

Time to Let Go

A Record of the Life and Death
of a
Young Man



In memory of
Roy David Deakin

and in gratitude to all
who loved him and
cared for him.

Time to Let Go

A Record of the Life and Death
of a
Young Man

Bruce Hugman

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PREFACE

Roy Deakin died from AIDS-related illnesses on 27 March 1992 at the age of thirty-two. For nearly nine years he and I enjoyed a loving and fulfilling partnership and a rich and satisfying life. Occasionally difficult and painful, it was not always a romantic idyll, but it was constantly challenging and exciting. It took us far beyond the boundaries we should ever have crossed independently and it was far beyond anything I had ever dreamed of enjoying.

The period of his illness was, at the same time, the most beautiful and painful and intense experience of our lives. It tested our energy, our resources, our love beyond all that we could have thought possible. It was, in the event, both terrible and glorious.

This book is an account of what we made of our last two years together, and of the legacy with which I now live.

Our suffering was nothing in comparison with the many whose lives are ravaged by war or wanton killing or other sudden death. But the issues and questions and doubts and fears which we faced are the common currency of

being human. How we dealt with it all, what we learnt may be of use to others, whether or not they are gay; whether or not AIDS is the threat they face.

Our good fortune was to have notice of death, and during the time of preparing ourselves to be surrounded by generous, supportive, loving friends, families and professionals. We were given much, and it was always Roy's wish - and it remains mine - to give in return when we could. I hope this book may be useful.

It was at a time when Roy was quite ill, some months before his death, that we discussed the arrangements for his funeral with the old friend who was to lead the ceremony. During that discussion, when he had so little to look forward to, he described our life together as 'a marvellous adventure'.

And so it was. I hope this account of it will touch and enrich the lives of others.

Bruce Hugman

London, November 1998

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PROLOGUE

The Story of a Partnership

Roy was born on 22 December 1959 to Harry and Vera Deakin. They, and his elder sister Ann, lived in a small, terraced, back-to-back house next to the River Sheaf in Sheffield. The house was lit by gas; a Yorkshire range provided the cooking facilities and the warmth for washing in the tin bath. When the Sheaf was in flood, the cellars of the whole street would be awash to ground-level.

Harry was a steam-engine fireman and then driver; Vera had been a conductress on the buses and was then was a part-time cleaning lady. Many members of the family lived in houses on the Avenue and nearby, and those others who were not related by blood were part of the tightly-knit and supportive community.

The family later moved to Rotherham and bought a house on a steep hill - far above the lapping of any potential floods.

Roy was not a great achiever at school, but, at sixteen, decided he was going to College to take 'A' levels. In his second year, Harry, just 46, died of a heart-attack.

Roy abandoned College, and started work as a bus conductor and then driver, determined to make his contribution to the household income.

Vera, in the meantime, had an operation for the removal of a benign tumour on her brain, which left her partially-sighted though physically fit. Sister Ann, by now married for some years, was bringing up her three girls fifteen miles away.

Roy was, at this time, not only hugely handsome - with neatly-trimmed full beard and moustache - but also an immensely sociable, popular man, enjoying the company of a regular group of friends with whom he went on frequent, extravagant binges. He was a smart, reliable, cheerful worker, undaunted by 4 a.m. starts or the pressures of front-line public service.

He had a very cautious, covert gay life, but shared the knowledge with only a very few friends and not at all with his mother or family. He had a few short-lived, largely unsatisfying relationships.

He was, and remained, devoted to Vera, with whom he shared a vigorous, warm-hearted satirical view of the world and human foibles and a generally earthy, suggestive sense of humour: they would often both be in helpless fits of giggles for minutes on end in response to some innuendo or ambiguity or evidence of human daftness. They both relished the peculiarities of Yorkshire folk and spoke in the rich accent and vocabulary of the region.

Vera was - and is - one of those women of heroic independence and energy who, in spite of a series of major tragedies, battles on, knowing that life continues and that time has to be filled. Losing her husband so young, facing the consequences of major surgery, discovering her son was gay and losing him to a lover, and, finally, attending the

funeral of the apple of her eye when he was just thirty-two, she could have been forgiven for going into a depressive decline. But no: as ever, she continues to re-organise the house on a regular basis; to clean and decorate; to do the garden; to trim the house up for Christmas; to go out on 'biddies' trips and on holidays; to bake, cook, knit, read and write letters. She has the deep strength which comes from a fine, robust constitution, and Roy was fortunate to inherit many of those qualities.

* * * *

The circumstances of my birth and life were very different. I was the first son of Mary and Peter, a mechanical engineer and a legal secretary. Father came from the relatively liberated south while Mother came from the Presbyterian regime of the Glasgow suburbs. Both grandfathers had achieved considerable professional success as managers in business, and both had started from modest origins.

The war was to end months after my birth in January 1945, and post-war, rationed Britain formed the backcloth to my earliest memories. My brother, Iain, was born in 1949, at about the time I was sent to the first of my fee-paying schools.

In every respect, my parents did all that they could to ensure Iain and I had a good start in life. They spent endless money and trouble on wholesome food and dietary supplements (cod-liver oil capsules and Vimaltol amongst many) on dental and medical care, on schooling, on holidays at home and abroad, and on ensuring that life had occasional high-point treats such as Saturday lunch in

restaurants. They were not in the least rich, but they managed their money so prudently that there was never any sign of scarcity. We had one of the earliest black and white TVs, and Dad had bought a car (a Ford Consul) just a few years after the war.

I went to a minor public school as a day-boy and then on to Oxford to get a respectable but undistinguished Second Class Honours in English Language and Literature. I stayed on for a fourth year to train as a teacher.

My career was regarded as pretty eccentric by my parents. I taught at a major public school for two years (where mother, certainly, hoped I would progress to an eventual headmastership), and then did a two-year postgraduate degree in Social Studies before becoming a probation officer. I worked on the streets of Sheffield for two years (mostly with young drug-takers and prostitutes) before moving to London as Director of the Albany, Deptford.

It was during my time in Sheffield, when I was about twenty-five, that I finally came to terms with being gay, and set out to meet other gay people and develop some kind of true and clear identity. After so many years of denial, dishonesty and mostly solitary sex, the change began to have a transforming effect on my inner confidence and available optimism, though it provoked an initially very tense time with my parents, most especially my mother.

London proved to be a difficult and painful time, and, after a year I emigrated to deepest Kent to stay with some friends in an ancient farmhouse set amidst eight acres of cherry orchards. Here, I worked for some weeks as second

chef in the posh restaurant in the village and then as a general farm labourer for six months or so, seeing through lambing and harvest on our neighbour's farm.

My friends then left the house, and I and two other friends who joined me started four years of smallholding - sheep, goat, pigs, hens, ducks, a house cow, vegetables, home-made bread and all the wonderful features of the then trendy self-sufficient life. I did some adult education teaching in Canterbury and then became deputy head of English at a large secondary modern school in Whitstable.

City life eventually beckoned again, and I returned to Sheffield to a joint appointment as a training officer in the probation service and a lecturer in social studies at the Polytechnic. After four years there, I applied for the job of Public Relations Officer for South Yorkshire Transport - the huge, famous, low-fare bus operation in South Yorkshire which provoked so much national controversy for its fares policies.

It was in my second year in that job, in the summer of 1983 when I was organising our participation in the Sheffield Show, that Roy, then a bus driver in Rotherham, responded to an appeal for volunteer helpers. On a bright, sunny day, amidst milling crowds, I met him and asked him to blow up a few hundred promotional balloons for us.

He was 23, and I, 38.

* * * *

It is hard to imagine two people with apparently less cultural, social and personal compatibility than the two of us, and it is still a matter of perplexity to me what it was

that made the partnership so good. In many ways we remained very distinct individuals with some very distinct tastes and habits, but a vast area of common ground was available to us, and it was on that that we discovered what we already shared and from which we took each other forward into new territories.

Within a few weeks of meeting, we spent a great deal of time together, including an idyllic long-weekend in London and Kent. We felt strongly that it would be wonderful to live in London.

Towards the end of 1983, I was approached about the possibility of taking up a PR post in London and was eventually appointed. Roy and I talked about whether or not he would pull up his roots and move south with me. After initial enthusiasm, as the time drew nearer, he began to develop serious doubts about leaving Rotherham and his mother.

Some instinct told me that the problem was that he could not tell his mother or family why he should be moving to London with me (he had never mentioned being gay at home), and that that was mixed up with his profound sense of responsibility for supporting Vera.

I proposed that I should phone his sister and tell her exactly what the situation was so that Roy could then tackle the question with the issue out in the open. This he did, and was warmly supported by the family in his intention. He did, not, however, tell the whole truth to Vera, and she remained anxious about what she saw as Roy's fragile and dependent status: what would he do if I threw him out? she wondered.

For Roy, these discussions cleared the air, and he felt free to make the move. So, just six or seven months after we had met, we set off for London, and temporary residence on the floor of a friend's crowded dining-room in Barnes.

I started my new job, and, within days of our arrival, after briefly indulging the joys of unemployed freedom, Roy found a job as an assistant at Travellers' Fare at Paddington Station. After a few weeks he applied to London Transport and went back to bus driving. After handing in his notice at Travellers' Fare, they told him they had been about to promote him to supervisor.

I occasionally caught his bus on my way to work, and felt a huge, romantic thrill at seeing him at the wheel of a big red London bus, and at being one of his passengers: if only everyone else on the bus had known how lucky they were to have such a driver!

Between us we earned a pretty substantial sum, and we very rapidly established the self-indulgent habits that were to characterise our years together: eating and drinking out together and with friends, going to films and plays, clubbing it way into the small hours, and going abroad for holidays. We went to Harrods and bought nest-building things in the sale, walked by the Thames and took riverboat trips along it, sat in parks and had picnics, strolled happily along Oxford Street, and began to feel that the Great City was becoming home.

After six months of bedsit land, we found and bought a turn-of-the-century, three-bedroomed, terraced house in Balham and set about renovating and decorating it from

top to bottom. Roy took a leading part in this substantial enterprise.

We had very similar nest-building instincts, and soon the house was transformed into a warmly comfortable, welcoming place, in which we felt at ease and in which our many guests had happy times with us. Each summer we had a great champagne party in the garden - an event which started at midday and usually went on into the following early morning - as well as many dinner parties and boozy evenings.

After a little while in the house, Roy decided he wanted to bring his beloved Lady down from Rotherham, and, though I was far from keen to have a dependent animal around, I raised no objection: he was devoted to her, and the house was, after all, as much his as mine.

I came to love the old black mongrel nearly as much as he, though I was, from time to time, feebly resentful of the affection and tenderness which he lavished on her, more of which I thought he might have directed towards me.

In a generally very harmonious life, we did have some mighty rows and struggles in the first couple of years as we went through the process of learning about each other and making all the adjustments and concessions which are necessary for two mature, independent people to live together.

I - for example - had a tendency to be very untidy and slovenly around the place, leaving newspapers and coffee cups, letters, clothes and any other movable items just where I had finished with them. It had been a huge personal liberation for me to be master of my own territory

once I had left home and to behave just however I pleased. While in many ways I was an intensely organised and focused person, this studied neglect of order in the domestic world had become something of an obsession with me.

Roy had quite different ideas about how a house should be managed and expressed them strongly. Some childlike aspect of my personality reacted to this with angry resentment and we had several real rows when he tried to persuade me to put things away and keep the house in order. As time passed, I began to adopt his values and behaviour, and though there were real lapses from time to time, my standards were soon nearly as high as his. Those are habits which have never left me.

That same process of accommodation and growth took place for us both in all kinds of ways, many of them much subtler and more internal than the mere orderliness of the external world.

Our approaches to the spending of money were very different: he, from a well-managed, prudent, working class home saw money as something to be put aside for hard times; I from a financially comfortable background and several years of bachelorhood on a reasonable income spent practically everything I earned and saw that freedom as the reason for earning. Roy, however, took to the pleasure of spending money rather more quickly than I took to the habits of domestic tidiness: we did save, but, my goodness, we did spend too!

He had always had a great appetite for pleasure. The dramatic move from Rotherham - with all the

opportunities and new experiences it opened up - reinforced and developed that to an adventurousness which was quite astonishing, and which occasionally made me feel cautious and conservative. He would try out new foods, new music, new cultural experiences, new friends and would almost always emerge satisfied and hankering for more.

Socially he was enormously competent and people of every age and background and type responded with warmth and affection to him - he had the most catholic circle of friends of anyone I knew or know now. He had no time at all for the superficial or pretentious, and quickly assessed who was to be taken seriously and who to be avoided for good. In many ways he was socially more adaptable and generous than I, and though we both maintained a few friends more or less independently, our mutual circle flourished, most often through new contacts he had made.

He was not in any sense an intellectual, though he had great natural intelligence, judgment and perception. My more serious, academic side was not something which was explicitly part of our mutual life. He was proud, I think, that I was a published writer, and encouraged me to continue writing, but he never read any of my books or articles - nor indeed anyone else's, I think.

My social work background had left me with a legacy of beliefs about how healthy human relationships should be conducted, some of which had proved valuable and durable. One of these was the principle of 'talking through' conflicts and difficulties as a way of restoring harmony. It's a very sound principle, and highly effective

in many circumstances, but I learnt from Roy that there are other ways of dealing with conflict that are often equally, if not more effective.

If there were anger or resentment in the air, my inclination was (sometimes after hours or days of brooding) to broach the subject and start a mutual inquisition as to what was happening. There were times when this was the best way for both of us (it was usually me who took the bull by the horns) - but there were many occasions when it wasn't the way at all. Roy taught me that anger (for example) can be expressed as the feeling of the moment and then be utterly forgotten. If my response to such an expression was to brood and sulk for ages, then I was making something out of the event which was entirely unbalanced in relation to his feeling or wishes. That robustness, that availability of spontaneity and of forward movement, was typical of him and from it I learnt a great deal.

He found tenderness much more difficult to express in words and there were times when I, with my particular attachment to verbal communication, found that quite difficult to endure. He knew it, and occasionally acknowledged it, and I came to accept that, in general it was not his way. His granite loyalty and commitment were so evident in action, why did I need the words as well?

It was only in the first year or two, and then only briefly, that we had any problems about sexual matters, and they stemmed from my enthusiasm for a number of bars and a raunchy night sauna in Amsterdam. It was a place I had visited several times before Roy and I met, and it had

provided me with some of the most delicious and memorable sexual experiences of my life, at a time when I had been just discovering how exciting sex with another man could be.

Roy had previously been on a brief holiday to Amsterdam with a mixed group of friends, but had discovered nothing of the astonishing gay life of the City. On our first visit together (the first of many) I wanted him to go to the sauna with me, but he decided it was not for him and was clearly not at all keen for me to go on my own. I went and next day, rather insensitively, told him all about the night's events. It was my way, I think, of indicating that I did not feel that whatever might have happened was significant or to be seen as intruding on our relationship. In retrospect I think I was imprudent and probably hurtful.

During later visits to the City, however, things were very different. We would go to the sauna together, sit for a while drinking at the bar or sweating in one of the cabins, and then go off separately, to meet an hour or so later and swap stories over a beer. The routine might be repeated three or four times before we would walk home together in the light of the dawn, feeling content and at peace. With the exception of these early indulgences (which took place only in Amsterdam), and two later, separate occasions of infidelity, we were both faithful.

Music was one area to which we both opened doors for each other. I was a dilettante dabbler in modern and pop music, but didn't know much about it, and hadn't really collected records or tapes much since the days of the

Beatles. I enjoyed pop music, particularly for dancing, but was quite out of touch with the modern scene. Roy had a tremendous collection of records and tapes which he renewed with purchases every time he heard something he liked. Listening to music was as integral a part of his life as reading the Guardian every day was of mine. He could happily spend hours with his headphones on and a drink in his hand.

He taught me to take popular music seriously and to find real pleasure in musicals and light musical entertainment - to understand that it was often not just frothy, lightweight, trivial entertainment, but a serious expression of real and profound feeling. 'I am what I am' was probably his absolute favourite song, and it represented the expression of his deepest feelings about life - live with pride, confidence, extravagance and colour whatever the odds or the objections: how could one not be profoundly moved by such a commitment?

And for him, I opened the door on classical music, which he came to love and listen to of his own accord. Seeking a gentle first experience of opera for us both, we saw the Magic Flute at the Coliseum and were both completely entranced by the production. We saw it twice more, bought the CD, and played it endlessly at home. He loved it.

He danced and sang in two or three musicals produced by the London Transport Players, and flourished in grease-paint and costume, though in the end withdrew because of the bitchy relationships and authoritarian style of some of the organisers. But costume he loved.

Knowing that he had a liking for drag, I had, very early in our relationship, bought him a pair of size eleven patent leather stilettos with six-inch heels. These remained a prized possession, to be brought out and tried at parties by even the butchest of our straight male friends, and worn by Roy whenever there was a suitable opportunity for exhibitionism. (One of the heels eventually snapped off under the weight of some hefty male, and it never got repaired.) At one of our summer parties, he emerged into the garden in a slinky black number belonging to one of our petite, slim girlfriends, a broad-brimmed hat, cigarette holder and fishnet stockings - and of course the stilettos. (Our slim friend was never able to wear the frock again.)

This was an aspect of him I was never quite at ease with, and I'm unsure why - whether it was because I was envious of his making such progress to liberation or afraid of finding I liked it too much, I don't know. His general appearance and behaviour were anything but camp, yet he could camp it up wonderfully when the mood took him. There were one or two of our girlfriends who were only too happy to indulge him with make-up, clothes and an appreciative audience, and I suspect his best drag nights were with them in my absence. I did not mind, indeed was pleased that what I had difficulty in offering he could find elsewhere.

We frequently went out for nights on the town, ending up at bars or clubs with drag shows, and there were a couple of acts we followed enthusiastically round the circuit: they were outrageous nights of happy, drunken, abandoned hilarity which I am sure I would never have considered let alone discovered without Roy.

I had always been a keen and committed cook, preparing lengthy and elaborate meals for my friends, something which Roy found perplexing in the early days: eating for him had been largely a swift, utilitarian activity. Over the years we became an incredibly accomplished team at providing hospitality, often spending a whole day preparing every last detail of a feast for ten or a dozen friends, and then, after they had gone, washing and clearing up everything before we went to bed. Even for ourselves, on a birthday or at Christmas, we would provide a feast, with the table fully decorated, flowers, candles, silver and linen, lingering for hours over the meal. I have the happiest memories of some of those intimate, indulgent domestic occasions.

After driving for a year or so, Roy applied for and was appointed as an Assistant Security Supervisor at London Transport's headquarters in Victoria. His principal duties were to work at the reception desk, signing staff and visitors in, answering enquiries, receiving parcels, and so on. He was a tremendous success at this, his warm, welcoming smile and courteous manner very rapidly making him popular with most of the hundreds of staff in the building. His attitude to Chairman or cleaner was just the same - mature, chatty, humorous, though there were some of the directors and managers whose attitude to him (and to humanity in general) used to make him furious.

For a short while, before Roy went to the headquarters building, I had had a senior PR post there, but it had come to a painful and wretched end with dire conflict with my boss, whom I, and many of her staff regarded as

unpredictable and tyrannical. I secured two months' salary in lieu of notice, but Roy and I had to face the possibility of very dramatic changes in our lives. Through this major crisis (and others that were to follow) Roy provided incredible strength and comfort.

For him, the crisis was a crucial turning point in his self-confidence and self-image within our relationship. Previously, I had been the major earner (we could both have survived on my salary) and, virtually unconsciously, I think, he had been left feeling less than an equal partner. However much I might have protested that what was mine was his, and that we were an equal partnership, for him, especially from his background, status and responsibility within a household were deeply connected with earning capacity and actual responsibility exercised. He had, without question, taken an equal or more than equal part in almost all the practical aspects of maintaining our home and in nurturing our partnership, but it was he who followed me to London for my new job and it was he who had been unemployed (even if only for a matter of days) while I brought home the wage-packet.

Now, it was he who was bringing in the income to keep us in our home and to feed us; it was I who was out of work. There was no sense of relish in this, and, at the time, I am not sure we quite realised how important a process of change was taking place, but it strengthened him and banished whatever lingering sense of inequality he felt.

I managed to build up a successful freelance PR consultancy, working from home, and was then recruited as a director of a small advertising agency in south

London. During that time we moved to a larger, four-bedroomed, 1890s terraced house half a mile from where we had first lived. There was a bigger garden and, beyond it, the open spaces of the Common.

After three years or so, that company went into liquidation and, once again, it was Roy who provided the steady strength and income through crisis. There was the real risk that we would lose the house if the liquidation evolved badly, and we had to face the stark realities of possible homelessness. This we did by facing the worst possible case which, we imagined, was setting up a tent on Clapham Common and waiting for something to turn up. As so often happens, staring the worst in the face makes one realise that it's not the end of the world, and that one might as well carry on without despair. He was just great, miserable and angry though he was some of the time about the causes of the disaster. We had lost thirty-five thousand pounds in the collapse, and it was I who had promoted the investment. There were no recriminations.

We went abroad once or twice a year: several times to Amsterdam, to California, Jersey, Barcelona and Seville, Rome; weekend and day trips to Scandinavia or France and had two magical holidays in remotest north west Scotland.

There we rented keeper's lodges, dozens of miles from evidence of civilisation, with little but sheep, deer, soaring birds of prey and the wild, unpredictable weather to absorb our attention. The cottages had electricity (the remoter one had a generator), open fires, and were set in wild, unfenced valleys covered with heather and rocky outcrops,