

REVIEW

## A broken family turns to TV for answers

John Preston

Even though it's a question I vowed to stop asking myself long ago, every so often it still comes rapping at the door. Why do they do it? Why do people reveal their innermost secrets on TV, secrets they'd almost certainly never reveal in front of actual people?

Exhibitionism has plenty to do with it, of course, but sometimes there's more to it than that – and in the case of *We Need to Talk about Dad* (Monday, Channel 4), there was an awful lot more.

If you could get beyond the rotten title, this was a remarkable documentary – one which set out to cast some light on a very dark mystery indeed. "My mum and dad were married for 18 years," announced a 23-year-old man called Henry Johnson at the start. Henry's childhood had been a safe haven and his parents strong, caring protective people. They were so happy that they were referred to as "the Sunday supplement family" by their friends. "And then," he said, "everything changed."

As Henry's mother, Nicky, recalled, she was out in the garden one day when her husband, Nick, blind-folded her. She assumed this was the prelude to a surprise – and in a way it was. Next thing, "he either dropped a rock on my head, or he hit me with a rock." She ended up with her skull fractured in three places and nearly died.

Ever since, Henry – and to a lesser extent his younger brother, Felix – had been trying to find out what had happened and why. Not only had the incident destroyed his relationship with his father, it had made him question everything he'd once taken for granted. "It seems to me that if a man can do something like that, someone I know is gentle... am I capable of that? Is everyone capable of that?"

His father has never been charged with attempted murder. Instead, thanks to his wife's pleas on his behalf, he was found guilty of GBH and spent just five months in prison. Now, he lives in Potsdam in

Germany, seemingly as exiled from himself as he was from everything else – we first saw him as a silhouetted figure standing in an empty flat. He had, he said, been deeply depressed by the death of his – abusive – father shortly before he had attacked his wife, and, "It was as if we were up on this pedestal and I wanted to smash the pedestal." But then he tailed off, as if in acknowledgement of the inadequacy of this, and puzzlement closed in again.

One of the strengths of *We Need to Talk about Dad* was the way in which director Elizabeth Stopford allowed Henry's confusion to

the early 1950s, soon after he had been arrested for homosexuality and forced to take female hormones that left him chemically castrated.

Ed Stoppard was far from obvious casting for Turing – he's not the sort of actor one can readily buy as gay – yet in many respects he was extremely good. While his Turing was more urbane than one might have expected, every so often his Adam's apple reared up and tremors passed through his Desperate Dan jaw, and you caught a glimpse of the turmoil that lay beneath.

Unusually, there wasn't that



**HIDDEN DEMONS** Nicky and Nick Johnson before Nick's attack

shape the film and to drive the narrative, even if ultimately it drove it in a circle. At the end there was no tangible explanation for what had happened; there were only vague pointers. Everyone remained locked in their own spheres of incomprehension. And here, perhaps, was the answer to why they talked so readily to the camera – because they couldn't, or wouldn't, talk to one another.

Now for even more cloaked behaviour and perplexing passion... *Britain's Greatest Codebreaker* (Monday, Channel 4) was a drama/documentary about Alan Turing. At the heart of it was the relationship between Turing (Ed Stoppard) and his psychiatrist, Dr Franz Greenbaum (Henry Goodman). Turing went to see Greenbaum in

much about Turing's breaking of the Enigma Code. Instead, it concentrated on his later work which "gave birth to the computer age". But there were plenty of personal details too, dabs of colour that formed an engagingly mundane counterpoint to Turing's cerebral activities – his visit to a Club Med in Corfu, for instance, or a trip to Blackpool with Greenbaum's family.

One of Greenbaum's daughters recalled how Turing had gone into a fortune-teller's tent and emerged "ashen-faced and with a horrified expression", refusing to reveal what the fortune-teller had told him. A few months later, Turing killed himself by eating a cyanide-injected apple. He didn't leave a note, but then with symbolism like that who needs one?



### DON'T MISS

#### THE BRITISH WOMAN ON DEATH ROW

Channel 4, Monday, 8.00pm

The disturbing story of a British citizen awaiting execution in a Texan jail



#### DIGGING THE GREAT ESCAPE

Channel 4, Monday, 9.00pm

A group of archaeologists, engineers and RAF officers recreate the famous Second World War escape

#### MONEY

BBC Two, Tuesday, 9.00pm

Acclaimed documentary-maker Vanessa Angle begins her new series by exploring the rise of wealth gurus

#### REV

BBC Two, Thursday, 9.00pm

The inner city vicar sets out to learn about the Islamic faith, but ends up in an inter-faith football tournament