



FAMILY FIRSTS

Mum and I caught up... and slowed down

When Anna Moore left family behind to enjoy a first holiday alone with her mother, she found time slowed, and then shifted...

Over the years, I've spent a lot of time with my mother, leaning on her heavily for babysitting and emergency childcare. We speak almost daily, she visits weekly and often joins me or my two brothers' families on holiday. But I've never thought about what it would be like for us to spend time together without children and partners.

So when my mother said one day, "We never did go on a canal holiday," as though this had been a lifelong ambition, my mind immediately sprang to who she could go with. My parents separated more than 20 years ago and, in any case, it would have been my dad's idea of torture (the Bahamas are more his style). But neither Mum, at 72, nor I, at 39, are able to parallel

park, so there's no chance we could handle a 45-foot boat all on our own.

It was my husband who suggested that my brother join us and we both leave our respective families behind. So simple – why hadn't we done it earlier? Probably because, for the last ten years, I'd been so immersed in the role of mother and wife that I'd barely considered my daughter/sister self.

My mum has always been someone far too easy to take for granted. When I was growing up, my dad worked long hours, but my full-time mum raised us with a superhuman supply of patience. I never once had the feeling she'd rather be doing anything other than reading me that story, drawing me that picture, driving me to that

disco or trawling the streets of Brighton with my teenage self in search of shoes.

As a nana, she's the same. Her eight grandchildren have all experienced that endless patience (something my children don't get from me) and unconditional love. Since Mum rarely asks anything of anyone, we haven't spent enough time wondering what more we can do for her. At 72, she's still on call. Increasingly, though, I've felt this nagging unease. Shouldn't it be payback time? Shouldn't it be me doing things for Mum – instead of the other way around?

We wanted to make the trip a surprise, but when we pulled into a small marina on the Grand Union Canal in Northamptonshire and my mother saw the narrow-boats, she



Happy days: Anna, Adam and their mum remember old times as they enjoy the tranquil countryside



burst into tears. She was so pleased, I found myself swallowing a lump, but mine was more about guilt and regret. This shouldn't have taken us so long.

For me there was another dimension too. It was my first time away from my children, which felt odd but liberating. Time stretched. There was peace and space, an adult calm and time we could move through at our own pace.

Which, on a canal boat, was very, very slow. There couldn't be a better way to step out of the world. Canal boats have a top speed of 5mph, though there seems to be an unwritten code that you never reach it. Each

lock – what with the mooring and the lock gates, then the sluice gates – took about 20 minutes. On our first day, we passed a flight of seven. In almost two and a half hours, we'd covered less than a mile. It would have been quicker to hop. On top of that, every man or woman you pass on a canal expects conversation as a matter of courtesy.

All this combined had a magical effect. Whereas, on a weekly basis, Mum and I will talk about the concerns of the moment – how the children are getting on, the health of my mother's friends – somehow, none of us mentioned any of that. We didn't ask the normal catch-up questions or go over the latest ground. By silent agreement, we left it all behind. For the first 24 hours, chugging through the Northamptonshire countryside,

"I slipped back into the role of youngest child, only girl"

we talked about the steering, the mooring and where to stop for lunch.

After that, we went backwards. For no obvious reason, we found ourselves remembering Sister Taylor, the community nurse who delivered me, and who used to visit our village school to check our hair for nits. We remembered a childhood holiday in Wensleydale when Dad was called away on business and Mum took the three of us to an underground cave. We had those "Whatever happened to...?" and "Do you remember when...?" conversations you only have when you've slowed right down. They reassure you that, despite new families, new homes and new memories, the old

ones are still there – shared, connecting us, cherished.

Being with my brother when neither of us were in parent mode also felt special. Most childhood memories – family holidays in particular – are taken up with Adam. Three years older than me, he tormented

me in his composed, controlled, unflappable style at every opportunity, but I worshipped him. To me, he seemed unbearably cool. I wanted his friendship, but by the time I'd become someone he thought worth talking to, he'd almost left for college. Then there was travel, babies, marriage.

Now I got to hang out with him with no interruptions, and without him torturing me. It's what my ten-year-old self longed for in a holiday! His humour and James Bond sangfroid was still in evidence. Within ten minutes of getting the boat, we were plunged into total darkness for almost an hour as we navigated the damp, dripping Blisworth tunnel – one of the longest in England. Mum and I sat nervously at the bow while Adam steered from the stern. When

we veered too close to the edge and the boat scraped violently along stone, we heard Adam deadpan in the darkness, "So that's where the sides are."

By the end of the trip, we'd talked a lot, had a lot of laughs. We'd caught up with our old selves. Mum fussed over us and worried we weren't eating enough (something she usually now reserves for grandchildren). Adam made us laugh. I giggled a lot and slipped back into the role of youngest child, only girl, hopelessly impractical and, after four days on a canal, still unable to steer a boat. It felt oddly comforting to discover I could feel so at ease, so happy and natural away from my husband and children. Here was somewhere else I belonged.

Before immersing ourselves back in the real world, we promised we'd make time to do something like this more often – or at least every year. Yes, it was a small step towards repaying an unpayable debt. But it showed us something else. In our fast track 21st-century lives where we frantically juggle kids, careers and supersized mortgages, all eyes on the future, there's nothing quite as soul restoring as a visit to the past.

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