

It was an ordinary day 25 years ago when I got up for work at 6.30am. I went to check on my twin daughters who were aged 18 months old. They both were sleeping soundly, snug in their separate cots, cuddling their favourite toys—a panda and a rabbit. As I looked out of the bedroom window, I saw that my car was covered in deep, crystal-filled white snow, shining in the street-lights. The sky was heavy with dark grey clouds as the snow continued to swirl deeper over my Pennine home.

The first time I travelled overseas I was 11 years old and went on a 10-day school trip to Calella in Spain via a two-day coach journey from Rochdale. We travelled down to Dover, all extremely excited as the coach entered the ferry. However, there were delays and confusion and for some reason we ended up with nothing but sour cherries from a brown paper bag to eat for the remainder of the journey; for the first and only time in my life I was seasick. Cherries always remind me of that choppy crossing.

I went into a dream and as I was driving to work, I saw a funfair in my local park. This was very odd as we had never had a funfair there before. I parked the car, changed my shoes into my dog walking shoes which were in the boot as it was always muddy in the park and I was wearing my business shoes. As I approached the rides, I was struck by the noise, the lights, smells, sounds and riotous colours coming from the normally green, staid park. As I approached the rides, I noted that I was the only member of the public in the park but here were lots of staff on all the rides and they encouraged me to board all the rides at no charge. I jumped on the helter skelter, teacups, ghost train and many, many more exciting rides, finally jumping onto the waltzers with the caterpillar cover. As I spun round and round, I suddenly felt very dizzy and giddy and woke up back in my car in a traffic queue outside the park. Looked down at my feet- why have I got my dog walking boots on as I am going in to work?

Whenever I see Fry's Chocolate Cream I think about my parent's Sub Post Office and the boxes of the dark pepperminty chocolate, I used to love sneaking a bar to eat, popping it into my mouth and letting the chocolate melt, melt, melt in my mouth before swallowing the peppermint cream inside.

Fergal reaching out.

The Last Picture I took was two days ago and was of Fergal, my cat. He was lying on my bed, on his side, with his front paws outstretched. He had somehow managed to get the lower part of his body under the spare duvet on the bed and looked snug and comical with one ear sticking up and the other folded down on to the duvet. One eye was almost looking at the camera, but not quite. He is such a wriggler and loves to stretch out and reach people.

The first time I got lost was in Redman's Park House Hotel in Blackpool and I went up to the top floor aged about 5 years old, wearing a blue taffeta dress and was wandering around the staff quarters looking at the long corridors-it was the biggest building I had ever seen. Red carpets and gold bannisters. It is still there – I would like to go back when lockdown ends.

Coronation Street

I have always been a big fan of Coronation Street. Yes, I know it is cheesy, but I love it. Don't know why, perhaps because it is northern like me? Perhaps because it is about the same age as me, give or take a few years, but I have grown up with comforting Corrie, watching it on my Mum's lap and I always try to watch each episode. This is a lot easier with catch up and plus one channels, plus the many repeats. The cast are like an extended family. My friend, David, was close to the originator of Coronation Street, Tony Warren, and during lockdown David sent me Tony's personal copies of his books Manchester Lights and subsequent novels. At last I had time to start reading the books. The Manchester and Salford scenes and characters are so familiar; love them as much as I love Corrie.

I met him in a youth hostel in Wales when I was 14

To James, how are you now, what did you with the rest of your life? Are you happy? How is your ankle? Did you have any children? Did you ever come back to the UK including Edinburgh? Have your music tastes changed? How are your parents? Thank you for all the fun times, especially for the tickets for David Bowie at my 17th birthday December 29th 1972.

Diary 30/03/2021

World Autism Awareness Week begins. House odd jobs completed at last, thanks, Chris! Bits of garden tidied. Census work refreshed, bag sorted, getting organised, phone calls made, emails read, snacks prepared, shoes, clothes ready for all contingencies. Laundry and dishwasher done. Sun shining and night lighter-yay.

Susan Swartz

My name is Susan Swartz and I live in Texas. I am a great believer in the power of dreams, and I follow my dreams. Two days ago, I had a dream about the president of the USA and so today I have travelled to Illinois to hear him speak. So now I am waiting at a presidential rally.

I do not feel too great in this jacket- it is a bit stiff, the sun is hurting my eyes. I am now refreshed from my journey and looking forward to the day. My last holiday was to Miami-I love the beach.

I have a kind of metallic taste in my mouth and could use a Martini.

A loudhailer announces that the president is en route, on time and passing with a few feet of me.

I have a loaded lady's pistol with a pearl handle in my handbag. I am going to shoot the president. Now my real secret is that I have been having an affair with the president will be disclosed.

Laura's Panda

Laura's Panda reminds me of my own toy panda that I have had since I was a baby. Eight inches tall and stuffed with straw, it cannot be washed. It is very grubby, with an orange ribbon around its neck and lacking one felt eye but oh so loved. Now lives in a box on my bedroom shelf, safe and never to be forgotten. My parents gave me the new panda for my 18th birthday which I remember along with my birthday cake and fizzy wine on the day, and of course my obligatory glass of port with mum and dad at midnight on Hogmanay, sharing the sofa with my new panda. My Laura took a real shine to the new Panda, who she named Amanda and this Amanda has been equally well loved. I have had to travel to Manchester on the train to go the fabric shop to buy new black and white fur fabric to replace worn out ears, feet, nose and legs on the new panda. She has been so well loved.

Evening time is when the toy panda often came into her own - being cuddled and appreciated. Soothing a crying child, comforting after a bad dream, helping me or my daughter to settle when on holiday or staying in a new, strange place overnight with family or friends. Always a silent confidante, an umbilical link to safety and familiar secure smells, surroundings, and feelings. Reassuring whilst at the dentist, hospital, doctor; calming whilst going through new experiences, the first plane journey or death of a beloved pet. Whispered secrets to the panda that no one else knows and heartened to know they will never be disclosed. The beloved panda will hopefully be passed to my grandchildren.

Home cooking

My Mum was a fantastic cook and she taught me from an early age how to cook all sorts of food and, very importantly, how to follow a recipe. This is a skill that has transferred to many areas of my life; before I start most tasks, the mantra is- 'read the recipe'. If I don't have all the ingredients and equipment in place before I start, then there is no point in beginning as I would get frustrated part way through because I could not finish the job. Whether it is filling in a job application form or replacing a brake cable in a car, I always read the instructions all the way through before beginning the job.

This has helped me in many projects; when for example on a course at work, the first direction on a list of 20 tasks was to read the directions all the way through before beginning the task. Direction number 20 was put your pen down and ignore all the previous directions. Everyone else struggled on the previous 19 tasks but as I had read all the way through to the end I just watched and waited as the rest of the group struggled through then groaned as they reached direction 20 on the list!

I have passed the skills of baking and reading recipes on to my two daughters who love cooking. They would often come home from school and spontaneously bake cakes, using my Mum's ancient Kenwood Chef mixer, the only thing that I asked her to leave me in her will! It is old but like she was, resilient, reliable, and full of memories of happy hours in the kitchen creating lovely food. I went on to study A Level Domestic Science and win awards for cooking which was all inspired my Mum. My love of cooking has continued throughout my life and I really enjoy being creative in over 50 years of my vegetarian lifestyle. I have continued to use the Chef during lockdown, baking cakes for isolated, elderly, neighbours, friends, and family, plus volunteers and staff in the hospital where I have been volunteering.

Three bears

Goldilocks enters the empty house and eats from the three bowls of porridge, sits on each of the three chairs then goes upstairs to sleep. She tries each bed and settles on the largest bed and falls into a deep sleep. When the three bears return home, they find her covered in blotches, coughing and with swollen face -she is going into anaphylactic shock- allergic to the feathers in the pillows and mattress! Luckily Mummy bear is a famous herbalist and gives her some medication made from fruits and herbs of the forest and Goldilocks made a full recovery, vowing never to break into a house again.

At the beginning of the COVID pandemic I spent the first six months doing more volunteering at my local hospital. I had been volunteering there and at the local hospice for some years with my therapy dog, but due to COVID, she was not allowed to have patient contact. However, I was asked to work on reception and do other duties throughout the hospital as new volunteers were being recruited. This was thoroughly enjoyable even when I was working five days a week, not quite what I had planned when I retired a few months earlier! I had a great team of people around me, I helped induct new volunteers, did tours of the hospital then also went out and about delivering prescriptions to patients and PPE and donated goodies to other NHS premises.

Conversation with the two black and white goats that I saw this morning in the woods at the bottom of my road:

How did you two get here? We have lived here for a couple of years.

Where did you come from? We escaped from some pens down the valley when there was a fire- the owners assumed we died.

Are you okay? Yes, we are fine, sometimes we get a bit hungry in the winter but generally we manage.

Do you have enough shelter? Yes, there are plenty of places under the shrubs and bushes, we do fine but are not keen on all the litter which presents as hazards to us.

Would you like to be somewhere else? No, we are fine here as long as people and dogs leave us alone and if the winters are not too harsh.