

Janet Mary Johnson (née Tobilcock)
18th March 1936 – 9th October 2018

Many of you knew Janet as “JJ”, which she much preferred. Perhaps though, she should have been called “JT” as her maiden name was Tobilcock, actually a misspelling from an old Cornish name Trebelcock. As a, JJ was one of the last people in the world with that name, so she would have liked to have kept it.

When a child is born, no parent knows what is going to happen during the life of their child. Parents may have hope and aspirations, often related to their child’s health and wellbeing and certainly, they hope their child will live a long and happy life. For JJ’s parents, as soon as they knew their eldest daughter was deaf, these hopes and aspirations became heart wrenching.

It is credit to them, as JJ’s mother wrote to JJ later in her life, “... *so easily could you have remained just another deaf girl, unable to speak and unable to take your place in a hearing world*”. JJ wrote “*It occurred to me the other day that when I was a child, I did not know who I was, not even my name and not knowing the language, I was very puzzled to observe people’s “blabbing away” not knowing it was communication!*”

JJ describes her attitude to her deafness and hence her life with reference to a child psychologist “... *if you put a plant in a pot and then place a stone over it, the plant will grow around this obstacle to survive.*” JJ said deafness was her stone, but she grew around it and blossomed into a strong flower.

JJ once met Helen Keller and perhaps she found Helen an inspiration for overcoming obstacles. Helen Keller could not hear or see and yet achieved many things in her life including gaining a degree in 1904, at the age of twenty-four! JJ kept a quote by Helen Keller, it reads “*Face your deficiencies and acknowledge them but do not let them master you. Let them teach you patience, sweetness, insight.*”

Although born in London, JJ was brought up in Rhodesia. The life that JJ had in Rhodesia as a young girl was in an era that no longer exists. As the elder child of Edna and Dick Tobilcock, JJ was brought up with her younger sister Eleanor in a home that celebrated her father’s heritage of a family influential to the Rhodesian Government. JJ’s grandfather had gone to Rhodesia in the early 1900’s and had become established in the community. By the time JJ’s father met her mother, he was also well respected within the close-knit business and Rhodesian society.

Once JJ’s parents realised that their daughter could not hear, with few options available to them in Rhodesia, they sent their beloved four-year old daughter to a special school for deaf children. But it was in Johannesburg, hundreds of miles away. Not only could they not visit JJ, but the school was run with tough discipline and for JJ as a young child, that was very frightening. JJ only came home when she was ill or at the end of term. It was heart-breaking for both JJ and her parents.

Even though JJ was learning sign language, it was no use to others who could not sign, and it was especially frustrating for JJ’s mother Edna. When JJ was seven, Edna decided to take on the challenge of teaching JJ to speak. Edna devoted the next seven years of her life to encourage, cajole and wipe away JJ’s tears of frustration as they shared the learning experience together.

Before Edna had married she was an accomplished pianist. Her musical knowledge was a decisive factor in how JJ learned to speak. Edna used the piano to teach JJ how to change her voice, using different intonations so that JJ did not speak in a monotone. By using a candle and showing JJ how the breath can change as one’s lips form different shapes, Edna

taught JJ how to announce clearly. This feat of learning to speak was surely a testament to the determination of both women and led to a close bond between mother and daughter.

So, it was possible for JJ to enjoy her childhood and to become a confident young woman. In 1953 when she was seventeen, JJ was selected as one of two debutantes representing Rhodesia, to meet Queen Elizabeth at the monarch's Coronation. Edna took advantage of having come to England for the ceremony, by taking JJ and her sister Eleanor on a three-month tour around Europe.

When JJ's future husband Henry Johnson first caught sight of JJ, he of course thought "There's an attractive young woman"! But there was something else about her that caught his eye. He decided to attract her attention. Of course, Henry did not realise JJ was deaf, and so as she held the teapot concentrating on pouring out tea into dainty teacups, he was puzzled when JJ did not respond to his request for a cup of tea. It did not take long before he caught her eye, the handsome young man that he was!

What was rather amusing about this story is that not long before they first met, Henry had visited a fortune teller who told him he was going to meet his future wife over a cup of tea. Henry had laughed and dismissed the idea as he preferred beer to tea!

After a short courtship, JJ and Henry were married in 1961 by Henry's eldest brother, in Salisbury Cathedral in the capital of Southern Rhodesia. A couple of years later Colette was born. JJ and Henry were not surprised when JJ became pregnant again, as the fortune teller whose predictions Henry had laughed at, had told him that he would have two children.

Sure enough, Simon was born, but it was only then that JJ was told much to her surprise, there was another baby waiting to come out! It took another hour for Tessa to arrive, but arrive she did, and so JJ and Henry's family was complete! So much for fortune tellers!

Before Henry worked for the Rhodesian Government, he was a policeman and each time he was moved to another remote area, JJ had to move too. She moved seventeen times in twenty years. Fortunately, each house was furnished, and so JJ only had to pack some suitcases and travel to the next house. When she arrived JJ never knew quite what to expect and often the houses had to be cleaned from one end to the other and the gardens cleared to make them safe as a play area for the children.

Some of the houses they lived in had no running water or electricity and living out in the bushveld meant they were surrounded by wild animals. There was always a risk of venomous snakes and spiders catching one of the children unawares. To help JJ be aware of her children's safety, the family always had dogs who would act as JJ's ears. The family's dogs were trained to run to JJ if there were any problems.

The sudden departure of the Johnson family to the UK in 1978 was as a result of the political changes prior to Rhodesia becoming Zimbabwe. Henry's earlier involvement in a court case of a powerful man meant he was at risk, which also meant JJ and the children were vulnerable. With only two suitcases each and little money, Henry secured safety for his family by flying to England where relatives put them up for a while in Kettering.

When JJ and Henry arrived in the UK with few personal belongings and little money, they had to do the best they could to get by. They found England so different to Rhodesia. It was not just the weather! It was shortly after the 'Winter of Discontent' when jobs were scarce. JJ and Henry had few friends in the UK and at that time there was little support and much prejudice towards deaf people.

But as many of you know, this was not going to stop JJ. Her motto was “Just get on with it”. She trained as a Chiropodist, visiting people in their homes and earned a reputation of being considerate and careful in her handling of people’s feet! It was during her training that she met and became lifelong friends with Julie.

As her children Colette, Simon and Tessa grew up and forged new lives for themselves, JJ made new friends, developed interests and took every opportunity she could to experience new and exciting things. JJ visited Colette in Australia seventeen times in all, staying for up to three months at a time. This means that JJ spent more than four years of her life out in Australia, where she made many friends.

JJ loved swimming in the Southern Ocean but on one occasion when she went kayaking, she got into difficulties and had to be rescued! She loved driving through the open spaces of Australia, sometimes she had to drive through bush fires or floods. Other adventures included camping on a dried up salt lake, going up in a hot air balloon and sailing on a tall ship where she had no fear, climbing to the top of the mast! JJ’s other watery exploits were rowing and fishing. One of JJ’s proudest moments was going sailing on the maiden voyage of Simon’s Yacht ‘The Robert Gordon’, which the family had considerable involvement in rebuilding.

Sometimes JJ did have her quieter moments, enjoying painting and sketching and she played Scrabble all of her life. She played croquet competitively, although I understand this can be quite an aggressive sport!

Only a couple of months ago, JJ renewed her passport in anticipation that she would be able to keep travelling.

I will now hand over to Gareth (son-in-law), to continue the tribute to JJ.

I would like to thank Colette, Simon and of course especially Tessa in inviting me to say a few words about their mother Janet

I first met Janet and her husband Henry more than 35 years ago when luckily for me they moved their family from Fleet in Hampshire to Camberley in Surrey. They had moved into a small, but perfectly formed house called, “Sweet Hay” at the bottom of the road where my parents lived.

In what has become almost legendary status, the story goes that I was passing on my enormous motor bike and stopped to speak with her youngest daughter Tessa who was busying herself in the front garden. Being the cool customer that I am, I suggested that I might take her out on a date sometime.

The truth of course is somewhat different. I had seen Tessa with her family move in some weeks before and it had taken what seemed like a life time to pluck up the courage to stop and chat. I was returning after a game of rugby and amazingly Tessa managed to put to one side that I had an ear hanging off as a result of the match. My 250cc Honda looked as though it had been through a hedge several times, as indeed it had, and she was seemingly impervious to the great smell of Brut that I had liberally applied for just this occasion. Tessa started to talk to me/at me, and 35 years later hasn’t yet stopped to draw breath.

Within moments I had been introduced to Janet and Henry. I started to panic. My first impression of Janet was probably the same as the majority of people who meet Janet for the first time – Janet is DEAF: and TALL. Thankfully I managed to compose myself and said, “isn’t your mother tall”, very smooth I thought. Janet was indeed both deaf and tall, but it became very clear to me from the offset, that Janet would never go through life allowing her deafness to define her. Tall maybe, but not Deaf.

A few weeks after that first meeting, Tessa and I had been on a number of dates, I was beginning to feel as though it might be time to start testing a few boundaries – “could I take Tess out on the back of my motorcycle, rather than in my mother’s automatic Mini”, “Maybe we could stretch that 11.00pm curfew to 2.00am” “ what about something a little more than a kissing and a cuddling in the back row of the movies”?

It was at that time that I first encountered what I call the “Janet look”. It’s a look that basically says – “I don’t need to hear what you’re saying in order to know what you’re thinking”, a look so fiercely penetrating that you feel like falling to your knees and admitting your guilt immediately. But perhaps I shouldn’t have been worried at all, because despite all my many and varied failings, I think Janet basically, deep down, actually liked me – well just a little bit.

Over the following months and years, I found myself more and more drawn to Janet’s family, even if it was out of nothing more than sheer curiosity. They were exotic, travelling to the UK from a life in Africa, having stopped off in exciting parts of the world along the way like Greece and Kettering, before settling in the Surrey stockbroker belt. Tessa would talk of fantastic stories about their childhood and Janet would produce some bizarre souvenir or nick knack to help illustrate them. Pretty quickly it became clear that this whole family was made up of romantic explorers. To be honest, I don’t think that Janet ever really got over the heartache of leaving Africa – she pretty quickly seemed to get over leaving Kettering however.

It’s a great sadness of mine that I never really got to know Henry well. As many of you may know Henry passed away far too early in life, not much older than I am now, a combination of events and happenings contrived to prevent me and many other from getting to know the real man. I once had a conversation with him about motorcycles, something I was surprised to hear he was really enthusiastic about.

In an unusually candid moment he spoke to me of his time in the police force in Zima and, how he was at first on Horseback and then given a Yamaha XT500 for his beat, this was a beast of a motorcycle! I was amazed and fascinated in equal measure. This incredibly soft spoken and modest man had been living the dream. A modern-day cowboy if you like. I was brought back down to earth with a bump when he confessed to me that it was on this very motorcycle that he had run over his children’s Dachshund. To this very day I still don’t know how you can run over a Dachshund on a motorcycle, but having spent time with Henry, I’m confident that it’s possible.

It’s extraordinary that the Johnson family, who live so very far away from each other, is so close knit, and this is an incredible testimony to Janet as a mother. All her children have inherited Janet and Henry’s adventurous spirit, Colette bravely moving to Australia and starting a new life with her husband and Alistair and raising their fantastic children, George and Robert. Simon running away to sea to become one of the pre-eminent super yacht captains in the world. And my beautiful Tessa who has given me the greatest gift in our children Megan and Paddy and taken us around the planet on planes, trains and boats and snowmobiles.

Janet was no idle bystander to all this. Even though life was not always fair to Janet and even though financial rewards rarely came her way, she was one of the richest people I know. Janet always contributed. Her life was full of rare and wonderful experiences, and perhaps that is because she would rarely say “no”.

Janet travelled to Australia every year and stayed 3 months with Colette and her family doing whatever the hell people do in Australia. She has sailed on tall ships and climbed rigging. She helmed Simon’s first yacht across the Bay of Biscay, she’s been taken on a day trip to

Plymouth and ended up driving to Gibraltar instead, because hey, why not, it had to be done. And yes, she's even been on the back of my motorcycle

But despite all these wonderful things, her greatest reward was the time she spent with her grandchildren. George, Robert, Megan and Paddy all had the influence of her knowledge, wisdom and above all love. The time she committed to them was too precious for words, and of course, it was reciprocated in spade loads. You have all become wonderful adults and are a credit to your grandmother – JJ. I know that you will miss her terribly, but you will always have a part of her wherever you go, and I have no doubt that you will have equally incredible adventures.

Janet lived here in Winchester and as a consequence my side of the family saw a lot of her, and despite her fearsome independence which she valued so much, sometimes for Janet and me that might have been occasionally too much.

Janet's last words to me were that I have been a wonderful son in law – I have not been a wonderful son in law. I have been human, and to be honest there have been times when Janet left me frustrated, exasperated, lost for words, confounded, confused beyond belief and downright pissed off. But I have always tried my best and I'm genuinely sad she is not here today.

In our house, and I expect many others, we will miss the silly hats, the badly parked car, the numerous and varied walking sticks (rarely required) and often left behind, the fitness fads, the art class stories, the scrabble nights and the kids doing jigsaw puzzles, the comfortable shoes with Velcro straps and the biscuit crumbs from a devoured and empty packet. Conversations about the weather and complaints about the weather, my newspaper read and re-read and never put back in order. The lateness to arrive and the panic of missed airplane flights, the forgetfulness and then the denial. Conversations about people I've never met and never heard of and always signing off with "how's your mum and How's Kev?". Kev!! Bloody Kev, what's he got to do with this?

So again, Janet's last words to me were "you've been a wonderful son in law". I have not been a "wonderful son in law, I've been your friend, a very flawed friend". If you could have been with us here today I would like to say just one thing – Thank You.

Janet you have given me everything I could ever have wished for. Your crazy family and the madness that is Colette and Simon. My wonderful, beautiful clever and super sexy Tessa. My amazing children Megan and Paddy. And of my life. Oh, and Kev!

My final message to you all is this – Beware anyone who can lip read, not heeding this warning can lead to terrible consequences!

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