

Nice and Clean

For years my Aunt Joan kept telling me that I was neglected, but I could never work out *how*. I was having a brilliant time, travelling the world with my grandfather, Cherokee, and his jazz band. I was perfectly happy, so if I was neglected it was news to me.

Aunt Joan had two main gripes. One: I wasn't clean enough; and two: my grandfather didn't give me fifty thousand rules to obey.

I don't mean that I was allowed to do just what I liked. Touring with the band required a lot of organisation, and I had to make sure that I wasn't a nuisance. That was a sort of unwritten rule I had to keep in mind all the time. I had to keep out of the

way when the equipment was being set up. I had to stay quiet while Cherokee tested the sound. Important things like that. But whenever I stayed at Aunt Joan's – and I was sent there at least once a year – the rules I had to remember were things like: Clean your teeth after every meal. When doing so, squeeze the toothpaste from the end of the tube. Replace your toothbrush in the toothbrush holder with the bristles facing outwards. Rinse the sink ...

You couldn't *move* at Aunt Joan's without a rule about it, and even staying still was dangerous because she would consider you a dust trap!

Why Aunt Joan was so keen on cleanliness and tidiness was a mystery to me. Her favourite phrase was 'nice and clean'. 'Gene, is your room nice and clean?' 'Is your shirt nice and clean?' 'Are your hands nice and clean?' If she got the chance to travel to the moon, her only question would be: 'Is it nice and clean?'

Aunt Joan also felt that I should be 'kept to a sensible routine'. As far as I could make out, this meant doing the same thing at the same time every day whether it was convenient or not. She thought the fact that I went to bed at different times every evening was terrible, even though I tried to explain that with the travelling and the performing, we had to be

adaptable. We would get up and go to bed at different times. We would eat at different times too. I think it's great. Every day is different. I definitely think it's worth it. I've learnt a lot by travelling around the world, and I've been to places that even older people have seen only on TV. I've also met some pretty amazing characters. I wouldn't ever want to swop my life for a quiet well-ordered existence in a 'nice and clean' house. But I was nearly forced to last summer when I was twelve years old.

Aunt Joan finally decided that I was 'in need of care and protection', so she called in the Social Services Department, hoping that they'd stop my grandfather being my guardian and turn me over to her to look after. But before I go into that, let me tell you about my grandfather.

Cherokee

The largest sort of saxophone is four feet six inches long. My grandfather Cherokee Crawford is just six inches taller. People smile when they see this little old man pick up a musical instrument that looks far too big for him. Cherokee smiles too, partly because he is nearly always smiling. His chubby face has deep laughter lines that never go away. But he also smiles because he knows that as soon as he begins to play the audience will realise that he and the saxophone are as one, that he can play better than anyone else alive today.

Sometimes, he makes the saxophone sound like the deep voice of some slow thoughtful friend telling

you a secret. Then he changes the mood and the saxophone sings like a bird! When the number comes to an end, people stamp and shout, calling out for more. Cherokee gives a little bow and grins, and I know he's totally happy. And I'm totally happy too to be there with my famous grandfather.

He's not big-headed though. He doesn't care about being a star. It's the music he cares about. I remember once he said to me, 'If you can find a way of earning a living doing what you want to do anyway, then you're one of the luckiest people in the world.'

When Cherokee hears the clapping, he thinks it's the music being congratulated and not just him. I have seen him a thousand times, standing at the side of the stage when another band is playing before his, and he's listening to the music, smiling and tapping his feet. He's the first to clap, and the loudest. He never thinks of other musicians as rivals. To him, they – we – all share the same enthusiasm: jazz.

When he walks into a theatre, Cherokee is immediately surrounded by a crowd. Some people want his autograph, others want advice. 'I'm wondering whether I'll get a nicer tone on my saxophone if I use a lighter reed. What do you think, Cherokee?' He'll listen carefully and give helpful advice.

He encourages anyone who wants to play a musi-

cal instrument, but he never says something is good when it's not. To him, you see, music is too important to lie about.

He's become very well-known too for doing chat shows on TV. He started off being invited to talk about his career in jazz, but he tells so many funny stories that now he's asked just because he's interesting. Last year he took part in a Cola ad – he's in an alley playing his saxophone – and since then the whole world recognises him.

'Legendary' is the word I often hear used to describe my grandfather. 'Would you please welcome the legendary Cherokee Crawford!' Thunderous applause! Then Cherokee will amble on and settle himself into a chair as if he's going to watch TV, not perform on it!

He doesn't get upset by much, which is just as well considering some of the crises that happen on tour, like wars breaking out when he's half-way through a concert. 'Keep on playing,' he said quietly once, when the sound of shells exploding in Dubrovnik momentarily stopped the music.

Not that he's keen on wars or fighting. He's full of ideas for bringing people together, and I've never ever heard him say a hateful word against anyone. If he had his way the whole world would be one big

musical group with lots of variation – gamelans in Asia, bagpipes in Scotland, harps in Ireland – all playing in total harmony.

Mrs Walmsley

The Social Services Department became interested in my case, or rather, turned me into a ‘case’, after Cherokee accidentally lost me on a Caribbean island.

I know this sounds pretty drastic, but I wasn’t really *lost*—not marooned alone on a desert island like Robinson Crusoe. I was more *mislaid*.

What happened was this. Cherokee’s band was providing some of the entertainment on the *QE2*. The liner anchored for a week off St Kitts in the Caribbean, and the passengers went ashore. When it was time to leave, Cherokee thought I was going back to the ship in one speedboat while he went in another.

In fact, I was out fishing with Samson, the son of the local hotel owner.

Cherokee only discovered that I was missing after the *QE2* set sail. I could have been sent by boat and plane to the liner's next port of call, but since it was returning to the same island two months later, Cherokee sent a telegram to me at the hotel instead.

Eejit! Stay put. Will collect in two months.
Behave well. Practise.

Cherokee

I was delighted. I liked Samson a lot and every day we fished and swam in the clear blue waters of the Caribbean. And I was learning to play calypso with the local steel band, so I had a great time.

But when she heard about it, Aunt Joan saw the situation quite differently.

'Your grandfather has absolutely no sense of responsibility!' she stormed. 'Fancy losing you like that! It's appalling!'

'I wasn't lost, Auntie,' I pointed out. 'I knew where I was and so did Cherokee, so how could I be lost?'

'You were *alone* in a distant foreign land!' she yelled, almost crying with rage. My Aunt Joan is a very big woman and when she's angry, she's as fierce as the Sumo wrestlers I've seen in Japan.

‘But there were lots and lots of people there. Actually, it was quite crowded at the hotel,’ I told her, trying to think of something comforting to say. ‘And the Caribbean is very nice and clean,’ I tried.

But not even this could calm Aunt Joan down. She kept me at her house, where Mrs Walmsley, a social worker, came to interview me.

When I first saw Mrs Walmsley, I thought someone had just stolen her car or something, but I soon learnt that she always looked shocked and worried.

She started off by treating me as if I was about two and a half years old instead of twelve.

‘Now then, dear. How are you feeling?’ she said, sort of bending down to speak to me. I was already over five feet tall – in other words, as tall as Mrs Walmsley, so this wasn’t necessary.

‘All right,’ I answered, shrugging. I was waiting for the trick questions.

‘Nasty experience was it – in the Caribbean?’ Mrs Walmsley asked sympathetically. I began to wish I hadn’t worn my denim jacket and that I’d had my fringe cut. I guessed Mrs Walmsley would favour a ‘short back and sides’ for boys.

‘Some people go there ‘specially for their holidays,’ I pointed out.

‘Ah, but you must have felt very frightened and

very alone,' she said, shaking her head.

'Not really.'

She gave up and riffled in her briefcase for a form. 'Now then, dear, you and I have to fill in a few details about you. Sit down here next to me and just answer as best you can.'

I glanced at the green form she held in her hand. 'Wouldn't it be quicker if I filled it in myself?' I asked.

She beamed. 'So you can write. Well done! But there are some rather big words on the form ...'

'My vocabulary is fairly extensive,' I told her. Just because I had moved about a lot, she thought I hadn't learnt a thing. She was forgetting that I spent all day with five grown-ups – Cherokee, the three other members of his jazz band and Paddy, the manager.

Red, the double bass player, had taught me how to read when I was six. He had trained as a teacher before deciding to make his living as a musician. Sometimes, he would give me proper lessons, teach me grammar and punctuation and so on, but he also taught me geography and history by just pointing things out while we were travelling: 'See those mountains? They're the Pennines. They run down the centre of England, like a backbone.'

I think it's easier to remember things that you've actually seen. For example, I've never done a geogra-

phy project on Brazil, but I've been there, and I can tell you how hot it is, and what the coffee beans look like growing in the fields.

I wanted to explain all this to Mrs Walmsley, but she was very keen to fill in the form.

'Full name?' she asked.

'Gene Crawford. Shall I spell it?' I asked. I had been named after a great jazz drummer called Gene Krupa, and I was used to people asking me how to spell my first name. 'G as in gnome, E as in envelope, N as in nincompoop and E as in embassy. After the world-famous Gene Krupa,' I announced, staring her in the eye, knowing full well she would never have heard of him.

She hadn't. She pursed her mouth in irritation and wrote in my name carefully.

'Now – address?' she asked. 'Hmm, that's difficult. I'll put "of no fixed abode".'

I scowled. 'No fixed abode' made me sound as if I slept in a cardboard box under a railway bridge. 'I was staying at the Savoy hotel in London before I came here,' I said.

Wallaby, as I had by now christened her, ignored the hotel bit. She didn't really seem a bad sort of person, but I began to realise that it was important to find out just how much power this woman had over me.

'Date of birth?' she asked.

'The seventh of January 1981,' I answered.

'Parents?'

'No.'

She put down her pen slowly and deliberately.

'Yes, Gene, I know you're an orphan, dear, but I must know your parents' names.'

'Eithne and Clive Crawford.'

'Nationality?'

'Dad was British, Mum was Irish. I could have an Irish passport —'

'British,' said Mrs Walmsley firmly, writing it down.

'Now, brothers? No. Sisters? No.' By now Wallaby had given up asking me and was answering the questions herself.

'How about friends?' she asked brightly.

I could have mentioned Samson in the Caribbean. And then there was Victor, the son of the hotel manager at the Savoy. Also, Paddy had about a hundred nephews and nieces, and he allowed one or two of them to tour with us during their school holidays. I liked Seamus best. He was a year older than me and played the piano. He also had a great singing voice. We'd had all sorts of adventures together. I suppose he was my best friend.

Mrs Walmsley interrupted my thoughts. 'Friends,

Gene?’ She obviously thought I couldn’t think of anybody.

‘Lots,’ I answered. ‘Seamus, Samson –’

‘That you see every day,’ she butted in, knowing the answer was no. ‘Now, school. Your record isn’t very good, is it?’

‘I usually do fine,’ I answered defensively.

When we stayed long enough in one place, Cherokee would send me to school and my reading, writing and maths were at least as good as the other kids in the class. Red taught me quite a lot of maths and I had plenty of time to read while travelling in our Ford Transit van. Sometimes I knew nothing about what the class were doing in history and geography, but at other times I knew a whole lot more. And I always did brilliantly at music!

‘I mean your attendance record,’ said Wallaby, screwing up her face with concern. Extra worry lines criss-crossed the ones that were there already. ‘How many schools have you attended? About ten? And never stayed more than half a term.’

‘We *move about*,’ I said, exasperated. ‘That’s how we live. And the law doesn’t say you have to go to school. It says you have to have an education. Red’s a qualified teacher. Actually I’m lucky – if I was in an ordinary class I’d get about one thirtieth of a teacher’s

attention. But I have a whole teacher to myself!

There wasn't a flicker of a response from Wallaby. She just shook her head and wrote something on my form. 'Poor peer group bonding,' she said aloud.

I didn't know what it meant, but it didn't sound like good news for me.