

## **Chapter 5. Eyes wide open: The daughter-in-law's story**



**G'day. My name's Chantel and I'm 28 years old. I've been married to Bromley, Sandy's older son, for two years and we live in London. It's a far cry from where I grew up, a suburb of Melbourne, Australia, but I enjoy it mostly. I'm not a big fan of the Tube to be honest, especially in summer. I miss the beaches back home too. And Dad's infamous BBQs and my favourite brand of lager and... enough of that. I'll make myself home sick. Really, I do like living here and I'm lucky that I have a job that I love too. I'm a children's bookseller and I get to read kids' books all the time, which is great. They have a simple honesty and innocence that adult books don't.**

### **So, why is this so hard to write?**

To be honest I'm finding it hard to write this because half the members of the family are journalists or natural born writers. With all the books I read I was hoping some of it would rub off on me but unfortunately I'm as inarticulate as ever. So if you're willing to put up with me I'll try to tell you my part in this family story.

When Sandy and Phil pitched this book idea to the family I thought 'Great. No one's really written much about the effects of Huntington's on an entire family before and it might be good therapy for everyone to get stuff off their chests'. I jumped in whole-heartedly. In reality I've found it bloody hard to write anything.

If we'd written this two years ago when Brom and I lived in their house I'd have found it easy, surrounded by the constant mess and tidying, the drinking and the mood swings that take place, seemingly, in the blink of an eye. Then there was also the frustration and anger (on my part) caused by the littlest things. It used to drive me crazy. And the worst part was it wasn't anyone's fault. There was no one to blame. HD caused those unpleasant feelings and for a while controlled our daily lives.

Now that we live away from the family home I find it hard to recall those feelings. I think that's a good thing. I didn't like feeling so angry and upset all the time over something I couldn't really control. Living in a house with Huntington's Disease also used to make me constantly think whether this would be our possible future, I mean Brom and me, and naturally that was upsetting.

### **Where I come from**

I come from a dysfunctional but relatively 'normal' family. My parents split up when I was 11 or 12 and my two brothers were 9 and 6. It hurt for a while but life went on. My Dad did a brilliant job bringing up my two brothers and me on

his own. He provided everything he could and I've never felt we missed out on anything, not important things anyway. (There is still the matter of a family holiday to Queensland he promised us 10 years ago!)

Anyway eventually both my parents met other people and we became one big happy extended family. As a kid I'd always wanted a sister. When Dad remarried I got four. I also gained another two brothers from Mum's second marriage. Just call us the Brady Bunch.

Five and a half years ago I came to the UK with friends to do some travelling, see the sights and have some fun. One week after landing I was in the town of Banbury, twenty miles north-west of Oxford, working in a bar. A couple of weeks later I met Brom and we got talking over a few drinks. We still argue over who hit on who but I know with perfect clarity the moment I fell in love with him. It was one of the happiest yet scariest moments of my life. One thing led to another and here we are five years later married, much to my mother's shame. Before I came over here she had said the worst thing I could do in life was to fall in love with an Englishman I'd met in a pub. (She adores him now though!)

I don't remember where we were the first time Brom mentioned that his Mum had Huntington's Disease (in a pub again no doubt) but I remember the look on his face when I said I knew what it was before he'd had a chance to explain it. He looked kinda relieved that he didn't have to explain it to me and at the same time a little apprehensive as to what I might say next or what questions I might ask. I could see that the whole topic had made him feel uncomfortable. To be honest I felt a little queasy too.

In my last year of school I studied Biology and our major assignment was to do a comprehensive study of a genetic disorder. I chose to study Huntington's disease. We had to explain what the disease was, how it affected sufferers, and what treatment was available to help combat the disease. As I began researching I started getting quite depressed reading about the mental and physical effects on a sufferer and the fact that it was totally incurable. I felt sick to my stomach reading case studies. What a horrible thing to have to go through. So, having studied all that, when Brom told me about his mum, I didn't ask any questions and we changed the subject.