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Introduction

Every family has a story. A story of love and loss, joy and pain.

The story of the family I was born into was one of great privilege and multiple traumas. But we didn't tell stories. There was no narrative or understanding of what had been, what was going on, or how to deal with it. My parents were young adults during the Second World War. My father was in the Navy and my mother was a land girl. But that was not where their injuries lay. My mother's parents and two siblings had all died suddenly and unexpectedly by the time she was twenty-five years old. My father's father and brother had also died, without warning, when he was still a young man. Their fathers had fought in the First World War.

As with the majority of people living in that era, and as my generation of baby-boomers can attest, they abided by the need to survive and multiply. They had admirable tenacity, grit and courage. Their route to survival, the only one open to them, was to forget and move on. They lived by the adage that what you don't talk or think about won't hurt you. Putting on a good show, hiding vulnerability and, yes, a stiff upper lip were the mantras of my childhood and that of most of my generation. But even when it's out of sight – perhaps especially when it's out of sight – the fingerprint of love and loss inside us continues to gather complexity. It isn't always visible to the naked eye, but is still complicated, still textured, still painful.

What is often not recognized is that behaviours like these are the legacy of trauma. Trauma doesn't have language. Trauma has no concept of time. It sits on high alert in our bodies, ready to be ignited many decades after the original traumatic event. It doesn't allow for the processing of emotion. For me it meant many pieces of the jigsaw were missing. I remember looking at black-and-white

photographs of my dead grandparents, aunts and uncles, examining them for clues because I knew practically nothing about them. The first time I saw a photograph of my maternal grandfather was this year. There were so many secrets and so much was left unsaid that I look back at my parents now and wonder: What did they know? What did they think about? Did they know what they felt? As a couple, did they ever talk about the things that mattered to them? And those secrets, did they tell each other or not? They certainly didn't voice any of it within my earshot.

This meant I was constantly observing and listening for clues. As it turned out it was the perfect brew to ferment a psychotherapist: I was always curious, listening intently, keenly interested in what was happening behind the façade, like a detective looking in the dust for footprints.

My parents have died. While I have been writing this book my love for and understanding of them have changed and grown. They live on in me, continually shaping and influencing me, as do all our key relationships. I am hugely grateful to them. I learnt from them many crucial skills, behaviours and ways of being that serve me well. I still benefit now from the immense opportunities they gave me.

I came to write this book about families because every client I have ever had has focused on their family. They want to know why they have difficulty with their relatives or describe why they love them, and everything in between. I am no different from my clients. In my therapy, I spent great tracts of time exploring my family of origin and my family now, trying to make sense of what was going on.

Families and their roles today

The phrase 'nuclear family', meaning two married parents and their children, no longer fully describes the 19 million families who live in the United Kingdom. Families come in many forms: single-parent

families, same-sex families, adopted families, extended families, polyamorous families, blended families, families with no children and families made up of friends in which there are no blood relationships.

In the past, a family's central purpose and function was to raise children. A big shift has taken place socially in that more mothers are working and have fewer children. Since we live longer, rearing children takes only half of our adult lifespan. We therefore live as adults in our family for much longer than we did in the past, carrying with us the burden or gifts from it. Every person living in these different models of family will have their unique response to them, which will be informed by their genetics, environment and experience.

I wanted to look beneath the skin of some of these types of families to find out what went on and to ask questions: what is it that enables some families to thrive despite enormous adversity when others fragment? What predicts family breakdown? Why do our families drive us mad?

This book aims to explore those questions and deepen our understanding of them. It isn't about how to raise perfect families. They don't exist. Families operate on a spectrum of dysfunction and function depending on internal and external stressors. Instead, I tell the stories of the lived experience of eight families as they face a particular challenge, charting them through multiple generations. The level of influence of one generation on the next is often underestimated. The unresolved stressors of one generation can be passed down to intensify the daily pressures of life for the next.

Families are in constant flux, which is why they are so complicated and why they are such hard work. While the older generation is facing old age, their adult children are dealing with their own offspring leaving home, and those young people are adapting to and stepping into adulthood. Nowadays what was seen as the normative four-stage life cycle – establishment (marriage), expansion (children), contraction (children leaving home), dissolution (partner dies) – is by no means the case for everyone. Relationships

often end in divorce, children choose not to leave home or return home after some years, or perhaps there are no children. We see from the stories that follow that at times families need to pull together, and at others to step back. It is this dance – the moving in and out as a family, seeking harmony while allowing for differences – that supports stability.

I am fascinated by families for good reason: families matter. Family is the single most important influence on a child's life and their outcome. They carry that reliable love into adulthood, as it strengthens their emotional, physical and spiritual well-being, which enables them to live a happy, healthy and productive life. At its best, family is the safe place where we can be our whole selves, with all of our frailties and fault-lines, and still be loved and deeply understood. Ideally, it is a place where the roots of our development are fully known, the atmosphere we grew up in acknowledged.

At the centre of our well-being is relationship. The quality of our lives depends on the quality of our relationships. As a therapist informed by the attachment theories of John Bowlby, I see that all our 'relational stuff' began with our family. It is the centre of how we learn to relate to each other and how we manage emotions in every aspect of our lives – ourselves, love, friendship, work – as well as family. The basis of our beliefs and values is programmed into us through our family, whether we follow or rebel against that family system. Most importantly, we gain our sense of our own value from our family: we come innately to believe we are of worth, or not.

When they are 'good enough', as Donald Winnicott, the eminent paediatrician and psychoanalyst, termed it, families form the bedrock of our lives, a foundation that keeps us steady when we face the brickbats of life. When functioning well, we can turn to our family in adversity, and for team support. When the external world feels fractured and alienating, home and family can be a refuge to heal and rebuild our strength.

We may not see our family, but they are still part of us, genetically, in our memories and our unconscious. We can never leave them, as we can a partner or a friend.

Exceptional families are ordinary families

The families I write about are both exceptional and ordinary. My belief is that I could pick any family at any point in their life, and between us we would learn a great deal about what is hidden beneath their external selves, what informs and influences them. It could be the ‘ghosts from their nursery’, their childhood influences, their parents and grandparents, or how their own children are forcing them to face aspects of themselves they haven’t dared look at before. What we’d find would be uniquely theirs and, in some ways, familiar to us all.

Discovering these further truths about themselves gave my clients, and would give any family, clarity and confidence to navigate their life in all its turbulence.

I am intrigued that in families most of what is talked about is of no consequence, and much that matters is left unsaid. It means our imagination goes to unknown and scary places: the stories we tell ourselves are full of gaps and assumptions. Knowing that family scripts are passed down through the generations, I was particularly interested in the power and influence of those secrets and silences. I came to understand that what is rejected in us, what is exiled to a dark unspoken place, tends to ferment and may become hostile and dangerous.

My clients did not come to see me because they wanted therapy to come to terms with those wounds from the past, but due to a painful present. We discovered, though, that their present was woven with threads from their past. Among much else, I saw clearly how trauma can be passed down from one generation to the next.

I knew the theory that when a traumatic event isn’t addressed and processed in one generation it continues through the generations until someone is prepared to feel the pain. I also knew the research about epigenetics: how trauma changes the chemical charge in our genes that impacts our operating system, heightening our response to external events, switching on the fight/flight/

freeze part of the brain, our amygdala. I noted that the amygdala stays on red alert decades after the event if the trauma has not been processed. For instance, if we had not addressed the trauma of the suicide in the Rossi family, one of the grandchildren might have been beset by fears, body images and sensations they could not explain; they would have believed something was wrong with them. The messages I take from this are, first, that it will serve us and our future generations to recognize that perhaps our psychological wound didn't start with us, that this is not our failure as a person. And, second, that by addressing the pain and processing it, we protect the future generations.

Each of the eight families faced tough life challenges, as we all do. It is at those peak points of change – like death, illness and separation – that families often falter. It can be a propensity to hold on to the past, fearing the future, that makes family transitions both threatening and exciting, each family member offering different, sometimes conflicting, attitudes. These families showed it takes enormous dedication and commitment to nurture family, to prioritize it over other life demands, to hold together in crisis. They demonstrated that families in transition, indeed at most times, require us to draw on our deepest reserves of love, patience, self-awareness, time, effort and, of course, money. I aimed to shine a light on the minutiae of what happens in a particular family, believing that the most personal and intimate details of ourselves can be translated most broadly to a universal perspective.

Generations

I am increasingly drawn to work with family systems because I see our lives as interconnected and interdependent, not separate. I see the process of change as a collective business. I have come to understand through this work that it is not what happens to a family but the quality of the connection and the intentional goodwill between its members that affect our capacity to manage.

The power of grandparents and parents to influence even adult children for better or worse was an important new insight to me. In these case studies we see that family is more than the individuals in it. Each member holds their own narrative, but they also combine to create the family system and way of being. They show that the family life cycle, from birth, adolescence and adulthood into old age, is the primary context of human development. It is through looking at their different stories from generation to generation, and how they influence each other, that we begin to understand ourselves.

In each chapter the family is the structure that holds the emotional system of each living generation, three and even five generations. How that emotional system is managed by everyone in the family, led by the parents and grandparents, shapes their resilience when they face big life changes or even traumatic losses.

We see that emotional systems are not logical. We may want our child/parent/grandparent not to be upset by something we see as trivial – or, at the other end, traumatic – but that doesn't work. The purpose of our emotional system is to give us messages that flow through our body about safety, danger, that allow us to experience pleasure and to have our needs met. It is important to know that the emotions can flow freely through us, whether they are painful or joyous. It is when emotions are shut down that dysfunction sets in. In families, dysfunction can be passed down from generation to generation, as the parent models it in their behaviour to their children, and the cycle continues.

A dysfunctional family comes in many hues and levels of dysfunction. It is generally one in which there are more negative interactions than positive. There is not a predictable attitude of goodwill in each family member, or reciprocal care and support for each other. They do not know how to deal with difficulty: a conflict can escalate into a stand-off that may last months, years or even generations. They tend to be rigid, with fixed views of right and wrong, and close down communication rather than open it up. Behaviourally and psychologically, they are unpredictable and

a source of distress to each family member when resolution is not sought or found. It may mean family members feel both abandoned and trapped. They may experience the addictive pull of variable reward, sometimes receiving the longed-for love and attention, and then, for no reason, experiencing its withdrawal: everyone is hooked, waiting for the next hit.

Those families who are rigidly dysfunctional, at the extreme end of it, who don't move along the spectrum, are unlikely to present themselves to me. I often wonder about the seemingly intractable issue that many of those who most need support and insight are least likely to ask for it. Or, worse, unable to access it.

Family systems carry more than just our scripts and emotions. They also, implicitly and explicitly, set the patterns of behaviour and connection between each member of a family – who has what role; who holds the power – as well as the beliefs and rules around what may be communicated, what is blocked, what behaviour is sanctioned. When negative, family dynamics can contribute to the problems of a particular family member and the root of individual and collective anguish. If, for example, the father is weak, his child may be domineering. The dynamic between them is co-created and affects everyone. Rather than dealing only with the weak father, it is important to address the whole family dynamic, since the family in its entirety is the medium for change.

Sometimes an individual acts out a behaviour as an expression of a systemic difficulty. For example, where money worries are not being addressed by everyone in the family, one of the children may have control issues. Families can get stuck at points of change and crisis, using an outmoded pattern of coping, hoping the outcome will be different, then find themselves more entrenched in their difficulty. It is the family as a whole that needs understanding. And at times they need more than understanding: they require active change and help in adopting different behaviours. When I worked with these families I looked at the patterns between all of the members, and what might be causing problems, rather than just a 'problem person'.

Anyone looking at their own family would benefit by examining their inherited family patterns and behaviours to see what may need adapting. It is often small unexpected changes that bring improvements. For instance, the Wynne family helped their depressed son by watching the whole series of *Modern Family* together.

Love matters

Love, the underpinning predictable resource for families to manage their emotions, is key. Love in all its forms: the capacity to give it, receive it, in action, by standing back, letting go or moving towards, through rupture and repair.

At the root of fracture and heartbreak in families there is often jealousy and competition for what can be seen as the limited resource of love in all those forms. It plays out in misery and hurt, and in the consequent battles of siblings and couples or in inter-generational rivalry.

There are ongoing debates about nature and nurture. When we are born we are given a genetic blueprint: our propensity for intelligence, athleticism and character traits, and we know that their potential can be fulfilled or blunted by our environment. The random luck of what kind of family we are born into, wealth or poverty, history, psychological health and family patterns, influences the quality of the nurture. But at the heart of well-being is our core identity: 'I am loved and I belong. This family is my home and safe place whatever happens to me or them.'

From my own experience and what I have learnt from the families in this book, when comparing non-biologically and biologically related families, the stories we tell ourselves become who we are. When we are told truthful stories, we trust that we are loved and belong. And we thrive, whatever our genetic inheritance or connection.

Families are messy, chaotic and imperfect. Where we love and

care most, we also hurt most, fight hardest and make our deepest mistakes. Yet we thrive when our family is held securely within and around us. It is worth the effort, heartache and strife. When we can trust in it, it can be the force that holds us together when our world is upended. Even across great distances, when our family is at the centre of our being it can help us find our own equilibrium despite the disorder and madness in the world.

The best thing we can do to help this is to prioritize our family, in our hearts, our minds – and with our time.

The Therapy

I am indebted to my clients who gave me permission to write about their most personal and difficult issues. I describe their narratives as stories, which is true, but it is worth remembering that I am describing their innermost personal lives. It is no 'story' for them. Their generosity and courage were based on their hope that in telling the story of their family, others may gain insight into theirs, perhaps healing wounds. I believe the wisdom gleaned by clients and therapists in the secrecy of the therapy room has for too long been an untouched resource of value to everyone.

I have disguised the real identity of my clients to protect their privacy. Some are composites and, apart from one family, all the client relationships in this book took place during the pandemic of 2020/21 and over Zoom. I have only mentioned the impact of Covid-19 when it materially affected my clients. With all the challenges Covid presented, it turned out to have some unexpected upsides for the therapeutic process. From a practical perspective it meant I could see more people at an agreed time: trying to get more than one or two people into a room with me, juggling travel and schedules, is a much bigger logistical challenge. I also saw that remote therapy was less intimidating, particularly for the older generations. Sitting in the safety of their own homes, perhaps with a cup of tea in hand, looking at other family members and me on the same screen became a friendly environment within which to discuss important, often intense, issues. At the end of the session I would leave the Zoom call, but quite often the family would stay on and talk more about what we had discussed. I often thought those would have been the best conversations to be a part of and regularly asked for an update but none came. For all the downsides of not picking up on visceral body signals from my clients, in return for their connectivity, seeing up

someone's nose rather than their eyes, the benefits of Zoom far outweighed the negatives. I will always want to work with clients in my room, but for families, in my practice, this is the way forward.

Many of the families were already part of my caseload. Others I chose because of the diverse lens they bring, like the Bergers, and the Singh/Kelly family, or the particular struggle they faced, like the Craigs. Each story can be read on its own or they can be read in sequence. The connection between them was that the families had the courage to come forward for support in the difficulties they were facing. They recognized they had to find new ways of dealing with them.

Conversely, when I listen to my clients who have painful and intractable problems with family members, who don't join them in therapy, their parent or sibling is fixated on being right, rather than willing to look at what else might be contributing to the issue. Holding rigid positions is a hallmark of families that are stuck in negative patterns. I believe the families in this book show it is their capacity to adapt and shift their perspectives while looking for closer connection and stability that marks them as functioning. Our therapy was, and usually is, an extremely good place to begin to explore and even to practise this important skill. The ability of these families to learn to manage their emotions, as well as allow them, was a significant factor in their robust surfing of life's challenges through the generations.

It's helpful, with this in mind, to turn to Daniel Goleman's *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ*. His definition of emotional intelligence: 'the ability to identify, assess and control one's own emotions'. If we are not to be hijacked by the sustained stresses of modern family life we need to be intelligent about our emotions. We need to grow in self-awareness – acknowledging what we feel and why we feel it. If we are self-aware, we can remind ourselves when we are in a state of overwhelm that other moods and emotions exist: this isn't all we are for ever. It enables us to practise habits to rebalance, like mindfulness, or even just step out of the room for a moment, which helps us to judge better how to recover from upset, not act it out. It gives us the discipline to filter words and feelings in the service of the relationship, not as an attack on it, to engage our thinking and feeling,

tune into others with empathy. Once we can steady ourselves and see others do the same, we don't need to impose ourselves but trust there is enough love within the family system.

Family therapy is often more intense than one-to-one. Every experience in the group is magnified by the number of people. For the parent, who holds responsibility (even if they don't wish to) for the place they're in, it can be particularly hard. Listening to the criticisms or pain of one's children requires forbearance. It takes courage and commitment to sit with those feelings. Painful revelations cut deep but unexpected positives may arise. Yet I believe that those families daring to embrace the force of their feelings, letting them run through them and shift their connection with each other, was in some cases transformative, and in others extremely helpful. Pain, unfortunately, is the agent of change. Avoiding it blocks change. Each of these families' new willingness to name, experience and process their obstacles will form their new family pattern.

I am not a family-systems therapist, which is a particular model of psychotherapy. My work is informed by its theories. I counselled these families with the aim of forming a strong attachment with them, which builds trust: the predictor of good outcomes in therapy. There are more matrilineal than patrilineal perspectives: there are more women in my therapy practice, which reflects the numbers of men in therapy as a whole. More men are accessing it, but in much lower numbers than women.

My contracts with my clients vary. I see couples who want maintenance a few times a year, some families monthly for similar reasons and most individuals weekly or bi-monthly. After the therapy I appreciate it when clients send me updates of their lives or Christmas cards but there is no expectation that they will. Yet their stories live on in me. They shape and influence me, as all important relationships in my life have done.

Therapy is not for ever. It always has an end. Through ongoing reviews there comes a time when we agree together a client's readiness to end. They are empowered to get on with their life without

the need for psychotherapy. Hopefully they have strengthened their resilience for when obstacles and losses face them, and to take responsibility for moving forward. They have acknowledged the injury from their parents, partner or an event but are not trapped in a blaming loop. Therapy doesn't fix what went wrong: it helps us learn to adapt, grow and change despite what went wrong.

An ending with a client is a significant, integral and vital element in the process of therapy. Acknowledged as part of the initial contract, it is important that it does not come as a shock to them. Endings are planned and tend to happen gradually. Having developed such a close and meaningful relationship, I am always sad when it ends. It can be tempting to continue as friends, but this is not advisable. A key consideration when I'm thinking about a different kind of relationship with a former client is not to cause harm. Honouring the therapy and the space it holds inside us both is best protected by clear boundaries. I have occasionally developed dual roles with previous clients, usually professionally, which are not harmful, but I tend to avoid it.

I mention my supervisor multiple times throughout the text. All therapists incorporate supervision into their clinical practice to protect clients from missteps by the therapist. For the counsellor it is the place for learning: the opportunity to reflect on their thoughts, feelings and behaviours in their approach to their client. My supervisor is my much-respected, valued and needed colleague, to whom I take my ethical questions, my mistakes, my dilemmas, my fury, or my worry about my clinical practice – and at times my satisfaction or clients' good outcomes. Without my supervisor I don't think I could work effectively. Working with people always brings up questions, conflicts and our own issues, which a wise and trusted person will help to clarify.

Having groups rather than individuals to work with and write about was a psychological juggle. It meant I had to exclude many aspects of people's lives, choosing to write about the parts that affected the whole family. Everyone I worked with, the majority of whom had never had therapy before, found it illuminating and bonding. They were glad of the opportunity to look at themselves

and face thorny issues while I took responsibility for conflicts and facilitated greater insight. Revealing their fears, experiencing painful emotions, was difficult, powerful and healing. I could see my clients' energy shift as new understandings emerged. A key element of psychotherapy is the opportunity to hear yourself, and each other, in a new way: the magical power of listening and being heard.

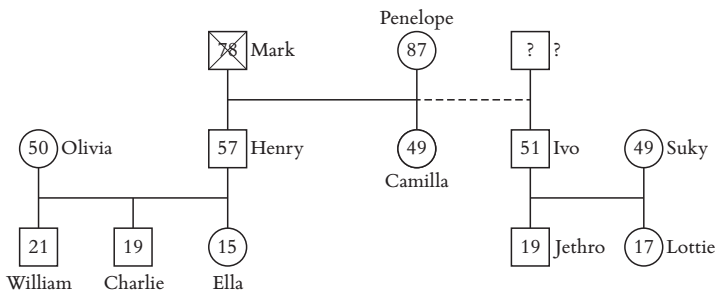
The families I worked with navigated many complex issues. They found the capacity to live with unanswered questions and learn to love again, despite huge losses. I came to see that in the process they shared the ability to straddle the uncertainty of life with a strong commitment to hope.

When practising therapy with my clients I am always writing in retrospect. When I looked at our work together, I took a third position. I accessed the intensity of our process, stepped back, and oscillated between the two views of client and therapist generating greater clarity. The idea was to consider their and my thinking. The psychologist Dan Siegel calls it 'mindsight'. I would also do a version of this with my clients: I would step back and offer my thoughts to them to give them fresh viewpoints. We know from behavioural science that we tend to support our past decisions even if new information suggests they are wrong. We confuse patterns of familiarity with safety. It can take an outsider's view, like mine, to shine a light on those intractable responses. The therapy room becomes a portal that allows the client to see themselves with greater depth, unpick stuck narratives, gain new perspectives of what has been going on and how they are in relation to each other.

One can never know how much time therapy will take or its outcome. I saw most of the families for just six or eight sessions. Considering how fixed family patterns and dynamics can be, I was encouraged by the speed and level of change that emerged. For someone using time as a barrier to seeking therapy I would suggest (with a smile) it takes less time than watching a TV series.

I understand how daunting it is to take time out to reflect, but the power of therapy as preventive medicine for families in the present and the generations to come can be profound.

The Wynne Family



The Wynne Family

Who am I? Am I the sum of my genes or do I make myself?

Case conceptualization

Ivo Wynne was fifty-one years old, a cabinet-maker, married to Suky, aged forty-nine an American-born documentary-maker. They had two children: Jethro, nineteen, and Lottie, seventeen. Ivo came to see me because he wasn't sure of his paternity, whether he was his father Mark's son or not. He wanted to explore this perplexing question, to help him decide the best direction to take: to find out more or live with the status quo – uncertainty. Ivo had an older brother, Henry, aged fifty-seven, and a younger sister, Camilla, who was forty-nine. Mark, Ivo's father, had died five years ago, leaving his mother, Penelope, aged eighty-seven, a widow who self-medicated with alcohol, a just-about-functioning alcoholic. We met in my counselling rooms.

'I'm fifty-one and right now, against every bone in my body, I know I have to find out who my biological father is. It seems incredibly asinine, but it never seemed weird to me that my dad rarely gave me attention when I was a child. Friends at school kept saying, "Why doesn't your dad ever come and watch you on Sports Day?" I was very sporty, winning every race, and I was captain of the cricket team. I'd say, "Oh, he's very busy," and, honestly, I didn't think it was wrong or weird. It was all I knew.'

As I heard Ivo's words, I could see his confusion but also a deep pain in his hazel eyes, which were set in a handsome face, with swept-back brown wavy hair. Designer glasses propped on his aquiline nose gave an impression of someone with aristocratic blood. But it was the way he crossed his legs, the arc of his elegantly clad limbs when he moved, that reminded me of highly

bred horses. Knowing our parents' history is a fundamental part of our identity for all of us, but if, as in Ivo's case, it also brings high status, then its loss would be another layer of complexity.

I asked Ivo to tell me more of his story. He was a craftsman, with his own company, which designed and made high-end kitchens and furniture. I found myself drawn to look at his hands with renewed interest, their capacity to create beautiful objects. I've always admired people who can make things, since everything I do is invisible. But I needed to turn my attention to his story.

Ivo was the middle brother of a family of three. His elder brother Henry had inherited the title and estate on Mark's death. Henry, aged fifty-seven, was married with three children. He ran the estate and was modernizing it to make it profitable. Camilla, his younger sister, had 'always had problems'. I imagined a whole world of sibling rivalry in that mix: the eldest son inherits the lot, leaving Ivo, labelled 'the heir and spare', with 'second-son-itis'.

Camilla, aged forty-nine, was (hopefully) one of the last of a generation of upper-class women born into a systemic patriarchy, their education for the purpose of marriage, not a career. She'd had multiple relationships, but now lived alone on the family estate, working part-time for a country auctioneer. She'd had a close bond with her father. They had all been brought up with the formal arrangement of a nanny and nursery life, quite separate from their parents. Henry and Ivo had been sent away at seven, as boarders, to a preparatory school. Camilla went at eleven. All three had been at the cruel end of corporal punishment and must have shut down on their vulnerabilities and emotions to survive that harsh environment, away from home, at such a young age.

Ivo told me, 'Twice I asked for my father's help. Once he gave me sleeping pills and the other time he suggested we go on holiday together in Italy to escape . . . He didn't know how to listen and be with me, but in offering the fix I knew he meant well. I remember him reaching to hold my hand once, when we went to see my mother in hospital after her attempted suicide.'

I took a breath in shock: he'd spoken of a traumatic event in such a light tone. I asked him how old he'd been and he replied, 'Fifteen.' I acknowledged how traumatic it was while I logged it as an example of his initial response to pain: glide over it, don't go there. I left a gap for other feelings to surface.

Ivo wrapped his fingers around his thumb, turning them back and forth, with a faraway look, tears in his eyes. He didn't mention his mother's attempted suicide, which he still blocked, just a memory of his father: 'I held his hand when he had dementia. That felt nice . . . he didn't know who I was . . .' He was smiling through his tears. 'I felt close to him.' Then he coughed, and turned his attention to the distance between them: 'I don't think he knew my birthday, or my middle name – he certainly didn't know what I was interested in, who my friends were or anything about me . . . but the agony for me isn't that. It's his chilliness towards me, which felt different from Henry and Camilla.' His head cast downwards, he said, with some awkwardness, 'He could never look me in the eye.' There was a long pause while we took in the devastation of his words.

I wanted to get beneath the surface, delve more into the mechanics of Ivo's early years. I was thinking that the roles each child adopts, reinforced by their parents, can have the greatest influence on the behaviour of a family. They are often formed in our family of origin to stabilize the family system. I wasn't clear yet as to who in the Wynne family took which role: had Ivo been 'the quiet one' and Henry 'the fixer'? While this might work well in their birth family, now that they were adults, joining other family systems, it may no longer fit and could even cause fracture. If it came up, I'd suggest they explore it with openness to see what might need adapting.

Three children can be brought up in the same house by the same parents and have entirely different childhoods. I've often heard a parent say, 'I don't know why so-and-so is difficult when her brother is easygoing' and I've had exactly the same upbringing.'

Yet each child evokes their own unique response from their parents, and memories of each event are shaped by that response.

Henry was organized, ambitious and a leader, all characteristics of an eldest child. I hypothesized that being the heir would give him power and self-importance yet add a layer of expectation from his parents and envy from his younger siblings.

Middle children, like Ivo, are harder to categorize, but they emerge in response to their elder sibling. If the older child is good, the middle child may be naughty to attract attention. I hadn't worked out how this had shaped Ivo, who seemed both erratic and successful, but it raised this question: how would it be to rear a child you knew wasn't genetically yours yet keep it secret?

Mark knew Ivo was innocent, but looking at him must have ignited a cocktail of feelings, ranging from fury, jealousy and outrage to disgust. No wonder he chose not to look at him. Henry and Camilla would undoubtedly have picked up on that, and might have been distressed by it, but there was such a paucity of parental attention that they probably interpreted it as a bonus.

Camilla interested me. Last-borns can 'get away with more' than their elder siblings, as their parents relax the rules. They tend to be affectionate, funny and easygoing, but they are often trying to catch up with their older siblings, who are bigger, faster and know more. *I* needed to know more but I would have imagined that, on one level, Camilla, the youngest, had an easier time. However, she had to deal with the patriarchy, privileging men and undervaluing women. To counter this context, Camilla took up her father's interests in botany, literature and family history. She was rewarded with closeness to her father. But, as I understood it, it had not worked particularly well for her either. She wasn't the funny, loving child: she was brittle and nervous. As I drew the genogram of their family, looking at the relationships and context between them, I hypothesized that Camilla's brothers had knocked her confidence. The impact of aggressive sibling rivalry, in effect bullying, is as harmful as it is in a school but often goes unchecked.

Given this had been his experience since childhood I asked Ivo what he wanted from coming to see me now. ‘I’ve been really good at burying it.’ He paused and smiled. ‘I’m not my mother’s son for nothing. She is the Queen of Denial. Over the years I’ve had or heard conversations that made me question if Dad was my father. It was always sitting in the back of my mind. I would turn up to see Dad and he’d be awkward, and very distant. I felt I didn’t belong. Henry and Camilla were cruel to each other but would enjoy pairing up to turn on me. They’d tie me up and beat me with a hairbrush, cover my face with mud, which felt like excrement, in my ears, up my nose, and countless other attacks. They’d tease me for being ugly, call me stupid – I remember Camilla saying to me, “Just looking at you makes me feel sick.”’

Again, I was shocked by the brutality of the picture he painted, and the lack of emotion he displayed as he spoke – but I felt it, a twisting in my chest. It was very hard to see in my mind’s eye the defenceless boy being attacked like that.

It occurred to me that their parents’ neglect had metabolized within the siblings into anger, then self-disgust, which they acted out with each other. Ivo had slowed down now, which allowed more space for his words and emotions to connect. I wondered if he’d picked up mine from reading my face. Feelings are contagious.

‘I wouldn’t have known how to say it then, but looking back, all I wanted was to be safe and to belong, but I never did. The lack of care and attention we received from our parents would put us on the at-risk register now, but if you live in a castle with a moat and titled parents everyone assumes you’re lucky, living the dream.’

I saw the hurt and pent-up rage in Ivo’s face: he was clenching his jaw at the discomfort his memories caused him. I guessed this was the first time he had properly voiced the many layers of distress that were sitting in his body. I told him how shocking his experience was: I had disturbing images of him being physically abused by his siblings and felt fury with them and protective of him, while acknowledging that they must all have been suffering to behave in such violent ways.

The level of neglect while the children lived in such luxury was confusing. I wondered with Ivo about how our collective blindness prevents us from seeing that class and privilege do not protect against suffering. As a society we tend to judge people from how they look, not from how they might feel. A big car represents wealth and assumed happiness but its owner's sad eyes tell a different story. I suggested Ivo had internalized that view. He nodded, holding his breath as a way not to take in my words.

From a psychological perspective, none of the siblings received reliable, secure love from their parents. They all carried negative coping mechanisms to manage their insecure childhood, but the scarcity of love meant they turned on each other to fight for the little that was available. That was the cruellest part. Healthy families use fighting to learn the difference between being clever and hurting: they discover from the trusted adults around them what they can and cannot say when arguing. This family had learnt to attack intending to wound, with no guidance or mediation from the adults around them. I thought of young birds in a nest, pecking each other to get to the worm first.

I could see Ivo was exhausted, but he wanted to continue. 'My first girlfriend had been told categorically that Mark wasn't my father by a close family friend. She asked Henry, who swore it was a false rumour, and they had a stand-up fight about it. I believed Henry and put it out of my mind. Mum came to see me once at university, the only time she ever did. She brought up the usual social banalities of her life, and then, as she closed the car door, just before she drove away, she said, "I know you think Mark isn't your father, but he is. I swear that's the truth." Basically, I have got on with my life since then and totally buried the question. But that same girlfriend emailed me a month ago with a photograph of a man who looks like me – she saw it in someone's house. But more than looking like me it's like looking at a clone of my son Jethro.'

I was racing to catch up with all that Ivo was saying, which was particularly hard as, the more distressed he felt, the faster he was

speaking. I was in a dilemma as to whether to ask him to pause for us take in the story so far but decided to let him get it out in a rush. We would deal with it in the following session. Ivo spat out, 'I was furious with her. How dare she just send that to me out of the blue as if it was trivial information? But much, much worse, she sent it to Henry and Camilla too. Without checking with me! I literally couldn't believe she was tearing my life up with one light-hearted email. Henry rang me to discuss it and we had a huge row. As usual all our old grievances were rolled out. We were both competing for who could win with the knock-out blow of nastiness. It was horrible. I slammed the phone down on him, as I have countless times, thinking how much I hate him and never wanted to speak to him again, but the row tipped me out of my denial.

'From that moment everything I read, saw on TV, listened to was about fathers and sons . . . I couldn't sleep, concentrate, eat, and I've been drinking a lot . . . Again I'm not my mother's son for nothing . . . The last weeks I've wallowed in my melancholy. Every day has been hard. I can't face it . . . can't face the day . . . I do what I must do, the bare minimum, but I'm existing, not living. That's a long way to say I'm not coping. I want to know how to be with it, what to do with it. If it's true, who am I? How does it change me? I look in the mirror and I see the same face, but I feel different. Is that my father's nose? I'd thought it was. I've always liked that link to him. I'm good at maths, like he was. We didn't have much of an emotional relationship, but I didn't realize until now how much of my sense of self I anchored in my parents – their genes, their history coming down to me. Even bloody places. My father's family made their fortune through politics and farming, and built their estate in Norfolk, so Norfolk has always been my roots – the whole county – its smell, its topography, going to my family home, the portraits of "my" ancestors. Do I have to let that go? Maybe my father didn't believe I was his child, but he brought me up as his child. If I'm not biologically his, is he still my father? Do I lose half my family? All my cousins from that side of the family, are they suddenly lost to me? Where do I belong now?