

TRANSCRIPTS OF THREE SEPARATE INTERVIEWS WITH CONTRIBUTOR
RHODA HARRIS FOR STARTLING TRUTHS OF OLD WORLD SPARROWS

P: Pauline (Harris– Producer/Director)

R: Rhoda Harris – (Contributor)

FIRST INTERVIEW

P: Alright then, so could you just start by saying what your full name is and how old you are and when your birthday is -

R: Hello, my name is Rhoda Claire Harris and I was born on the 30/11/32 and on Friday, next Friday, I will be 80.

P: And how do you feel about that?

R: Well I'm not so thrilled about it because you know, when you get to 80 you're on the last lap aren't you?

I'm lucky but then at the same time I'm pissed off. I'd rather be 60 and I feel quite envious when I look round at all younger people. And I get upset when I look at my great-grandchildren who are 7 and 3... and I think I'm not going to know them for very much longer. And that's sad. Of course I may well live to be 90 or 100 but with the medical conditions I've got that's unlikely.

P: You just don't seem to... OK, and then what else have you got wrong with you?

R: Oh, I've got fluid behind my eyes, which means, erm, once a month I have, erm, a hypodermic needle in each eye, which is very uncomfortable and very sore but I'm so lucky to have it because if it wasn't available I would be blind in a few months. So it's worth the pain and it's worth the fear that you get. You've got to get on with it.

P: And what is... Can you describe a bit of that fear? How you feel about these needles in your eyes every month?

R: I – I dread going because I know that, er, it is going to be very painful afterwards and the thought of laying down there having hypodermic needles in your eyes give you a tummy-churning feeling. But as I've said it's well worth it. It's better than the alternative, and this treatment's only been available for 8 years. So... I'm fortunate. I'm still sick about having it done.

P: Mmmm

R: I'm sick that I've got it. I'm sick that I've got everything wrong with me that I've got.

P: What else have you got wrong?

R: I've got arthritis in my knee, I've got arthritis in my back, I've got a peculiar, very horrible pain in my left calf that nobody seems to know anything about and I can't walk on it for very long, even though my loving family think that I should walk on it more to get it better. They don't know how sick I feel after about 20 minutes.

P: Why do you think you take a sleeping pill every night?

R: Because I started taking it when I first got trouble sleeping when I was underactive (thyroid). And unfortunately them

R: Soaps.

P: Tell me why you love the soaps.

R: Because I've watched them since they started in 1960. And I suppose they get addictive. And because I know every character so well in them... And sometime they're very annoying because the scripts aren't very good. And... I like Deal or No Deal, I like Pointless. I love Newsnight. I watch Question Time, which I wish was on more than once a week. And that's about it.

P: That's fine and what do you love about your crime novels? Because you love— Do you want to say what crime novels you read?

R: Well, unfortunately, the crime novel authors don't write quick enough. I love John Sandford – he doesn't write enough books. One a year. Mark Billingham's the same – one a year. Karen Slaughter – one a year. Lee Child

P: OK. Sorry for this but I'm just going to go back to this aneurism, talk a bit more about the aneurism. Because how do you... What does it feel like that's inside you?

R: An unexploded bomb. I'm not religious in the fact that I never go to church but I can't tell you the number of times I've prayed. It never goes away. You never stop thinking about it: when your children come home at the weekend you pray 'don't let it happen now'; when your granddaughter comes on a Wednesday 'please don't let it happen now'; looking after your great-grandchildren 'please God don't let it happen now'. And it's there. It's with you – it never leaves you.

P: And the reason the surgeon won't operate; can you just explain that a little bit more? Because of the position, and you've only got one kidney and all of that. Would that be OK?

R: Oh...

P: I'm sorry that you're getting a bit upset now. Because you don't like talking about it, do you?

R: Not really...

P: Do you want to say why you don't like talking about it?

R: Because nobody wants to die and I feel quite frightened. And I'm not certain there is an afterlife. And that's it. Everything will go on and that'll be the end of it. You just won't exist anymore. And I could take the chance. He's told me 50:50 but I don't believe it's 50:50 I think it's even less than that.

P: Why won't he operate? He's advising not to operate, isn't he?

R: Because I've got one kidney, because he think that he'd have to remove the kidney. He'd have to cut it off for such a long time that it wouldn't work properly,

which would mean dialysis every day, which I wouldn't want to do but I would rather have that than dying. And various other organs would have to be cut off. Erm... but the main thing is the anaesthetic; at 80 years old, an 11 hour operation is quite a long time to have an anaesthetic. So these are the things, you know, but there's always a chance but it's taking that chance. What do you do?

P: Thank you so much for all of that ... What's the hardest thing now, about approaching 80?

R: Frightened of dying.

R: Yes, I've... I... I think it's among the guilt that you get because I thought you know, well we're all sat round the bed and I'm celebrating an age that she would never

R: I mean I had a baby boy who died when he was 3 days old and I didn't even hold him because he'd been, he'd been slightly injured at birth and they wanted to cot nurse him for 3 days.

P: What year was that?

R: 1956. And, um, it's ridiculous but I didn't start grieving for that little boy until Carol died – why? Why? I was just so glad to have another baby and eventually have 4 babies. And I never even gave the little boy much thought and then Carol died – and it's strange how your mind works.

P: This is a hard question but if you... Sorry... Could you describe what it's like as a mother to lose a child?

R: It's the worst thing that can happen to you. Its – I've had operations, I've had... You have worry right from your baby being born. Every time your child's ill you worry, you feel frightened that something's going to happen to them. When they get of age to drive a car you're scared to death that they'll have an accident. But when that child dies... Life is never, ever, ever the same. Ever.

P: I didn't want it to get so depressing so quickly for us but, I mean, if there was a fondest memory... Is that, is that hard?

R: Fondest memory of Carol? Well because she was the only daughter I had in

P: You were 10?

R: I was 10 when she died.

P: And she used to...? What was her job?

R: Well she didn't... Poor love she was a single mum and so she used to leave work, rush home, have her dinn

P: What's the good things about being older do you think?

R: I can't think of one thing. I cannot think of one thing. Maybe it's nice that you retire and you don't have to go to work. But there's so many things that you can't do.

P: Like what?

R: Well because of my medical problems I've got to rely on whoever comes home at the weekend to Hoover the house for me and I hate it. I hate that.

P: Do you want to talk a bit about your mobility? Because you're walking's not... when you were in your 70s you were cycling weren't you?

P: Ten of us?

R: Ten of us.

P: You're going to go to bingo?

R: And then we'll come home. And then on Sunday we will go to a very nice pub and we'll all enjoy a lovely Sunday lunch. And that's it, that'll be the weekend. And we'll come home and the girls will go back. Oh on the Monday morning I will be going to have the two eyes injected, which will be a bit of a downer, thinking about it on the weekend, but it's just one of those things that can't be helped. And then, hopefully, I'll look forward to being 81.

P: Are you a bit frightened that you won't reach 81?

R: I'm a bit frightened that I won't reach tomorrow.

P: Do you live every day in fear?

R: Yes. I live because of the aneurism... You're always, unfortunately, in fear. And I don't mean that I go round weeping and wailing; I go round trying to enjoy things and look forward to it but it's always at the back of your mind. It won't go away. It's there.

P: What's it like?

R: Anybody that's felt fear will know what fear is. It's fear. You're frightened. You don't know what it's like when an aneurism bursts, what's going to happen, you know. Where's the blood going to go? How are you going to feel? Is it quick? No... No.. It's a damn nuisance and I'm quite pissed off about it. As I've said many times, if I didn't

P: So when you were younger you had unhappy moments? And did you feel like you were stuck in a—

R: Y

R: No I'm not going to have a whiskey on my birthday.

P: Did you think that you'd live to the age of 80?

R: I had a feeling I'd live to be 100. B

R: Well yeah I think you will because I did mention once that I think I made the biggest mistake of my life. I think I met somebody... Oh years before my husband died. He was also a fire officer who was very, very interested in me and I didn't even know he existed and he was very kind at my husband's funeral. He arranged it and everything and it was probably a few weeks after he rang up and I, and I was quite rude to him and I think maybe now... I don't know. Maybe not a romance but we could've, I could've kept friendly with him.

P: So when I'm talking about romance you're thinking about this man from 1987?

R: Yes, I would love to meet this man again, not for any other reason but really just to apologise to him. That's bothered me just lately.

P: I think it's more than that though, isn't it? Because when I asked you about romance you— ?

R: Yes I've— I've got this feeling...— I don't know why I've started thinking about him. God knows. He's probably dead for all I know. But it would be nice to meet him again. I had this fantasy that maybe we might bump into each other, and we might meet... I don't know, I don't think it'll happen.

P: And if you did meet up again, what would you like to do? Would you like to go out with him?

R: Yes I would, er...

P: Do you ever when you're out, do you notice a man that's good looking or/?

R: /No. No.

R: Oh when I look in the mirror I'm very critical, of course I'm critical. My god when I look at pictures when I was 40 and 50, I realise I'm not any, not much now to look at.

P: You are, you're very attractive. But what is it you don't like at old age when you see...?

R: Tiredness. Tiredness is the worst in my life. I find things an effort just lately.

P: Tell me about a typical day then, before we finish. So tomorrow/

R: /A typical day is like— When you're old you wake up early. I don't know why but you do. I'll have a cup of coffee and a cigarette and I'll go down and have a – oh I'll take my 4 tablets, that's the first thing I do when I wake up – take my 4 tablets, go downstairs and um, make porridge, put BBC News on, come back to bed, read for an hour, snuggle down and sometimes go to sleep or just doze for about an hour. I like to be up and er, showered before – well, I tape a programme and I watch it later on – I tape Bargain Hunt.

P: Pardon?

R: I tape a programme called Bargain Hunt and sometimes it's alright and sometimes it's boring but I watch that and I go across the road, I buy a paper, I take it back to bed with me because I have to use a magnifying glass to read the crossword. I read some of the paper with a magnifying glass – that's very irritating. And then I get up do things around the house. And look forward to the TV starting in the evening. Oh after I've made the dinner.

P: After you've made your dinner, what happens then?

R: Er, I watch a little bit of news, I might start watching a programme and then I'm very lucky because if my phone rings it'll be either one of my 2 daughters or it might be my granddaughter. Um... occasionally it could be a grandson. I'm very lucky that I've got a very loving family – I really appreciate all of them...

P: But what happens every night? At teatime, after tea? What about Dawn coming round to do your drops?

R: Oh that's right – yes – I have a very good neighbour who comes round – because I cannot put my eye drops in, I've got to have eye drops.

P: For?

R: Glaucoma. That's another little thing – I'll add it to my punishments you see – glaucoma. And Dawn comes in and puts my eye drops in and we have a little chat,. And that breaks the evening up for half an hour, and then she goes home. And then I watch TV, in between talking on the phone, and then, as I've told you earlier I take my sleeping tablet, trot upstairs and another day's gone. And tomorrow will be just the same, and the day after that. And that's in between all the prayers I give up to

say 'please god' – for somebody that never goes to church, and is not really sure about the afterlife – I do pray to a man called God. Please don't let it, please don't let it burst today.

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the girls and their boyfriends. And then I met my husband and, unfortunately, he didn't dance. That is life – that's exactly what I mean – that is life. We stopped going dancing, which was the love of my life. We changed to going to the pictures, which I found... alright. But I would've loved to have been married to a dancer. But there you go.

SECOND INTERVIEW

P: Yes, anyway mum... I just wanted to talk about how you feel on the inside. Can you still feel that little girl inside of you?

R: Erm... Well I don't know about feeling a little girl inside of me. I... I can go back to memories of that little girl and when I do go back to memories of that little girl, they're not happy memories unfortunately. There's sad memories, erm... because I th- I think at the time I was probably quite a happy child. I was never smacked. I was never treated badly. I had a mother who I adored and I think she adored me. But you know, when she died we were very, very, very poor. Very poor. That was before 1948. And my Grandma did her best... but she never kissed me or cuddled me. In fact she said to me once she would love me a lot more if I was a boy. That was because her daughter had gotten pregnant and wasn't married, and she was terrified that I'd bring the shame on her. And er... So when I look back it's... There are a few happy memories but there's a lot of sadness.

P: You can never feel like that little girl?

R: I never feel like that little girl. Only if I do feel like that little girl, it's a sadness and I don't *really* want to feel like that little girl. I'd rather feel like myself in my... When I was happy. When I was having children and the children were very small. I loved having babies. I loved...

P: Does she still feel part of you, this little sad girl?

R: Yes, it always will. If I started to think about the little sad girl and all the trauma that I went through as a child and as a teenager I would cry buckets

R: I can remember loads of things but... Ä . q t hnd th me ` ow 94t! ean

P: That's terribly sad isn't it?

R: Yeah but I wasn't sad, I was quite happy in the wood. I had an imaginary friend

P: Aw thank you for that. Anything to sum everything up?

R: Anything to sum everything up? Well... just one little bit of advice, this will probably make people a bit sick but, oh, life is so short, it goes so quickly and it's alright me saying it because I haven't done it, but try not to waste it, try to enjoy it and whatever come up that's not nice, just think, well I'm alive and it will pass. And that's about all, that's all really. Just from an old, silly old lady.

P: You're not silly... at all.

R: Well, silly when you're 80 years old and dreaming of meeting a man she's not seen for 20 years.

P: And what would be the best outcome of all of that?

R: The best outcome would be that we would – not be living together, I don't think we could live together – but that we would meet quite regularly that we would, you know, that we could go out. You know, you do feel a little bit jealous sometimes when you see couples. It would be nice to go and have a coffee. I don't drink now. I haven't drunk for – what? – 27 years. If he drinks I'll be quite happy to go into a pub and have a lemonade. Just being with somebody, having somebody looking at you and thinking that they like being with you, that they enjoyed your company – that they wanted to be with you, that they thought that you were, you know, still attractive – would be absolutely gorgeous.

P: Yeah. Can I ask something about the loneliness?

R: Yeah the loneliness is not good. It's not good. I absolutely dread the snow because I'm so unsteady on my feet that if it snows, that is it. I can't even go out to the shop across the road. Erm, yeah, the loneliness.

P: Can you describe what that feels like? When you feel a bit lonely.

R: How can I put it? It's ok if somebody's coming to see you that day or you're going out, that's ok. It's when you get up and you know that you're not going to see anybody all day long. And, erm, yeah... It's, um... It is lonely but you see... You've got to – you can do two things about loneliness: you can wallow in it, feel sorry for yourself or you can do things you enjoy.....

P: What about these panic attacks?

R: Yes... I used to have a lot more that I have now – I'm pretty good at controlling them now.

P: Can you remember when they started?

R: I think I've had panic attacks since I was born, love. I can remember being – when I was a kid, I used to panic about... Oh! Hundreds of things, hundreds of things. As a

child. Well I'd forget my times tables, so I'd panic like mad all the way to school or, erm... yes lots of things. Or lessons that I didn't enjoy, I used to panic and er...

P: Was this whilst your mum was still alive?

R: No I don't think so. I think it started after my mum died. I can't remember panicking when I had my mum.

P: So you had panic attacks when you were a young kid. What about when you were a teenager, did you have panic attacks then?

R: Oh, I had panic attacks when I was a teenager, I was a hypochondriac. If I heard about anybody having a disease or an ailment I was so sure I'd get them, when I was 16, 18, 20. You see, this is what I'm saying to people, don't waste your life by being stupid. I was a very stupid person... stupid.

P: Well you had a lot of trauma at a very young age.

R: I mean, now I'm older and wiser, which not everybody gets to be. If you're not older and wiser at 80, well then, God help you.

P: Can you remember the panic attacks you had as a young mother.

R: When I was a young mother I didn't have panic attacks. I think having children cured me of panic attacks. But I've had funny turns for the last 80 years (laughs). ... I must admit since Carol died and I found out I'd got a life-

bread and you must soak the bread, so that it's nice and soft – they don't like it unless it's soaked. And I go out and I throw it down and he doesn't move from the fence but the minute I turn round and walk away, I get to the door, because I'm a bit awkward on my legs I can't turn round until I've hooked myself on my doorknob. And there he is eating.

P: But what happens? You've said all the other birds will fly away and it'll stand by your feet.

R: The other birds don't come down when I'm sat out. The sparrow will and when I go back inside the other birds fly down– there's dozens – it's like that Hitchcock film, there's so many birds come down. It's not long before all the bread's gone.

P: So you're sat in this chair and what happens with this bird?

R: Nothing happens – it just sits there, when I'm sat there.

P: And what have you thought, who this bird is?

R: Oh you know, now this is going to freak you out because I think this is a bit silly. I hope and pray that there's an afterlife and if there is an afterlife I wonder if you're asked what you want to be. And I look down at this little sparrow and I say, "Are you Carol?" Of course it doesn't answer. But, you know, I get a lot of comfort from this little creature that comes and stays with me

P: Why do you think it might be Carol?

R: I don't know. I don't know.

P: well, just think about it a little more.

R: No, I can't. I just don't know. You know, I've reached 80 and we've all got to die. And you do hope there is somewhere to go. And if I was then to change into anything I'd definitely change into a bird. Because when you're a bird you can go anywhere. There's all these different places and families.

P: But what about the cats?

R: I know... [laughs] I know...well I wouldn't mind being a bird as long as I didn't meet any cats

P: And what does it feel like feeding these birds?

R: Oh, it's lovely. It's a lovely feeling. They rely on me. They wait. There's houses opposite and quite a lot of birds sit on the rooftops and they sit in a line and I know damn well they're waiting for the bread to come down on my grass. It's a lovely feeling. Especially in the bad weather they love that bread it keeps them really full up.

P: That's really nice isn't it?

R: Ohh it's lovely. They're part of my little family – my birds.

P: This last week there's been bad snow, and I know you've had it before even worse than this–

R: It's not just this last week – it's been two weeks. I have been shut in this house for two weeks. Now two weeks might not... when everybody's up and about and going out and working and doing whatever, two weeks flies by.

P: I just wanted to talk about the feeling when the snow's thick outside and you're stuck inside.

R: Well, you get different thoughts sometimes.. Sometimes I'm just so grateful that I'm in the house I've got all the food in that I need, it's warm. But sometime I can wake up and feel absolutely panic-stricken, with a churning stomach.

P: And what is that fear?

R: And then it goes. The panic goes.

P: I wonder if you could explain that panic a bit more, you've said you get a churning tummy... What else happens – do you get breathless?

R: I just feel... Oh, it's very, very hard Pauline to explain a panicky feeling. It's a panicky feeling of wanting to be anywhere but where you are, be anywhere. Feeling closed in, feeling that you're, you just want to go out and talk to somebody. Meet somebody. You know, a couple of times I've thought of ringing the Samaritans but what do you say? "I feel panicky, can you help me now?" You've got to sort yourself out.

R: No.

P: And, you know before your birthday you were frightened you weren't going to make it to 80, weren't you?

R: Oh yeah. Yes i was frightened. And then I was frightened that I wouldn't make it to Christmas.

P: Yeah, so there's always little milestones

R: And it's so silly because I do tell myself you're just wasting precious days worrying about whether you're going to die the next day, or even that day. It's silly. I have got better just recently. I have got much better – I've wasted four years worrying about something that's not happened. In fact I think it's my New Year's resolution. I never

got the curtains closed and I think “oh my god I’m just so... I’m just so frightened of the feeling of wanting to go out”.

P: The feeling of wanting to go out but not being able to?

R: That’s right, not being able to. You feel trapped.

P: And when you’ve had problems with your phone – what’s that like?

R: Oh, my phone was a nightmare. The phone was such a nightmare. I was having trouble with my phone and stuff for...oh...a good 6 weeks; I mean I had a mobile.

P: But when you couldn’t find the mobile charger, that was quite scary for you wasn’t it?

R: That was terrifying. The phone went off and I couldn’t find the er... the charger to charge my mobile.

P: And it meant what?

R: It meant if I ever became ill – what could I do? I couldn’t let anybody know. I couldn’t ring my neighbour. I was helpless. It was like being shut in a room and not