

The things though, will remain a problem. The connection between women and clothes surfaces often in these pages, particularly in the unacknowledged testimony of many nineteenth- and twentieth-century women and girls; and it was with the image of a New Look coat that, in 1950, I made my first attempt to understand and symbolize the content of my mother's desire. I think now of all the stories, all the reading, all the dreams that help us to see ourselves in the landscape, and see ourselves watching as well. 'A woman must continually watch herself,' remarked John Berger some years ago.

She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself. Whilst she is walking across a room or whilst she is weeping at the death of her father, she can scarcely avoid envisioning herself walking and weeping.³³

* This book is intended to specify, in historical terms, some of the processes by which we come to step into the landscape, and see ourselves. But the *clothes* we wear there remain a question. Donald Winnicott wrote about the transitional object (those battered teddies and bits of blanket that babies use in the early stages of distinguishing themselves from the world around them) and its usefulness to the young children who adopt it. The transitional object, he wrote, 'must seem to the infant to give warmth, or to move, or to have texture, or to do something that seems to show it has vitality or reality of its own.'³⁴ Like clothes: that we may see ourself better as we stand there and watch; and for our protection.

Part two

Exiles

Kay and Gerda sat looking at the picture-book of animals and birds, when just at that moment the clock in the great church-tower struck five. Kay exclaimed: 'Oh dear! I feel as if something had stabbed my heart! And now I've got something into my eye!' . . . 'I think it's gone!' he said; but it was not gone. It was one of the glass pieces from the mirror, the troll mirror, which you no doubt remember, in which everything great and good that was reflected in it became small and ugly, while everything bad and wicked became more distinct and prominent and every fault was at once noticed. Poor Kay had got one of the fragments right into his heart. It would soon become like a lump of ice. It did not cause him any pain, but it was there.

(Hans Christian Andersen, 'The Snow Queen')

The Weaver's Daughter

. . . Stuff slippers and white cotton stockings,
The lasses they mostly do wear,
With a dimity corduroy petticoat,
It is whiter than snow I declare;
With a fringe or a flounce round the bottom
These lasses they will have beside,
And a sash for to go round their middle
And to tie up in bunches behind.

. . . The servant girls follow the fashions,
As well as the best in the place:
They'll dress up their heads like an owl, boys,
And will think it no shame or disgrace.
They will bind up their heads with fine ribbands,
And a large bag of hair hangs behind;
And when they do walk through the streets, boys,
No peacock can touch them for pride.

('The Lasses' Resolution to Follow the Fashion',
c. 1870, in Roy Palmer,
A Touch on the Times: Songs of Social Change,
1770-1914, Penguin, 1974)

When I was three, before my sister was born, I had a dream.
It remains quite clear across the years, the topography
absolutely plain, so precise in details of dress that I can use
them to place the dream in historical time. We were in a
street, the street so wide and the houses so distant across the
road that it might not have been a street at all; and the

houses lay low with gaps between them, so that the sky filled a large part of the picture. Here, at the front, on this side of the wide road, a woman hurried along, having crossed from the houses behind. The perspective of the dream must have shifted several times, for I saw her once as if from above, moving through a kind of square, or crossing-place, and then again from the fixed point of the dream where I stood watching her, left forefront.

She wore the New Look, a coat of beige gaberdine which fell in two swaying, graceful pleats from her waist at the back (the swaying must have come from very high heels, but I didn't notice her shoes), a hat tipped forward from hair swept up at the back. She hurried, something jerky about her movements, a nervous, agitated walk, glancing round at me as she moved across the foreground. Several times she turned and came some way back towards me, admonishing, shaking her finger.

Encouraging me to follow in this way perhaps, but moving too fast for me to believe that this was what she wanted, she entered a revolving door of dark, polished wood, mahogany and glass, and started to go round and round, looking out at me as she turned. I wish I knew what she was doing, and what she wanted me to do.

In childhood, only the surroundings show, and nothing is explained. Children do not possess a social analysis of what is happening to them, or around them, so the landscape and the pictures it presents have to remain a background, taking on meaning later, from different circumstances. That dream is the past that lies at the heart of my present: it is my interpretative device, the means by which I can tell a story. My understanding of the dream built up in layers over a long period of time. Its strange lowered vista for instance, which now reminds the adult more than anything else of George Herriman's 'Krazy Kat'¹ where buildings disappear and reappear from frame to frame, seems an obvious representation of London in the late forties and early fifties: all the houses had gaps in between because of the bombs, and the

sky came closer to the ground than seemed right. I understood what I had seen in the dream when I learned the words 'gaberdine' and 'mahogany'; and I was born in the year of the New Look, and understood by 1951 and the birth of my sister, that dresses needing twenty yards for a skirt were items as expensive as children – more expensive really, because after 1948 babies came relatively cheap, on tides of free milk and orange juice, but good cloth in any quantity was hard to find for a very long time.

Detail like this provides retrospective labelling; but it is not evidence about a period of historical time. The only *evidence* that the dream offers is the feeling of childhood – all childhoods, probably – the puzzlement of the child watching from the pavement, wondering what's going on, what they, the adults, are up to, what they want from you, and what they expect you to do. It is evidence in this way, because as an area of feeling it is brought forward again and again to shape responses to quite different events. Memory alone cannot resurrect past time, because it is memory itself that shapes it, long after historical time has passed. The dream is not a fixed event of the summer of 1950; it has passed through many stages of use and exploration, and such reinterpretation gives an understanding that the child at the time can't possess: it's only recently that I've come to see who the woman in the New Look coat actually was.

Now, later, I see the time of my childhood as a point between two worlds: an older 'during the War', 'before the War', 'in the Depression', 'then'; and the place we inhabit now. The War was so palpable a presence in the first five years of my life that I still find it hard to believe that I didn't live through it. There were bomb-sites everywhere, prefabs on waste land, most things still on points, my mother tearing up the ration book when meat came off points, over my sister's pram, outside the library in the High Street in the summer of 1951, a gesture that still fills me with the desire to do something so defiant and final; and then looking across

the street at a woman wearing a full-skirted dress, and then down at the forties straight-skirted navy blue suit she was still wearing, and longing, irritatedly, for the New Look; and then at us, the two living barriers to twenty yards of cloth. Back home, she said she'd be able to get it at the side door of the mill; but not here; not with you two . . .

My mother's story was told to me early on, in bits and pieces throughout the fifties, and it wasn't delivered to entertain, like my father's much later stories were, but rather to teach me lessons. There was a child, an eleven-year-old from a farm seven miles south of Coventry, sent off to be a maid-of-all-work in a parsonage in Burnley. She had her tin trunk, and she cried, waiting on the platform with her family seeing her off, for the through train to Manchester. They'd sent her fare, the people in Burnley; 'But think how she felt, such a little girl, she was only eleven, with nothing but her little tin box. Oh, she did cry.' I cry now over accounts of childhoods like this, weeping furtively over the reports of nineteenth-century commissions of inquiry into child labour, abandoning myself to the luxuriance of grief in libraries, tears staining the pages where Mayhew's little watercress girl tells her story. The lesson was, of course, that I must never, ever, cry for myself, for I was a lucky little girl: my tears should be for all the strong, brave women who gave me life. This story, which embodied fierce resentment against the unfairness of things, was carried through seventy years and three generations, and all of them, all the good women, dissolved into the figure of my mother, who was, as she told us, *a good mother*. She didn't go out dancing or drinking (gin, mother's ruin, was often specified. 'Your mother drank gin once,' my father told me years later, with nostalgic regret). She didn't go, as one mother she'd known, in a story of maternal neglect that I remember thinking was over the top at the time, and tie a piece of string round my big toe, dangle it through the window and down the front of the house, so that the drunken mother, returning from her carousing, she could tug at it, wake the child, get the front

door open and send it down the shop for a basin of pie and peas. I still put myself to sleep by thinking about *not* lying on a cold pavement covered with newspapers.

The eleven-year-old who cried on Coventry station hated being a servant. She got out as soon as she could and found work in the weaving sheds – 'she was a good weaver; six looms under her by the time she was sixteen' – married, produced nine children, eight of whom emigrated to the cotton mills of Massachusetts before the First World War, managed, 'never went before the Guardians'.² It was much, much later that I learned from *One Hand Tied Behind Us* that four was the usual number of looms in Lancashire weaving towns.³ Burnley weavers were badly organized over the question of loom supervision, and my great-grandmother had six not because she was a good weaver, but because she was exploited. In 1916, when her daughter Carrie's husband was killed at the Somme, she managed that too, looking after the three-year-old, my mother, so that Carrie could go on working at the mill.

But long before the narrative fell into place, before I could dress the eleven-year-old of my imagination in the clothing of the 1870s, I knew perfectly well what that child had done, and how she had felt. She cried, because tears are cheap; and then she stopped, and got by, because no one gives you anything in this world. What was given to her, passed on to all of us, was a powerful and terrible endurance, the self-destructive defiance of those doing the best they can with what life hands out to them.

From a cotton town, my mother had a heightened awareness of fabric and weave, and I can date events by the clothes I wore as a child, and the material they were made of. Post-War children had few clothes, because of rationing, but not only scarcity, rather names like baratheia, worsted, gaberdine, twill, jersey, lawn . . . fix them in my mind. The dream of the New Look must have taken place during or after the summer of 1950, because in it I wore one of my two summer dresses, one of green, one of blue gingham, which

were made that year and which lasted me, with letting down, until I went to school.

Sometime during 1950, I think before the summer, before the dresses were made, I was taken north to Burnley and into the sheds, where one afternoon my mother visited someone she used to know as a child, now working there. The woman smiled and nodded at me, through the noise that made a surrounding silence. Afterwards, my mother told me that they had to lip-read: they couldn't hear each other speak for the noise of the looms. But I didn't notice the noise. The woman wore high platform-soled black shoes that I still believe I heard click on the bright polished floor as she walked between her looms. Whenever I hear the word 'tending' I always think of that confident attentiveness to the needs of the machines, the control over work that was unceasing, with half a mind and hands engaged, but the looms always demanding attention. When I worked as a primary-school teacher I sometimes retrieved that feeling with a particular clarity, walking between the tables on the hard floor, all the little looms working, but needing my constant adjustment.

The woman wore a dress that seemed very short when I recalled the picture through the next few years: broad shoulders, a straight skirt patterned with black and red flowers that hung the way it did – I know now – because it had some rayon in it. The post-War years were full of women longing for a full skirt and unable to make it. I wanted to walk like that, a short skirt, high heels, bright red lipstick, in charge of all that machinery.

This was the first encounter with the landscape of my mother's past. We came once again, on the last trip I made North before I was nineteen, during the autumn or winter of 1950 when, as I can now work out, my mother was pregnant with my sister. On this particular and first visit of the late spring, the world was still clear. On the edge of the town, it seemed like the top of the street, a little beck ran through some woods, with bluebells growing there, so that

memory can tell that it was May. We paddled in the shallow water; this was the clean water that they used to use for the cotton; it came from another place, where the mills were before there was steam; you could see the gravel clear beneath. We didn't pick the flowers: we left them there for other people to enjoy. She wore her green tweed jacket; it was lucky she didn't have any stockings on otherwise she'd only have had to take them off; she laughed, she smiled: the last time.

At the back of the house, through the yard to the lane, the lavatory was perched over another stream; you could see the water running past if you looked down. In this back lane I played with another child, older than me, she was four: Maureen. She was a Catholic, my grandmother said, but I could play with her, she was a nice little girl, but they weren't like us: you could tell them by their eyes. It was the women who told you about the public world, of work and politics, the details of social distinction. My grandmother's lodger, the man who was to become her third husband when his wife died ten years later, stayed self-effacingly in the background as she explained these things. Anti-Catholicism propelled my mother's placing of herself in a public sphere. A few years later she often repeated the story of Molly, her best friend at school, the priest beckoning to the Catholic child from over the road, furtively passing a betting slip; the strain of the penny collections at church with a dozen mouths to feed at home.

As a teenage worker my mother had broken with a recently established tradition and on leaving school in 1927 didn't go into the sheds. She lied to me though when, at about the age of eight, I asked her what she'd done, and she said she'd worked in an office, done clerical work. Ten years later, on my third and last visit to Burnley and practising the accomplishments of the oral historian, I talked to my grandmother and she, puzzled, told me that Edna had never worked in any office, had in fact been apprenticed to a dry-cleaning firm that did tailoring and mending. On that

same visit, the first since I was four, I found a reference written by the local doctor for my mother who, about 1930, applied for a job as a ward-maid at the local asylum, confirming that she was clean, strong, honest and intelligent. I wept over that, of course, for a world where some people might doubt her – my – cleanliness. I didn't care much about the honesty, and I knew I was strong; but there are people everywhere waiting for you to slip up, to show signs of dirtiness and stupidity, so that they can send you back where you belong.

She didn't finish her apprenticeship – I deduce that, rather than know it – sometime, it must have been 1934, came South, worked in Woolworth's on the Edgware Road, spent the War years in Roehampton, a ward-maid again, in the hospital where they mended fighter pilots' ruined faces. Now I can feel the deliberate vagueness in her accounts of those years: 'When did you meet daddy?' – 'Oh, at a dance, at home.' There were no photographs. Who came to London first? I wish now that I'd asked that question. He worked on the buses when he arrived, showed me a canopy in front of a hotel once, that he'd pulled down on his first solo drive. He was too old to be called up (a lost generation of men who were too young for the first War, too old for the second). There's a photograph of him standing in front of the cabbages he'd grown for victory, wearing his Home Guard uniform. But what did he *do* after his time on the buses, and during the War years? Too late now to find out.

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During the post-War housing shortage my father got an office job with a property company, and the flat to go with it. I was born in March 1947, at the peak of the Bulge, more babies born that month than ever before or after, and carried through the terrible winter of 1946–7. We moved to Streatham Hill in June 1951, to an estate owned by the same company (later to be taken over by Lambeth Council), and a few years after the move my father got what he wanted,

which was to be in charge of the company's boiler maintenance. On his death certificate it says 'heating engineer'.

In the 1950s my mother took in lodgers. Streatham Hill Theatre (now a bingo hall) was on the pre-West End circuit, and we had chorus girls staying with us for weeks at a time. I was woken up in the night sometimes, the spare bed in my room being made up for someone they'd met down the Club, the other lodger's room already occupied. I like the idea of being the daughter of a theatrical landlady, but that enterprise, in fact, provides me with my most startling and problematic memories. The girl from Aberdeen really did say 'Och, no, not on the table!' as my father flattened a bluebottle with his hand, but did he *really* put down a newspaper at the same table to eat his breakfast? I remember it happening, but it's so much like the books that I feel a fraud, a bit-part player in a soft and southern version of *The Road to Wigan Pier*.

I remember incidents like these, I think, because I was about seven, the age at which children start to notice social detail and social distinction, but also more particularly because the long lesson in hatred for my father had begun, and the early stages were in the traditional mode, to be found in the opening chapters of *Sons and Lovers* and Lawrence's description of the inculcated dislike of Mr Morrell, of female loathing for coarse male habits. The newspaper on the table is problematic for me because it was problematic for my mother, a symbol of all she'd hoped to escape and all she'd landed herself in. (It was at this time, I think, that she told me that her own mother, means-tested in the late 1920s, had won the sympathy of the Relieving Officer, who ignored the presence of the saleable piano because she kept a clean house, with a cloth on the table.)

Now, thirty years later, I feel a great regret for the father of my first four years, who took me out and who probably loved me, irresponsibly ('It's alright for him; he doesn't have to look after you'), and I wish I could tell him now, even though he really was a sod, that I'm sorry for the years of

rejection and dislike. But we were forced to choose, early on, which side we belonged to, and children have to come down on the side that brings the food home and gets it on the table. By 1955 I was beginning to hate him – because *he* was to blame, for the lack of money, for my mother's terrible dissatisfaction at the way things were working out.

Changes in the market place, the growth of real income and the proliferation of consumer goods that marked the mid-1950s, were used by my mother to measure out her discontent: there existed a newly expanding and richly endowed material world in which she was denied a place. The new consumer goods came into the house slowly, and we were taught to understand that our material deprivations were due entirely to my father's meanness. We had the first fridge in our section of the street (which he'd got cheap, off the back of a lorry, contacts in the trade) but were very late to acquire a television. I liked the new vacuum cleaner at first, because it meant no longer having to do the stairs with a stiff brush. But in fact it added to my Saturday work because I was expected to clean more with the new machine. Now I enjoy shocking people by telling them how goods were introduced into households under the guise of gifts for children: the fridge in the house of the children we played with over the road was given to the youngest as a birthday present – the last thing an eight-year-old wants. My mother laughed at this, scornfully: the clothes and shoes she gave us as birthday presents were conventional gifts for all post-War children, but the record player also came into the house in this way, as my eleventh birthday present. I wasn't allowed to take it with me when I left, though: it really wasn't mine at all.

What happened at school was my own business, no questions ever asked, no encouragement nor discouragement ever given. It became just the thing I did, like my mother's going out to work. Later, the material conditions for educational success were provided: a table in my room, a pattern of domestic work that allowed homework to be

done. From the earliest time I was expected to be competent: to iron a blouse, scrub a floor, learn to read, pass an exam; and I was. (There was, though, as my sister was to discover later, all hell to pay if you failed.) Indifference to what happened at school was useful: learning is the one untouched area of my life. So in reconstructing the pattern of this neglect, I am surprised to find myself walking up the hill with my mother from school one afternoon. She was smiling a pleased smile, and working things out, I think it must have been 1956, the day she was told that I'd be going into the eleven-plus class and so (because everyone in the class passed the exam) would be going to grammar school. I remember the afternoon because I asked her what class we were; or rather, I asked her if we were middle class, and she was evasive. I answered my own question, said I thought we must be middle class, and reflected very precisely in that moment on my mother's black, waisted coat with the astrakhan collar, and her high-heeled black suede shoes, her lipstick. She looked so much better than the fat, spreading, South London mothers around us, that I thought we had to be middle class.

The coat and the lipstick came from her own work. 'If you want something, you have to go out and work for it. Nobody gives you anything; nothing comes free in this world.' About 1956 or 1957 she got an evening job in one of the espresso bars opening along the High Road, making sandwiches and frying eggs. She saved up enough money to take a manicuring course and in 1958 got her diploma, thus achieving a certified skill for the first time in her forty-five years. When I registered her death I was surprised to find myself giving 'manicurist' as her trade, for the possibility of a trade was something she seemed to have left behind in the North. She always worked in good places, in the West End; the hands she did were in *Vogue* once. She came home with stories and imitations of her 'ladies'. She told me how she 'flung' a sixpenny piece back at a titled woman who'd given it her as a tip: 'If you can't afford any more than that

Madam, I suggest you keep it.' Wonderful! – like tearing up the ration books.

She knew where we stood in relation to this world of privilege and possession, had shown me the place long before, in the bare front bedroom where the health visitor spoke haughtily to her. Many women have stood thus, at the window, looking out, their children watching their exclusion: 'I remember as it were but yesterday,' wrote Samuel Bamford in 1849, 'after one of her visits to the dwelling of that "fine lady"' (his mother's sister, who had gone up in the world):

she divested herself of her wet bonnet, her soaked shoes, and changed her dripping outer garments and stood leaning with her elbow on the window sill, her hand up to her cheek, her eyes looking upon vacancy and the tears trickling over her fingers.⁴

What we learned now, in the early 1960s, through the magazines and anecdotes she brought home, was how the goods of that world of privilege might be appropriated, with the cut and fall of a skirt, a good winter coat, with leather shoes, a certain voice; but above all with clothes, the best boundary between you and a cold world.

It was at this time that her voice changed, and her Lancashire accent began to disappear. Earlier, years before, she'd entertained us in the kitchen by talking really broad, not her natural dialect but a stagey variety that always preceded a rapid shift to music-hall cockney for a rendering of 'She Was Only a Bird in a Gilded Cage':

It's the same the whole world over
Ain't it a bleeding shame
It's the rich what gets the pleasure,
It's the poor what gets the blame.

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We weren't, I now realize by doing the sums, badly off. My father paid the rent, all the bills, gave us our pocket money,

and a fixed sum of seven pounds a week housekeeping money, quite a lot in the late 1950s⁵ went on being handed over every Friday until his death, even when estrangement was obvious, and he was living most of the time with somebody else. My mother must have made quite big money in tips, for the records of her savings, no longer a secret, show quite fabulous sums being stored away in the early 1960s. When she died there was over £40,000 in building-society accounts. Poverty hovered as a belief. It existed in stories of the thirties, in a family history. Even now when a bank statement comes in that shows I'm overdrawn or when the gas bill for the central heating seems enormous, my mind turns to quite inappropriate strategies, like boiling down the ends of soap, and lighting fires with candle ends and spills of screwed up newspaper to save buying wood. I think about these things because they were domestic economies that we practised in the 1950s. We believed we were badly off because we children were expensive items, and all these arrangements had been made for us. 'If it wasn't for you two,' my mother told us, 'I could be off somewhere else.' After going out manicuring she started spending Sunday afternoons in bed, and we couldn't stay in the house or play on the doorstep for fear of disturbing her. The house was full of her terrible tiredness and her terrible resentment; and I knew it was all my fault.

Later, in 1977, after my father's death, we found out that they were never married, that we were illegitimate. In 1934 my father left his wife and two-year-old daughter in the North, and came to London. He and my mother had been together for at least ten years when I was born, and we think now that I was her hostage to fortune, the factor that might persuade him to get a divorce and marry her. But the ploy failed.

Just before my mother's death, playing about with the photographs on the front bedroom mantelpiece, my niece discovered an old photograph under one of me at three. A woman holds a tiny baby. It's the early 1930s, a picture of

the half-sister left behind. But I think I knew about her and her mother long before I looked them both in the face, or heard about their existence, knew that the half-understood adult conversations around me, the two trips to Burnley in 1951, the quarrels about 'her', the litany of 'she', 'she', 'she' from behind closed doors, made up the figure in the New Look coat, hurrying away, wearing the clothes that my mother wanted to wear, angry with me yet nervously inviting me to follow, caught finally in the revolving door. We have proper birth certificates, because my mother must have told a simple lie to the registrar, a discovery about the verisimilitude of documents that worries me a lot as a historian.

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What kind of secret was the illegitimacy? It was a real secret, that is, the product of an agreed silence on the part of two people about a real event (or absence of event), and it was an extremely well-kept secret. Yet it revealed itself at the time. Often, before I found out about it in 1977 and saw the documents, the sense of my childhood that I carried through the years was that people knew something about me, something that was wrong with me, that I didn't know myself. The first dramatic enactment of the idea that I should not embarrass people with my presence came in 1954 when the children we played with in the street suggested that I go to Sunday school with them. It is a measure of the extreme isolation of our childhood that this event took on the status of entering society itself. Tremulous for days, I then stood reluctantly on the doorstep after Sunday dinner when they called for me, clutching the hot, acrid penny that I'd been told I'd need for the collection, saying: they might not want me to come; they won't want me. From inside the house I was told to stop making a fuss and get up the road. It was a High Anglican church. We were given a little book with space for coloured stamps showing scenes from the Gospels that you received for each attendance.

Every stamp cries duty done
Every blank cries shame;
Finish what you have begun
In the Saviour's name

exhorted the book inside the front cover (a familiar message; the first social confirmation of the structures of endurance that the domestic day imparted). I stayed to win many Church of England hymnals.

It wasn't I think, the legal impropriety that I knew about, the illegitimacy; rather I felt the wider disjuncture of our existence, its lack of authorization.

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In 1954 the *Pirates of Penzance* was playing at the Streatham Hill Theatre, and we had one of the baritones as a lodger instead of the usual girls. He was different from them, didn't eat in the kitchen with us, but had my mother bake him potatoes and grate carrots which he ate in the isolation of the dining-room. He converted my mother to Food Reform, and when she made a salad of grated vegetables for Christmas dinner in 1955, my father walked out and I wished he'd taken us with him.

I've talked to other people whose mothers came to natur-opathy in the 1950s, and it's been explained as a way of eating posh for those who didn't know about continental food. I think it did have a lot to do with the status that being different conferred, for in spite of the austerity of our childhood, we believed that we were better than other people, the food we ate being a mark of this, because our mother told us so – so successfully that even now I have to work hard at actually seeing the deprivations. But much more than difference, our diet had to do with the need, wrenched from restricted circumstances, to be in charge of the body. Food Reform promised an end to sickness if certain procedures were followed, a promise that was not, of course, fulfilled. I spent a childhood afraid to fall ill,

because being ill would mean that my mother would have to stay off work and lose money.

But more fundamental than this, I think, a precise costing of our childhood lay behind our eating habits. Brussel sprouts, baked potatoes, grated cheese, the variation of vegetables in the summer, a tin of vegetarian steak pudding on Sundays and a piece of fruit afterwards is a monotonous but healthy diet, and I can't think of many cheaper ways to feed two children and feel you're doing your best for them at the same time. We can't ever have cost very much. She looked at us sometimes, after we'd finished eating. 'Good, Kay, eh?' What I see on her face now is a kind of muted satisfaction; she'd done her best, though her best was limited: not her fault. Children she'd grown up with had died in the 1930s: 'They hadn't enough to eat.'

She brought the food home at night, buying each day's supply when she got off the bus from work. My sister's job was to meet her at the bus-stop with the wheel basket so she didn't have to carry the food up the road. We ate a day's supply at a time, so there was never much in the house overnight except bread for breakfast and the staples that were bought on Saturday. When I started to think about these things I was in a position to interpret this way of living and eating as a variation of the spending patterns of poverty described in Booth's and Rowntree's great surveys at the turn of the century; but now I am sure that it was the cheapness of it that propelled the practice. We were a finely balanced investment, threatening constantly to topple over into the realm of demand and expenditure. I don't think, though, that until we left home we ever cost more to feed and clothe than that seven pounds handed over each week.

Now I see the pattern of our nourishment laid down, like our usefulness, by an old set of rules. At six I was old enough to go on errands, at seven to go further to pay the rent and the rates, go on the long dreary walk to the Co-op for the divi. By eight I was old enough to clean the house and do the weekend shopping. At eleven it was understood that I

washed the breakfast things, lit the fire in the winter and scrubbed the kitchen floor before I started my homework. At fifteen, when I could legally go out to work, I got a Saturday job which paid for my clothes (except my school uniform, which was part of the deal, somehow). I think that until I drop I will clean wherever I happen to be on Saturday morning. I take a furtive and secret pride in the fact that I can do all these things, that I am physically strong, can lift and carry things that defeat other women, wonder with some scorn what it must be like to learn to clean a house when adult, and not to have the ability laid down as part of the growing self. Like going to sleep by contrasting a bed with a pavement, I sometimes find myself thinking that if the worst comes to the worst, I can always earn a living by my hands; I can scrub, clean, cook and sew: all you have in the end is your labour.

I was a better deal than my sister, because I passed the eleven plus, went to grammar school, would get a good job, marry a man who would in her words 'buy me a house and you a house. There's no virtue in poverty.' In the mid-1960s the Sunday colour supplements were full of pictures of student life, and she came to see a university as offering the same arena of advantage as the good job had earlier done. The dreary curtailment of our childhood was, we discovered after my mother's death, the result of the most fantastic saving: for a house, the house that was never bought. When I was about seventeen I learned that V. S. Naipaul had written *A House for Mr Biswas* in Streatham Hill, a few streets away from where we lived. There are interpretations now that ask me to see the house, both the fictional one and the one my mother longed for through the years, as the place of undifferentiated and anonymous desire, to see it standing in her dream as the objects of the fairy-tales do – princesses, golden geese, palaces – made desirable in the story simply because someone wants them.⁶ But for my mother, as for Mr Biswas, the house was valuable in itself because of what it represented of the social world: a place of safety, wealth

and position, a closed door, a final resting place. It was a real dream that dictated the pattern of our days.

It seems now to have been a joyless childhood. There were neighbours who fed us meat and sweets, sorry for us, tea parties we went to that we were never allowed to return. I recall the awful depression of Sunday afternoons, my mother with a migraine in the front bedroom, the house an absolute stillness. But I don't *remember* the oddness; it's a reconstruction. What I remember is what I read, and playing Annie Oakley by myself all summer long in the recreation ground, running up and down the hill in my brown gingham dress, wearing a cowboy hat and carrying a rifle. Saturday-morning pictures confirmed it all: women worked hard, earned their own living; carried guns into the bargain.

The essence of being a good child is taking on the perspective of those who are more powerful than you, and I was good in this way as my sister never was. A house up the road, Sunday afternoon 1958, plates of roast lamb offered. My sister ate, but I refused; not out of sacrifice, nor because I was resisting temptation (I firmly believed that meat would make me ill, as my mother said) but because I understood (though this is the adult's formulation rather than the ten-year-old's) that the price of the meal was condemnation of my mother's oddness, and I wasn't having that. I was a very upright child.

At eight I had my first migraine (I could not please her; I might as well join her; they stopped soon after I left home) and I started to get rapidly and relentlessly short-sighted. I literally stopped seeing for a very long time. It is through the development of symptoms like these, some of them neurotic, that I can site the disasters of our childhood, and read it from an outsider's point of view. I think I passed those years believing that we were unnoticed, *unseen*; but of course we were seen, and the evidence of witnesses was retrievable by memory much later on. In 1956 when the first migraine opened a tunnel of pain one June morning, my little sister developed acute psoriasis. My teacher was worried at my

failing sight, I couldn't see the board by the spring of 1957 and read a book under my desk during arithmetic lessons. Did he send a note to my mother? Surely he must have done; what else could have shaken her conviction that glasses would be bad for me? He said to me the morning after he'd seen her, 'Your mother says you're doing exercises for your eyes; make sure you do them properly.' I thought he was being kind, and he was; but I preserved the voice that I might later hear the disapproval in it. I think they must have used the eleven-plus and the amount of blackboard work it involved as a lever, because I got a pair of glasses before the exam.

That afternoon she walked up the road with me, what had they told her? The next year, standing by my new teacher's desk, now in the eleven-plus class, he showed my book to what must have been a student on teaching practice. 'This one,' he said, 'has an inferiority complex.' I didn't understand, had no dictionary in which to look up the words, but preserved them by my own invented syllabary, rehearsing them, to bring out for much later scrutiny. I must in fact have known that people were watching, being witnesses, for some years later I started to play a game of inviting their comment and disapproval and then withdrawing the spectacle I had placed before their eyes, making them feel ashamed of the pity they had felt. By the time I was fifteen we'd all three of us given up, huddled with tiredness and irritation in the house where my father was only now an intermittent presence. The house was a tip; none of us did any housework any more; broken china wasn't replaced; at meal times my mother, my sister and I shared the last knife between us. Responsible now for my own washing, I scarcely did any, spent the winter changing about the layers of five petticoats I wore to keep warm, top to bottom through the cold months. One morning, asked by the games mistress why I wasn't wearing my school blouse, I said I hadn't been able to find it in the place I'd put it down the night before (not true; I hadn't a clean one), presenting thus a scene of

baroque household disorganization, daring her to disapprove, hoping she would.

Ten years before this, school had taught me to read, and I found out for myself how to do it fast. By the time I was six I read all the time, rapidly and voraciously. You couldn't join the library until you were seven, and before that I read my Hans Christian Andersen from back to front when I'd read it from start to finish. Kay was my name at home, and I knew that Kay, the boy in 'The Snow Queen', was me, who had a lump of ice in her heart. I knew that one day I might be asked to walk on the edge of knives, like the Little Mermaid, and was afraid that I might not be able to bear the pain. Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* was in the old library, a one-volume edition with coloured illustrations for Victorian children, the text pruned to a litany of death by flame. My imagination was furnished with the passionate martyrdom of the Protestant North '... Every blank cries shame; Finish what you have begun, In the Saviour's name.'

I see now the relentless laying down of guilt, and I feel a faint surprise that I must interpret it that way. My sister, younger than me, with children of her own and perhaps thereby with a clearer measure of what we lacked, tells me to recall a mother who never played with us, whose eruptions from irritation into violence were the most terrifying of experiences; and she is there, the figure of nightmares, though I do find it difficult to think about in this way. Such reworking of past time is new, infinitely surprising; and against it I must balance what it felt like then, and the implications of the history given me in small doses; that not being hungry and having a warm bed to lie in at night, I had a good childhood, was better than other people; was a *lucky* little girl.

*

My mother had wanted to marry a king. That was the best of my father's stories, told in the pub in the 1960s, of how difficult it had been to live with her in 1937, during the

Abdication months. Mrs Simpson was no prettier than her, no more clever than her, no better than her. It wasn't fair that a king should give up his throne for her, and not for the weaver's daughter. From a traditional Labour background, my mother rejected the politics of solidarity and communality, always voted Conservative, for the left could not embody her desire for things to be *really* fair, for a full skirt that took twenty yards of cloth, for a half-timbered cottage in the country, for the prince who did not come. For my mother, the time of my childhood was the place where the fairy-tales failed.

A Thin Man

Roll up, roll up, come and see the mermaid,
See the lovely lady, half a woman, half a fish.
In went the lads to show it wasn't swank,
When little Tommy 'Iggins put some whisky in the
tank.

Well, she got frisky, swimmin' in the whisky,
And when she come up for air
She bowed to the audience, gave 'er tail a swish;
'Er tail it come off, and she really looked delish;
She says, 'What d'y'want, lads, a bit o' meat or
fish?'

At the Rawtenstall Annual Fair.

('Rawtenstall Annual Fair', 1932, from Roy
Palmer, *A Ballad History of England*,
Batsford, 1979)

By the time my father could sit down in a pub with me, slightly drunk, tell me and my friends about Real Life, crack a joke about a Pakistani that silenced a whole table once, and talk about the farm labourer's – his grandfather's – journey up from Eye in Suffolk working on the building of the Great North Western Railway, up to Rawtenstall on the Lancashire–Yorkshire border, I was doing history at Sussex, and knew more than he did about the date and timing of journeys like that. My father, old but gritty, glamorous in the eyes of the class of '68, a South London wide boy with an authentic background, described his

grandfather's funeral, about 1912, when a whole other family – wife, children, grandchildren – turned up out of the blue from somewhere further down the line, where they'd been established on the navy's journey north. (This was a circumstance paralleled at his own funeral, when the friends and relations of the woman he'd been living with for part of the week since the early 1960s stole the show from us, the pathetic huddle of the family of his middle years.)

When I look in the mirror, I see her face, but I know in fact that I look more like him. A real Lancashire face. He was a thin man. I knew his height, five foot ten, but he never seemed tall; he shrank in later years to not much above my height. The silhouette of men has changed completely since the 1950s, and it is this above all else that has altered the outlines of city streets; not the shape of the buildings nor the absence of trams and the growing sleekness of cars, but the fact that men no longer wear hats – broad-brimmed felt hats, tipped slightly over one eye. The Sandeman port man loomed on the hoardings outside Hammersmith Broadway station, the first thing I can remember, sitting up in my pram: an exaggeration and extrapolation of how they all looked, huge coat swirling, trousers flapping, the broad-brimmed rakish hat. A consistent point of my mother's propaganda against him was the shoddiness of his dress and the cheapness of his clothes, his awful ties, his refusal to spend money on his appearance, his lack of taste. But memory doesn't detail him like that; rather, a silhouette, a dapper outline.

*

He took me out once to a bluebell wood. My sister had just been born, we were waiting to move to Streatham Hill: spring 1951. I wore one of the two gingham dresses (I can't remember which colour, I can never remember the colour; they are both just the dress, the clothing of dreams). He was to take me out again, but this time in the bluebell wood was really the last time. I had a sister; we were about to

move; his expulsion from the domestic scene about to begin.

It was shaded, a real wood, the sunlight outside beyond the trees, with a fern-covered slope up to the left of the path, the bluebells growing up the slope, and a clearing at the top of that. Up this small incline, and my father started to pick the bluebells from in between the ferns, making a bunch. Did he give me some to hold? I can't remember, except how else to know about their white watery roots, the pale cleanness pulled from the earth? And if he did give me some, what did I do with them in the next few minutes?

The arrival of the forest-keeper was a dramatic eruption on this scene, jarring colour descending on a shady place, a hairy jacket in that strange orange tweed that park-keepers still sometimes wear, plus-fours, brown boots and a pork-pie hat. He was angry with my father, shouted at him: it wasn't allowed. Hadn't he read the notice, there'd be no bluebells left if people pulled them up by the roots. He snatched the bunch from my father's hand, scattered the flowers over the ground and among the ferns, their white roots glimmering, unprotected; and I thought: yes; he doesn't know how to pick bluebells.

My father stood, quite vulnerable in memory now. He was a thin man. I wonder if I remember the waisted and pleated flannel trousers of the early 1950s because in that confrontation he was the loser, feminized, outdone? They made him appear thinner, and because of the way the ground sloped, the forest-keeper, very solid and powerful, was made to appear taller than him. In remembering this scene I always forget, always have to deliberately call to mind the fact that my father retaliated, shouted back; and that we then retreated, made our way back down the path, the tweed man the victor, watching our leaving.

All the charity I possess lies in that moment. Any account that presents its subjects as cold, or shivering or in any way unprotected recalls the precise structure of its feeling. The child who told Henry Mayhew about her life as a seller of

cresses in the winter of 1850 stands on the page clutching her shawl about her thin shoulders as the very aetiology of my pity. And there is a more difficult charity that lies somewhere beneath this structure, partly obscured by figures of the imagination like the little watercress girl: pity for something that at the age of four I knew and did not know about my father (know now, and do not know), something about the roots and their whiteness, and the way in which they had been pulled away, to wither exposed on the bank.

Summer came, and we started to live in the new house. It was June, a hot afternoon out in the garden, which was soon to become a farmyard of hen-houses and duck-ponds made out of old tin baths, but now on this hot day, a couple of weeks after we'd moved from Hammersmith, the perfect and sedate little garden made by the old couple who inhabited the house for forty years. The world went wrong that afternoon: there is evidence: a photograph. My father said 'Smile, Kay,' and I smiled; but it is really the day of my first dislocation. I lie on my stomach on the grass, my baby sister on a rug to my right, just in front of me. I am irritated and depressed because she has come to stay. Things have changed: on removal day I turned on the kitchen tap to fill a cup with water and couldn't turn it off, and the removal man was angry with me: the first time an adult's anger has been directed at me. I remember this now. Somewhere on the grass, beyond the photograph, is an apple that I've been given to cheer me up, but that I refuse to eat. We carry moments like this through a lifetime: things were wrong; there was a dislocation between me and the world; I am not inside myself. And he said 'Smile Kay,' and I smiled: the first deception, the first lie.

*

He had a story about how he left the North, a good story, well told. He'd had a few when he first presented it to me, and listeners from that Christmas meeting of 1967 in the pub remember its inconsistencies above anything else. The

setting for the tale my father tells is the Blackpool Tower ballroom, it's the summer, and Robin Richmond is playing the organ. Which year? My calculation now says it must be 1934, but he doesn't mention dates himself. Is the famous organist introduced to add glamour to the occasion and the telling of it, even though my father affects to despise the sea-side medleys he's playing? Then suddenly Robin Richmond becomes a part of the story. My father implies that he's been carrying on with the organist's woman. Anyway, there's a woman somewhere in the story, a woman to fight over. There is a fight. On the dance floor or in the underground car park? It's unclear; but the story suddenly shifts to the car park anyway, and it's Robin Richmond punching him, and knocking him out; yet the music seems to go on playing.

Someone knocks my father out anyway, and he either gets into, or is pushed inside a car, on to the back seat. He has a lot to sleep off. The story cuts suddenly to South London, to Balham, and Ellis wakes up, not knowing where he is. The drivers of the car have brought him all the way from Blackpool, not realizing he's in the back. It's outside a lodging house, the car; the people are friendly. He eats bacon and eggs, 'looks around a bit', decides he 'likes the look of the place', borrows ten pounds, goes back North to 'collect a few things', coming back down again to the city in which he was to pass the next forty years of his life. He emphasized 'the few things': the phrase meant more than was apparent: one day, secrets might be revealed.

It's a good story, an allegory I think, that covers a plainer tale. Something had gone wrong, he was scared, he had to get out of town. Fifteen years after the telling, long after his death, looking at the suddenly revealed photograph on the bedroom mantelpiece, I found out what it was he'd left behind.

*

Underneath the Hammersmith flat, the flat we left in the

early summer of 1951, was a cellar. It was part of the huge gothic building next door where he worked. It ran underneath our first-floor flat too, but to reach it you had to go down the stairs and out into the street first. Down here, my father kept his tools, and sometime during the year before we moved he started to make me a dolls' house. My mother took me down there to show me work in progress, the bare toy rafters and the little roll of tiled wallpaper for the roof. My father was surprised to see us, and in retrospect it is very odd that we should have made this descent, for later on, his not understanding the conventions of emotional life, like keeping surprises a secret – or preparing any sort of surprise, giving any sort of present – was to be one of the many items on my mother's check-list of his failures.

My mother leant back against a workbench, her hands on its edge behind her. It tipped her body forward, just a little. She leant back; she laughed, she smiled. Ellis stood under the spot of light, a plane in his hand, a smile: a charmer charmed. Years later it becomes quite clear that this was the place where my mother set in motion my father's second seduction. She'd tried with having me, and it hadn't worked. Now, a second and final attempt. By the time he took me to the bluebell wood, my sister was born, and our life was set on its sad course. The scene of seduction remained a mystery for a very long time, an area of puzzlement that failed to illuminate, like the light absorbing the darkness over the workbench. When I consciously thought about the mysteries of their relationship, I used in fact a highly literary set of devices.

My intensest reading of the fairy-tales was during the summer of my seventh year. The feeling of nostalgia and regret for how things actually are was made that June as Gerda in 'The Snow Queen' looked for Kay along the river banks that were eventually to lead to the queen's frozen palace, and she came to the place where the old woman, the witch, made all the rose trees sink into the dark ground so

that Gerda would stay with her, not be reminded by the flowers of Kay, for whom she is searching.

Out the back, outside the room where the child reads the book, there grew a dark red rose with an ecstatic smell. The South London back gardens pressed up against the open window like a sadness in the dusk, and I lay on my bed, and read, and imagined what it was they were doing downstairs. The wireless was playing and I saw this picture: they both sat naked under the whitewood kitchen table, their legs crossed so that you couldn't really see what lay between. Each had a knife, sharp-edged with a broad yet pointed blade, and what they did with the knife, what the grown-ups did, was cut each other, making thin surface wounds like lines drawn with a sharp red pencil, from which the blood poured. In the book the Little Robber Girl whom Gerda has encountered on her journey north

pulled out a long knife from a crevice in the wall and drew it across the reindeer's neck; the poor animal kicked with its legs, and the Robber Girl laughed and then pulled Gerda into bed with her. 'Do you take the knife to bed with you?' asked Gerda, looking somewhat scared at it. 'I always sleep with a knife,' said the Little Robber Girl. 'One never knows what may happen.'

Downstairs I thought, the thin blood falls in sheets from my mother's breasts; she was the most cut, but I knew it was she who did the cutting. I couldn't always see the knife in my father's hand.

In the same book, another girl, another woman – the Little Mermaid – longs to enter the world above the sea from which she is excluded by being what she is: 'More and more she came to love human beings, more and more she wished to be among them. Their world she thought, was far larger than hers.' It is love that will help her enter this world, desire for the prince whom she watches obsessively, as she swims round his ship, night after night. To enter this world of adult sexuality, to gain two legs instead of a fish's tail, she

strikes a bargain with the Sea Witch: she must feel every step as if walking on the edge of knives, and her tongue must be cut out. In pain, dumb and silenced, she makes her sacrifice in vain, for the prince does not love her back; and when the day of his marriage to a mortal dawns, the Little Mermaid must die. Her sisters of the sea offer her the chance of life: by killing the prince and having his warm blood fall on her feet, her legs will join together again, into a fish's tail. But instead she sacrifices herself, flings away the knife, and is dissolved into the foam on the waves.

The fairy-tales always tell the stories that we do not yet know. Often, a few years later, I would long for my mother to get rid of my father, expel him, kill him, make him no more, so that we could lead a proper life. And what I know with hindsight about that summer of the fairy-tales, is that a new drama was in process of enactment. The removal of my father by the birth of my sister (an old, conventional story, every eldest daughter's tale) was being formalized by my mother's warfare against him, a warfare that always stopped short of banishment; and I was to end up ten, indeed twenty years later, believing that my identification was entirely with her, that whilst hating her, I was her; and there was no escape.

The Little Mermaid was not my mother sacrificing herself for a beautiful prince: I knew her sacrifice: it was not composed of love or longing for my father, rather of a fierce resentment against the circumstances that were so indifferent to her. She turns me into the Little Mermaid a few years later, swimming round and round the ship, wondering why I was not wanted, but realizing that of course, it had to be that way: 'How could he do it,' she said, 'leave two nice little girls like you?'

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Our household and the registrar general's socio-economic categories mask a complicated reality. Social class is defined by a father's occupation, and during my childhood we must

have belonged to class III (manual). A heating engineer without any training, he did get inside boilers and mend them, but more often told other men what to do. He was, in effect, a foreman. I think that for my mother, years before in the 1930s, her relationship with him had been a step up, a kind of catch for the weaver's daughter. His parents had once kept a corner sweet shop, and my mother told me when I was about eleven that they'd briefly had a pony and cart before losing it, and the business. She spoke of this vehicle, in which she'd never ridden, with a diffident pride: the little nod of pleased possession. But the pleasure had to be ambiguous now: she was already long engaged in revealing my father's meanness, vulgarity and lack of ambition. When he married in 1926 he gave his trade as traveller for a firm of mill-part manufacturers in York. There's a photograph that looks as if it were taken about this time showing a woollen mill decorated for Christmas, the girls turned towards the camera, their looms still, and standing amongst them one man, my father in a collar and tie, a visitor from the mobile world outside.

If we'd lived within my father's earning power, been uncomplicatedly his children, two meals a day round the kitchen table, parents sharing a bed (and the *car*; in all those years my mother was never driven anywhere in the firm's car) then our household would actually have represented, and represented to its children, the unambiguous position of the upper working class. But it was my mother who defined our class position, and the emotional configurations that follow on such an assessment. What is more, until we were in our thirties, my sister and I continued to believe that she bore the major burden of supporting us. As children we believed that without her we'd go hungry, and the knowledge of how little we cost came very late indeed.

He had nothing to give her in exchange for herself, not even the name that the statute books would allow him to bestow on her (and probably wouldn't have given it to her had he been able). The house was rented, the weekly seven

pounds was payment for us, not a gift to her. She made us out of her own desire, her own ambition, and everything that came her way in the household was a by-product of our presence and her creation of our presence. We were an insurance, a roof over her head, a minimum income. We were her way of both having him and repudiating him. We were the cake that she both had and ate, before he left (though he never really left), and after.

In 1958 I passed the eleven-plus, and in August of that year the uniform I needed for grammar school was the subject of angry debate. He'd been approached for money for the gaberdine mac, the tunic, the shoes, and he had handed some over, but not a lot. The uniform must have been a strain on the seven pounds. The issue, this Saturday afternoon, is the blouses that I will have to wear. I'm wearing a new one anyway, one from Marks & Spencer with blue embroidery round the collar, as I approach him at my mother's persuasion and drag his attention away from the form on telly. He asks why I can't wear the one I've got on. I'm profoundly irritated, outraged at his stupidity; they don't allow it, I say: it's a *rule*.

He did know some rules, but he didn't embody them: they were framed by some distant authority outside himself. For instance: I had become very timid in the years after 1951, often frightened of falling down, of appearing a fool. I disgraced him that summer in the public eye, sitting at the top of the slide on the Common, a queue of impatient children behind me, frozen with fear, quite unable to let go of the sides and slide down. In disgrace I turned round, made my shameful way down the steps again, the children parting in front of me and my father apologizing to the adults with them. He took me home and complained to my mother: there's something wrong with her, a child of five ought not to be frightened; a child of five ought to be able to slide.

He waited for me on the doorstep one time about a year later after he'd sent me down the road for a paper, because a neighbour watching me had said I was walking funny,

looked flat-footed. I had my wellingtons on the wrong feet, it turned out. He knew the social prescriptions that said we ought to be alright, have *nothing wrong* with us – to be able to read, to walk straight – and that he was judged by our performance too.

In the mid-fifties he started to live in the attic, treated the place like a hotel. The firm put a telephone in the house, about 1956, so that he could deal with emergencies about burst boilers in the middle of the night. He came home at six o'clock, collected phone messages, made a mug of tea, washed, went out to his other life. Whilst we were children he always came back, sometimes before midnight. In the attic he read the *Evening Standard*, smoked a cigarette before he went to sleep. I interpret this nightly return as an expression of the ambivalent responsibility that lay in the seven pounds handed over on Friday, as a failure either to desert us or to change the situation he'd put us in: a man serving out his time, the maintenance payments as much a matter of obligation as those imposed in a bastardy order issued by a court of law. My sister says he came back because he didn't want to commit himself anywhere. He was a man of benevolent irresponsibility.

She wouldn't feed him, after about 1958, but he was allowed tea. Every morning in a red tartan dressing-gown he made his own. She must have bought the tea (that we were never permitted to drink) out of the seven pounds. Tea was tea and milk was milk (except for a brief flirtation with goats' milk, at which all the worms turned) but she had some choice over sugar, and refused to buy white poison. There was a long time, about 1960, when he complained every morning about the grittiness and how it made the tea taste. Later, I think he bought his own packets of Tate & Lyle.

We still had lodgers in the 1960s, not the glamorous turn-over of the theatrical years, but sad, long-term men. My father met the newly arrived watch-mender on the stairs and said 'Hello, I'm the other lodger,' and the watch-

mender believed him for days. This incident was remembered, given the status of a joke (our only family joke), an explanatory device, for my father to recall ten years later in the pub, for me and my sister to remember and laugh over after my mother's funeral. Curtailment of activity and exclusion from particular rooms of the house was a rule that my mother put into effect for all those men who handed over payment to her. The watch-mender wasn't allowed to use the bath – she said he was too dirty. This stricture didn't apply, however, to the Indian student who occupied the room before him. My mother explained that Hindus had to wash in running water and that they found us dirty. He had the charm of the exotic for her: anything foreign, over which she could show a classy tolerance, was a route away from her social situation. Later, she was to call herself a Powellite.

On Saturday afternoon the front room became briefly my father's territory. Racing on the telly, bets over the phone to the bookie, mugs of tea, whisky later on. He cleared the room after the football results and when he'd checked his coupon. This usage, I now understand, was his right within the treaty negotiated somehow with my mother. I could have read those rights in other actions, in the way, for instance, if he came home early on a weekday night and found us still in the front room, he'd switch off the lights, and fire and television, and leave us in the dark as he went upstairs to the attic; and in the permanently dismantled electric fire in my room, so that I could only ever burn one bar.

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My father used to say: 'She's a wonderful woman, your mother,' or sometimes 'She's a bloody wonderful mother, Edna is.' When? When I asked him, on her instructions, for something. There was a long campaign, about 1961, to get him to buy a unit to replace the deep porcelain sink in the scullery (he didn't); pressure a few years later to get him to buy a house, and then to make a will. When I hear of passive

resistance, I think of my father. All pleadings were now made through me. I would feel the justice of my mother's cause, raise the matter, usually Saturday lunch times after he got home from work, and before the racing started, plead the case, argue that she worked so hard. He never capitulated; listened; then: 'She's a bloody marvellous mother, your mother.' I can never read this deadly rejoinder, never, however many times I rehearse it, *hear* what it was he was saying. In interpretation it falls this way, then that; I don't know what he meant. It was a statement beyond irony (though it was ironic, in a way I couldn't and wasn't expected to understand: information withheld). He meant it in some way, revealed that he had surrendered to her interpretation of events, was playing the role assigned to him. Sometimes drink was mentioned: 'She doesn't drink, your mother.' I think the stories of maternal neglect brought from pre-War Lancashire expressed a reality that both of them knew about. Much later, he was genuinely shocked when, at twenty-seven, I wrote to my mother and said that I didn't want to see her for a while because she upset me so much. He said then that she'd been a good mother; but he'd forgotten the unassailable irony of fifteen years before.

There were fits and starts in their relationship, so dramatically altered at Christmas 1954. They got together again, the attic temporarily abandoned, about 1961. There were meals together; I remember weeping at Sunday dinner time into a bowl of tinned fruit, the tinned food itself a sure sign that some truce was being enacted. But it didn't last. Once, a dreadful time, the other life invading ours ('There's that woman on the phone again;' 'Why tell me?' 'Who else is there to tell?'), I packed all his things in the suitcases, and put them in the hall. I wanted him to go, for *something to happen*, something to change. I saw the future – work, the journey home, the quick meal, television, tiredness, my mother's life – stretching ahead for ever, like the long streets of South London houses; no end ever to be seen. But he didn't go. Nothing changed.

I still see him in the street, seven years after his death, a man of his generation, an old man at a bus-stop, his clothes hanging in folds; a way of walking. I shall never see my mother in the street in this way; she, myself, walks my dreams.

When he died I spent days foolishly hoping that there would be something for me. I desperately wanted him to give me something. The woman he'd been living with handed over two bottles of elderberry wine that they'd made together out of fruit gathered from the side of the ring road where her flat was. I drank one of them and it gave me the worst hangover of my life.

He left us without anything, never gave us a thing. In the fairy-stories the daughters love their fathers because they are mighty princes, great rulers, and because such absolute power seduces. The modern psychoanalytic myths posit the same plot, old tales are made manifest: secret longings, doors closing along the corridors of the bourgeois household. But daddy, you never knew me like this; you didn't really care, or weren't allowed to care, it comes to the same thing in the end. You shouldn't have left us there, you should have taken me with you. You left me alone; you never laid a hand on me: the iron didn't enter into the soul. You never gave me anything: the lineaments of an unused freedom.