

FIRST UP



PHOTOGRAPH: KIRSTY ANDERSON

What it feels like to ...

DISCOVER YOUR FATHER IS A MURDERER

MICHAEL PHILLIPS

MY dad went to prison in 2006. I was confused because to me, one night my dad was there watching a movie with me and the next he was gone. My mum would always tell me stories that he was away working or he was away to a factory to make money. We were living in Ireland when it happened, so he was in an Irish prison.

When we moved back to Glasgow I remember saying to my mum, "Why are we going back home?" She would tell me my dad was going to work away and that we had to go back

home because my granny missed us. It didn't make sense to me.

The first time I saw him in prison was hard. I was only eight. I didn't know he was in a prison. We flew to Belfast. There were sniffer dogs, searches on visitors, metal detectors and fingerprint scanners. Once you get there you have to take out all your stuff, say who you're visiting, put your stuff in lockers and you're left in a waiting room. Then you're put into a van and taken down to another waiting area.

Before I knew it I was taken to my dad. I was scared, worried, anxious and paranoid. I'd never

seen anything like it before.

On the flight home I asked my mum, "My dad's in prison, isn't he?" She confirmed it.

For years I didn't know why. I had my own theories. There were bits of the story that would start to add up and over the years I put them together to make my own story.

I found out the truth when I was 15. Until then my parents would sugar-coat it but I remember asking my mum and she said to ask my dad. So I asked him on my next visit and they told me everything.

When I found out it was more relief than anything else. I cried. Not

because I was upset but because I was relieved somebody had told me what had happened. He had been sentenced to 14 years for murder.

For the longest time before my dad went to prison I didn't really like him. I don't know why. After I was told everything, I felt closer to him and that I could speak to him more. Now I know the truth I want to talk to him more. I want to know more about his past. He's Irish and was involved with the Ulster Volunteer Force and I want to learn more about my family history.

The worst thing about not having him around, especially as a child,

was seeing people with their dads. Seeing them being picked up by their dad at school and especially on Father's Day.

My life has been different from others because of this. When my dad was sent away I was suddenly the man of the house. It was me who had to take care of my family and I was only a kid myself. When he left I had to mature a lot but that's a good thing, all in all.

If my dad hadn't gone to prison I wouldn't be the person I am today. I can take this as a positive to shape myself for the future.

DANIELLE GIBSON

■ FIDELMA COOK

“In slow motion I saw the Brits, mouths agape, turn to our table

ERIC, my wine merchant, has featured in these columns before. He is aware of it and is actually rather chuffed. Therefore, before I tell you a little story of yet another bizarre day in La Lomagne, I feel I must tell you that he has given me full permission to tell it. OK?

First of all, let me describe Eric. I'd say he's 6ft 2in, late 40s probably, attractive and lean from running and skiing, well read, charming and, most importantly, kind.

He's been my provider of fine Bordeaux, in between my Lidl cheapies, since the second year I came here. A long time. I know I could buy the same for less online but sometimes it's good to listen to an expert and broaden one's education instead of just slugging away.

A divorcee, he has a beautiful little girl he sees every weekend and holidays, and there seems to be no shortage of girlfriends.

But the important thing is his kindness, which I discovered during those months in hospital when, hearing of my break, he turned up – a shining presence among the crocked; a pleasant diversion for my nurses.

Over that time he sorted my internet access and smuggled in little treats of chocolates, magazines and, of course, wine. He even offered to move in to my guest wing and look after me and the dog on leaving re-education. That was the point my son said: "Bloody hell. How much money do you spend on his wine?"

Trust me, not enough to justify such attention. Over the years I've come to believe he is just one of the genuine people in life. And, when I can, I put work his way. That's how it should be, non?

So when he invited me for lunch (not the first time) I said great and suggested the still newish commune restaurant four kilometres away.

As you can imagine, he scrutinised the wine list then dismissed the one he chose as too warm and had it briefly placed in a cooler. He flung it round his mouth with puffed cheeks

and finally pronounced it acceptable. Me? I just swallowed.

The tables began to fill up. Two tables of Brits; probably the ones who comment here but how would I know?

A Frenchwoman I've known over the years crossed the room to give me the double kiss. Sharp, intelligent, amusing, she has never seemed a fit for her retired farmer husband whose accent is a rich country mix.

Later he crossed too, saying with a frown, "Who are you?"

"Fidelma," I said as it had been a few years since I'd seen him.

"Ah, Fidelma," he said with evident pleasure and did the bisous.

Of course I introduced them to Eric, but was aware of a dismissive tone. "Who are you?" he asked.

Joking, Eric said he was my fiance. The old boy turned and asked, "You're a cougar, then?"

"If I were," I replied archly, "he'd be a lot younger." This, of course, was all in French.

Suddenly he turned on my host. "You speak French?"

Calmly Eric replied: "Of course. I am French."

In fact he answered the same question twice. The old man half sneered and walked away as Eric turned his head in dismissal.

I let it go, seeing for the first time rage on my companion's face and wondering what I'd missed, what nuance, what sentence I'd not quite got in the fast exchange.

We had finished when the

old man lumbered over again on his way out. Again he seemed to taunt Eric, who was now bristling. I heard again: "You speak French?"

This time, Eric pushed back his chair, threw down his napkin, towered over the much older man and shouted: "Enough. I've had enough. You've insulted me twice now, sir. Get away from me before something happens I won't be responsible for."

I am not good with scenes. In slow motion I saw the Brits, mouths agape, all turn to our table; the shock on the face of the old man's wife; the heads of the young waiter and waitress as they peered through the kitchen door.

My hands making placating movements, I said quietly, though my heart was thumping, "Enough now, calm – calm down. Whatever it was, please, just stop."

The old man left. I sat silent until Eric composed himself.

Finally the explanation. "I come from the centre of France. I've lived here for 30 years. But always, always someone says: 'You speak French?'"

My face showed incomprehension. "My accent is different," he said.

"But obviously French. The Tarn et Garonne is racist, so racist – you have no idea. And I've had enough. I'm sick of it. I've had too many years of it."

Anger left his eyes. He looked at my stricken face and apologised. Not for his actions, but for embarrassing, for shocking, me.

My old cleaner had said something similar about obvious targets, Muslims. And, yes, this area is Front National but there are good people here too, I said.

He smiled. "Perhaps." And he is back to the solicitous man I know, leaving me wondering if I really know anything about life here at all.

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