

Manchester

I didn't set an alarm. I didn't need to. Invariably, my parents' fumbling and mumbling would wake me up. Maybe that was retribution for my habit to play Hercule Poirot audiobooks in order to get to sleep (narrated by Hugh Fraser).

The situation I was in had been the result of all three of us sleeping in the same room. It was a big room with three well placed beds. On each side of the room lay me and my mum on – if I had to critique – slightly narrow beds. Sprawled out in the centre on a queen-sized bed was my dad. After being made to turn off Hugh Fraser's dulcet tones I rested on the bed in a horrible quietness. I often find myself with an incapacity to sleep in total silence. The absence of distraction gets me lost in an insomniac's jungle of my own thoughts.

I was thoroughly lost in that jungle when a girthy snore rolled into the space. Dad was asleep no doubt. Predictably, his snores kept on coming. These undulating grumbles only further reminded me of my inability to fall asleep quickly. But then the obvious hit me. Dad was asleep and, though I couldn't be certain of mum, she hadn't stirred once. If they both were asleep then surely a quiet bit of Hercule Poirot couldn't hurt. I turned it back on and soon found myself drifting off. That was the end of my last full day in Manchester. Now let's go back to the start.

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We don't celebrate Christmas. That's a by-product of us being Muslims. A by-product of Christmas, however, are the beautifully clear roads. Travel to your hearts content on Christmas Day I say. Certainly no one else will be.

We packed our bags and scuttled into a cramped car on the morning of the 25th. True to form the roads were nearly empty and we enjoyed a traffic-free journey. The view was pretty samey (rolling green fields ad infinitum) but nonetheless quite calming to look at. We stopped once at a service station – a Welcome Break I think. As I headed towards the service station toilets it occurred to me that our family were not the only ones who had caught on to the usefulness of Christmas Day roads. Most of the people there were women in hijabs and men in kaftans. As I write this I realise I make it sound like there were throngs of Muslims just milling about at some kind of service station celebration. It was only a handful of people but still made me chuckle.

All in all the journey was pretty uneventful. The end invariably became a bit more exciting but I think that's because you know you're getting closer. We had rooms booked at the Travelodge in Stockport but we decided to go first to my aunt's house. Over the course of the trip that became the de facto meeting point for the family. As we drove through the suburbs of Sale I noticed a street called 'Broad Road'. Though my brother has yet to accept that this is funny Broad Road is essential B...Road Road. We finally managed to get to my aunt's.

It's a curious feeling saying hello to your relatives. Firstly, these were people I hadn't seen for some time. Secondly, the whole set-up of a 'relative' is a bit weird. At least for me, they're people who you don't really talk to, who don't live with you and who don't really have the same interests as you. But you interact with them as if this wasn't the case. My hellos and 'how are you's were broadly vanilla though I do remember high-fiving my five-year-old cousin. I wasn't really sure how to greet her. She probably won't remember. To be honest, I'm not fully convinced she even knows my name.

Perhaps this is familiar for most but there comes a bit of a liminal period after you've arrived and greeted everyone. It's not very clear what to do next. My gambit was 1) toilet trip 2) a glass of water 3) sitting beside the dining table with said glass of water. At that point your

other relatives feel comfortable enough to ask you the same questions they asked you last year. I then proceed to give basically the same answers with a little bit of last year sprinkled in. Ctrl + C, Ctrl + V for each relative.

Most of that night was just conversation. Lots of small talk. As a consequence of the infrequency with which we see our relatives it has become traditional to bring a gift of sort – at the very least for the younger ones. We give the gifts wrapped in wrapping paper. We might also give a card. Sometimes, for the older ones, they may get money. Generally speaking, you also give the gifts out pretty soon after you arrive. Get it out of the way and what not. So normally we give the gifts on the day we arrive – that being the 25th.

So we can summarise all this as follows: Our extended family (on my dad's side) meet up on the 25th December and give wrapped gifts, money, and cards.

I think we've accidentally celebrated Christmas.

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The Costa was in Stretford. Not Cheadle. Not Gatley. Stretford. The big one. This seemed to be a point of contention the night before. Just before we left our aunt's to head to the Travelodge the issue of tomorrow's plan came up. Now the overall idea was to go out with our grandparents. The specifics were the issue. My granddad has severe dementia. He's often confused, can't make decisions, and is easily agitated. There couldn't really be too many people going and there already was. So the Costa had to be nice and open and the Cheadle one wasn't.

Stretford it was then.

After dropping me, my brother, my sister and my other grandma (who'd come with us from Reading) at the Costa my parents headed over to Gatley to pick up my grandparents. Gatley isn't the most aesthetically pleasing of towns. Off the top of my head I couldn't tell you the ratio of takeaways to people in your average English town. But whatever it is Gatley is above average. It's a small town – home to about 9,000 people – in the county of Greater Manchester. It's where my dad grew up and where I spent a few weeks every winter holiday. It's not viscerally or innately exciting but it is, I guess in a way, a special place for me. Gatley was where I spent those last few days of the year that have a peculiar knack of feeling fuzzy, cosy and almost insular.

We waited in the Costa for a good ten minutes before my uncle and cousin arrived. They were part of the café posse but as they were staying at my aunt's house they came separately. My uncle and my dad are identical twins. If you ever see an old photo of them you'll have a hard time saying who's who. Neither my dad nor my uncle can do it. In fact, the only one who can is my aunt. Now they're a bit older this isn't quite the case. But what they lack in visual similarity they make up for in personality. I won't say they're exactly the same but they have almost identical approaches to conversations and situations. Take the following example. I asked my uncle where in the USA was North Carolina. He said "*North* of South Carolina". I asked my dad the same question and he said "in the *North* of America". What's more, I asked my dad the question only to prove to my uncle that, predictably, my dad would give a similar answer.

After a further five or so minutes my grandparents arrived with mum and dad. The whole thing lasted about two and a half hours. We bought an assortment of sandwiches, coffee, muffins, and wafers. I had a wonderful conversation with my grandma about her time in Egypt. The two of them travelled there after my granddad got a job at the University of Asyut. Asyut is a smallish city south of Cairo and was where my dad was born. To get there they drove through Europe and then caught a ferry from Italy to Egypt. During the boat trip the

police weren't so hot on my granddad. I think he said something about Nasser. When they arrived the place was buzzing with life. At first, my grandma wasn't so keen. It was chaotic and overwhelming with people everywhere, cars anywhere, and lambs in toilets.

I can briefly explain this. My father and uncle were born in the hospital in Asyut. When they got back to where they were staying my grandma put them each in a cot. All was, basically, well. That was until a lamb came running out of the toilet. I guess there must have been a lamb in the toilet. At this point I could try and use some descriptive phrases to help you picture what a lamb running around a house is like but I know you're picturing it. Of course what isn't always present when a lamb is running about a house is two new-born babies. They were fine though. Can't say the same for the lamb.

She had lots to tell about her past and always does. It's absolutely amazing to hear about her history. The nooks and crannies of everyone's lives are always so much more immense than you think. I met a man at work who fought in Japan when he was 19 – the same age I was when he told me about it. I met another man who changed lifeboat design so that they float to the surface if they sunk with the ship. I met a woman who taught me a bit of Portuguese.

It's clear to me that my Grandma loves to talk. In a way that's what makes the situation all the more frustrating. I don't know how much I can go into it really as it kind of isn't my story but as my granddad is easily agitated and confused going out is very tricky and normally infrequent. Furthermore, in his current state, he isn't the greatest conversationalist. This seems to make it tricky for my grandma to have the chance to communicate, in depth and detail, with the very person she's with most.

In any case, there came a point where my granddad wanted to go home. We'd said our goodbyes then my parents took them back to Gatley. We stayed, waiting to be picked up. All in all a pretty decent trip. Once they came back and collected us we headed to the designated meeting spot – aunt's house. A few hours and one disappointing burger later we finally made it back to Stockport's wonderful Travelodge. 1) Hercule Poirot on. 2) lights off. 3) See you tomorrow.

The Monday was pretty similar in structure to the day before. Before heading to aunt's house™ we met the grandparents with a slightly slimmed down café posse. My uncle & co had decided not to join. Also, that morning, my brother, sister, and other grandma headed back home on the train. It was just me and my parents at that point. I think the reason I wanted to stay was because often I hadn't. I'd find myself crumbling against the clamour of academic work. I'd become sick of genuflecting to the gods of essays and exams. So I thought – sod it. I'll stay. Fewer days to do work. Sure. Whatever.

That evening I met my second and third cousins for the first time in about a decade. I didn't really know what they would look like. I could only give you a description so vague that you wouldn't be able to identify anyone with it. It is an odd feeling meeting someone who is effectively a stranger. We hadn't really talked much anyway so, to be brutally honest, it did kind of feel like I was getting to know a stranger. But as far as strangers go they were really pleasant and lovely. I imagine it was the same for them when meeting me (in that I was a stranger not whether I was pleasant and lovely). I think I made a few too many of those jokes that don't really work unless you actually know the person making them.

I also met my great-uncle again. We had met a few months prior when we stopped by his house near Bristol. I remember having a brief conversation with him about jazz and specifically the song, 'Misty'. He lent me two CDs. One was of the film 'Play Misty For Me' starring Jessica Walters and Clint Eastwood. The other was of the '68 Newport Jazz

Festival. We'd planned to give them back to him after we heard he was coming to Manchester. I clumsily forgot to bring them so that ended that plan.

During our visit to his house he passionately showed us his impressive vinyl collection. On the Tuesday of our Manchester trip we went out to HMV and got him one to add to his collection. I knew he was a man who loved his jazz but also vaguely remembered him talking about salsa. I think he was trying to listen to a more diverse variety of music. I found a vinyl titled 'Rare Caribbean Groove'. After giving some of the songs a perhaps blasphemous listen on YouTube I zeroed in on the vinyl. At times it had a jazzy feel to it whilst also exploring a different kind of music. After giving it to him he studied the sleeve for quite some time. The way a kid does with a toy they can't open just yet. I'm really glad he liked the vinyl.

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In the mid '90s two people decided to learn some Arabic. One was born in Egypt but had lived in Manchester almost his entire life. The other had fled the Bosnian war only a few years prior. They met in an Arabic class and eventually got married on September 10th 1999.

Despite neither my dad nor my mum being from Manchester, that interesting city seems to have had a central role in my family history. My dad got there after my granddad found a teaching job. My mum got there on a coach carrying refugees headed for Manchester. She and a coachful of other Bosnians became a small diaspora there. It isn't particularly noticeable but every now and again you can feel its faint pulse. Tuesday morning was one of those moments.

We sat in the Brezo Lounge of Cheadle and ordered three 'Veggie Breakfasts'. Curiously, the baked beans came in a small pot. I immediately poured mine out as did my dad while he remarked on the pointlessness of such a pot. A few minutes past ten my mum's friend walked through the door. Mum stood up and they greeted each other like old friends would.

It all went exactly like you'd expect. The conversation flowed over both new and old ground. The conversation danced between English and Bosnian. Largely because my dad didn't speak any of the latter. For the moments when the conversation was in Bosnian, he sat there, in his words, "like a lemon". After the café the day was pretty vacuous. We made the traditional pilgrimage to Cheadle Quality Save and then a quick trip to Manchester city centre.