remember either smashing into the back of another vehicle or a fellow motorist crashing into my car? Would I really forget whiplash and the hassle of insurance claims? Trust me. I have no knowledge of this accident and I don't know where you are getting your information. So please, STOP CALLING ME!

Mollie Cooke always dreamed of writing her life story but dementia robbed her of the opportunity. Now, her beloved granddaughter Katherine has made Mollie's wish come true – two years after her death aged 96.

Everyone was very upset," Katherine Anne Lee recalls. "The church service was very distressing and we were all so desperately sad.

"But afterwards, at the wake, they were playing really beautiful music. It was bagpipes and Nana always loved bagpipes. I remember it being very calm, very quiet, and I took that moment to say goodbye to her.

"I closed my eyes and visualised her back on her lane, back in her cottage in Church Stretton, she was meeting up with her daughter and husband and they were talking and laughing together. That's what she would have wanted and that vision was so beautiful and calming I knew from then on it would be OK."

Katherine's vision brought such comfort because, sadly, her grandmother's life was anything but calm.

Mollie Cooke lost her first husband in the Second World War, only to go on to lose both her second husband and only daughter to cancer. Living alone her in little cottage in Church Street, Church Stretton, she began a descent into Alzheimer's disease.

But it was always her dream to share her experiences of life and death, love and loss in an autobiography – and she would share her stories and talk about her aspirations with Katherine as she sat at her bedside.

Encouraged

"She always said she would like to write down her life story because she had experienced so many things," explains 37-year-old Katherine, who moved to Switzerland as a child but spent every summer with her two brothers, Matthew and David, at Mollie's cottage. "We as grandchildren encouraged her to do it because it's all part of our family and it would have been nice to have it down in a real book to keep for the future.

"But then her dementia started to get worse and worse. She started to take medication quite early on in her life to enable her to stay at home but when she turned 70, we began to notice a real difference.

"It started off with her just forgetting simple things. But you don't really notice it at first, after all, that's part of growing old. But then she started to forget really important things like paying her gas bill and leaving food to go off in the pantry. It was hard because I wasn't always in the country so we got people to come in and clean for her and prepare her meals but she would forget who they were and then fire them. Then she



Writing to reach you – Katherine (left) thinks her grandmother Mollie would have been pleased

would say that she had other people helping her, like in the garden for example, and we wouldn't know if they were taking advantage of her – or even if they were real.

"The final straw came on her 90th birthday. We had organised a surprise party at a local hotel but when I went to pick her up she had fallen over in the garden and her hand was badly bruised and leg cut. We took her to the hospital and they said she had had a stroke. That's when we decided the time had come for her to go into a home. It was not an easy decision and we spent the next three weeks finding the perfect place."

That perfect place was Hartland's Rest Home in Shrewsbury. It was here that Mollie would share all of the stories from her past with Katherine. Stories such as losing her first husband Jack Meridith in the Second World War. Stories such as finding love again with Bill Cooke

and having a daughter Sue. Stories such as losing Sue to cancer when she was aged just 38 and with a young family of her own and then losing her beloved Bill.

"Dementia is a very strange thing to experience," continues bank worker Katherine. "Nana's most recent memories were wiped out first but she could still remember certain times in her life from very far back. She remembered her childhood with her brothers and what mischief they would get up to. She was talking about people I didn't know but it was all still so real and fresh to her.

"We were really lucky with Hartland's – it's a great place and her care was exceptional. The only problem is, when you put a dementia patient into a home and they lose the structure and responsibility of their daily routine they often deteriorate. She soon started to forget who we were. I think she knew we were family because she was always comfortable with us but she couldn't call us by our names. That was very upsetting.

"Sometimes after she'd asked who you were and where she was, she would realise and remember for a moment – and that could be the most upsetting of all. She'd get upset too. She would realise I was her granddaughter and then she would remember that she had a daughter who died and her eyes would tear up. That was difficult. But then, five minutes later, she would forget again. I was always questioning myself and how much good and bad I was doing. I didn't know if I should keep on explaining who I



“Nana’s recent memories were wiped out but she could still remember certain times in her life”

ANDREW OWEN



before telling wrote it for her

Y’all starting to speak like our pals from Uncle Sam

Hi there, y’all. How ya doin’? Now, it’s entirely possible that you are wondering why I chose to start writing this column in an American accent.

I was going to open with a nicely British ‘hello’, after which I was planning to ask if you’d had a good Christmas and New Year. (I know you can’t answer me directly because I’m talking to you on a piece of paper – unless you’re a skinflint cheapskate and reading this on the internet – but that’s not the point right now. Stop confusing things. I was trying to be friendly.)

Anyway, I then decided – or figured, to stick with the American theme – that I should probably try and sound all transatlantic, sort of like Davy Jones from The Monkees. After all, everyone else is these days.

For example, have you noticed how we don’t have shops any more (and not just because of supermarkets and tax-dodging internet retailers crushing the life out of every high street – little bit of politics, ladies and gentlemen, yes indeed). Now we have ‘stores’. The other day I was reading about how a well-known pizza chain, of American origin, was planning to open a ‘new store’ (as opposed to an old one) nearby.

Now in my day, that pizza chain would have been opening either a takeaway or a restaurant, but definitely not a store – for the obvious reason that it isn’t one.

You may also have read about clothes stores opening (or, more likely, closing), book stores, and even bakery stores.

Many moons ago my primary school headmaster (this was in the days when you still had such things as headmasters and headmistresses) gave an assembly in which he told us of his time in America.

Back then people didn’t fly about quite as much as they do now, and going to the US, where the sun never stopped shining and where they made Starsky & Hutch and Susannah Hoffs from The Bangles, was still quite an event – or a big deal, to use another Americanism.

Our headmaster had visited a number of US schools, and I can remember being terribly impressed when he told us that “over there, they don’t have headmasters, they have principals. They’d say that I’m the principal of this school.” He even adopted a mock American accent for that last bit.

Today, if the fruit of your loins is of school age, it’s more than likely that he or she has a principal instead of what you and I had.

I have absolutely no idea when this change came about, or why. Is ‘principal’ supposed to sound more impressive than headmaster/mistress/teacher? Who decided that we should change, and why wasn’t I asked for my opinion? Dammit, y’all, that just ain’t right, y’know?

Of course, people have been moaning for years about American culture taking over the world. Columbus probably got it in the neck the moment he returned to tell people of his amazing discovery and everyone asked him why he was doing so ‘in that accent’.

And I like America. It’s a beautiful country and the people – the ones who aren’t armed to the teeth, or mad – are usually very nice indeed.

But I’m not one of them, and unlike those who talk like they’re living over there, who walk around with their trousers slung around their knees so we can see which brand of underwear they prefer, and use the phrase “my bad” in front of other human beings without feeling the need to immediately withdraw to a desert island for the next 50 years, I’ve managed to accept this.

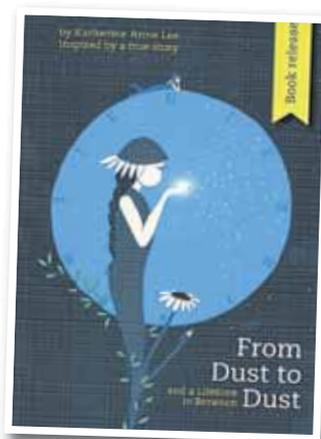
Now then, having got that off my chest it’s time for a large Coke, a Big Mac and fries and, possibly, a trip to see the latest Hollywood blockbuster at the movies.

Isn’t it great to be British?

“I should probably try and sound all transatlantic”



Home is where the heart is – Mollie’s former old home in Church Stretton



Final resting place – Mollie, her husband Bill and their daughter Sue are all buried in Church Stretton New Cemetery

... she’s written her memoirs

was in case she remembered and got upset.” Mollie, who worked as a needlewoman and milkmaid during her working life, passed away in 2011 but it wasn’t until a year after her death that Katherine had the idea for writing her memoir.

“I always wanted to have a go at writing but I never had time to think about the story,” she explains. “After her death, I was feeling so stressed and Mollie stayed in my mind a lot.

“Then I started thinking about how she always said she wanted her story told so why didn’t I just do that? I knew it would be OK because it’s what she always wanted. I felt like she was talking me through it all. And then one night, it all just came to me. It was like I was stepping into her shoes. It was good looking at things from her point of view. It made me think what life was like for her as a mother, a wife and a woman. It was interesting to experience and then understand that. I did enjoy looking at things through her eyes. It was a healing process, seeing things through her point of view brought about clarity.

“But there were times that were very distressing, like when I was writing about my mum. Then I would take a break and go outside to calm down in the fresh air.

“Mollie lost two husbands. The loss of her first husband was quite far away from me but writing about my grandfather Bill was very upsetting. And I started to realise how that must feel – to lose two husbands and your

daughter and then realise that you’re in a cottage by yourself with the early signs of dementia. I hadn’t realised quite how upsetting that would have been for her. But people get through these situations, they work through them. There is always hope, that’s what I wanted to get across.” Katherine finished the book in five months flat. Stepping into her grandmother’s shoes to tell the story in the first person, *From Dust to Dust* and a Lifetime in Between goes from Mollie’s childhood in rural Shropshire, through the war and into her later life.

Bubbly

But does Katherine think her grandmother would approve?

“As a young person, she was quite shy and didn’t like talking a lot, but as she matured she became very talkative and liked to be at the centre of everything.

“She liked to be the one talking and telling the stories. She very much enjoyed that – so yes, I think she’d approve.

“She was very bubbly and she liked younger men,” Katherine laughs. “She liked to look at younger men and have a chat with them. If the gardener or the baker visited the home and had a talk with her, that made her day. She was funny and she always made things enjoyable. She wouldn’t grumble. Although sometimes, at the end of the

day, when it was just you and her she would tell you how she was really feeling – that she couldn’t believe how life had treated her at times and she had lost two husbands and her only daughter. When my mum died, our relationship grew stronger. She was the only girl – like me – and we bonded over girly things like clothes, beautiful material and lovely china, which we had in common, along with flowers and gardens. She was the closest person to my mum in the family line and that was very special.”

Katherine’s book is out now but what does she hope the readers get from it?

“Cancer and dementia are two things that many families will have experienced,” she explains. “I hope the book offers some insight and understanding into these matters and perhaps a different way of looking at things.

“Dementia is a growing illness. There are a lot of people dealing with it. I hope the book gives people another point of view on the matter and what to prepare for. You know, there’s not just the bad side to think about. Not everything is always so black and white.

“These people are still here with us and you can still have some lovely moments with them. I hope the book takes away some of the fear.

“Mollie had a hard life, filled with emotion, but as a result, she had a lot of heart in her life. She felt things with her heart. We mustn’t forget that – she’s an example to us all.”

Elizabeth Joyce