

# I didn't become an Actress

Do our lives disappoint us or free us from our dreams?

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**W**e were in the school canteen area, cleared now of children, with fallen peas and a few bits of carrot being swept across the floor to make way for the small audience of teachers coming to hear me speak.

I became aware of her standing next to me, broom in hand, as I laid out a selection of books and papers in preparation for the talk I was about to give.

Cautiously, she checked my name, and then, face lighting up, said, "You were the best teacher I ever had!"

I beamed at this smiling, fifty-something-year-old woman standing there with her broom. She told me her name and immediately I remembered: thirty-five years ago, an enthusiastic, feisty girl who, for two years, had been in one of my Drama classes. I remembered some of the other students from that class as well and some of the performances we'd put on together, all those years ago. She remembered too. We hugged each other, transported back, delighting in our memories.

Tentatively she said, "I didn't become an actress, I became a cook..." as if apologizing for not having lived up to something; as if I'd be disappointed that, after all these years, she still wasn't a Hollywood name.

I imagined her life now, cooking for the children every day in school, sweeping away the debris of their meals, knowing all their names and most of their parents, consoling them when they cried, telling them off when they threw food. I imagined her perhaps having children of her own, teenagers if not adults by now, loving their mum and starting jobs themselves, inheriting her enthusiasm and feistiness. I imagined her out with her friends at weekends, drinking wine together and laughing, telling crazy stories: a group of women supporting each other over the years through the deaths of parents, through marital break-ups and difficulties with children, advising each other about problems at work and how to deal with stupid men. I imagined her telling her friends that – guess what! - she'd met her old Drama teacher in the canteen at work and – what's more - he'd remembered her. "That teacher! The one we used to have for Drama! The one we used to do plays with! I recognized him even though his hair's white.... Yeah, *that* one! He was all right. We used to have a laugh with him when he was our teacher. Anyway, I saw him the other day and we had a nice chat!"

"I didn't become an actress, I became a cook..."

I was touched that she'd even thought of acting. As a teacher, I'd never expected my students to become actresses. I'd hoped that they'd be kind and confident people, whatever they ended up

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doing. "And I didn't become a famous Drama teacher," I felt like saying. "I became some bloke who goes round giving talks to teachers in schools."

People were starting to arrive. She had to finish sweeping the floor and I had to finish laying out my papers.

Later, with an audience of teachers in front of me, listening, I saw a familiar figure crossing behind them, leaving the building, job done for another day, on her way home or off to another job.

She smiled. And waved.