TRANSCRIPTS OF THREE SEPARATE INTERVIEWS WITH CONTRIBUTOR RHODA HARRIS FOR STARTLING TRUTHS OF OLD WORLD SPARROWS

P: Pauline (Harris– Producer/Director)

R: Rhoda Harris – (Contributor)

FIRST INTERVIEW

P: Alright then, so could you just start by saying what your full name is and how old you are and when your birthday is -

R: Hello, my name is Rhoda Claire Harris and I was born on the 30/11/32 and on Friday, next Friday, I will be 80.

P: And how do you feel about that?

R: Well I'm not so thrilled about it because you know, when you get to 80 you're on the last lap aren't you?

I'm lucky but then at the same time I'm pissed off. I'd rather be 60 and I feel quite envious when I look round at all younger people. And I get upset when I look at my great-grandchildren who are 7 and 3… and I think I'm not going to know them for very much longer. And that's sad. Of course I may well live to be 90 or 100 but with the medical conditions I've got that's unlikely.

P: Do you want to tell me what they are? Those medical conditions.

R: Oh, I've got an aneurism in my aorta, that my heart surgeon thinks would be very unwise to operate on.

P: Where is it again, your aneurism? It's on the…?

R: The aorta, which is the main vein and then, and the aneurism is very close to my heart and the surgery would take 11 hours and he doesn't think that I would survive, so that is sickening, that is sickening.

P: So do you know what size it is?

R: The last time I had a CAT scan it was 6.4 and the cut-off point is 5. They always operate on patients with an aneurism measuring 5. So…

P: I don't think they always operate on people at 5…

R: Well, that's what the heart surgeon told me and so I'm not going to argue with him. I think he knows better than I do.

P: You can talk to me.

R: (Laughs) Oh…

P: You just don't seem to… OK, and then what else have you got wrong with you?

R: Oh, I've got fluid behind my eyes, which means, erm, once a month I have, erm, a hypodermic needle in each eye, which is very uncomfortable and very sore but I'm so lucky to have it because if it wasn't available I would be blind in a few months. So it's worth the pain and it's worth the fear that you get. You've got to get on with it.

P: And what is… Can you describe a bit of that fear? How you feel about these needles in your eyes every month?

R: I – I dread going because I know that, er, it is going to be very painful afterwards and the thought of laying down there having hypodermic needles in your eyes give you a tummy-churning feeling. But as I've said it's well worth it. It's better than the alternative, and this treatment's only been available for 8 years. So… I'm fortunate. I'm still sick about having it done.

P: Mmmm

R: I'm sick that I've got it. I'm sick that I've got everything wrong with me that I've got.

P: What else have you got wrong?

R: I've got arthritis in my knee, I've got arthritis in my back, I've got a peculiar, very horrible pain in my left calf that nobody seems to know anything about and I can't walk on it for very long, even though my loving family think that I should walk on it more to get it better. They don't know how sick I feel after about 20 minutes.

P: Why do you think you take a sleeping pill every night?

R: Because I started taking it when I first got trouble sleeping when I was underactive (thyroid). And unfortunately they're addictive. Once you start taking then you just get used to taking them, you feel you can't sleep without taking them.

P: And is it nice that feeling of when you take it?

R: It's a lovely feeling. I sometimes think about 5 o'clock in the afternoon, when I'm feeling a bit tired, and a bit grotty, I can't wait to take them because it's a sedative and… it makes you feel lovely and calm, and you're not frightened. And it doesn't work straight away, er, with me it takes an hour to work so I can go to bed and read and enjoy reading. And then I go to sleep. Lovely.

P: Is that one of your best past times? Not sleeping – reading?

R: No, my best past times are watching TV and – two, two past times – TV and reading.

P: And what's your– What do you watch when you're watching TV? What's your favourite programmes?

R: Soaps.

P: Tell me why you love the soaps.

R: Because I've watched them since they started in 1960. And I suppose they get addictive. And because I know every character so well in them… And sometime they're very annoying because the scripts aren't very good. And… I like Deal or No Deal, I like Pointless. I love Newsnight. I watch Question Time, which I wish was on more than once a week. And that's about it.

P: That's fine and what do you love about your crime novels? Because you love– Do you want to say what crime novels you read?

R: Well, unfortunately, the crime novel authors don't write quick enough. I love John Sandford – he doesn't write enough books. One a year. Mark Billingham's the same – one a year. Karen Slaughter – one a year. Lee Child

P: OK. Sorry for this but I'm just going to go back to this aneurism, talk a bit more about the aneurism. Because how do you… What does it feel like that's inside you?

R: An unexploded bomb. I'm not religious in the fact that I never go to church but I can't tell you the number of times I've prayed. It never goes away. You never stop thinking about it: when your children come home at the weekend you pray 'don't let it happen now'; when your granddaughter comes on a Wednesday 'please don't let it happen now'; looking after your great-grandchildren 'please God don't let it happen now'. And it's there. It's with you – it never leaves you.

P: And the reason the surgeon won't operate; can you just explain that a little bit more? Because of the position, and you've only got one kidney and all of that. Would that be OK?

R: Oh…

P: I'm sorry that you're getting a bit upset now. Because you don't like talking about it, do you?

R: Not really…

P: Do you want to say why you don't like talking about it?

R: Because nobody wants to die and I feel quite frightened. And I'm not certain there is an afterlife. And that's it. Everything will go on and that'll be the end of it. You just won't exist anymore. And I could take the chance. He's told me 50:50 but I don't believe it's 50:50 I think it's even less than that.

P: Why won't he operate? He's advising not to operate, isn't he?

R: Because I've got one kidney, because he think that he'd have to remove the kidney. He'd have to cut it off for such a long time that it wouldn't work properly,

which would mean dialysis every day, which I wouldn't want to do but I would rather have that than dying. And various other organs would have to be cut off. Erm… but the main thing is the anaesthetic; at 80 years old, an 11 hour operation is quite a long time to have an anaesthetic. So these are the things, you know, but there's always a chance but it's taking that chance. What do you do?

P: Thank you so much for all of that … What's the hardest thing now, about approaching 80?

R: Frightened of dying.

P: I know you don't really like to talk about these things but it's quite… Would you mind saying why you would want to be cremated and things like that? Because you have a fear of all of that as well don't you?

R: I have a fear before I get cremated of being taken to the LGI and being shoved in a cold drawer. And I really would love my family when I die to have the funeral directors pick me up and take me down to their… their little room, where you lie on a little bed with your head on a pillow. I've got this terrible, terrible fear that I've had all my life – never, ever has it gone away – that I would be in a cold storage drawer in a morgue and I would wake up. And I know it's ridiculous, and I know it couldn't happen… but then again I've read in the paper in my years of living that at least three people that've been pronounced dead have come round. And I've read that in the newspapers, with photographs of them; the whole story. And that absolutely terrifies me. I don't want a post-mortem. If I'm going to die, I'm going to die. I'm dead. Let me go to a–

P: Let me go to what?

R: My daughter died. And I watched her in this room and she was laid on the bed, a cover over her. I want it to be the same… Go on ask me.

P: I was going to ask about Carol and I knew this would be upsetting. Do you want me to talk about Carol or not?

R: I don't know. We can try.

P: I suppose because – and it is upsetting, and I don't want to make you feel too upset about it – but not everybody… not every parent has to go through what you went through and I just wondered if you'd mind? How old were you when you found out that Carol was ill? That she was going to die, that she had Motor Neurone Disease?

R: I was 76. And it's not just the grief that's hard, you have the guilt to deal with. And the guilt, that doesn't go away.

P: And you mentioned… Did you say that you spent your 76th birthday up there? You said to me–

R: Yes, I've… I… I think it's among the guilt that you get because I thought you know, well we're all sat round the bed and I'm celebrating an age that she would never reach. It was awful.

P: Could you just say how old Carol was then?

R: 47.

P: Did you think at the time? When you were celebrating your 76th birthday round her bed. Were you aware of that feeling then or was it afterwards?

R: No, to be honest, I don't think it was then because it was my birthday, my girls were home and I was enjoying opening the presents. It's just one of the things that I feel guilt. You know I spent the last night with Carol and you don't know, of course you don't know, that that's the last time.

P: See, it does get so upsetting doesn't it? I mean you felt you didn't do enough on the day she died?

R: I didn't do enough on the day that she died at all. It was the worst time I'd ever been with her because she couldn't take phone calls from any– The phone never stopped ringing Carol had so many friends. 400 people were in the church. And her sisters wanted to speak to her and I had to take the phone and say 'no, she's not very well', and not once did I say to her 'why – what's wrong? Why don't you feel very well? What's wrong?'. Not once. Most of the time I sat with her there I felt quite numb. I wanted so many times to cry and I think Carol would have quite liked to have me– to have seen me cry. But sitting with a daughter that's dying… you know Motor Neurone's terrible -they're quite normal; they're not in any pain; they're sitting up and they're having a drink; and they're smoking; and they're watching TV. And sometimes you can't believe that you're going to lose them. And that day I should've shown more tenderness, more… been more upset. Why, ask why…

P: Ask her why what?

R: Why she didn't feel very well. What was wrong. But I didn't and all I wanted was– I'd been there since 2 o'clock and it was half past 9 and the only chair in the room that I had to sit on was a dining-room chair and I was so tired. And I was just dying for my grandson to come and then I could go home. And when Michael rang me at quarter past 5 to tell me his mum wasn't very well – it sounds awful now – but I was pleased. I thought 'oh when she sees me she'll be like, oh my are you coming up? There's no need to come up.' I couldn't wait to get up there to give her a hug/

P: /You mean… You mean at 5.30 the next morning?

R: 5:15, next morning. My son-in-law picked me up and he didn't say anything. And it's 5 minutes away, or maybe less in a car. And when we got to their house there was the ambulance, I couldn't believe it. And I said to my son-in-law 'what's the

ambulance doing?'. And then he said 'I think Carol's had a cardiac arrest'. And I met the ambulance man coming out and he said 'Are you– Who are you?' and I said 'I'm her mum'. And he said 'I'm sorry she's gone'.

P: I know... I know… Obviously we've spoken of this before, haven't we? But I mean you know you spoke of an afterlife…

R: Yes, Carol was very spiritual. She really believed in the afterlife. She said many times 'I'm not frightened of dying because there's an afterlife but I'm just going to miss you all.'

P: And what did you…? You mentioned something about an afterlife to me the other day in the car. I don't really remember… It was something you'd said that someone had said. That they thought they'd go to hell or something and you were worried about going to hell as well.

R: Oh, I'd watched a programme on TV and they were discussing the life after death and one of the women being interviewed said that she'd told her children that there was definitely a hell and that if you sinned against God you certainly wouldn't go to heaven but that you would go to hell. And people on the panel listening to her were horrified and I felt amazed. But then I remember Carol telling me that at her work as an OT she'd talked to a Catholic priest who'd visited one of her patients. And he told her that there was a heaven and a hell, but the hell was on earth, with all the terrible things that happened, that God couldn't do anything about and heaven was a place that was full of peace and love. And that's what Carol believed.

P: But you said in the car that you hoped you didn't go to hell…

R: I certainly hope I don't go to hell. I could do. If there is a hell, believe you me I might go to it.

P: Why?

R: oh… I've lived a shocking life. I've certainly not been a good faithful wife and I've certainly not been a wonderful mother.

P: I think you've been a wonderful mother

R: Well I'm so lucky that my children think that. But, you see, this is it with life… in your 30s, 40s, 50s, and 60s even, you go blissfully along. I didn't start feeling any guilt really 'till I was in my mid-70s. So I suppose that's lucky really. You don't feel guilty about things you've done until you get aged. Well you don't in my case, and since Carol died everything's sort of intensified.

P: Could you describe?

R: I mean I had a baby boy who died when he was 3 days old and I didn't even hold him because he'd been, he'd been slightly injured at birth and they wanted to cot nurse him for 3 days.

P: What year was that?

R: 1956. And, um, it's ridiculous but I didn't start grieving for that little boy until Carol died – why? Why? I was just so glad to have another baby and eventually have 4 babies. And I never even gave the little boy much thought and then Carol died – and it's strange how your mind works.

P: This is a hard question but if you... Sorry… Could you describe what it's like as a mother to lose a child?

R: It's the worst thing that can happen to you. Its – I've had operations, I've had… You have worry right from your baby being born. Every time your child's ill you worry, you feel frightened that something's going to happen to them. When they get of age to drive a car you're scared to death that they'll have an accident. But when that child dies… Life is never, ever, ever the same. Ever.

P: I didn't want it to get so depressing so quickly for us but, I mean, if there was a fondest memory… Is that, is that hard?

R: Fondest memory of Carol? Well because she was the only daughter I had in Wetherby she was always here. I saw a lot of her… I could depend on her, but don't think that we had a wonderful daughter and mother relationship. Did we heck – we used to argue, she used to annoy me intensely, I suppose I did the same with her… It does get easier. It's nearly 5 years now and you can, you can look back and you can laugh at some of the things. It does get easier... And it changes because at first you're so sorry for yourself and the grief and it's so hurtful, but now it's… you don't feel sorry for yourself. It does change. It changes, maybe a month after she's dies you feel sorry for her. And you watch your great-grandchildren grow up and you're so sorry that she can't see them.

P: Sometimes do you think she's watching over them?

R: Well, you like to think that but you don't know. We don't know – that's the problem.

P: Do you think if you did know, you wouldn't be so frightened of death? If you really knew that you were going on somewhere else?

R: Oh I think if we knew that nobody would… I would, I would be quite happy to think I was going to see my mum… and my daughter. Yeah.

P: And do you remember your mum, still? After all these years.

R: Yes, I was 10 and I can remember her as though it was yesterday

P: You were 10?

R: I was 10 when she died.

P: And she used to…? What was her job?

R: Well she didn't… Poor love she was a single mum and so she used to leave work, rush home, have her dinner, put me to bed and then she had a night job at a dance hall at the Mecca in Leeds where she worked behind a kiosk… selling cigarettes and chocolates and what-have-you. And she didn't get home 'till about 2 in the morning.

P: And you were living where?

R: We were living in Leeds.

P: With?

R: Grandparents.

P: And what about…? You were going to tell me something about 2am.

R: She'd quite often wake me up because she slept with me and she used to give me a piece of Mars bar. This is unbelievable now, when you think of how we get our kids to clean their teeth but I used to eat a Mars bar at 2 o'clock in the morning and snuggle back to sleep.

P: What do you think the main difference between 40 and 80 is? Can you remember what it was like to be 40?

R: I can remember as though it was yesterday, to be 40. I cannot believe that 40 years have gone. You've got a lovely figure, your face is nice. You don't even give a thought to dying because the years stretch ahead of you – it's endless.

P: Mum, that's not entirely true is it because you were frightened of dying when you were 32…

R: Yeah, but not in the same way as I am now. The thought… it used to cross my mind.

P: Yeah but you had a real fear that you wouldn't reach 32. You told me that.

R: I can't remember. 32?

P: Yeah… you weren't going to reach 32… you know, you've always been frightened of dying. Does it feel more real now?

R: Much more real that I can't ever remember thinking about it before.

P: You've told me loads of times.

R: Maybe but I can't remember.

P: What's the good things about being older do you think?

R: I can't think of one thing. I cannot think of one thing. Maybe it's nice that you retire and you don't have to go to work. But there's so many things that you can't do.

P: Like what?

R: Well because of my medical problems I've got to rely on whoever comes home at the weekend to hoover the house for me and I hate it. I hate that.

P: Do you want to talk a bit about your mobility? Because you're walking's not… when you were in your 70s you were cycling weren't you?

R: Oh my goodness me, yes. 10 years ago I used to bike to Wetherby, go to the supermarket, get all my shopping on my bike handlebars, cycle back.

P: And what do you think's happened over the past 10 years?

R: Arthritis.

P: Do you think if you didn't have the body ailments you'd enjoy your old life

R: Oh goodness me. That would be better than winning the lottery. If I didn't have this aneurism life would be so wonderful. I can cope with the eyes – the eyes, they're fine. It's the aneurism. And for some reason the tiredness I get and I don't know why that is. It's probably because I don't get enough fresh air, exercise. It's probably because I smoke. That can't help.

P: And do you feel a bit lonely sometimes?

R: I feel lonely but I quite enjoy my own company – providing I've got a good book, and there's something good on TV, I can cope. And I'm so very lucky that I have daughters that come home, that care for me and that come home at the weekend, that travel such a long way. They've both got exacting jobs so I'm very fortunate. I've got a granddaughter that I adore that comes once, sometimes twice, a week.

P: What do you adore about her?

R: I adore her because her mum was separated from her father when she was born and I literally was there when she was 3 days old and her mum had to go out to work. And really it was like having a 5th daughter.

P: Tell me what you love about her.

R: Well I think I love her so much because she's lost her mum and I feel so protective about her and I feel that I don't want… I don't really want anything to happen to me 'til she's got a baby of her own because when she's got a baby of her own - they're– Your baby's the most important thing in your life. And she will miss me, but she'll cope because her child's there and her child's healthy. And er…

P: Can you tell me something about her that you love?

R: No I can't really because… How can you tell– ? How can you describe how much… how– ? Why you love a person? You know, you know you love your children because they're your children, they're part of you and she feels part of me.

P: What about her personality do you love? … [both laugh] You're rubbish… How funny – you can't say?

R: I can't, I can't say her personality because she's – she's…

P: Alright, we'll move on mum.

R: Move on, move on yes… [laughs] I don't think you're a very good interviewer.

P: On Friday, this Friday you're going to be 80 years old and what do you think you're going to wake up and feel?

R: Thankful that I'm alive. I think that every morning [laughs] it won't have to get to be Friday to think that. And I shall look forward to my family all coming to see me and I suppose you feel a little bit. You feel a bit proud that you've got to 80. You're lucky, I suppose.

P: And what are you doing on your 80th birthday?

R: Well I don't know. I think it's all going to be– The whole weekend's going to be a surprise.

P: It's not. You can say what you're going to do. Why are you lying? [laughs]

R: Well I'm not sure, I'm not sure what's going to happen till evening and when my granddaughter and her husband arrive, and then my two daughters arrive and we're going to celebrate by having fish and chips. And then Faye and her husband will go home and then we'll watch a bit of TV and then I'll come to bed and read my book. And then next morning my daughter from London will come and she'll my cut hair. And Saturday night it's 30 years since I went to play bingo but we're all going to play bingo and hopefully I'll be able to see the numbers.

P: And what's the prize money? Do you know?

R: I've no idea what the prize money is. No idea at all.

P: How many of you will be going then? Is it grandchildren?

R: There'll be, um, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10 people will be going.

P: Including you?

R: Including me.

P: Ten of us?

R:Ten of us.

P: You're going to go to bingo?

R: And then we'll come home. And then on Sunday we will go to a very nice pub and we'll all enjoy a lovely Sunday lunch. And that's it, that'll be the weekend. And we'll come home and the girls will go back. Oh on the Monday morning I will be going to have the two eyes injected, which will be a bit of a downer, thinking about it on the weekend, but it's just one of those things that can't be helped. And then, hopefully, I'll look forward to being 81.

P: Are you a bit frightened that you won't reach 81?

R: I'm a bit frightened that I won't reach tomorrow.

P: Do you live every day in fear?

R: Yes. I live because of the aneurism... You're always, unfortunately, in fear. And I don't mean that I go round weeping and wailing; I go round trying to enjoy things and look forward to it but it's always at the back of your mind. It won't go away. It's there.

P: What's it like?

R: Anybody that's felt fear will know what fear is. It's fear. You're frightened. You don't know what it's like when an aneurism bursts, what's going to happen, you know. Where's the blood going to go? How are you going to feel? Is it quick? No… No.. It's a damn nuisance and I'm quite pissed off about it. As I've said many times, if I didn't have that, I'd be the most joyful person. Apart from losing Carol, but I could be.

P: And if you were to give me some advice, what would it be? Just in terms of life and age. I keep asking hard questions.

R: No because I can remember being quite upset when I got to 40, I can remember being really upset. And even more upset when I was 50. You think 'oh my God, I'm getting old' and you're not. You're not old at 50, you're not old at 60, you're not really old at 70. And– not once in your life do you ever start thinking 'oh I'm must enjoy today. I'm must enjoy it as if it were my last'. You never think that, ever. Because that's young people. And whatever disaster you go through one thing you should always try and think of and that's - this will pass. And I've done that, I've done that. That's got me through a lot of things thinking it's going to be alright, this will pass. And if you can do that– I didn't do it when I was younger and I'm doing it now. You find out things when it's too late, but if I'd've done it when I was younger I think I might have been happier.

P: So when you were younger you had unhappy moments? And did you feel like you were stuck in a–

R: Yes, I didn't have a happy marriage and I wished when I was 40 that I wasn't married. Er… so…

P: What does that feel like? Stuck in an unhappy marriage?

R: It's bloody awful because the person I was married to was a good man and I loved him but I wasn't in love with him. I got married – I don't think I knew what love was. And that's why I enjoy my granddaughter coming to see me with her husband because they're so much in love and they're so lovely, to see how they are, and I feel quite envious. I had never felt like that with my husband, ever.

P: But you did meet somebody, didn't you? That you fell in love with.

R: yes, I fell in love with somebody when I was 40, but I had 4 children and there wasn't a lot I could do about it. And that's all part of the guilt I feel now because I did leave them and I went out…

P: Well you didn't leave them– You went out, you mean, with the man? How long did you go out with this man?

R: 17 years.

P: While you were married?

R: While I was married. I went out with a man who wasn't married for 17 years. And because of the, um, the unhappiness I began to drink and it's a very slippery slope. And from drinking no more than two gin and tonics a night, you'll end up drinking, eventually, a whole bottle of whisky a day. And you have to cope with being an alcoholic, and you see this is where your guilt comes in now because I don't know how awful it must've been for your family. But 27 years ago I went into a detox clinic and you do go through a nightmare, but I've never had a drink since. And I just wish I could give up smoking, the way I gave up drinking.

P: That's an amazing achievement isn't it? Are you proud of that?

R: Oh I'm proud that I'm not drinking again. I look back and I think how horrid I must've been; how horrible life was. But drink is the worst thing that you can get addicted to. Drink. Because you cannot, you just cannot imagine life without it. And, to be honest, there's times now when I feel very tired and a bit fed up and I think it would be lovely to have a whiskey and dry ginger. I used to feel that it took all your tiredness and unhappy feelings and if you didn't feel very well you felt so much better. Unfortunately in my case, it wouldn't stop, I don't think. And, it may do, but how often do you back a horse at 500 to 1? So I daren't take the risk.

P: On your birthday? On your birthday you're not going to have a whiskey?

R: No I'm not going to have a whiskey on my birthday.

P: Did you think that you'd live to the age of 80?

R: I had a feeling I'd live to be 100. But, you see, that is not unusual. Everybody wants to think that. Everybody must think that. That's your ultimate goal in life.

P: To live to 100?

R: To live to be 100.

P: I suppose one would like to think you get wiser as you get older; is that right or not?

R: No it's not. It maybe is with 9 out of 10 people but I must be the 1 out of 10. I still say things that are stupid. I still wished I hadn't said that. I still do things that I think are silly.

P: And inside then, do you still feel a lot younger than outside?

R: Oh yes – the inside. I can still look at men and think they're quite fancy-able.

P: Of a certain age?

R: Of a certain age.

P: And what age is that then? What is the best age that you think a man is the most attractive at?

R: What now?

P: Mmmm

R: Oh I don't know. 50s, 60s some of them. But no older. I'd never, ever marry a man in his 70s and 80s.

P: Why?

R: Not that I'll get the chance... I wouldn't want the chance.

P: What is it about a man in his 70s or 80s that–

R: They're too old and wrinkled. [both laugh]

P: Right… OK… And would you like a bit of romance do you think? Would you be into that? Or are you not bothered?... Do you ever think about it?

R: Yeah I think about it quite a bit now but I don't really want to say now, in front of my daughter.

P: Oh no! Why? I don't mind.

R: Well yeah I think you will because I did mention once that I think I made the biggest mistake of my life. I think I met somebody… Oh years before my husband died. He was also a fire officer who was very, very interested in me and I didn't even know he existed and he was very kind at my husband's funeral. He arranged it and everything and it was probably a few weeks after he rang up and I, and I was quite rude to him and I think maybe now... I don't know. Maybe not a romance but we could've, I could've kept friendly with him.

P: So when I'm talking about romance you're thinking about this man from 1987?

R: Yes, I would love to meet this man again, not for any other reason but really just to apologise to him. That's bothered me just lately.

P: I think it's more than that though, isn't it? Because when I asked you about romance you– ?

R: Yes I've– I've got this feeling...– I don't know why I've started thinking about him. God knows. He's probably dead for all I know. But it would be nice to meet him again. I had this fantasy that maybe we might bump into each other, and we might meet… I don't know, I don't think it'll happen.

P: And if you did meet up again, what would you like to do? Would you like to go out with him?

R: Yes I would, er…

P: Do you ever when you're out, do you notice a man that's good looking or/?

R: /No. No.

P: You're not interested? So it's just this one man in particular that you've been thinking of?

R: Mm, yeah.

P: Do you have any regrets about this 17 year relationship with the other man?

R: Yes. I wish I'd never had it. I regret every minute of the 17 years… Because I started drinking, because I left my children on a night, because I could've had a happy life with a husband that I was married to.

P: But you didn't love him.

R: No I didn't love him. But… I didn't love him because I'd met this other man that I thought I *fell* in love with and, oh… this is where, when you get older you, I suppose this is where wisdom comes in, and you look back and you think why the hell did I do all that? Why? You forget how you felt at the time. How you felt at the time doesn't matter now. You can't bring back the memory. At the time I wanted to live with this man, I wanted to leave my husband but I couldn't leave my children. I couldn't take

my children away from their dad because he was a very loving dad and the kids loved him very much and it was all a muddle. And I should never, ever have started an affair. I was extremely selfish and that is a part of the guilt that I get now; how very, very selfish I was. And I do regret it.

R: Maybe that's why I've been punished. Maybe that's why, you know. I think that often. This is why I've got an aneurism and this is why I've got eye trouble. It's… Maybe it's punishment. You don't know.

P: In which case you might go to hell.

R: [laughs] Well, I really don't believe this hell bit. I really don't. I really cannot imagine it– Listen, I can't imagine a heaven so I can even less imagine a hell.

P: So in reality do you not... Do you think there is somewhere we float about?

R: Do I think what?

P: Do you think there is somewhere you float about?

R: No I can't imagine you floating about anywhere. I really can't. I once, when I was a kid I was very poorly and I remember being – this is so true, on my children's lives – and for some reason my grandma who didn't really, and I don't know why because she didn't really love me very much, erm, for whatever reason she had – maybe I wasn't a loveable kid, I don't know – but she was sleeping with me and I was up at the ceiling of the bedroom looking down at me and my grandma asleep. And that has never, ever, ever, left me. It's as though it was yesterday. So, you know, was that an out of life experience? I've no idea. So maybe you do float about but all I can imagine is all the people in your family, if they've all come back, it's really weird to think that your room's full of people floating about.

P: What looking over you now?

R: Yes listening now to this rabble. The way I'm rabbling on.

P: No, you've done very well. You have been… We have been talking for about an hour now.

P: How old do you think you look?

R: I think I look about 72, 73.

P: If you had to give a self-portrait in words what would you say?

R: I would say my face is quite nice looking; I've got nice thick hair; I've always had a nice bust, well-shaped bust; I'm quite trim; I've got an active mind, I love crosswords, love crime books.

P: What about when you look in the mirror and you said to me 'oh I look old'?

R: Oh when I look in the mirror I'm very critical, of course I'm critical. My god when I look at pictures when I was 40 and 50, I realise I'm not any, not much now to look at.

P: You are, you're very attractive. But what is it you don't like at old age when you see…?

R: Tiredness. Tiredness is the worst in my life. I find things an effort just lately.

P: Tell me about a typical day then, before we finish. So tomorrow/

R: /A typical day is like– When you're old you wake up early. I don't know why but you do. I'll have a cup of coffee and a cigarette and I'll go down and have a – oh I'll take my 4 tablets, that's the first thing I do when I wake up – take my 4 tablets, go downstairs and um, make porridge, put BBC News on, come back to bed, read for an hour, snuggle down and sometimes go to sleep or just doze for about an hour. I like to be up and er, showered before – well, I tape a programme and I watch it later on – I tape Bargain Hunt.

P: Pardon?

R: I tape a programme called Bargain Hunt and sometimes it's alright and sometimes it's boring but I watch that and I go across the road, I buy a paper, I take it back to bed with me because I have to use a magnifying glass to read the crossword. I read some of the paper with a magnifying glass – that's very irritating. And then I get up do things around the house. And look forward to the TV starting in the evening. Oh after I've made the dinner.

P: After you've made your dinner, what happens then?

R: Er, I watch a little bit of news, I might start watching a programme and then I'm very lucky because if my phone rings it'll be either one of my 2 daughters or it might be my granddaughter. Um… occasionally it could be a grandson. I'm very lucky that I've got a very loving family – I really appreciate all of them…

P: But what happens every night? At teatime, after tea? What about Dawn coming round to do your drops?

R: Oh that's right – yes – I have a very good neighbour who comes round – because I cannot put my eye drops in, I've got to have eye drops.

P: For?

R: Glaucoma. That's another little thing – I'll add it to my punishments you see – glaucoma. And Dawn comes in and puts my eye drops in and we have a little chat,. And that breaks the evening up for half an hour, and then she goes home. And then I watch TV, in between talking on the phone, and then, as I've told you earlier I take my sleeping tablet, trot upstairs and another day's gone. And tomorrow will be just the same, and the day after that. And that's in between all the prayers I give up to

say ‘please god’ – for somebody that never goes to church, and is not really sure about the afterlife – I do pray to a man called God. Please don’t let it, please don’t let it burst today.

And sometimes I have my great-grandchildren for the afternoon, on the Saturday afternoon. And I worry about them because they love me so much and I adore them, and I think ‘oh my god when I’m, I think Millie’s just got over losing nana Carol’. To lose nana – the old nana – would be a bit awkward, nasty for her but… that’s life.

P: That song – That’s Life – you said you wanted it at your funeral didn’t you?

R: Well I’m not sure about my funeral you see, I’ve got this idea that – rather than have all my family sat, really fed up in a church that I’ve never visited – I thought that if they just sent me to the crematorium, there’s a Salvation Army chaplain that I really like that could say a few words over me before they push me into the furnace… I don’t know. My grand-daughter didn’t like the idea of that. She’s more or less said that she’s coming to the crematorium with me. So if they decide to come/

P: We will.

R: /I’d like That’s Life played. Frank Sinatra. I love it, I just love it.

P: What do you love about that song?

R: It’s just so true, it’s so true of my life. It is so true. Of everybody’s life, not just me.

P: What?

R: When you’re up, when you’re down. When you’re flat on your face, you get up and go on. And you’ve been so many things in your life, haven’t you, you’ve been a teenager, you’ve been a, um, a lover, a mother, a grandmother, you’ve been so many things. It’s like being a pauper, a king, yeah, I love it.

P: What do you mean you’ve been so many things?

R: Well you have been so many things. You’ve been a young kid, you’ve been a teenager. I mean I used to love dancing, dancing was my life. I watch Strictly Dancing now and – oh my god – 6 nights a week I used to dance. And I used to go on my own – I’d no girlfriends to go with. I used to go and the minute I used to go there, you’d be stood about 2 minutes and you get asked to dance and all night long you were being asked to dance, I was very lucky. I was never sat down waiting for a partner and then, believe it or not, I used to walk home, which was a good 10 miles. I was very thin.

P: What did you love about the dancing? You were a good dancer, weren’t you?

R: I was a good dancer; I loved the dancing. And, of course, I got to know people at the dance, the dancehall that I went, and I got into a little clique there, with 3 or 4 of

the girls and their boyfriends. And then I met my husband and, unfortunately, he didn't dance. That is life – that's exactly what I mean – that is life. We stopped going dancing, which was the love of my life. We changed to going to the pictures, which I found… alright. But I would've loved to have been married to a dancer. But there you go.

SECOND INTERVIEW

P: Yes, anyway mum… I just wanted to talk about how you feel on the inside. Can you still feel that little girl inside of you?

R: Erm… Well I don't know about feeling a little girl inside of me. I… I can go back to memories of that little girl and when I do go back to memories of that little girl, they're not happy memories unfortunately. There's sad memories, erm… because I th- I think at the time I was probably quite a happy child. I was never smacked. I was never treated badly. I had a mother who I adored and I think she adored me. But you know, when she died we were very, very, very poor. Very poor. That was before 1948. And my Grandma did her best… but she never kissed me or cuddled me. In fact she said to me once she would love me a lot more if I was a boy. That was because her daughter had gotten pregnant and wasn't married, and she was terrified that I'd bring the shame on her. And er… So when I look back it's… There are a few happy memories but there's a lot of sadness.

P: You can never feel like that little girl?

R: I never feel like that little girl. Only if I do feel like that little girl, it's a sadness and I don't *really* want to feel like that little girl. I'd rather feel like myself in my... When I was happy. When I was having children and the children were very small. I loved having babies. I loved…

P: Does she still feel part of you, this little sad girl?

R: Yes, it always will. If I started to think about the little sad girl and all the trauma that I went through as a child and as a teenager I would cry buckets

R: I can remember loads of things but… I really don't know what to tell you. I can remember… I can remember going when I was about 8 years old into a wood in Horsley with a carrier bag and my doll's tea set in it, and a doll and a teddy and I used to spend all afternoon there. Now if you think of that now. You couldn't do that. No mum in these days would let you do that, but I did it. I used to go off. Because you've got to bear in mind I had no…..– Children were not allowed to play with me. Obviously the mums had been very shocked to find out I was an illegitimate child and they told their children that they really shouldn't bother with me because I didn't come from a very nice family… and they used to say that to me, ' I wish I could play with you but you haven't got a daddy'. And, you know, I accepted it. I didn't cry and run home and tell my mum. I knew that would upset my mum.

P: That's terribly sad isn't it?

R: Yeah but I wasn't sad, I was quite happy in the wood. I had an imaginary friend called Jean; I thought that was the most lovely name in the world, Jean. And she had a family and I used to ask her about her mum and her dad, and her sisters and her brothers. And that imaginary family really went on for years... years. I used to throw a ball at the side of the house. Catch it and throw it back. Catch it and throw it back. Talk to Jean, tell her what had happened at school, about what I'd had for my dinner.

P: And how old was Jean?

R: Same age as me. When I was 9, she was 9. When I was 10, she was 10.

P: If you were to go back and meet Rhoda with Jean, is there anything that you might say to her now?

R: Oh, what I would say to her now…I'd say to her 'why don't you go up to your grandma and throw your arms round her, and hug her and kiss her?' It might've made her hug me. And I think I would've said to these girls that wouldn't play with me, I would say, 'Well I think that your mum is really nasty for telling you awful things about me. I've done nothing wrong; why does your mum think that I've done something wrong?' I think I used to think that, now, looking back. I can remember thinking that but I never dared say it.

R: My brother he were 5 year… He was 5 years old when my mum died

P: You never talk really about being kids that much do you?

R: No we don't really.

P: So you felt like his mum when you were 10?

R: Well I had to tell him that mum had gone to heaven to be with the angels because my grandma wouldn't tell him. When er… my grandma used to go to the hospital - you were allowed on a Sunday only to visit the hospital where my mum was erm… because she had TB and you know, I don't know, I have no idea the day my mum died. And that's awful. But I know it was a Sunday and my brother was 5. And I think back to my children at 10, what they could do, I was 10 and I made fairy, fairy buns we called them, and iced them. And my grandma said you'll have to see to Terry because I'm visiting mama – we always called her mama. And we were just– and actually when she came in I was just saying to– I was telling Terry off for something he'd done, 'Stop doing that, just sit down and behave.' And my grandma came in and she sat in the chair at the end of the table and I looked up and I went, 'How's mama?' and she went 'She's died'. And I just went back, I didn't answer her. And when I look back she must have hated me – no wonder she couldn't love me. I didn't say anything, I just started erm, clearing the plates away, and getting Terry ready for bed. And er, when I put him to bed she said had I told him and I said no, and she

said ‘Well tell him first thing in the morning.’ And I went to bed, and next morning I said come and sit on my knee, and he laughed but he jumped on my knee. And I said ‘Mama’s gone to heaven with the angels’ and he went, ‘Ohh’. And I can’t remember anymore…

P: Mmmmm... Can you remember the funeral?

R: Yes, I can remember the funeral. Somebody from the church came – this was awful, this was an awful memory – somebody from the church came and said we can, er– the children can come to my house and, erm, stay with me until the funeral service is over, and if you give me an idea of the time I will return them. And it was a really old– I mean to me she looked about a 100, an old lady in a long black dress and a big black hat, and she had a car. Well Terry and I had never been in a car and we sat in the back seat terrified, and we drove to this horrible, big, dark house, and we sat on a settee and she said, ‘Now don’t move, just sit quietly.’ And we just sat holding hands for what seemed like hours and hours, till suddenly she came in the room and said, ‘Come on, right, get in the car and I’ll take you home.’ And when we got home, well would you believe it all these Uncles and Aunts, who’d never even bothered seeing me – I’d never met them before – were stood in the sitting room talking to grandma and they completely ignored me and Terry. And Terry said could he go out to play and I said, ‘Yeah, go on.’ And he went out to play and I just sat there and they didn’t speak to me – I’ll never forget that, they never, ever turned round and said hello. They never spoke. 4 people, 2 Uncles, 2 wives, my grandma. Not a word. I can remember them talking about their children. I can remember one of them saying, ‘Oh, she loves dancing, she’s always dancing.’ Oh!

P: Talking about their children?

R: About their children.

P: And this was the day of the funeral?

R: This was the day of my mum’s funeral.

I can remember when my mum was in the hospital about a month before she died and, er, I can remember my grandma taking us because my mum was begging my grandma to see us. And she took me and we sat outside this ward and she asked the ward sister if we could just stand in the door and just wave to me mum and, er, she got quite cross. I can remember her getting quite cross with my grandma and saying, ‘No. No children allowed. How dare you bring them here?’ So we sat outside, me and Terry, holding hands… till she came out. And it must’ve been awful for my mum knowing that we were just outside the door and she couldn’t see us.

P: Amazing, isn’t it that no children were allowed in the wards?

R: I know, I know.

P: Aw thank you for that. Anything to sum everything up?

R: Anything to sum everything up? Well… just one little bit of advice, this will probably make people a bit sick but, oh, life is so short, it goes so quickly and it's alright me saying it because I haven't done it, but try not to waste it, try to enjoy it and whatever come up that's not nice, just think, well I'm alive and it will pass. And that's about all, that's all really. Just from an old, silly old lady.

P: You're not silly… at all.

R: Well, silly when you're 80 years old and dreaming of meeting a man she's not seen for 20 years.

P: And what would be the best outcome of all of that?

R: The best outcome would be that we would – not be living together, I don't think we could live together – but that we would meet quite regularly that we would, you know, that we could go out. You know, you do feel a little bit jealous sometimes when you see couples. It would be nice to go and have a coffee. I don't drink now. I haven't drunk for – what? – 27 years. If he drinks I'll be quite happy to go into a pub and have a lemonade. Just being with somebody, having somebody looking at you and thinking that they like being with you, that they enjoyed your company – that they wanted to be with you, that they thought that you were, you know, still attractive – would be absolutely gorgeous.

P: Yeah. Can I ask something about the loneliness?

R: Yeah the loneliness is not good. It's not good. I absolutely dread the snow because I'm so unsteady on my feet that if it snows, that is it. I can't even go out to the shop across the road. Erm, yeah, the loneliness.

P: Can you describe what that feels like? When you feel a bit lonely.

R: How can I put it? It's ok if somebody's coming to see you that day or you're going out, that's ok. It's when you get up and you know that you're not going to see anybody all day long. And, erm, yeah… It's, um… It is lonely but you see… You've got to– you can do two things about loneliness: you can wallow in it, feel sorry for yourself or you can do things you enjoy…..

P: What about these panic attacks?

R: Yes... I used to have a lot more that I have now – I'm pretty good at controlling them now.

P: Can you remember when they started?

R: I think I've had panic attacks since I was born, love. I can remember being– when I was a kid, I used to panic about… Oh! Hundreds of things, hundreds of things. As a

child. Well I'd forget my times tables, so I'd panic like mad all the way to school or, erm… yes lots of things. Or lessons that I didn't enjoy, I used to panic and er…

P: Was this whilst your mum was still alive?

R: No I don't think so. I think it started after my mum died. I can't remember panicking when I had my mum.

P: So you had panic attacks when you were a young kid. What about when you were a teenager, did you have panic attacks then?

R: Oh, I had panic attacks when I was a teenager, I was a hypochondriac. If I heard about anybody having a disease or an ailment I was so sure I'd get them, when I was 16, 18, 20. You see, this is what I'm saying to people, don't waste your life by being stupid. I was a very stupid person... stupid.

P: Well you had a lot of trauma at a very young age.

R:. I mean, now I'm older and wiser, which not everybody gets to be. If you're not older and wiser at 80, well then, God help you.

P: Can you remember the panic attacks you had as a young mother.

R: When I was a young mother I didn't have panic attacks. I think having children cured me of panic attacks. But I've had funny turns for the last 80 years (laughs). … I must admit since Carol died and I found out I'd got a life-threatening health problem. I panic more now than I've ever done in my life. At least now I'm panicking about something… there's a reason for it.

THIRD (FINAL) INTERVIEW

P: Can you remember when you started feeding the birds? What do you do?

R: Well, I've certainly never spent my life feeding the birds. In fact I started feeding the birds when I started to age a bit.

P: Pardon?

R: Well, maybe I've only been feeding them say the last… well, it's awful to say this… maybe since Carol died. I've no family in Wetherby now. I started watching the birds and er… they feel like part of the family. This sounds really a bit of a fantasy but I do believe I have a sparrow that when I get up in the morning I've got a friend on my garden and when I draw the curtains, even drawing the curtains doesn't faze him. And I think it's the same sparrow – maybe, who knows? – but I feel as though it is and I know that in the summer I sit out in the garden and this same little sparrow will come and eat the bread and sit near me. Now none of the other birds would do that. They don't come when I'm sat out… but the sparrow does. And er… It really has me on a piece of string because when I see him sitting there, I quickly cut up

bread and you must soak the bread, so that it's nice and soft – they don't like it unless it's soaked. And I go out and I throw it down and he doesn't move from the fence but the minute I turn round and walk away, I get to the door, because I'm a bit awkward on my legs I can't turn round until I've hooked myself on my doorknob. And there he is eating.

P: But what happens? You've said all the other birds will fly away and it'll stand by your feet.

R: The other birds don't come down when I'm sat out. The sparrow will and when I go back inside the other birds fly down– there's dozens – it's like that Hitchcock film, there's so many birds come down. It's not long before all the bread's gone.

P: So you're sat in this chair and what happens with this bird?

R: Nothing happens – it just sits there, when I'm sat there.

P: And what have you thought, who this bird is?

R: Oh you know, now this is going to freak you out because I think this is a bit silly. I hope and pray that there's an afterlife and if there is an afterlife I wonder if you're asked what you want to be. And I look down at this little sparrow and I say, "Are you Carol?" Of course it doesn't answer. But, you know, I get a lot of comfort from this little creature that comes and stays with me

P: Why do you think it might be Carol?

R: I don't know. I don't know.

P: well, just think about it a little more.

R: No, I can't. I just don't know. You know, I've reached 80 and we've all got to die. And you do hope there is somewhere to go. And if I was then to change into anything I'd definitely change into a bird. Because when you're a bird you can go anywhere. There's all these different places and families.

P: But what about the cats?

R: I know... [laughs] I know...well I wouldn't mind being a bird as long as I didn't meet any cats

P: And what does it feel like feeding these birds?

R: Oh, it's lovely. It's a lovely feeling. They rely on me. They wait. There's houses opposite and quite a lot of birds sit on the rooftops and they sit in a line and I know damn well they're waiting for the bread to come down on my grass. It's a lovely feeling. Especially in the bad weather they love that bread it keeps them really full up.

P: That's really nice isn't it?

R: Ohh it's lovely. They're part of my little family – my birds.

P: This last week there's been bad snow, and I know you've had it before even worse than this–

R: It's not just this last week – it's been two weeks. I have been shut in this house for two weeks. Now two weeks might not… when everybody's up and about and going out and working and doing whatever, two weeks flies by.

P: I just wanted to talk about the feeling when the snow's thick outside and you're stuck inside.

R: Well, you get different thoughts sometimes.. Sometimes I'm just so grateful that I'm in the house I've got all the food in that I need, it's warm. But sometime I can wake up and feel absolutely panic-stricken, with a churning stomach.

P: And what is that fear?

R: And then it goes. The panic goes.

P: I wonder if you could explain that panic a bit more, you've said you get a churning tummy... What else happens – do you get breathless?

R: I just feel… Oh, it's very, very hard Pauline to explain a panicky feeling. It's a panicky feeling of wanting to be anywhere but where you are, be anywhere. Feeling closed in, feeling that you're, you just want to go out and talk to somebody. Meet somebody. You know, a couple of times I've thought of ringing the Samaritans but what do you say? "I feel panicky, can you help me now?" You've got to sort yourself out.

P: Going back to this snow. You know when you worry about me and Jane – what sort of things do you think?

R: Well I worry about you all the time – mothers do. There isn't a mother on this earth that doesn't. I'm frightened, mainly, when you're in your cars. I'm frightened – then my tummy churns.

P: What sort of things do you think?

R: Well, I'm frightened of you dying. I've lost a daughter and I know it can– I know you can lose children. When you say you can lose children, the whole world can lose children but I've lost one of mine. Two of my children. And I'm so frightened… but you know I'm not just frightened for you, I'm frightened for my grandchildren. And I can't tell you how I feel when you all go out shopping in one car. I don't like it. I bury myself in a bubble.

P: OK. Is there anything else you want to say before we finish about the snow and the feeling of being trapped in?

R: No.

P: And, you know before your birthday you were frightened you weren't going to make it to 80, weren't you?

R: Oh yeah. Yes i was frightened. And then I was frightened that I wouldn't make it to Christmas.

P: Yeah, so there's always little milestones

R: And it's so silly because I do tell myself you're just wasting precious days worrying about whether you're going to die the next day, or even that day. It's silly. I have got better just recently. I have got much better – I've wasted four years worrying about something that's not happened. In fact I think it's my New Year's resolution. I never thought of it at the time.

P: [Pauline explains what the drama is about] Does that sound OK to you?

R: Mmm, that does it sounds very good.

P: She can't get hold of her children, she's ringing them.

R: Oh there's nothing worse if they don't ans– if it goes on to voicemail. Something's happened to them.

P: That's what you think? Something's happened to them. And then what do you think?

R: Well, you add a few prayers.

P: When it's your birthday and Christmas is it quite hard, not getting a card from Carol?

R: Oh yes, everything... Every single celebration without Carol is hurt… it hurts. But you know, you don't really need a birthday or Christmas.

P: I think I was just aware of it at first, that you got a card from me and Jane and Deborah.

R: Do you know what really hurts? It's not getting cards - it's sending them. That hurts.

P: Going back to this snow. You said you get a feeling of being closed in.

R: Oh it's very, very bad... You are closed in with the snow. You're not closed in when it's raining, because you can get out when it's raining. But when it's snowing and when it's slippy. And I walk with a stick and I'm very unsteady on my feet. It's terrifying. It's, um, I stand at the door – I go and stand at the door no matter how cold it is. I just have to – to get the closed-in feeling away. At night time when you've

got the curtains closed and I think “oh my god I’m just so… I’m just so frightened of the feeling of wanting to go out”.

P: The feeling of wanting to go out but not being able to?

R: That’s right, not being able to. You feel trapped.

P: And when you’ve had problems with your phone – what’s that like?

R: Oh, my phone was a nightmare. The phone was such a nightmare. I was having trouble with my phone and stuff for…oh…a good 6 weeks; I mean I had a mobile.

P: But when you couldn’t find the mobile charger, that was quite scary for you wasn’t it?

R: That was terrifying. The phone went off and I couldn’t find the er... the charger to charge my mobile.

P: And it meant what?

R: It meant it if I ever became ill – what could I do? I couldn’t let anybody know. I couldn’t ring my neighbour. I was helpless. It was like being shut in a room and not being able to get out. It was terrifying. But, you know, it ended – things do end – and all was well. Is that it Pauline?