



Arts
Tin Pan Alley: 50 years in pop music's street of dreams

How does a single mother run a top-flight career and cope with a young family? Only with ruthless organisation, says **Suzy Walton**

How to have it all, the Whitehall way

CLAIRE LIM



Suzy Walton – with children, Benny, 15, Elliot, 11, and Millie, 17 months – is a senior civil servant in the Cabinet Office. Her previous jobs have included head of strategic futures in the Prime Minister's strategy unit; senior psychologist at the Ministry of Defence; television producer; and – long ago – she was Lydia, the young deaf girl in the West End hit *Children of a Lesser God*

Seven days before my third caesarean, in the summer of 2002, as I crawled into a top-floor Whitehall meeting room gasping for breath, I did wonder if my long-standing decision to be equally answerable to my job and my family was sane. The boss – Geoff Mulgan, the Prime Minister's Head of Policy – had already begun speaking. Suffering from my inability to overcome a fear of lifts, I was being pumped with oxygen and water.

Resisting the temptation to ask for my usual stress antidote, chocolate (this was the Department of Health, after all), I regained a vertical stance just in the nick of time, gathered together the few brain cells that had not gone on unauthorised maternity leave and said my piece. Boss happy, I retained the smile until just outside the door, then wobbled back to the relative sanctuary of the carpet beneath my desk in the Cabinet Office for an essential mid-morning, pre-birth nap.

For 15 years, since the birth of my eldest son Benny (followed by Elliot and Millie), I have worked both in and out of the home and done neither job part-time nor half-heartedly. I have three children, three degrees and am now on to my third significant career. Majoring in mothering and working seems to puzzle people – but for me, there was never a case to answer or a choice to make. The early deaths of both my father and my husband ignited a survival instinct and since the age of 16 I have been self-sufficient.

When a woman arrives at the point where she realises she is on virtually permanent call to the family and the job, coping strategies appear that rival those of any mountaineer. In fact, the analogy is quite a good one, for it seems we each climb a mountain in relative isolation. No two women have quite the same combination of children, childcare needs and job demands (let alone the delicate issue of partner support – both financial and emotional). This can make it very lonely

sometimes. I once ran a local support group for working parents, but had to give up after several evenings alone in pizza restaurants where the only company was the sound of the mobile, as call after call came in about the unreasonable boss/road/babysitter.

This was a pity. I yearn to make new friends but, short of meeting people at 10pm at motorway service stations, I'm not sure how a working mother is supposed to fit in friendship. One of my New Year resolutions is to tackle this, somehow. My own survival kit has

I throw a party once a year for all the people I never see

always been ruthless organisation. Every event, from a trip to the supermarket to a holiday on the other side of the world, has had to be planned and executed with attention to detail that the best military strategist would envy. Skills that I learnt while working at the Ministry of Defence were exceptionally useful, but my time as a stage manager of pantomimes was also instructive. Pressing one of my console buttons even a microsecond too late meant the flash would ignite beneath, not before, the fairy, the audience rather than the dancers got the dry ice, or the beanstalk wouldn't grow.

As I've got higher up my own particular mountain, I've discovered that survival strategies need to be refined and reinforced on an almost daily basis. The odd crisis – acute tummy ache before the piano exam, dead goldfish – was quite manageable with one child and a place relatively low down the corporate hierarchy. But, as the number of children increased in direct proportion to the work responsibility, I

discovered I needed three of me: one to don navy suits and give the best at work, one to run a constant taxi service between school and the GP surgery, and one to cover for the other two. I saw myself facing two equally credible opposing parties – the Corporation and the Children. The case for both was strong and I didn't want to rule in favour of either.

With a little creativity and a lot of determination, I have now devised a set of coping strategies that seem to work. Organisation is still important. I spend every Friday night noting down the movements of all in the household in a big diary for the week ahead. I have to plan my own time exceptionally carefully and work four very long days – breakfast with the children at 6am, getting in to work by 7.30 and finishing not far short of 12 hours later. On the fifth day, I either work from home or go into work late. On Saturdays, we have to ruthlessly prioritise and decide whether the playground, the school match or the party takes priority. And on a Sunday, we do something together – usually swimming or board games. Socialising has been one of the main sacrifices, so I throw a party once a year and invite all the people who I would dearly love to see at other times but can't.

To this great feat of organisation, I have had to add two key ingredients: paid help and creativity. Up until the point where my husband was diagnosed with leukaemia, I had managed without live-in help. I was with the Ministry of Defence and when I travelled abroad, I took the children. When I turned up at an overseas military base and was greeted with the customary "Morning, ma'am, may I be of any assistance to you?", I would say: "Yes, can you please set up a crèche for these two?" This is where the creativity comes in – I believe there is always a solution to every child- or work-related problem and it is not necessarily the obvious one. But when my husband collapsed and went to hospital one night, and a very

distressed junior doctor read out a diagnosis of leukaemia, I knew I could no longer keep us afloat working solo.

Feeling bad about employing someone to live in who was going to have to witness death tearing through the family, I approached a few au pairs. Without much difficulty, I found a lady from the Czech Republic brave enough to help us. Over the next few years, Hana morphed into Cecile from France, Melanie from Germany, Asrun from Iceland and now Petra from Germany.

Of course, an au pair cannot and should not be asked to do everything. So, I have had to add a day nursery, a cleaner, a gardener and an occasional

shopper, for when Waitrose at 8am on a Saturday is beyond me. And, since au pairs must be free for English classes, twice a week I take my Filofax and mobile phone into all meetings, ready to activate a crisis support system.

Whether I would be successful is another matter but the ultimate contingency plan is obviously to leave work and handle the situation myself. I haven't had to do this yet, but part of my planning was to ensure I worked for an organisation with good family policies who would recognise that a home emergency needs dealing with and not use this as ammunition against me. I think the Cabinet Office, my

current employer, does exceptionally well here. All my direct bosses in the Civil Service have been excellent and very understanding, although I reserve the red rosette for the aforementioned Geoff Mulgan.

Is it all worth it, you may ask. What fun is life if every last detail has to be stage-managed so that no child is left uncollected, no work issue is left unsolved and a coffee with a colleague has to be put in the diary six weeks ahead? Well, I feel exceptionally lucky and exceptionally fulfilled. I've given birth to three amazing children, I have travelled the world as a journalist with my own travel programme, I spent

three years on the West End stage (before I had children), I have studied to the highest level possible, become a chartered occupational psychologist, and have spent the past 10 years doing highly challenging and rewarding work for government.

I can't and won't accept that there is a choice to be made between work and family. I think women have a huge potential to embrace both aspects fully, if they want to and if they are able to create the relevant opportunities.

But there is a cost to being a busy working mother. For me, it has been the loss of a close network of friends. I did have some, but when my husband was in hospital and I used to visit before and after work as well as needing to be back for the children, most slipped away. Understandably, many could not deal with my circumstances.

I wasn't sure that I could either, but I got a glimpse of the future when I took the children off to a bereavement camp in Gloucestershire after my husband's death. Here, I met people from all walks of life who had lost a partner but still had children to raise. Through them, I saw that there would be a future if I could persevere and if I learnt to enjoy simple things with the children.

So, although I bemoan the fact that I have an overly thin Filofax, I gain great comfort and pleasure from just going for a walk with the children, seeing a film with my new partner or collapsing on the sofa with fish and chips for all.

Having someone new in my life has helped – we met on the internet and discovered we lived around the corner from each other – and having a baby together has been fantastic for all of us. The boys adore their little sister, but integrating someone new into a family takes time – years perhaps – and we don't yet live together as husband and wife. So, it's not a carbon copy of what was – it's something new, and how we do things together, and how we help each other and the boys will take time to evolve.

One or two legacies of the bereavement period remain – panic attacks out of the blue, recurring nightmares of planes not getting off the ground (not helped by two aborted landings at Gatwick very recently) and an inability to go within 10 ft of a lift. But, having done a PhD on suicide, I'm aware of the degrees of stress and its various manifestations and I know when to switch off.

It can be problematic when I reach crisis stress levels at work but I've learnt to smile, exit gracefully, and slot back in a few hours later, mentally recalibrated. Having lived through death, life – no matter how busy, how complex or how stressful – is not really a problem at all.

Great-Aunt Ruth was scary – but it's only now I can appreciate her worth



Tom Kemp
A Father Writes...

In the early hours of yesterday morning, and in fascinated horror, I tuned in to BBC1 and watched a schmaltzy American film about a blind man. My excuse for staying up, long after respectable Britons were tucked up in their beds, is that my father was completely blind from his childhood and I was interested to compare the Hollywood version of his affliction with my impressions of the real thing.

Needless to say, this being Hollywood, the hero of *At First Sight* recovers his sight in the film, through the intervention of his devoted girlfriend and a brilliant New York eye surgeon. Later, he loses it again. But don't worry. This being Hollywood, blind man and girlfriend live happily ever after, he

having decided that he can see better now that he is blind again (in the sense of being able to see into people's characters and souls, blah-blah-blah, yuck-yuck-yuck).

The film reels out all the familiar stereotypes of the blind. Robbed of his sight by a childhood disease, our hero has developed all his other senses to an astonishing degree. He can tell that his sister has brought him apples and bananas from a single sniff of the air when she enters the room. He can identify his friends by the sound of their car engines and knows the dimensions of a room by the echoes of the rain on window-pane and skylight.

He is, of course, determined to be as independent as he possibly can, and bitterly resents any

kindness to him that might be construed as charity.

Well, there may be blind people like this. (Indeed, the makers of *At First Sight* claim that it is based on a true story.) All I can say is that my father wasn't a bit like that.

He would accept any kindness shown to him in the spirit in which it was meant, without any chippy nonsense about being too proud to accept "charity". He showed not the slightest desire to do anything for himself that others were willing to do for him.

True, he had very sensitive fingers, which enabled him to read Braille at great speed. He also had an exceptionally brilliant, analytical mind, which may have been honed by his blindness, although I reckon that he would

have been brilliant anyway. But his other senses – taste, hearing and smell – were no more acute than yours or mine. If he had a sixth sense, which allowed him to see into people's souls, he never displayed the slightest sign of it.

But there was one part of the plot of *At First Sight* that I found very moving. In the film, our hero had been brought up from childhood by an older sister, who had devoted her young life to him. She was jealous of her blind brother's girlfriend, and resisted the interloper's attempts to get his sight restored. The sister thought that only she understood his needs. He was hers, and she had come to depend upon his dependence on her.

The sister made me think

immediately of my great-aunt Ruth, who brought up my father before the war, and rearranged her entire life to accommodate his needs. I had only ever thought of her before as a strict and disaffected spinster, much given to discipline, who was always licking handkerchiefs to clean my face in my childhood, and whose visits my siblings and I came to dread.

I always knew that my mother's parents had reservations about their lovely daughter marrying a blind journalist, rather than the duke of their dreams. But it had never occurred to me even to speculate on what Great-Aunt Ruth thought about the match, when she handed over her brilliant young nephew – her *raison d'être* since her dashing fiancé, a pilot in the

Royal Flying Corps, was killed in action in the First World War – to my chaotic mother. The wrench must have been almost unbearable, although she never showed it.

Now that George has reached marriageable age, I am coming to realise how hard it will be to surrender him to a wife. Vile though he is, nobody will ever be quite good enough for him. How much harder it must have been for Great-Aunt Ruth, who let go of her infinitely dependent protégé to somebody so terribly different (delightfully different, I would say) from herself.

Perhaps Hollywood schmaltz is not such a bad thing after all. For the first time in 50 years, it has inspired in me a charitable thought about my terrifying great aunt.

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