

GHOST GRANDAD

The Answers

The things people will wish they had asked *you*,
written down before everyone has to start guessing.

Not just for grandads — for anyone who wants to
leave behind more than things.

Because one day, what your family may miss most
are the answers only you could have given.

— ★ —
This journal belongs to

Written for

Inspired by the novel
Ghost Grandad: Mostly Yes

GHOST GRANDAD: The Answers

A companion journal inspired by the novel Ghost Grandad: Mostly Yes

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Ghost Grandad: Mostly Yes is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental — except, possibly, to certain elderly relatives who will insist it's about them.

It probably isn't.

Mostly.

Wondering where all this came from?

Marcus Whitfield has been given news nobody wants.

His granddaughter is five, the future worries him enormously, and Marcus has never been particularly good at accepting the limitations other people regard as unavoidable.

What he decides to do about it is brilliant, improbable and ethically rather questionable.

Unfortunately, Marcus isn't the only person with an idea.

Read the first five chapters of Ghost Grandad: Mostly Yes completely free.

No purchase. No commitment. Just enough Marcus to decide whether you want to know what happens next.

[**ghostgrandad.com/read**](https://ghostgrandad.com/read)



Before you begin

I wrote a novel about a man who is told he has a few months left to live.

Unfortunately for everyone around him, Marcus Whitfield is not the sort of man to sit quietly in a chair gazing wistfully at sunsets. He has a private laboratory, a brilliant mind, a five-year-old granddaughter he adores, and a firm conviction that an iPad is not a suitable replacement for education, moral guidance, family history, jokes, opinions, stories, books, music and somebody saying, 'No, darling, that is a terrible idea,' at exactly the right moment.

So he decides to leave something of himself behind.

Not just dates and facts. Not the respectable edited version that families tend to produce once enough time has passed. The real stuff. What he knew, what he believed, what made him laugh, what he regretted, what he got spectacularly wrong, and what he would have said to his granddaughter at eight, fifteen, twenty-two or forty — particularly on one of those days when life has gone sideways and nobody sensible is answering the phone.

Writing Marcus made me think about something I hadn't really considered before:

What would you need to write down if you wanted somebody you loved to still be able to ask you?

Not just 'Where were you born?'

I mean: what did your mother say when she was cross? What did your father do that nobody else noticed? What did your childhood kitchen smell of? What did you believe at thirty that you now think was complete rubbish?

And what would you say to somebody you love who is frightened, furious, grieving, embarrassed by something they've done, hopelessly in love or about to make a truly terrible decision while insisting it is an excellent one?

Those are the answers people lose.

And the older I get, the more I wish I'd collected them from the people I've loved and lost, instead of leaving myself and the remaining family to reconstruct everything later from memory — an enterprise about as reliable as you'd imagine.

I should therefore make it clear that I am not a therapist, historian, grief expert, memoir coach or any sort of guru. I have no qualifications whatsoever in encouraging people to 'explore their journey', which is probably just as well.

I'm simply someone who wishes I had asked more questions while there was still somebody there to answer them.

So take what's useful and totally ignore what isn't. Skip pages. Come back later. Write three words if three words are all you have. Make a mess of it.

Nobody is marking it.

Unless your family are very odd indeed, in which case that is probably something you should record too.

One last practical thing before the memories.

The very first thing Marcus did wasn't any of this. He put his affairs in order — the dull but extremely loving business of making sure the people left behind weren't hunting through drawers for insurance policies and trying to guess passwords during the worst week of their lives.

There are some practical checklists at the back for exactly that. Do those first if you can.

Then get on with the interesting stuff.

Chrissy Idle

Why this journal is different

Most journals of this kind ask you to tell your life story.

This one does some of that, because otherwise three generations from now somebody will be squinting at a photograph saying, 'Who on earth is that person in the hat?' while everybody else pretends they know.

But I'm much more interested in the things an official life story usually leaves out.

How you sounded.

The words you used. The things you noticed. The completely irrational things that annoyed you. What you thought mattered. What you learned the hard way. The things you always said. The advice everybody received whether they had actually asked for it or not.

Because people rarely miss a CV.

They miss the phrases. The warnings. The daft stories. The opinion delivered from the armchair. The recipe nobody bothered writing down because 'everybody knows how to make it', when of course everybody absolutely does not.

They miss being able to ask.

That's what this is for.

Not a perfect autobiography. Definitely not a solemn family monument.

More a collection of useful answers, memories, warnings, jokes, recipes, opinions and assorted family nonsense that would otherwise disappear while everybody is busy trying to remember where you kept the spare keys.

How to use it

First of all, do not try to make it beautiful.

Lovely if it happens. Entirely unnecessary.

Nobody has ever opened something handwritten by somebody they loved and thought, 'Such a shame about the penmanship.'

And you don't have to answer everything. Answer what interests you, what feels important, what makes you laugh or what you know somebody will one day want to know.

Write as much or as little as you like. This is probably the opposite of the advice most journals give, but nobody has ever complained that Grandad left behind far too much information.

They want the detail. Usually the daft detail.

If a question annoys you, skip it. If it makes you cry, leave it for another day. If it reminds you of something completely unrelated, write that instead. The unrelated thing may very well be more interesting than the question I asked.

Start wherever you like. Some people will start with childhood. Others will immediately turn to Part Eight and write to the person they have in mind. You may fancy money, pets, regrets, recipes or the family story that has been exaggerated for so long it now needs planning permission.

There are no rules about order.

If you can, write by hand. Typed is infinitely better than nothing, but handwriting leaves something of the person behind in a way no font quite manages, however clever Silicon Valley believes itself to be.

If your handwriting is so appalling that even you occasionally have to hold it up to the light and guess, type it — but perhaps add the odd handwritten note afterwards.

My Dad wrote almost entirely in capitals. Fortunately this was before capitals were interpreted as SHOUTING.

Every question has a number: the part number followed by the question number. So 1.3 is Question 3 in Part One.

If you run out of room, don't squash another forty-seven words into the bottom centimetre of the page. Use one of the continuation sheets at the back, write the question number on it and put it with the right page.

There is no word limit. I am not Ofsted.

Put dates on things too. Month and year is enough. Some of your answers may change over time and that's worth knowing. We are all allowed to change our minds despite what the internet appears to believe.

And include photographs wherever you can.

Then — and this is the important bit that practically nobody does — write down who is actually in them.

Names. Place. Rough date.

An unlabelled photograph can become a complete mystery remarkably quickly. Every family eventually acquires at least one box containing twenty photographs of unidentified people whom everybody agrees must have been important to somebody.

Finally, once you've written some of this, tell someone where you've put it.

There is no point creating a priceless family archive and hiding it so successfully that somebody discovers it in 2047 behind a broken printer and three obsolete charging cables.

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Part One — Where you come from

This is probably the easiest place to start if the more emotional questions make you want to close the book and put the kettle on.

We'll start with facts. Dates, streets, schools, grandparents, houses. They sound harmless enough.

Then suddenly you're remembering your grandmother's pantry, the noise of somebody coming through the front door and the particular horror of nylon sheets.

Memory is sneaky like that.

1.1 Where and when you were born

The date first, obviously, otherwise future generations will be relying on guesswork and somebody's dodgy Ancestry subscription.

But don't stop there. What sort of world were you born into?

What did people worry about? What did things cost? What was completely normal then that would now cause a risk assessment and several emails?

What was difficult that is ridiculously easy now? And what was perfectly straightforward then that we have somehow managed to make considerably more complicated?

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1.2 Your parents, as you understood them then — and as you understand them now

Tell us what they were actually like. Not just names, jobs and "Mum was lovely".

What did they worry about? What made them laugh? What did they never discuss? What were they good at? What were they hopeless at?

And once you became an adult yourself and discovered that grown-ups are largely making it up as they go along, did you understand anything about them differently?

Most of us eventually realise something about our parents that would have been completely beyond us at fifteen. Usually about twenty years too late to mention it.

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1.3 Your own grandparents

What did you call them? Grandma? Nana? Granny? Something completely inexplicable that started with the first grandchild and everybody simply accepted?

Where did they come from? What did they do? What did their house look and smell like? What did they always say?

You don't need a grand biography. Sometimes the thing you remember is a chair, a biscuit tin, a cardigan, a smell or the precise way somebody said your name when you were in trouble.

And if you barely knew them, write down what you were told. You may be the last person in the family who knows even that much.

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1.4 Your brothers and sisters — or whoever stood in for them

Who came before you? Who came after? And, crucially, what did that mean in the family pecking order?

What did you fight about? What did you share? What did you blame each other for years later?

Who was the favourite? And don't pretend there wasn't one.

What did you get up to when the adults weren't looking? Which sibling could be trusted with a secret and which absolutely could not?

If you had no brothers or sisters, who filled that space instead — cousins, neighbours, lifelong friends? Families have a habit of creating their own honorary members anyway.

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1.5 A relative you barely knew anything about

Nearly every family has one. The great-aunt nobody talks about. The grandfather who died before you were born. The relative who went to Australia, Canada or “abroad” and then appeared in conversation approximately twice.

What do you know? It may only be a name, one story, a photograph or something somebody once said. Write the fragments down anyway.

If you have a photograph and know who it is, label the bloody thing now and save everybody else the detective work.

And if there is something you always wished you had asked about them, put that down too. Somebody further down the family line may eventually find the answer.

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1.6 The house that feels most like your childhood

Take somebody through the front door. Not the estate-agent version. Nobody needs to know it offered “generously proportioned accommodation”.

What did it actually feel like? What did it smell of? Which room was freezing? What was on the mantelpiece? Was there a drawer you weren’t allowed to open? Was there a cupboard everybody was slightly afraid of?

What noise did the front door make? Who came to it — milkman, coalman, pools man, insurance man, rag-and-bone man, neighbours who never knocked?

And what tiny household rule made complete sense at the time but now sounds faintly insane?

Nobody is going to feel emotionally connected to your tasteful hallway. It’s the nylon sheets, the three-bar fire and the immersion-heater switch nobody was allowed to touch that they’ll remember.

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1.7 The smells and tastes that take you straight back

This one is much easier than it sounds. Think of a smell that immediately puts you somewhere else.

Somebody's kitchen. Coal smoke. Furniture polish. Cut grass. School corridors. A grandparent's coat. A particular soap. The inside of a new car.

And food. What did Sunday dinner taste like? What pudding did somebody always make? What were you given when you were poorly? Which sweets could you identify blindfolded at twenty paces?

You may find you remember things here that you haven't thought about for fifty years. Write those down before they disappear again.

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1.8 What things cost, and what you did with your pocket money

Put the prices down as you remember them. Old money is perfectly acceptable — although do explain it, because there are now fully grown adults who have never encountered a shilling and would probably assume it is Scandinavian.

How much pocket money did you get? Weekly? Occasionally? Only after performing some appalling household task?

What did you spend it on? What did you save for? How long did saving actually take? What was considered a luxury?

If you knew roughly what the adults earned, put that down too — not just the number, but what that money bought. Prices tell people far more about a period than we realise.

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1.9 How trouble worked in your house

This is about how you were told off, rather than how you tell everybody else off. We get to that later.

Was it a look? A raised voice? The wooden spoon? Being sent upstairs? The silent treatment? “Wait until your father gets home”?

Who was the soft touch? Who absolutely was not?

What did you get punished for? And, far more interestingly, what did you do that they never found out about?

Looking back, were the rules fair? Or were some of them clearly invented by adults who had simply run out of patience?

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1.10 The moment you first realised your family was not like other families

Everybody eventually discovers this. Sometimes it's good. Sometimes it decidedly isn't. And often the revelation happens over something tiny.

You go to somebody else's house for tea and discover they say grace. Or don't. They eat something you've never seen before. Their parents let them stay up until ten. They have a sitting room people are actually permitted to sit in.

Or you discover that something completely normal in your house is apparently regarded elsewhere as very odd indeed.

What was yours?

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1.11 The days your family made a fuss of

Christmas. Birthdays. Sundays. New Year. Holidays. Every family has its own version.

What absolutely had to happen before Christmas could officially begin? Who cooked? Who complained? Who always arrived late? Who fell asleep? What food appeared every single year despite nobody particularly liking it?

What did birthdays look like? What happened on Sundays?

And if your family went away, what was the ritual of getting there? Packing the car, sandwiches wrapped in foil, somebody needing the loo eleven minutes after leaving home?

These little family customs disappear surprisingly quickly because everybody assumes somebody else remembers them. Don't assume.

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1.12 The family story that gets told every single time people gather

You know the one. Someone starts telling it and at least one other person says, "Oh God, not this again."

Write it down before it mutates any further.

Who tells it best? What is the official version? Which part has clearly been improved for dramatic effect over the years? And what actually happened, as far as you know?

By now there may be absolutely no way of establishing the truth, but that is part of the story too.

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1.13 School — and whatever came after

"The best days of your life", apparently. Possibly. For a lot of people they were simply a sentence to be served. Which were they for you?

What was the school actually like? The building, teachers, rules, dinners, playground, uniform, smell?

What were you good at? What did you dread?

Name the teachers who made a difference. And the dreadful ones. There is no reason they should escape purely because several decades have passed.

1.14 Your teenage years

Ah yes. The years many of us would prefer not to have entered into evidence.

Who were you at fifteen? What did you wear that you would now deny under oath?

What music did you listen to? Who were your friends? Where did you go? What did you do at weekends?

Who were you trying desperately to be? What were you worried about? What were you utterly certain mattered enormously that, looking back, mattered not one jot?

And what would you say now to that fifteen-year-old version of yourself who was absolutely convinced everybody was looking?

Because they weren't. They were far too busy worrying that everybody was looking at them.

Part Two — Who you became

These are the years when you were busy becoming yourself, although you probably had no idea that was what was happening.

Jobs. Decisions. Money. Risks. Mistakes. Lucky escapes. Complete changes of direction. Things you meant to do and things you somehow found yourself doing for thirty years.

And quite a lot that nobody ever gave you a certificate for, despite the fact it taught you considerably more than some of the things they did.

2.1 What you actually did all day

Forget the job title for a minute.

What did you actually do?

“Teacher”, “builder”, “secretary”, “manager”, “driver”, “nurse”, “mother” — useful labels, but they don’t tell anybody much about what your days were really like.

What were you good at? What did you secretly enjoy? What bored you rigid? What did the job demand that nobody outside it understood?

If you had several careers, write about all of them. Reinventing yourself counts too.

And if your main work was unpaid, it was still work. Quite often rather more of it.

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2.2 A decision that changed the direction of your life

Big or small. The job you took. The one you turned down. The person you married. The person you didn’t. The house you bought. The country you left. The phone call you made.

Or the thing you agreed to because you were tired, flattered, broke, hopeful, stubborn or temporarily out of your mind.

Which decision sent your life off in a different direction? Would you make it again? And what about the thing you didn’t do?

Regrets are allowed. We’re not doing the modern thing where every unfortunate decision has to become a wonderful learning opportunity. Some were simply bad decisions.

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2.3 Something you were afraid of that turned out not to matter — and something you weren't afraid of that turned out to matter enormously

We spend an extraordinary amount of time worrying about things that never happen. Meanwhile something we hadn't given five minutes' thought to wanders in through the side door and changes everything.

What did you worry about unnecessarily? And what caught you completely by surprise? Were there risks you should have taken and didn't? Or one you did take when everybody else thought you were mad — and were you?

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2.4 A failure you've never really talked about

This is not a tribunal. Nobody is required to make a statement in mitigation.

Something went wrong. Perhaps badly. What happened?

What did you think it said about you at the time? And with the benefit of hindsight, what did it actually say?

Sometimes failure teaches you something useful. Sometimes it teaches you never to do that again. Both are perfectly good answers.

Who helped you afterwards? And who, rather memorably, didn't?

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2.5 The proudest thing you've done that nobody gave you a certificate for

Not necessarily the obvious achievement. Think about the quiet ones.

The person you stuck by. The difficult thing you sorted out when nobody else knew it needed sorting. The time you behaved well when behaving badly would have been considerably more satisfying. The thing you kept going through.

What are you privately proud of? Put it down. There is no requirement to be falsely modest in your own journal.

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2.6 Who taught you — and what it cost

Who taught you something that stayed with you? A brilliant boss. A dreadful boss. A colleague. A parent. A neighbour. Somebody who showed you exactly how something should be done. Sometimes the dreadful examples are just as educational.

Then the slightly harder bit. What did your work or ambition cost you? Time? Health? Relationships? Weekends? Somebody else's patience?

Did anybody else pay a price for something you wanted? If the answer is uncomfortable, you are probably answering the right question.

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2.7 What you made — and where to find it

What have you left behind that somebody could actually see, use, read, visit or hold?

Or it might be a garden you made out of a tip, a piece of furniture, a recipe, something knitted, a machine you somehow kept running for twenty-five years, a family you brought up.

And take photographs of things you're proud of. We photograph lunches, sunsets and cats in cardboard boxes by the thousand, then completely forget to photograph the things we actually made.

What was your version of the big events? War. The three-day week. The moon landing. Decimalisation. The Berlin Wall coming down. The pandemic. Whatever belongs to your lifetime.

What I want is what happened in your house.

What did people talk about? What suddenly became difficult to buy? What did everyone believe was going to happen? What did they get completely wrong? What frightened you? What seemed enormous at the time and is now barely remembered?

Part Three — The people and pets you loved

All varieties. The person you fell in love with. The person you shouldn't have.

Family. Friends who became family. People you lost. People who drove you mad and whom you still miss.

And animals, obviously. They count.

3.1 How you met the people who mattered most

Tell the proper version. Not the polished thirty-second version you've repeated so often that all the interesting bits have fallen off.

Where were you? What did you think of them? What did they think of you? What were you wearing? What happened next?

And how spectacularly wrong was your first impression? Sometimes somebody who becomes one of the most important people in your life begins as “that irritating man at work”. These things are worth recording.

3.2 Somebody you loved and lost

Please don't just write, "She was kind," or, "He had a great sense of humour." For one thing, not everybody's mother was kind. If yours wasn't, you're allowed to say so.

What was this person actually like? What did their laugh sound like? What did they always say? What did they cook? Wear? Watch? Sing? Get hopelessly wrong?

What irritated you about them? Put that in too. Oddly, the things that used to drive you up the wall are often exactly the things you would give anything to experience once more.

If this page is too difficult today, leave it. It will still be here.

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3.3 An apology you never got to make, or forgiveness you never got to give

Write it here. It doesn't have to be sent anywhere. It doesn't have to be balanced, fair or beautifully expressed.

It is quite possible you were right. It is also possible you weren't. Most family rows contain at least a little bit of both.

Say whatever was left unsaid.

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3.4 What you learned about love from watching your own parents

Not what they told you.

What they showed you.

How did they behave towards one another when nobody else was around? Were they affectionate? Loyal? Funny? Cold? Constantly bickering? Completely devoted while pretending not to be?

What did you learn from them that served you well? And what did you have to unlearn later, possibly at considerable inconvenience?

What did you swear you would do differently? Did you?

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3.5 The person who believed in you when it counted

Who saw something in you before you could see it yourself? What did they say? Did you believe them at the time?

Teachers and parents get a lot of credit for this sort of thing, but sometimes it is a colleague, a friend, a customer, a neighbour or somebody you knew for six months.

Did you ever tell them what difference they made? If not, at least put it here.

3.6 Becoming a parent — and the people they turned out to be

If you had children, or brought up somebody else's, start at the beginning. What did you actually feel the first time you saw them?

You are allowed something more complicated than “instant overwhelming joy”. A lot of new parents are frightened, exhausted, bewildered and wondering who thought it was sensible to let them leave hospital in charge of an entire human being.

Then tell us about the child. Not just milestones. What were they like? What made you laugh? What worried you? What did they do at four that you can still see in them at forty?

What are you proud of that you probably don't say often enough?

And if you became a grandparent, what surprised you about that?

3.7 The animals you loved

Dog, cat, horse, pony, rabbit, bird, whatever managed to install itself in your life.

“We had a dog called Rex” is hopelessly inadequate. What was Rex actually like? What appalling habits did he have? What did he understand that humans apparently didn’t?

Which animal made you laugh most? Which one broke your heart? And which supposedly belonged to somebody else but had clearly made its own decision about that?

Animals are part of family history too.

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3.8 What ended, and whose fault it was

Honestly. Relationships end. Friendships end. Sometimes spectacularly. What happened?

“Both of us” is available as an answer, but only if it’s true and not simply the tidy version that prevents you having an argument with a piece of paper.

And if it was entirely their fault, you may say so. They are not here marking it either.

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Part Four — What you actually believe

Not what you think you ought to believe. Not the careful dinner-party answer designed to prevent a row before pudding.

What do you actually think?

You are allowed to contradict yourself. Almost everybody does. Some of us are simply better at forgetting the previous opinion.

4.1 What you think makes a good life

Not a successful life. Not an impressive one. A good one.

What have you seen make people genuinely happy? And what have you watched people chase for years only to discover it didn't make them remotely happy at all? Money? Status? Houses? Jobs? Relationships? Peace and quiet?

If somebody you loved was twenty-five and asked what actually matters, what would you tell them? And what would you tell them not to waste fifteen years worrying about?

4.2 Something you once believed strongly and no longer believe

This is one of the useful privileges of getting older. You are allowed to discover you were talking rubbish.

What changed your mind? One event? A person? Something you read? Or simply years of evidence piling up until maintaining the old opinion became ridiculous?

What did you once believe absolutely that you now don't? And is there anything you suspect you may still be wrong about?

4.3 What matters more than people currently think — and what matters a great deal less

Your possibly unfashionable opinions go here.

What is everybody getting terribly excited about that you suspect won't matter at all twenty years from now? And what are people largely ignoring that you think they will wish they hadn't?

You do not need to make yourself agreeable. Future generations may find your opinions appalling. At least they'll know what they were.

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4.4 Social media, the internet and AI — your honest verdict

Right then. The novel that produced this journal is partly about technology, screens and what happens when we hand rather too much of our thinking over to them, so I can't really leave this one out.

What has the internet genuinely improved? The people you can keep in touch with. The information you can find in seconds. The things you can learn. The fact you no longer have to drive to a library to discover who played somebody in a television programme in 1978.

And what has it made worse? Attention spans? Sleep? Conversation? Privacy? The ability to sit in a queue for three minutes without reaching for a phone?

What do you think social media has done to us? And what about the fact that increasingly what you see is being chosen specifically to keep you looking, clicking, buying or furious?

How good are you at spotting rubbish online?

Be honest.

Then AI. Wonderful? Terrifying? Both? What do you think it will change? What are you excited about? What worries you?

Write what you think now, because this is one answer that may look completely different in ten years.

And that will make it particularly interesting.

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4.5 Your honest opinions about money

What do you wish somebody had told you at twenty-five? Were you a saver, spender or somebody who managed to be both depending on what you were buying?

What was the smartest financial thing you did? And the daftest?

Did having more money change anything you expected it to change? What did you spend money on that was worth every penny? And what was a complete waste?

If you could sit your younger self down for ten minutes with a bank statement, what would you say?

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4.6 A rule you live by that you've never actually said out loud

Most of us have one. Something quietly running underneath the decisions we make.

It might be sensible. It might be peculiar. You may never have put it into words. Have a go.

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4.7 Faith, doubt, and what you were raised in

What were you brought up to believe? Church every Sunday? Another faith? Nothing at all?

Did it stick? Did you lose it, change it, come back to it, or quietly stop thinking about it?

If you believe in God or something beyond us, what do you mean by that? Not the official wording. Yours. If you don't believe, say that too.

And have you ever experienced something you couldn't quite explain, despite your best efforts? No correct answers required.

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4.8 What you think happens when we die

Well, we might as well ask. Do you think there's something afterwards? Nothing? Another go? Do you have absolutely no idea? That is a perfectly respectable answer.

Has what you think changed as you've got older?

And perhaps more interestingly, regardless of what you believe, what do you hope?

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Part Five – How you sound

This may be one of the most valuable parts of the journal.

Facts tell people what happened to you. They don't tell anybody what it was actually like having you in the room.

So this bit is about the language, habits and assorted nonsense that made you recognisably you.

5.1 Your phrases

What do you say all the time? You may have absolutely no idea. Ask somebody who lives with you. They'll know immediately and may enjoy this exercise rather more than you do.

What do you say when something goes wrong? When somebody is being ridiculous? When you're pleased? When you're trying to be diplomatic and failing? When you've completely had enough?

Write the actual words. Not the edited version. Swearing included if appropriate. There is little point preserving your authentic voice and then sanitising it.

5.2 What you call things

Every family has its own private dictionary. We called hot water bottles “wobblies”. Seventy years on, we still do.

The remote control. The airing cupboard. The end of the loaf. The drawer full of things that don't belong anywhere else.

Nicknames too. Especially the unflattering ones.

What words does your family use that would mean absolutely nothing to anybody else? Write them down. Otherwise in one generation everybody starts using the correct terminology like strangers.

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5.3 How you tell somebody off

Not just what you say. How do you do it?

Immediately and loudly? Very quietly, which is worse? Three hours later after constructing your case? In writing? With sarcasm? Do you use somebody's full name?

Do you have the sort of silence that causes everybody else to reconsider their behaviour without a word being spoken?

What does being in trouble with you feel like from the other side? Ask somebody if you're feeling brave.

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5.4 Your sense of humour

What makes you laugh until you can't speak? Dry humour? Slapstick? Sarcasm? Innuendo? Terrible puns? Animals behaving disgracefully? People taking themselves far too seriously? Your own disasters once enough time has passed and everybody has survived?

What do you find hilarious that nobody else understands? And what supposedly hilarious thing leaves you completely cold?

Put down the comedians, sitcoms, films, books, programmes and people who made you laugh. If some of them can still be found online, say where.

Your descendants deserve the opportunity to decide your taste was dreadful for themselves.

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5.5 How you are in a crisis

What happens when something goes seriously wrong? Do you go quiet? Take charge? Make tea? Produce lists? Ring everybody? Grab a stiff G&T? Start cleaning something completely irrelevant? Make matters considerably worse for the first hour and then become surprisingly effective?

And what do you need from other people? Practical help? Reassurance? Silence?

What should nobody under any circumstances say to you unless they actively want another problem?

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5.6 Your ordinary day, hour by hour

Not a holiday. Not Christmas. A completely ordinary Tuesday you'd be perfectly happy to have again.

What time do you wake? What happens first? Tea? Coffee? Phone? Dog? Radio? What do you eat?

What do you potter about doing that you've never thought worth mentioning? What's on in the background? When is your favourite part of the day? What do you do before bed?

This may sound like the dulllest question in the whole journal. I suspect it could eventually be one of the most precious.

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Part Six – What you would say

These aren't necessarily messages for the person as they are today. They're for whoever that person becomes.

Eight and frightened. Fifteen and convinced the entire world is staring at them. Forty and heartbroken. Fifty and exhausted. Or simply having an absolutely rotten Tuesday.

Imagine they've rung you and said, "What do I do?" What would you say? Not something suitable for a fridge magnet. Something useful.

6.1 To a child of eight who is frightened

Of the dark. School. The dog next door. A noise. Something they can't properly explain.

What would you say if you were sitting on the edge of the bed at half past nine, everybody was tired and they needed you, rather than a parenting manual?

What did somebody say to you when you were frightened that actually helped? Or what do you wish somebody had said?

6.2 To somebody of fifteen who is certain everybody is looking at them

Remember fifteen? Unfortunate, wasn't it?

What were you desperately self-conscious about? What did you believe about yourself that turned out to be completely untrue? Did anybody try to tell you? Naturally, did you listen?

What would have been genuinely useful to hear then? Not merely correct. Useful.

And perhaps tell them the thing almost nobody believes at fifteen: everybody else is far too busy worrying about themselves to spend that much time thinking about you.

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6.3 On the day something they wanted very much doesn't happen

The exam. The university. The job. The house. The relationship.

What do you say when somebody has tried very hard and it still hasn't worked? And equally important, what should you not say?

Most of us have experienced somebody delivering a perfectly well-meant sentence at precisely the moment we wanted to hit them with a cushion. What actually helps?

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6.4 On the day it finally does happen

The other side of it. They got the job. The house. The qualification. The thing they've been chasing for years.

What should they do? Celebrate? Take it in? Remember who helped?

And what if, after wanting something for years, finally getting it feels oddly flat? That happens too. What would you tell them?

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6.5 On a day when they're embarrassed about something they've done

They have made a mess of something. Possibly a spectacular one.

What do you say?

Do they need to apologise? Put something right? Admit it? Stop making it worse?

What would you want them to understand about making mistakes? And if you've made one of similar proportions yourself, say so. There are times when "I've done something equally stupid" is considerably more useful than a lecture.

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6.6 On the day they fall in love with somebody you'll never meet

What do you hope they find in another person? What matters? Kindness? Humour? Loyalty? Curiosity? Somebody who can load a dishwasher without requiring a round of applause?

What warning signs would you want them to notice? And how would you say it in a way that gave you at least a sporting chance of being heard?

Then, because statistically it may well happen: what do you say if it goes horribly wrong?

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6.7 What they should do on a bad day

Be specific. "Be kind to yourself" is a lovely sentiment and not much practical use when you're crying in a supermarket car park.

What should they actually do?

Ring somebody? Eat something? Go outside? Make tea? Go to bed? Stop reading messages? Have a bath? Put the phone somewhere they cannot send anything they'll regret in the morning?

What should they absolutely not decide after nine at night, three glasses of wine or six hours without sleep?

Sometimes you don't need advice for the rest of your life. You need to get safely through the next hour. What would you tell them?

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6.8 What you would want said at their wedding — and by whom

If there is a wedding. There may not be. Write what you would want somebody to say on whatever important day eventually arrives.

What would you want them reminded of? What would you want said about love, commitment, family or simply choosing somebody to share a life with?
And who would you trust to say it without turning it into a forty-minute speech about themselves?

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Part Seven – The small things nobody else will remember

This is where all the apparently insignificant stuff goes. The things everybody knows now, so nobody thinks to write them down. Which is precisely how they disappear.

Birth certificates can be found. The story behind the chipped blue bowl can't.

7.1 Names, dates and places worth keeping

Full names. Nicknames. Birthdays. Where people lived. Where they're buried, if that's something your family would want to know.

Who was related to whom. Especially the complicated bits that everybody currently understands perfectly but would require a diagram and legal counsel to explain in thirty years.

Put it down. Genealogy websites are useful, but they don't know why Auntie Jean didn't speak to Uncle Peter after 1974.

7.2 The songs, and why

What music belongs to your life? What was always playing when you were growing up? What takes you instantly back to a particular year, room, person or holiday?

What did you dance to? What did you sing very badly? What was “your song” with somebody?

A list is useful. The story beside the song is better.

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7.3 A recipe, with the story attached

Not just ingredients and method. Whose recipe was it? When did you eat it? Christmas? Sunday? Birthdays? Comfort food? Or the thing produced because there was almost nothing in the fridge but everybody agreed to call it dinner?

What did you change over the years? Who objected? And what ingredient must never under any circumstances be removed because somebody on TikTok has decided there's a healthier alternative?

Write enough that somebody else could actually make it. They will want it to taste like yours.

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7.4 The joke only your family understood

Every family has at least one thing that can reduce several grown adults to helpless laughter while everybody else stares blankly.

Write it down. It may look completely unfunny on paper. That's fine.

Where did it start? Who said it? Why did it become funny? And who must never be allowed to pretend they've forgotten?

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7.5 Your best friend at school, and the thing you were secretly good at that nobody noticed

Who was your best friend? What happened to them? Do you know where they ended up?

And what were you rather good at that never appeared on a school report? Making people laugh? Drawing? Fixing things? Remembering every song lyric ever written while apparently unable to remember French vocabulary for twenty minutes?

Put the small things in. They're usually the first to disappear.

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7.6 What you would want kept — and what should get binned

This could save your family months. What do you own that really matters to you? And why? Because without the story, the object may look completely ordinary.

Then the equally useful list: what can go? No guilt. No family committee meeting. No holding up a chipped vase and wondering whether it represented your very soul.

If you don't care about it, tell them. You may liberate several cupboards at a stroke.

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7.7 Include old photos

Or at least say where they are. Then do the one thing everybody means to do and almost nobody does:

Write down who's in them.

Names. Place. Approximate date. And, if you remember it, what was happening.

A photograph of an unknown smiling woman in 1964 is mildly interesting. A photograph of Great-Aunt Mary on the day she left her husband and went to Blackpool is considerably better.

Think about your digital photographs too. Where are the important ones? Cloud? Computer? Phone? Hard drive? Print some if you want them to survive technological fashion.

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7.8 Your family tree

Do a rough one. It does not have to resemble something prepared by a genealogist. Biro and arrows are acceptable.

Names. Rough dates. Marriages. Children. Branches. The one who emigrated. The one nobody talked about. The second marriage everybody forgets to mention.

A family tree website can produce the skeleton. You can add the useful bit: who these people actually were.

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7.9 A page of favourites

Quick answers. Don't overthink them. Taste is surprisingly personal and people will enjoy knowing yours.

Colour	
Tree	
Animal	
A meal you'd choose above all others	
Pudding	
Drink	
Flower or plant	
Somewhere abroad	
A corner of the UK	
Season	
Time of day	
Weather	
A song — the one that gets you every time	
A piece of music, or an album	
Website/s	
Book/s	
Film/s	
Sitcoms and TV shows	
Paintings, or anything you'd call art	
A sport — and a team you've followed	
A musician or band	
A saying you live by	

[illegible]

Part Eight – For you, specifically

Up to now you've been creating a record. This part is different. This is for one particular person.

A child. Grandchild. Partner. Friend. Somebody who may currently be too young to understand any of it.

If you're doing this for several people, make a copy of these pages for each one. This part shouldn't be shared out like a tin of biscuits.

8.1 The moment I first saw you

Tell the truth rather than the polished version that's been repeated at birthdays.

Where were you? What did you think? What did you actually feel? Joy, obviously, perhaps. But terror, surprise, relief, disbelief and “Good God, what happens now?” are all available too.

What do you remember about that first moment that they couldn't possibly know?

8.2 Things I noticed early that I don't think you know I noticed

What was there from the beginning? Stubbornness? Kindness? An outrageous sense of humour? Determination? The ability to charm everybody in the room and then quietly dismantle something expensive?

What did they do as a tiny child that made you think, “Ah. That’s who you are”?

What have they still got? And what do you hope they never lose?

8.3 What I see in you that came from me — and from somebody you’ll never meet

Whose eyes? Whose hands? Whose temper? Whose laugh? Whose habit of standing in a doorway talking for twenty minutes when they originally came upstairs for something?

Tell them. And if you recognise somebody in them whom they’ll never meet, describe that person properly.

It is oddly comforting to know where bits of you came from. Even the inconvenient bits.

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8.4 What I hope for you that I probably won’t say to your face

Because families are often hopeless at this. We can discuss the weather, parking and what somebody had for tea indefinitely, while leaving the important things unsaid for years. So say them here.

What do you hope for this person? Not what you want them to achieve.

What do you want their life to feel like?

What do you hope they know about how you feel about them? This one doesn’t need a joke at the end.

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8.5 The questions I think you’ll ask me one day

What are they too young to ask now? Or perhaps too polite?

Money. Family arguments. Relationships. Why somebody stopped coming at Christmas. What really happened in 1987.

What do you suspect they’ll eventually want your version of? You might as well give it to them while you can.

8.6 The books I want you to read one day

Which books changed something in you? Which simply kept you company at exactly the right moment?

What should they read at sixteen? Thirty? During a terrible period? On holiday? Add films, programmes and music if you like.

And say why.

A list of worthy titles without explanation is dangerously close to homework. If you have a copy you've scribbled in, keep that one for them. Your notes in the margin may eventually mean more than the book.

8.7 If you read nothing else in this book

One sentence. That's all.

If every other page vanished, got coffee spilled over it or was put “somewhere safe” — traditionally the most dangerous location in any house — what one thing would you want this person to know?

Anything else

Your page. Anything that didn't fit.

Anything I should have asked and didn't.

Anything that arrived in your head six weeks later and refused to wait politely for the correct section.

Put it here.

A closing note

If you've got this far, you've already done far more than most of us ever get round to doing.

And if you haven't filled every page, it doesn't matter. Half a memory is better than none.

A phrase. A recipe. A warning. A joke. Somebody's name written beside a photograph. One honest sentence you nearly didn't bother writing.

The people who love you won't care about the blank pages. They'll be extremely grateful for the ones that aren't.

Now tell somebody where you've put it.

I am completely serious about that. Families have enough trouble finding the Sellotape.

Chrissy Idle

About these questions

The man who started all this is Marcus Whitfield, a character in *Ghost Grandad: Mostly Yes*.

Marcus has only months to live and a five-year-old granddaughter he adores. A sensible grandfather might leave letters, videos and a few carefully chosen words for the future.

Marcus is not a sensible grandfather.

He is a scientist, an inventor, and deeply unimpressed by the idea that his granddaughter might grow up being educated, advised and influenced more by algorithms than by the people who love her.

He doesn't just want to leave behind answers she can read one day.

He wants her to be able to ask him.

So Marcus decides to do something about it.

Something brilliant, improbable and ethically rather questionable — which works rather better than anyone expected.

Ghost Grandad: Mostly Yes

A darkly funny story about family, love, AI, control, letting go — and the trouble that starts when a dead grandfather's advice can answer back.

Marcus didn't stop at a notebook.

If you're curious about Marcus — and where all this came from — you can read the first five chapters of *Ghost Grandad: Mostly Yes* free here.

I hope you enjoy them.

ghostgrandad.com/read



Chrissy Idle

Getting your affairs in order

Marcus's first move wasn't actually any of the interesting stuff. It was paperwork.

Because however fascinating your memories may be, they are not much help to somebody who is standing in your house trying to work out where the will is, what bank accounts you have and how on earth to get into your phone.

Putting things in order is dull. It is also one of the kindest things you can do for the people left behind.

So use these lists to gather what matters, then tell somebody you trust where everything is.

And one sensible warning before we start: this is a checklist to help you think, not legal advice. Rules differ across England and Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and, of course, the rest of the world. If you're elsewhere, use this as a prompt and check the local rules.

For the will itself, ring two or three local solicitors and ask for a fixed-fee quote for a straightforward will. It is often more affordable than people expect, and it is considerably safer than discovering later that something important wasn't done properly.

Your will — what to gather and decide

You and your family

- ☐ Your full legal name, any former names, address and date of birth
- ☐ Your marital or civil-partnership status — in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, marrying usually cancels an existing will; Scotland differs
- ☐ Whether you already have a will that needs replacing
- ☐ Everyone who depends on you — and anyone you mean to include, or deliberately leave out

Executors — the people who carry it out

- ☐ One to four people you trust — and ask them first
- ☐ A back-up in case your first choice can't act. An executor is allowed to inherit too.

Guardians — if you have children under 18

- ☐ A guardian
- ☐ A back-up
- ☐ Have a quiet word with them before giving them this unexpected promotion

What you own and what you owe

- ☐ Property — and how it's owned. A home held as 'joint tenants' usually passes to the survivor automatically, outside the will
- ☐ Bank and savings accounts
- ☐ Investments and ISAs
- ☐ Premium Bonds
- ☐ Business interests
- ☐ Vehicles
- ☐ Valuables
- ☐ Pensions and life insurance — check the nomination or 'expression of wish' on each separately, as these often pass outside the will
- ☐ Digital assets and cryptocurrency — see the separate lists below
- ☐ Debts — mortgage, loans and credit cards

Who gets what

- ☐ Any specific gifts — the item or sum, and the full name of the person or charity. For a charity, include its registered number.
- ☐ The residue — who gets everything left after debts and specific gifts, and in what shares
- ☐ A back-up beneficiary in case somebody dies before you
- ☐ The age at which children should inherit — for example 18, 21 or 25

Funeral and personal wishes

These are guidance rather than binding instructions.

- ☐ Burial or cremation
- ☐ Any particular funeral wishes
- ☐ Organ donation
- ☐ Who should look after any pets

Please include the pets. Somebody will otherwise be standing in your kitchen, grieving and simultaneously trying to establish whether the cat will tolerate Auntie Margaret.

Signing the will

This is the bit where doing it properly matters.

- ☐ The will must be in writing and signed by you in front of two independent adult witnesses, who then sign it too. Scotland requires one witness.
- ☐ Witnesses must not be beneficiaries — or married to one — or the gift can fail
- ☐ Date it

Afterwards

- ☐ Store the original safely
- ☐ Tell your executors exactly where it is
- ☐ Review it after major changes such as marriage, divorce, a birth, death or house move — or every three to five years

Definitely use a solicitor if your affairs are more complicated — for example a blended or unmarried family, a vulnerable or disabled beneficiary, a business or farm, property abroad, a large or tax-sensitive estate, or if you intend to leave out somebody who might reasonably expect to inherit.

This is not the moment to discover that the internet template wasn't quite as clever as it claimed.

Your digital life and passwords

A generation ago this list would have been considerably shorter. Unfortunately we have made progress.

- ☐ How to unlock your phone
- ☐ How to unlock your main computer
- ☐ Where your passwords live — perhaps in a password manager, with its master password stored safely, or in a sealed written list
- ☐ Your email accounts — these are effectively the keys to almost everything else
- ☐ Social media accounts — Facebook, LinkedIn and any others. Should they be memorialised, closed or handed on?
- ☐ Whether any services allow you to nominate a legacy contact
- ☐ Photos and files stored in the cloud — how to reach them and what you want preserved
- ☐ Subscriptions and anything paid monthly that will need cancelling or transferring
- ☐ Anything you have published or created online, and where to find it

Do not put passwords into the will itself.

A will may become a public document after probate.

Keep passwords separately and tell the right person where to find them. Preferably not 'somewhere safe'. We've covered that.

Money and crypto

- ☐ Banks and savings accounts — where the paperwork or logins are
- ☐ Pensions
- ☐ Investments
- ☐ Premium Bonds
- ☐ Any cryptocurrency — which currencies, and whether they're held on an exchange or in a wallet
- ☐ Where the keys or seed phrase are kept
- ☐ Clear instructions for whoever inherits it

If you own cryptocurrency, assume the person sorting out your affairs knows absolutely nothing about it. Because they may not.

Without the relevant keys or seed phrase, it can be gone permanently. Leaving somebody £20,000 they cannot actually access is less generous than it initially appears.

Where to find everything

Write down where the following actually live:

- ☐ The will
- ☐ The solicitor or service holding it, if applicable
- ☐ Property deeds
- ☐ Mortgage information
- ☐ Insurance policies
- ☐ Birth certificate
- ☐ Marriage or civil-partnership certificate
- ☐ Passport
- ☐ National Insurance number
- ☐ Contact details for your solicitor
- ☐ Accountant
- ☐ Financial adviser
- ☐ Employer, if relevant
- ☐ This journal
- ☐ The separate password information

Then tell one trusted person that this list exists and where it is.

A perfect archive that nobody can find is no archive at all.

Continuation sheets

If one of the questions needs more space, use a continuation sheet.

Put the question number at the top — for example 3.2 — so it can be reunited with the correct page later.

Use as many as you need. Nobody ever wished somebody they loved had left them less.

CONTINUATION SHEET

This continues my answer to — Part _____ Question _____

Sheet _____ of _____

CONTINUATION SHEET

This continues my answer to — Part _____ Question _____

Sheet _____ of _____

CONTINUATION SHEET

This continues my answer to — Part _____ Question _____

Sheet _____ of _____