

The card in 1970 said 'Happy Christmas, Mary, forty years on, love Bunny'. We'd been Head Boy and Girl at our northern grammar school; the sixth form was, unusually, mixed. I suppose today you'd call us 'an item'. Then, he went down to London to study engineering, and I went to a good secretarial college in Manchester. I was ill straight after school – a heart thing – and the doctors told my mother I shouldn't have children. I suppose we translated that, then, as 'don't get married'. So, I sort of broke it off with Bunny, or let it – lapse. I picked myself up, and it was a good life; dutiful daughter through the war (both sets of parents were in cotton, comfortable) career girl. I was soon PA to some important men; tennis club, holidays, theatre – I loved Shaw, always. And good friends. During the war I met Dick and Fenna, and when we all made the leap to London in the early '50s. I'd often spend a 'Sunday in the suburbs', with their children: Ralph, serious in glasses, Alison, clever too, but loving my smart outfits and make-up. I'd let her do my hair – I'd turned ash-silver in my twenties - and redo the bright lipstick and the Yardley powder. Fenna'd say, 'Are you sure you don't mind, Mary?' Ambitious parents, pushing them both all the way to Oxford. But I helped plant another seed in Alison. She was about nine when I first invited her for a 'girls' weekend' at my London flat, Bohemian Chelsea then, later, South Ken. There was always a Saturday matinee. It was 'Salad Days', and she did all the songs that evening, clattering in my too-big court shoes.

By then I was 'Girl Friday' to Arthur Kenyon, distinguished architect, who really encouraged me. I loved that whole world, and eventually – I'd always been good at writing – I got my own column in 'The Builder' – the Bible for architects and engineers. We called it 'Not For Men' (this was the early '60s!) and all the men said it was what they read first. It was common sense really, women's sense about design, in small things and big. Cities and kitchens. I got to go down sewers, up tower blocks. The men were lovely. One holiday on Cyprus – I had lovely hols with girl-friends – I even got to interview President Makarios, though it can't have been about drains! There's a photo.

Men? Oh, there had been suitors early on: dashing Basil, in the green roadster, but I didn't want to, didn't believe in - ... well, I was an old-fashioned girl. I had my work, my friends, gifts and glowing references for Ralph and Alison, willing ear for Fenna, frustrated as so many wives at that time.

Then Bunny; Frank was his real name. Something just – clicked. We met: his wife had died. There were four grown sons, he lived and worked in Bath. It just seemed – well, why wait when you're both rising 60? I went on working after we got married, but then there was his - our – house in Bath, the families, a cottage in Cornwall. I think I did write a piece about how when you have two houses you never quite know which is home. I let the work dwindle; well, let the young have a go, too! But I kept my columns, for Alison. We sold Cornwall, and 'retired' to the open, modern house in Bath. My books - beloved Shaw - and pictures, were sort of diluted, not concentrated as they'd been in my bachelor 'pads'. Alison, acting at the Bristol theatre, came with the man who'd become her second, and best husband. Not second-best! We had a giggle on the 'phone. He was a charmer.

About then, mid-'80s, words, language, started to - ... hide; I couldn't recall the word for 'champagne' one day. And, well, that's a one-way street, you know. When I got 'upset' Bunny was so good, though he could be - ... tetchy. I was calm with my beloved jazz, or watching the fish in the tank. We had had good times together, 40 years on: a fairy tale! But I sometimes missed the bachelor girl, giggling in Greece with Bernice, operas, deadlines ... but, well, 'you never can tell', can you?

Mary Haddock, my fairy godmother

Alison Skilbeck