



Impressions

Practice questions

Key points to remember:

- ✓ Impressions = what do you think and feel about....
- ✓ Highlight what is asked for in question;
- ✓ Track through the text from top to bottom;
- ✓ Systematically work through – point (adjective) /evidence (quote);
- ✓ A range of points need to be made – consider personality/ appearance/ interaction with others/ description of place;
- ✓ Consider **title/ tone/ language choices/ images/ presentational devices and structure** in the text and respond to these ideas in your answer. (consider the whole text)
- ✓ **Time and marks:**
 - * **5 marks = 7-8 minutes reading and answering the question;**
 - * **10 marks = 15 minutes reading and answering the question;**
- ✓ You're aiming for:
 - * 4-5 points = 5 mark questions
 - * 8-10 points = 10 mark question

Q: What impressions does Paul Birmingham give about kite-flying in this extract? [5 marks]

The joy of kite-flying – who knew?



It's taken me 34 years on planet Earth to experience the thrill of flying a kite. I know, I know, what was I doing as a child? Sadly, it seems I lived an unfulfilled, kiteless childhood...

Homemade heaven

Earlier in the year my kitelessness ended when the family and I attended a local kite festival. Apart from it being an awesome spectacle with giant octopus, sharks and dragons filling the skies (a spectacle so good it kept my kids away from the flashing swords and ice cream sellers for a record-breaking half an hour!) we got to make our own kites. For just a couple of pounds and the assistance of some friendly folk on the stand, the children had their very own kites and it was time to give them a go...

Disappointingly, the kites were great and the kids loved them. Yes, I did say 'disappointingly' and the reason being that the kids required no help from me. They were happy with just themselves and their new toys and I didn't get a look in! Even my three-year-old told me, "Get off Daddy. Go away!" Charming. But seriously, what joy from a piece of plastic, a couple of sticks, tape and string. And never fear, leave the kids long enough and it's inevitable that they'll get tangled-up, giving you the perfect excuse to assist and show them how it's done!

Q: What impressions does Bill Bryson create of Llandudno in this extract? [10 marks]

A View of Llandudno

Llandudno is truly a fine and handsome place, built on a generously proportioned bay and lined along its front with a huddle of prim but gracious nineteenth-century hotels. It was built as a holiday resort in the mid-1800s and it cultivates a nice old-fashioned air.

5 When I arrived, I discovered that the town was packed with weekending pensioners. Coaches from all over were parked along the side-streets. Every hotel I called at was full and in every dining room I could see crowds of nodding white heads spooning soup and conversing happily.

10 Further along the front there stood a clutch of guesthouses and a few of them had vacancy signs perched in their windows. I selected a place that looked reasonable enough from the outside – it promised colour TV and coffee-making facilities, about all I require these days for a lively Saturday night – but from the moment I set foot in the door and drew in the mildewy smell of damp plaster and peeling wallpaper, I knew it was a bad choice. I was about to flee when the proprietor appeared and revealed that a single room with breakfast could be had for £19.50 – little short of a swindle. It was entirely out of the question that I would stay the night in such a dismal place at such an extortionate price, so I said, 'That sounds fine,' and signed in. Well, it's so hard to
15 say no.

20 My room was everything I expected it to be – cold and cheerless, with ugly furniture, grubbily matted carpet and those mysterious ceiling stains that bring to mind a neglected corpse in the room above. Fingers of icy wind slipped through the single, ill-fitting window. The curtains had to be yanked violently before they would budge and came nowhere near meeting in the middle. There was a tray of coffee things but the cups were disgusting and the spoon was stuck to the tray. The bathroom, faintly illuminated by a distant light activated by a length of string, had curling floor tiles and years of accumulated muck packed into every corner and crevice. A bath was out of the question, so I threw some cold water on my face, dried it with a towel that had the texture of a Weetabix and gladly went out.

25 I had a long stroll along the prom to boost my appetite and pass an hour. It felt wonderful. The air was still and sharp and there wasn't a soul about, though there were still lots of white heads in the hotel lounges, all bobbing merrily about. I walked nearly the length of The Parade, enjoying the chill autumn air and the trim handsomeness of the setting: a soft glow of hotels to the left and an inky void of restless sea to my right.

30 I dined simply in a small, nondescript restaurant and afterwards set off to hunt for a pub. Llandudno had surprisingly few of these vital institutions. I walked for some time before I found one that looked even vaguely approachable. It was a typical town pub inside – stale, smoky, noisy and busy. I sat at the bar for a while and, as sometimes happens in these circumstances, I had a sudden urge to return to my seafront lodgings for an early night.

35 In the morning, I emerged from the guesthouse into a world drained of colour. The sky was low and heavy and the sea vast, lifeless and grey. As I walked along, rain began to fall.

(Adapted from 'Notes from a Small Island' by Bill Bryson)

A2. Look at lines 15-31.

What impressions do you get of work in the mines from these lines?

You must refer to the text to support your answer.

[10]

15 In Johannesburg they spent two weeks training us. We were all quite fit and strong, but nobody could be sent down the mines until he had been made even stronger. So they took us to a building which they had heated with steam and they made us jump up and down on the benches for four hours each day. They told us how we would be taken down into the mines and about the work we would be expected to do. They talked to us about safety, and how the rock could fall and crush us if we were careless. They carried in a man with no legs and put him on a table and made us listen to him as he told us what had happened to him.

They taught us Funagalo, which is the language used for giving orders underground. It is a strange language. There are many words for push, shove, carry, load, and no words for love, or happiness, or the sounds which birds make in the morning.

25 Then we went down the shafts. They put us in cages, beneath great wheels, and these cages shot down as fast as hawks falling on their prey. They had small trains down there and they took us to the end of long, dark tunnels, which were filled with green rock and dust. My job was to load rock after it had been blasted and I did this for ten hours every day.

30 I worked for years in those mines, and I saved all my money. Other men spent it on women, and drink and fancy clothes. I bought nothing. I sent the money home and then I bought cattle with it. Slowly my herd got bigger.

I would have stayed in the mines, I suppose, had I not witnessed a terrible thing. It happened after I had been there fifteen years. I had been given a much better job, as an assistant to a blaster. They would not give us blasting jobs, as that was a job the white men kept for themselves, but I was given the job of carrying explosives for a blaster. This was a good job and I liked the man I worked for.

Q: What impressions does Bill Bryson create of Manchester as a city? [10 marks]

I took a train to Manchester and, having left home late, it was four o'clock and getting on for dark by the time I emerged from Piccadilly station. The streets were shiny with rain, and busy with traffic and hurrying pedestrians, which gave Manchester an attractive big-city feel. For some totally insane reason, I had booked a room in an expensive hotel. My room was on the eleventh floor, but it seemed like the eighty-fifth, such were the views. Manchester seemed enormous – a boundless sprawl of dim yellow lights and streets filled with slow-moving traffic.

I played with the TV, confiscated the stationery and spare tablet of soap and put a pair of trousers in the trouser press – at these prices I was determined to extract full value from the experience – even though I knew that the trousers would come out with permanent pleats in the oddest places. That done, I went out for a walk and to find a place to eat.

I walked for some distance but the only places I could find were either the kind of national chains with big plastic menus and dismal food, or hotel dining rooms where you had to pay £27.95 for three courses of pompous description and overcooked disappointment.

Eventually I ended up in Chinatown, which announces itself to the world with a big colourful arch and then almost immediately loses heart. The better-looking restaurants were packed, so I ended up going to some upstairs place, where the décor was tatty and the food barely OK. When the bill came, I noticed an extra charge marked 'S.C'. 'What's that?' I said to the waitress, who had, I should like to note, been uncommonly surly throughout.

'Service charge.'

I looked at her in surprise. 'Then why is there also a space here for a tip?'

She gave me a bored, nothing-to-do-with-me shrug.

'That's terrible,' I said. 'You're just tricking people into tipping twice.'

She gave a heavy sigh, as if she had been here before. 'You want to see manager?'

The offer was made in a tone that suggested that if I were to see the manager it would be with some of his boys in a back alley. I decided not to press the matter, and instead returned to the streets and had a long, purposeless walk through Manchester's dank and strangely ill-lit streets. I can't remember a darker city. I couldn't say where I went exactly because Manchester's streets always seem curiously indistinguishable to me. I felt I was just wandering in a kind of urban limbo. Eventually I ended up beside the great dark bulk of the Arndale Centre. What a monumental mistake that was. I suppose it must be nice, in a place as rainy as Manchester, to be able to shop undercover but at night it is just 25 acres of deadness, a massive impediment to anyone trying to walk through the heart of the city. Outside it was covered in those awful tiles that make it look like the world's largest lavatory, and indeed as I passed up Cannon Street three young men with close-cropped heads and abundantly tattooed arms were using an outside wall for that very purpose. It suddenly occurred to me that it was getting late and the streets were awfully empty of respectable-looking chaps like me, so I decided to get back to my hotel before they put me to similar use.

I awoke early and hit the streets determined to form some fixed impression of the city. My problem with Manchester, you see, is that I have no image of it, none at all. It is an airport with a city attached. If I haven't got a very clear image of the city, it's not entirely my fault. 'Shaping Tomorrow's City Today' is the official local motto, but in fact Manchester is decidedly of two minds about its place in the world. At Castlefield, they were busy creating yesterday's city today, cleaning up old warehouses, recobbling the quaysides, putting fresh coats of paint on the old arched footbridges and scattering about a generous assortment of old-fashioned benches and lampposts. By the time they have finished, you will be able to see what life would have been like in nineteenth-century Manchester if they had had wine-bars and cast-iron litter bins. At Salford Quays, on the other hand, they have done everything they can to obliterate the past, creating a kind of mini-Dallas on the site of the once-booming docks of the Manchester Ship Canal. It's the most extraordinary place – a huddle of glassy modern office buildings and executive flats in the middle of a vast urban nowhere, all of them seemingly empty.

Q: What impressions does Enzo Calzaghe give of his son, Joe? [10 marks]

Relative Values

Enzo Calzaghe talks about his son, the boxer Joe Calzaghe.

I was brought up in Sardinia and Sardinian culture is very simple: you're a football player, a boxer, a waiter, or a cook. That's about it. I wanted Joe to be a football player, but he wasn't picked for this and that, and then when he was eight, I gave him a punchball and he was pretty good. I took him to the gym, aged 10, and the trainer said: "You have an open-class kid." I said: "What does that mean?" He said: "It means he's very, very good."

Now I'm not stupid. I know class. People say don't push your kid. But I'm completely the opposite. If you've got a kid with class – whether it's in tennis, studying or whatever – they've got to be pushed, because the day they don't make it, they will say: "It's because of my old man. He didn't give me any encouragement." But then, if it all goes wrong and you did push them, it'll be "Dad ruined my life". I've never been scared of pushing Joe, because my son is not a run-of-the-mill talent. He's a genius. I noticed that, and I was not going to let him live a normal life and destroy what I'd spotted. There was something unique there. Obviously, he wanted to play with other kids, but I was trying to make him understand his ability. Encouragement became an order.

I'm a dad only to the door of the gym. Then we're purely fighter and trainer. We switch off. Moody in the gym? Joe's a psycho. That works for us. That chemistry is exactly what we need in order for me to push him, and him to want to be pushed. That's the beauty of it. In the lead-up to a fight, I call him a chameleon, a snake of different colours. He changes all the time. His eyes go from passionate and warm to cold and ice. I don't get any communication out of him. He's what you'd call arrogant and psyched up. That's what I want to see.

I never think of the danger. At the end of the day, boxing is a sport, no worse than driving a car. I've got no reason to be anxious or stressed. It's his job and he does it well. Because I've trained him, I know he's better than the other guy so I've never had the eyes of a father in the ring. It sounds as if I'm a sadist but we love each other to bits. I would never be training Joe if I didn't have the ability for it. A few years ago, there were some selfish remarks in a newspaper. They were saying he wasn't performing, even though he won. They were saying: "Change your father as a trainer." That hurt me because they wanted Joe to leave me. I'd got a win out of him so what was the problem? I said to Joe: "If you want to go, go. But I don't deserve this." But we rode that storm.

I don't know why Joe has never got the recognition he deserves. The problem in Britain is they love losers and Joe has never had the respect. He's too good for his own good – that's the bottom line.

We've never been tempted to leave Wales. When you've got enough, you've got enough, and the warmth we have as a family – you couldn't get that if you were a billionaire. You can't buy love. The family is the most important thing. If the fighting finished tomorrow, my job is done. I've been rewarded as a father and as a trainer. I'm happy – absolutely over the moon with myself.

Q: What impressions does James Cracknell give of what it was like to take part in the race? [10 marks]

Telephone interview with James Cracknell

In 2005, Olympic gold medal winner James Cracknell and television presenter Ben Fogle were rowing in the Atlantic Rowing Race towards Antigua in the West Indies. Their blisters and other injuries were so bad that Fogle, with a swollen finger, wasn't sure how much longer he would be able to carry on. But their main worry was the hurricane bearing down on the 23ft boat that could blow them back towards their starting point, the Canary Islands. This is what James Cracknell said in a telephone interview during the race:

Since last Saturday, we have hardly made any progress – just 100 miles in almost a week. We've experienced the worst weather they've ever had in the race and it looks as if it will continue until next Tuesday.

The hurricane itself didn't hit us, but we got caught by strong winds blowing in exactly the wrong direction so we had to put down the sea anchor. For two and a half days we were stuck in our cabin, which is like being shut in a car boot. When the wind eased off, we were able to set off at midnight and row for seven hours, which took us over the 2,000 miles-to-go mark. We celebrated with a chocolate bar. But we keep having to stop because of the weather. We've lost so many days that we are starting having to ration our food. We wanted to do the race in forty days, and took enough food for fifty, but that looks optimistic now, so we've cut our daily ration of 8,000 calories by 600. By the time we get to the last few days, we will be having a horrible time because we've left all the food we don't like until then.

We've been thirsty as well as hungry. Earlier in the week, the machine which removes salt from seawater broke and we nearly had to break into the fresh water we carry as ballast. We could only drink five to six litres a day, instead of ten.

We haven't seen another boat since the day we set off so we don't know our position in the race. The weather has brought out the differences in our competitive attitudes, so there has been a bit of tension. I mind about being overtaken and I'm keener to row in the rain than Ben is; he just wants to get to the end. The race is a battle with your mind and little things can become really annoying.

I'm not looking forward to the next four days because we're going to be stuck in the cabin again. We're bored with talking to each other, we've only got one pack of cards, and we've played all the games we know. We need to sleep as much as we can, but it gets really hot in the cabin because the wind is so strong that we have to keep the windows and hatch shut. Out of a twelve-hour night we probably sleep for only two hours and spend the rest of the night trying to get comfortable. We sleep head to toe on a shelf that is only the width of a shoulder and, just as I am dozing off, I find Ben's foot in my mouth. It has been such a hard slog that both of us are struggling to find the excitement in this adventure.

Q: What impressions does Orwell create of the working conditions in a coal mine? [10 marks]

The Road to Wigan Pier

The book from which this extract is taken was first published in 1937 after George Orwell had visited the industrial north of England.

5 When you go down a coal mine it is important to try and get to the coal face when the 'fillers' are at work. The machines are roaring and the air is black with coal dust and you can actually see what the miners have to do. At those times the place is like hell, or at any rate like my own mental picture of hell. Most of the things one imagines in hell are there, except the fire, for there is no fire
10 down there except the feeble beams of lamps and electric torches which scarcely penetrate the clouds of coal dust.

15 When you have finally got there - and getting there is a job in itself - you crawl through the last line of pit props and see opposite you a shiny black wall three to four feet high. This is the coal face. Overhead is the smooth ceiling made by the rock from which the coal has been cut; underneath is the rock again, so that the space you are in is only as high as the ledge of coal itself, probably not much more than three feet. Most shocking of all is the frightful, deafening din from the conveyor belt which carries the coal away. The air is foul, the heat is unbearable and you cannot see very far, because the fog of coal dust throws back the beam of your lamp, but you can see the line of kneeling men driving their shovels under the fallen coal and flinging it swiftly over
20 their left shoulders. They are feeding it on to the conveyor belt, a moving rubber belt a couple of feet wide which runs behind them. Down this belt a glittering river of coal races constantly. In a big mine it is carrying away several tons of coal every minute. The coal is shot into tubs and then dragged to the cages and hoisted to the outer air.

25 It is impossible to watch the 'fillers' at work without feeling a pang of envy for their toughness. It is a dreadful job that they do, an almost superhuman job by the standards of an ordinary person. They are not only shifting monstrous quantities of coal, but they also have to remain kneeling all the while. They could hardly rise from their knees without hitting the ceiling, and you can easily see by trying it what a tremendous effort this means. Shovelling is comparatively easy when you are standing up; kneeling down, the whole of the strain is thrown on your arm and stomach
30 muscles. And the other conditions do not exactly make things easier. There is the heat - it varies but in some mines it is suffocating - and the coal dust that stuffs up your throat and nostrils and collects along your eyelids, and the unending rattle of the conveyor belt, which in that confined space is rather like the rattle of a machine-gun. But the fillers look and work as though they were made of iron.

35 It is only when you begin making a few calculations that you realise what a stupendous task the 'fillers' are performing. Each man is shifting coal at a speed of about two tons an hour. I have just enough experience of working with a shovel to be able to grasp what this means. When I dig my garden I might shift two tons of earth in an afternoon. But I don't have to work kneeling down, a thousand feet underground, in suffocating heat and swallowing coal dust with every breath I take.
40 The miner's job would be as much beyond my power as it would be to perform on the flying trapeze or to win the Grand National. I am not a manual labourer and please God I never shall be one, but there are some kinds of manual work that I could do if I had to. At a pinch I could be a tolerable road-sweeper or an inefficient gardener or even a tenth-rate farm hand. But by no conceivable amount of effort or training could I become a coal-miner; the work would kill me in a few weeks.

Q: What impressions does Orwell give of Sheffield in these lines? [10 marks]

SHEFFIELD

The passage printed below was written by George Orwell in 1937 after he visited the industrial north of England.

Sheffield, I suppose, could justly claim to be called the ugliest town in the world. Its inhabitants, who want it to be pre-eminent in everything, very likely do make that claim for it. It has a population of half a million and it contains fewer decent buildings than the average East Anglian village of five hundred. And the stench! If at rare moments you stop smelling sulphur it is because you have begun smelling gas. Even the shallow river that runs through the town is usually bright yellow with some chemical or other. Once I halted in the street and counted the factory chimneys I could see; there were thirty-three of them, but there would have been far more if the air had not been obscured by smoke. One scene especially lingers in my mind. A frightful patch of waste ground (somehow, up there, a patch of waste ground attains a squalor that would be impossible even in London) trampled bare of grass and littered with newspapers and old saucepans. To the right an isolated row of gaunt four-roomed houses, dark red, blackened by smoke. To the left an interminable vista of factory chimneys, chimney beyond chimney, fading away into a dim blackish haze. Behind me a railway embankment made of the slag from furnaces. In front, across the patch of waste ground, a building of red and yellow brick, with the sign 'Thomas Grocock, Haulage Contractor'. At night, when you cannot see the hideous shapes of the houses and the blackness of everything, a town like Sheffield assumes a kind of sinister magnificence. Sometimes the drifts of smoke are rosy with sulphur, and serrated flames, like circular saws, squeeze themselves out of the factory chimneys. Through the open doors of the foundries you see fiery serpents of iron being hauled to and fro by redlit boys, and you hear the whiz and thump of steam hammers and the scream of the iron under the blow.

I do not believe that there is anything inherently or unavoidably ugly about industrialism. A factory or even a gasworks is not obliged of its own nature to be ugly, any more than a palace or a dog-kennel or a cathedral. It all depends on the architectural tradition of the period. The industrial towns of the North are ugly because they happen to have been built at a time when modern methods of steel-construction and smoke-abatement were unknown, and when everyone was too busy making money to think about anything else. They go on being ugly largely because the Northerners have got used to that kind of thing and do not notice it. Many of the people in Sheffield, or Manchester, if they smelled the air along the Cornish cliffs would probably declare that it had no taste in it. But since the war, industry has tended to shift southward and in doing so has grown almost attractive. The typical post-war factory is not a gaunt barrack or an awful chaos of blackness and belching chimneys; it is a glittering white structure of concrete, glass and steel, surrounded by green lawns and beds of tulips. Look at the factories you pass as you travel out of London. They may not be aesthetic triumphs, but certainly they are not ugly in the same way as the Sheffield gasworks.

Q: What impressions do you get of Ambreen Sadiq? [10 marks]

Ambreen Sadiq, Muslim Girl Boxer, aims to combat prejudice to succeed in the ring

Ruth Gledhill

Few girls, let alone Muslim girls, can expect to pick up a pair of boxing gloves and go out fighting. But Ambreen Sadiq, a 15-year-old schoolgirl from Bradford, has overcome opposition from her community to win her latest fight, and is aiming for the 2012 Olympics, having already attended one training session with the England squad. Hailed as a 'pioneer' by the Amateur Boxing Association, Ambreen has already won the national female championship for her age and weight.

She first became involved with the sport three years ago when she accompanied her brother to a local boxing club, and has now been nominated in the female category of the Junior Sports Personality of the Year at this year's British Asian Sports Awards. Her coach, Naz Jalil, said, "I think it's brilliant that one of my pupils has been selected. You get some mixed feedback from the Asian community, but with this being the Asian Sports Awards, there is now an acceptance of what she is doing; it gives her a pat on the back and the support she needs."

He said Ambreen paid no attention to those who disapproved of her boxing for cultural reasons, and she would continue to compete in preparation for June's national championships and work towards competing internationally. "Ambreen is a talented and dedicated boxer, but she's also a strong and determined character and knows she's got the support of her family, friends and coach, and that's all she needs. She doesn't listen to negative comments."

In the ring, Ambreen transforms from a shy Muslim girl in traditional dress to a rapid-fire fighting machine in shorts, vest and ponytail. She admits, though, her culture and religion sometimes make it hard for her. "People go to my mum and dad and say 'Tell your daughter not to box. It's not good. It brings shame to the culture.' When they say stuff like that, I do feel really down. I feel like they should be supporting me and be proud of me. It's what I want to do and I think I'm good at it. It really upsets me and gets to me. I just want to prove them wrong."

A spokesman for the Muslim Council of Britain said, "We would not take a position against this." He did say some Muslim scholars, however, did regard boxing as 'inhumane'. Ayesha Abdeen, vice-chair of the Muslim Women's Sports Foundation, said: "We believe that women should have an opportunity to take part in sport and keep fit and healthy. A Muslim woman boxer I would say is quite rare."

Martin Utley, regional coach for the Amateur Boxing Association, said Ambreen Sadiq was one of the top female boxers in Britain: "There are other Muslim girl boxers but not at this competitive level. She is pioneering as far as Muslim girls are concerned in boxing."

Read lines 1 to 30.

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What impressions do you get of Colum's mother in these lines?

[10 marks]

You must use the text to support your answer.

The narrator of this passage is Colum McCann and he is looking back on his childhood in Ireland.

One of the many things my brother, Corrigan, and I loved about our mother was that she was a fine musician. She kept a small radio on top of the piano in the living room of our house in Dublin and on Sunday afternoons, after scanning through whatever radio stations we could find, she raised the lid of the piano, spread her dress out at the wooden stool and tried to follow the piece of music from memory. Our mother played with a natural touch, even though she suffered from a hand which she had broken many times. We never knew the origin of the break; it was something left in silence. When she finished playing, she would lightly rub the back of her wrist. After all these years I can still sit in the museum of those afternoons and recall the light spilling across the carpet. At times our mother put her arms around us both, and then guided our hands so we could clang down hard on the piano keys. It is not fashionable anymore, I suppose, to have a regard for one's mother in the way my brother and I had then, in the mid-1950s, when the noise outside the window was mostly wind and sea. One looks for the chink in the armour such as the leg of the piano stool shorter than the other or the sadness that would detach us from her, but the truth is we enjoyed each other, all three of us, and never so evidently as those Sundays when the rain fell grey over Dublin and the squalls blew against the window.

Our father, a physicist, had left us years before. A cheque, postmarked in London, arrived through the letter box once a week. Never a note, just a cheque which spun in the air as it fell. We ran to bring it to our mother. She slipped the envelope under a flowerpot on the kitchen windowsill and the next day it was gone. Nothing was ever said.

The only other sign of our father was a wardrobe full of old suits in our mother's bedroom. Our mother found us one afternoon, dressed in his grey suits with the sleeves rolled up and the trousers held up by elastic bands. We were marching round when she came in and froze in the doorway, the room so quiet we could hear the radiator tick.

'Well,' she said, as she knelt on the ground in front of us. Her face spread out in a grin that seemed to pain her. 'Come here.' She kissed us both on the cheek. 'Now run along.' We slipped out of our father's old clothes and left them in a puddle on the floor. Later that night we heard the clang of the coat hangers as she hung the suits.

Over the years there were the usual tantrums and bloody noses and our mother had to deal with the whispers of the neighbours, sometimes even the attentions of the local widowers but for the most part things stretched comfortably in front of us.