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Germs: A Memoir

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As a child, I loved lists of all sorts, and found that all sorts of things could be listed. I listed the sails on a windjammer, not knowing how they worked, and the names of philosophers, not knowing what they were, and, a particular source of pleasure, the names of royal mistresses and of royal favourites, not knowing how they earned their keep. I listed the flags of the different nations, and their capital cities, and the rivers on which these cities stood. I listed butterflies, and the names of Napoleonic marshals, and shirtmakers in London, in Paris, in Venice. When on a journey I had, as a matter of singular urgency, to list in what became a succession of small red notebooks the names of the places we went through, often with a pencil that went blunt when I needed it most, I learned out of necessity countless ways in which place names could be discovered by a small boy sitting in the back seat of a car, and craning his neck so as to see out of the window. There were the wasp-coloured AA signs, there was the writing over the local post office, there were ancient milestones, and, in many counties, signposts had a finial, cone-shaped or circular, giving the name of the nearest town or village. To grown-ups, or those I met, these clues were unknown, or were so until the war came and they were ostentatiously swept away so as not to give assistance to enemy parachutists, but to a small boy, always in doubt that he had been anywhere unless he could write the name down with a pencil in a notebook, these signs had a value born of desperation. And, of all these lists, the most necessitated – though, even if I could have, I never would have entrusted it to paper – was a catalogue of the various ways in which the unreliability, the incontinence, of the body forced itself on my attention. I memorised the different shapes, and colours, and outlines, sharp or blurred, with which scabs, and bruises, and grazes, can mark the skin, nor was I content until I also had a mental list of the yet more formless stains that shame a child’s underclothing as the secretions of the body spread outwards, and I would try to commit them to memory even as, in the sanctuary of the lavatory, I endeavoured to remove their physical traces.

I was born on 5 May 1923, in a London nursing home, which occupied a house in an early 19th-century square. The square, Torrington Square, was destroyed in the war. One side of it still stands as a terrace, but I do not know whether this includes the house where I was born, even though I know the number of the house, and, if the house still stood, it would not be more than two or three hundred yards from the university department in which I taught for
over thirty years. And, if I add that, for the last twenty of those years, my department was in
the very square, and more or less directly across from the very house, where my mother was
born, and where she lived for the first five or six years of her life, and I never went to look at
the house, it might seem as though my life has had a unity to which I have been indifferent. I
can only say that coincidences are not unity.

My mother was much impressed by coincidences: these and others. She treated coincidence
as a fact of life, and she tended to think of it as the most powerful link that could unite two
lives. She asked me if I didn’t think it a coincidence that someone had been to the same
school as my brother, or that I shared my initials with a friend of hers. She would say to me
sometimes, ‘Do you believe in coincidence?’ meaning, did I accept the importance of
coincidence. If, in later years, I asked her something about the Russian ballet, or about my
father’s life, she was likely to say, ‘That’s a coincidence, for last week I overheard someone
talking about the Russian ballet,’ and she might add, ‘Has the Russian ballet come back into
fashion, because I have a lot of things I could tell people?’ or, ‘That’s a coincidence, I was
thinking about Daddy only today, and you couldn’t have known about that,’ and she might
add, ‘Or could you?’ and these coincidences she then took, and expected me to take, as more
interesting than what I had asked her. Certainly she never gave me the information I asked
for. But she never answered any question that I put to her. She did not like it if one person
talked to another.

From time to time my mother would say how much she would like it if one day I would
arrange for her to visit the house where she was born, which by now belonged to my
university. If her next question was not ‘Why won’t you do this for me?’ she talked of the visit,
now assumed to take place, as though it would be of as great an interest to those who now
worked there as it would be for her. Not that this was a distinction she often made: for she
seldom found a reason for any course of action that was as strong as the interest that others
took in what she might do. She did not want to disappoint the world.

My parents, once married, always lived outside London. This was a decision of my father’s.
Before he married in 1920, he had, from the time he arrived in England from Paris in 1900,
with just one exception, when, during the Great War, as we called it in my childhood, he had
evacuated himself to Aylesbury, always lived in London.

Marriage, he thought, required a change. A family needed fresh air. I paid dearly for this
decision, but it was what he would have thought had he worked in Paris or in Berlin, and,
once I recognised the un-Englishness of the thought, I was willing, at least intermittently, to
forgive him for it. I colluded by trying to think of the roads, and the houses, and the woods
where I grew up as part of some leafy French or German suburb, Neuilly-sur-Seine, or
Wannsee, or Schwabing, where the air is perennially fresh. Where I actually lived was the first
issue over which I asked myself whether reality mattered, or how much.

As to what the decision meant for my father, I do not know. It certainly gave him freedom
from the family for whose sake he had made it. Weekends apart, he dined at home at most eight or nine times a year. Generally he returned from London well after midnight. He rose after a breakfast in bed of stewed apple, toast melba, tea, a glass of hot water and some pills, and left the house briskly at 8.20. His face was delicately shaved, he selected his overcoat with great care, put one arm in the sleeve, shook the coat up onto his shoulders, inserted the other arm, picked up his letters and a newspaper, and ran the short distance from the front door to the waiting car. The only friends he had were friends who came down from London.

That I was born in London came about because my father thought that, at least for a matter as serious as birth, there was no reliable doctor outside London. Indeed it was only for us, us English as he must have thought of us, my mother, my brother and me, that an English doctor would do at all. For himself, until history put a stop to it, he always went to Berlin to see his doctor, and, when his doctor came to London for a few days, my father would take him out to an expensive restaurant, and there order for both of them all the rich food he had travelled several hundred miles to hear himself forbidden. In two other respects, he tried somewhat harder to follow his doctor's orders. Every summer he started a cure at Marienbad, or Carlsbad, or Pau, though he invariably broke it off after a week, and spent the rest of his holiday on the Lido or the Riviera, or at Biarritz. And every morning, he stood on a pair of scales, and, taking out a gold pencil from his dressing-gown pocket, wrote down his weight in fine German numerals, on a pad which was attached to a metal ashtray.

Three years earlier my brother had been born in the same nursing home. He had been breast-fed for a little while. In my case my mother decided not to make the attempt. My birth was in itself uneventful, but I am sure that it caused my father to pine. It was a small death for him, one of a series of which his life came to be constituted. Thus far he had survived, in some measure, the departure of strange women from his life; the Great War; marriage; abandoning London; the frequent company of my mother's mother; the birth of my brother, which also gave him pleasure; and now there was my birth. Other small deaths were to come, from which the big death, with all its terrors, was ultimately to bring relief. Not that my father was austere. I do not think that he willingly denied himself anything, nor would he have thought that there was virtue to doing so. He took a crueller revenge on himself. He converted the luxuries of life into necessities, so that, when they were absent, he missed them, but he took their presence for granted.

Shortly after I was born, I was circumcised. It was done by a rabbi, and with, I was led to believe, a cigar cutter. I was circumcised for health reasons, though there might have been other vestigial reasons. I imagine that my father was circumcised, but I never knew for sure. I do not believe that I ever saw my father naked, even though I often watched him dress in the morning. These levees, to which I was certain to be invited within a day or so of my father's return from one of his frequent trips abroad, when he would lay out at the end of the bed the dozen or so ties he had brought back, were almost the total of the moral education that I received from him. However, from them I learned many things which I value highly. I learned
how to choose a shirt in the morning, I learned how to hold up my socks with garters, I
learned how to use the forefinger of the right hand to make a dimple in the knot of my tie, I
learned how to fold a handkerchief, and to dab it with eau de Cologne before putting it into
my breast pocket, and, above all, I learned that it was only through the meticulous attention
to such rituals that a man could hope to make his body tolerable to the world. But, as to the
body itself, what I learned was strictly limited by the fact that, at a certain moment, my father
invariably turned his back to me, and, manipulating the long tails that shirts had in those
days, passed the back of his shirt between his legs, and so deftly pulled it up towards his
waist, that, by the time he turned round to face me, the lower part of his body was completely
swaddled in linen shirt and silk underwear.

It was another thirty years or so before I came to realise the loss that I, and perhaps both of
us, had suffered through my father’s reticence. We were on holiday in North Wales, where we
had taken for the summer the upper part of a rambling 19th-century castle, and, one late
afternoon, various members of a large and famous Bloomsbury family, children and
grandchildren of the old lady to whom the house belonged, had settled down in deckchairs
under the window where I was trying to write. Some of them had been swimming in the sea,
some reading, one had been writing in pencil in a large notebook, and now they had gathered,
with bottles of white wine standing on the grass between them, and they were settling down
to discuss a member of the family whose arrival had been delayed. Was he a contented
person, or a discontented person? Did he really belong to the town, or to the country? Would
he have been more at home in Tolstoy or in Turgenev? What painter could have done justice
to his appearance? How did he look at his best? On all these matters conflicting views were
expressed, and, when it came to the last question, a dry, shrill voice, coming from a young
man, rose to a peak: ‘I think Dad looks best stark naked.’ There were restrained cries of ‘Oh,
yes, yes,’ and generous applause.

As these words reached me, sitting at my desk and writing a partly confessional work, which I
recognised at the time would never, on one pretext or another, be allowed to see the light of
day, I was made to feel how different my life would have been, what a happier fate my
manuscript at least would have had, had I only been in a position to make that remark, or had
my father, just once, turned to confront me as he was arranging himself within his trousers. I
am not suggesting that my father was emotionally reserved with me. Indeed I never felt him
to be more himself than when, leaning forwards and taking off his spectacles, he tickled my
cheeks with his eyelashes, and gave me what he called ‘butterfly kisses’. With me, he was, I
suspect, more bored than reserved. It was the thought of having, within the dullness of his
own house, exposed to a young boy the vagaries of life, the excitements that awaited him in
later years or in foreign cities, that he found so daunting.

When I was somewhat less than two we moved house, and this house, like the last, my father
rented. The truth was that there were only certain things that my father liked owning. He
liked owning paintings, and, to a somewhat lesser degree, he liked owning books. He liked
owning the things that he turned out of his pockets at night and laid out on the dressing-table. These were the gold pencil, a gold case for a toothpick, a very thin Swiss pocket watch in a shagreen case, which, when pulled open, became a small bedside clock, a special key for opening first-class compartments on the Southern Railway, a silver cigarette lighter, a few carefully folded five-pound notes, printed, as they were in those days, on the finest transparent paper and held in place by a gold clip, some spare coins, and a small pearl tiepin, which smelled permanently of eau de Cologne. My father liked owning suits, and he liked owning ties, in both cases in profusion, and the latter passion he communicated to me, though, in loving ties, I possibly loved the shirtmakers they came from, or at least the names of the shirtmakers, even more. In time I came to believe that, through associating my father’s ties with the labels sewn inside them, I would, when expensive foreigners came down to lunch on a Sunday, be able, by observing how the silk was ribbed, or how the dots were formed, or the precise shape of the knot, to know one of the most important things about them, or the shirtmaker they went to. Another thing my father liked was paying for everyone when he ate out: he liked owning, for a brief while, his own airy portion of a restaurant or a grillroom.

The ‘we’ who took part in this move were my parents, my brother, our nanny, a cook, my mother’s two dogs, one from her days on the stage, a Pomeranian, and another, a Pekingese, and myself. We also had a parlourmaid who was black, which was a rarity in those days, and she was called – to her face, I believe – ‘Black Mary’. It was not till some two or three years after we moved that my father found it necessary to have a chauffeur, and then there was a succession of chauffeurs. One, named Keith, had a spidery handwriting in which he wrote out the weekly accounts of petrol and the hours he had worked, and my father, misreading his name, called him ‘Heath’. It was a sign of the times, either of the prevalence of respect, or of the scarcity of jobs, that the mistake was never pointed out to my father until Keith came to leave us and asked for a reference. He was a pale, sickly young man, with a moustache that was like hair sprouting out of a mole.

The one I knew best was the last, who also stayed the longest: a thickset, sandy-faced man with heavy tortoiseshell spectacles, called Allen, who had a strong temper, which was known to erupt in the early hours of the morning after my father had kept him waiting at the wheel outside a hotel, or on holidays abroad, when crossing some high Alpine pass between one Central European spa and another. A particularly terrible quarrel broke out between Allen and my father on the descent into Innsbruck, while my mother and my brother, sitting in the back of the car, white with tension, clung onto the silk tassels that hung down from the pale wood panels. The year was 1928, and, at that very moment, while they were on their way to Venice, where, as a photograph shows, they would sit on the Lido with the Russian dancers, I was on holiday at Felpham with my nanny, playing on the stony beach with my bucket and spade. I passed that summer playing a game that I had invented, which I called Butchers. To set up the game, I collected into a big pile the largest stones I could find in the immediate vicinity, and the game itself began with my picking up the first stone, holding it up to my eyes,
and turning it over and over until I detected, or pretended to detect, which was a difference the game obscured, a hairline crack running across it. Holding the crack firm in my sights, and keeping my head completely rigid, I reached down with my empty hand, felt for my spade, tipped it on its side so that it was now not a spade but a cleaver, and, raising it a few inches, brought it down on the stone with a quick sharp tap. If all went well, the stone, colluding with my thoughts about it, fell apart along the line I had imposed on it, and revealed a blood-red interior, veined with grey and white. A second blow followed fast on the first, then a third, perhaps a fourth, until the stone was now in many fragments. I repeated this with stone after stone until the original stock was disposed of, and instead there was a pile mostly of red meat, but also of fragments to be rejected. These fragments I had already classified as gristle, as bone, or as fat, and, with deliberate roughness, I grabbed them and hurled them far away onto some imaginary sawdust floor. I was now ready for the last part of the game, in which, lifting my hand high above the blood-red pile, and opening wide the palm of my hand, I half brought it down, half let it fall, in a movement carefully modelled on what I had seen real butchers do, and, as it hit the slivers of meat, it immediately sorted them into the different cuts. In a butcher’s shop, the meat would have been soft to the touch, but, in the game, it was sharp and jagged and cut ferociously, from which it gained an unwanted realism as blood ran out from my hand and stained the stack of cutlets, steaks, chops, kidneys, liver, which I had piled up in front of me. And I must now explain, if it is not already apparent, that I knew the differences between the various cuts of meat in just the way that I knew the differences between the various sails of a windjammer, or the differences between the various philosophers of antiquity: my knowledge stopped at the names. I had not the slightest idea what the cuts of meat looked like, or whereabouts in the animal they came from, and, least of all, how they tasted. The beauty of the game lay in its abstractness, and the mysterious skills it kept alive. Another snapshot in my possession shows that, from time to time, I would look up from my work, and, under a mop of dark hair, stare out past the camera, to where the beach shelved steeply away, and where the sea could be heard crashing down on the shingle, sucking it back into its interior, with what was for me deadly regularity. My bleeding hands broke up the monotony of holiday life.

At about the time when I came of an age to notice novelty, and no longer assumed that the world as I now looked out on it had witnessed all the events recounted in the history books which I was just beginning to devour, the first new thing to break in on my vision was the cinema. At one moment the cinema did not exist, and, the next moment, these generally square buildings were all over. Made of the thin, dark red bricks of the period, they were faced with white stucco grooved to look like stone, which, with great artificiality, introduced the bright look of the seaside into land-locked suburbia. Behind the cinema was the car-park reserved for the patrons – cinema, car-park, patron, all being new words – but soon there were few more familiar, more welcome, sights than the string of small coloured lights looped over the entrance to the car-park, or the two chromium-plated boxes that were screwed to the brickwork of the cinema, through the glass fronts of which, when they were not too dirtied by
the rain, passers-by could make out from the sepia-tinted stills, the high points in the movie that was currently showing: when one of these shots came up in the course of the movie, a low gasp of recognition was involuntarily released into the crowded darkness of the hall. If the film was a western, or a war film, another form of preview, which I loved, was a sand table that would be set out in the foyer of the cinema, re-creating the high sierras and canyons of some unknown land, or the battlefields of Flanders with their water-filled trenches and blasted trees, or the skies above them where fearless aviators were locked in single combat.

In every cinema, a patrons’ book was placed next to the kiosk where tickets were sold, and those who signed their names in the book would then receive free a monthly programme, printed in violet ink on shiny paper so that the lettering was always slightly blurred. Each double bill had a page devoted to it, and it was a rule of our family, originating probably from my mother, who liked rules without reason, that only on a Thursday morning, and then with her permission, and under her direct supervision, could the programme be picked up, and the page turned, turned and then very precisely folded back onto itself. When my mother turned the page of the programme, she let out a low hiss. Ordinarily the programme lay on my father’s bedside table, along with the miscellaneous books he brought back from his travels: some Tauchnitz volumes, a work of Freud’s in German, a novel by Joseph Kessel in French. My mother had no need for a bedside table.

Half turning the page, or looking round the corner into the future, was, without some very special excuse, forbidden, and not until I was 14 or 15, by which time I was grappling in my mind with the ideas of Raskolnikov, did it seriously occur to me to breach this rule.

For each film, the programme gave the title, listed the characters and the actors who played them, said whether the film was a U certificate or A certificate, and provided a brief synopsis of the plot. I loved the words *character, cast, plot, synopsis*, and I wanted to learn the precise distinctions that they embodied. I did well with some of these words, but with the last of them I made the least headway. The word itself was obscure, and so were many of the synopses themselves, particularly so when the film was A certificate, or was judged unsuitable for children to see, for the management went on the assumption that the synopsis, though it had to be fair, must be suitable for all to read, with a result that was very far from that intended. Even as I began to read the three or four lines, I fell into a state of dread that I had read, or was just about to read, something that, innocuous enough in itself, would nevertheless inform me, particularly if I allowed my mind to wander, of something that I was not supposed to know about, and, though I had no desire to preserve my innocence, what I did not want was to lose it through someone else, and least of all through someone else’s carelessness or oversight, for then I would inadvertently be tied for ever to the shame from which I desired to escape.

The regime under which I grew up reserved the cinema for two sorts of occasion: winter, and rainy afternoons. Winter came round with its own relentlessness, and it began on the day
when the clothes I had been wearing for the past few months (aertex shirts, khaki shorts, cotton underpants) were, without any discussion, taken out of my chest of drawers and cupboard, and replaced by another lot (Viyella shirts, tweed shorts, woollen combinations) which were stored on shelves of wooden slats surrounding a metal boiler held together by rivets, in a small, steamy room called ‘the airing cupboard’. At first the winter clothes were painfully rough against the skin, the one exception being my balaclava, which, because it was made out of the very coarsest wool, had, on the suggestion of some friend of my parents, been lined with silk. However, one great glory of winter clothes was that, once the sharp smell of mothballs had worn off, they were aromatic, and, as they were laid out first thing in the morning, most powerfully when there was snow outside, they gave off the delicate smell of warmed flannel, which, merging with the smell of eau de Cologne, which illicitly I dabbed myself with as soon as my father left the house, stayed with me all day. The end of winter was left more to chance than its arrival, and it roughly coincided with the sound of the first cuckoo, and, a week or so later, winter and summer clothes were reversed.

Rain, by contrast, was unpredictable, and it remained all my childhood the object of a deep conflict. On the one hand, there was the knowledge that only the sight of rain spitting against the windows, or battling with the wipers as they raced across the windscreen, could convert what was a shadowy promise written in violet ink into the warm reality of the cinema. Entry into this reality was gradual, and it was the richer, the darker, the more deliciously oppressive, for the three or four stages into which it was broken up. First, the car had to be parked. My mother, like many drivers of that period, had some difficulty in ‘backing back’, as it was called, and often I could feel my bladder fill in response to her slowness. Then there was the run across the car-park in wellingtons and a stiff mac, crunching the cinders underfoot as I went, and already feeling that the world in which anything might happen was taking me over. Jumping the puddles, I was a horse leaping a swollen stream as we, the cavalry, moved up into the attack, or I was a steeplechaser taking in its stride a particularly vicious hurdle, or, cut out the horse, and now I was my own awkward self who hadn’t seen the puddle, and waded straight through it, or who had seen it but hadn’t noticed how deep it was, and slammed down, first one foot, then the other, to make the water splash up over the top of my boots. For a minute or so, I became the rough boy I never wanted to be. Next there was the delay as the tickets had to be bought, and the small violet or cherry-coloured pieces of paper curled up through the carefully etched slab of steel that lay just the other side of the ornamental grille, and were torn off and handed to us. Certainty descended, and we progressed through the foyer, up the steps, into the cinema itself, unless there was a necessary detour through the long curtains into the chamber grandiosely marked ‘Gentlemen’. My prayer was always the same: it was that we should arrive just before the lights went down, and the torches of the usherettes, flickering like fireflies in the night, were needed to direct us to our seats. For, once darkness fell, couples who had nowhere else to meet started to find comfort in the warm smell of each other, and, for me to be certain that I could withstand the excitement with which the cinema began to creak, it was best to have
looked on the faces of the audience while they were still distinct under the ceiling lights. Indeed I could see no reason why my mother should not imitate the punctuality that my governess showed every Sunday when she took me to church, and why we should not time our entry to perfection so that we would walk down the aisle at the very moment when the organ, which always gave me a headache if I had to listen to it for any period of time, had stopped, and the organist had taken his bow, and organ and organist had descended into some uncertain depths. If only my mother would co-operate with my wishes, then no sooner would I have been got into my seat, and my mac folded on a neighbouring chair, than the great miraculous event, half sunset, half sunrise, with the intervening night displaced, would start to unfold. The lights dimmed, a hush, like the end of the day, fell on the audience, and the first titles came up on the screen, and they could, just for a moment, be seen on the far side of the gauze curtains, as clear as pebbles through still water. Then, as the curtains slid open, and the gauze was gathered up into pleats, it was as though a light wind had started up before dawn, and made ripples on the surface of the stream, and now, from one second to the next, as fast as that, the lettering became blurred, until the curtains passed across it, and then, one by one, the words again became legible, and the screen took on the unbounded promise of a book first opened.

All this I longed for, but, against this, there was another sight, and the deep-seated dread I had of it. It was that when, at the end of the film, still blinking at the light, still trying to resolve the loyalties that the film had stirred up in me, who was good, who was bad, and, as a separate issue, which side was I on, I would find myself standing by the heavy glass doors that led back to reality, and not only would the rain have stopped, but the sun would have come out. By now the water that had clung to the trees, or that had collected on the lampposts and on the tiled roofs and on the undersides of the gutters, would, at first slowly, but with gathering momentum, have dripped down, and now lay on the road, where the first rays of pale sunlight hit it, so that, looking out, I could see the tarred surface glint and sparkle in the late, departing glory of the evening. To many a natural cause of joy, this sight stirred in me the deepest, darkest melancholy. Local sunlight after rain had, quite unaided, the power, not just to make my spirits drop, many things did that, but to convince me, beyond anything that hope could counter, that life would never again have anything to offer me. Even today, when in actuality the sheen on a bright, wet surface has more or less lost its terrors for me, I have only in imagination to take myself back in years, and I can once again understand the full dismal power that the experience had over me. But my inability to convey this terror to others, like my inability to convey the far worse horror of the smell and sight and touch of newspaper, has sometimes made me feel a mute among mankind. One evening, while I was an undergraduate at Oxford, about the time I first got to know Lord D.C., and he had given me the sense, which I had barely had up till that moment, of how easy it might be to talk to someone, the conversation after dinner turned to the differences between melancholy, and sadness, and nostalgia, and to what Turgenev, and what Jane Austen, and what Hardy, could tell us about these things, and I, after a silence that I had kept for twenty minutes or so,
plucked up my courage to bare my soul to the company around the table, and I said that I knew nothing more melancholy than sun after rain on a suburban road. D., who was my host, turned to look at me, screwing his head around in a very characteristic way, and blurted out his answer in a fast, high-pitched voice. ‘Richard,’ he said, ‘I think I see exactly what you mean, and it’s fascinating, but really I don’t see why "suburban". Aren’t you trying to be too – specific? I don’t see why suburban has anything to do with it. I really don’t think it has.’ At that moment, I believe, though I have not fully appreciated it until now, the certainty that I had had interesting experiences, and that one day I would be able to convey their poignancy in words of great precision, died. Over the years it was to die many deaths, none altogether fatal.

Someone might ask why could I not have wanted the rain to come down enough that I could go to the cinema, but to clear up enough that, the film over, I would look out on dry streets? I convey nothing about my childhood if it is not clear that I could never have formed such a desire, for I always found one thing worse than having too little, and that was having too much. To a superstitious child, which I was, it was like being God. To a young boy unruly with socialism, which I was soon to be, it was like being rich. It handed life over to boredom. The sight that so distressed me brought me closer to the sense of death than anything else that I experienced at that time of my life: closer even than seeing, as I once did, from the front seat of my mother’s car, around six o’clock on a Saturday evening, a man in white flannel trousers, who had been walking home after an energetic game of tennis, and had collapsed just where the road was crossing an expanse of gorse and fern. At the moment we passed, two ambulance men were drawing a sheet over his face. A tennis racquet lay beside him, out of its press, which, I knew, was the final neglect.

Over the years, sunlight after rain on suburban streets has been overtaken as an intimation of mortality by another sight. This is the sight at evening of large orange tail-lights, dipping and rising, rising and falling, as the cars and the taxis, one after another, slowly recede down Park Avenue, bumping over the potholes and the large metal panels, past the expensive apartment blocks and their doormen, past the neon-lit coffee-shops where small elderly ladies in fur capes dine early, past the street-vendors and the stores where cheap cigars are sold, until they eventually disappear into the electric blue of the dusk.

At Lower Halliford, there was a big, rambling hotel, part Tudor, part improvisation out of corrugated iron and ill-fitting panes of glass. It was there that parties of fishermen stayed, and, one stifling August evening, when most likely I was ten or 11, my father, quite uncharacteristically, proposed that we should go there and dine as a family, perhaps to celebrate the unlikely fact that he was in England at that time of the year. I was given a warm bath, I was dressed quickly, and I held out my hands for inspection, turning them over to display my fingernails. The hotel dining-room stuck out into the river on a rickety pier, the mosquitoes buzzed around us, and, as our plates were put before us, my father tapped them
with his hands to see if they had been warmed, and, when the water was poured out, he brought his glass quickly to his lips to see if it was iced. How the meal passed, and who spoke to whom, and the measure of my father’s disappointment, are things I find it impossible to imagine. What followed an hour or so after I had gone to bed was of a kind that punctuated my childhood.

At dinner I had ordered what was at that time my favourite food: a grilled Dover sole on the bone. Whether the fault lay with the fish, or with the way it was cooked, or with the suppressed excitement inside me, I do not know, but, after saying my prayers and sleeping a short while, I woke up. I rushed myself to the bathroom, and there, crouched over the washbasin, I began a long agonising vigil. Hour after hour passed: for much of the time my governess, with whom I shared a bedroom, stayed with me, and once my father came in and cooled my forehead with eau de Cologne. Craning my head forward, I wondered why, knowing that things would be better if I could stick my finger down my throat, I could not do so: was it the love of life, or was it the lure of death, and why could I not achieve the result I desired by merely pretending that my finger had gone as deep down as I could want? I prayed to God, and promised that, in return for a respite from terror, I would give up this, I would give up that. Never again, as the bathwater grew cold, would I tell myself stories about the courts of distant royalty, which had, I noticed, the power to wrinkle the skin on my scrotum.

Some time in the early hours of the morning, I managed, against all odds, to raise my head, and I suddenly caught sight of the moon, and I tried to offer up my stomach, and the dreadful taste of rotting fish in my mouth and around my teeth, and all my feverish thoughts, to this sudden vision of beauty. To see the moon in her entirety, I placed my forehead against a pipe, and rolled it to right and left, so as to catch now this refraction, now that refraction, as the image passed through the pane of fluted glass, and, years later, during and just after the war, in nightclubs, or bottle parties, or small homosexual clubs where my friends took me, I would, in response to frustration, or uncertainty, or fear, get up from the table where we were sitting, excuse myself from the predatory attentions of the cigarette-girl with her beestung lips, and walk falteringly to the lavatory, and there I would rest my forehead against the cream-coloured pipe that brought the water down from the cistern into the lavatory bowl, and slowly rotate my head in that old way, to right and left, from side to side to side. Without benefit of the moon, I sought solace from the cool of the pipe, and from the words of the crooner as they filtered through the flimsy door. On such occasions, a single line of poetry, which had become like a rune for me ever since I first read it at the age of 15, appeared in my head, repeating itself over and over again, night after night, frustration after frustration, lavatory after lavatory. ‘Elle passa sa nuit sainte dans la latrine.’ It has been my companion, this vagabond line, this present from the voyant voyou, for over sixty years.

What happened with the Dover sole repeated itself with every favourite food of childhood. First, I loved it; then there was one occasion too many, and I was sick all night; then the next morning, I had turned equally against the thing, the thought of the thing, and the word for
the thing. The foods were in turn Dover sole; flapjacks; unripe plums, which I preferred to ripe plums; tinned sardines; fried tomatoes; and, most fallen from grace in that I cannot eat them to this day, sweetbreads.

Once a week there were seven ties of my father’s, plus one or two black bow ties, to be taken to the dry-cleaners to be steamed and pressed. I always tried to be the one who gathered up the ties from the stair-rail on which they were set out, so that, running my thumb into the heavy silk of the lining, I could find the name of the shirtmaker from whom they came. For some years I used to think that I would come of age when my ties too were pressed every time I wore them. But, by the age of 11 or 12, I changed my mind on this subject, and for a reason that was to have far-reaching consequences. By this time, I had pored over photographs of poets and avant-garde composers, and I had noticed that they favoured large loose knots, whereas my father instructed me that a well-dressed man, though he tied his tie at its widest part, pulled it as tight as he could, at the same time puckering it in the middle with the help of his index finger, and then slid the knot up so that it concealed the collar button. It was, of course, only if in life I continued to follow my father’s instructions that my ties too would need to be so frequently ironed, and, not only did the photographs I loved tell me not to, but increasingly my deepest wish was to break him too from the habit, even if I had no idea how a flowing knot would look as it swelled under his well-tended double-chin. The reality was that my father had, after all, known poets and avant-garde composers, and, in quarrelling with him, as I did in the early years of adolescence, and bitterly too, I was above all things trying to recall him to a sense of who and what he really was. When I was 16, I found the phrase I needed to describe what my father had turned his back on: it was ‘the buried life’. My father had turned his back on a life he had buried, and, by turning his back on it, he buried it deeper, he buried it from me. I found the phrase in the poetry of Matthew Arnold, which I loved at this stage, and which was one of the few tastes I had that bound me to the ‘official’ culture of the school, and two things made the discovery more poignant. One was that Arnold’s poetry was itself the poetry of a buried life, and the other was that, underneath some exterior that I was starting to form, there was a buried life of my own, another ‘stripling Thames’.

About the age of nine or ten, I looked into a glass-fronted bookcase, and there saw, on the shelf below where my father kept his copies of the German classics, an ancient guidebook in four volumes, dating from the late 18th century, entitled *The Environs of London*. Bound in leather-covered board, the colour of pale creamy fudge, these volumes soon became my favourite reading of a certain sort. I say of a certain sort because, up till then, any book that captured my interest, such as a novel by Scott or Dickens, or by Kingsley or Harrison Ainsworth, or even by the much despised and now completely forgotten Jeffrey Farnol, whose daintiness deeply offended me, I would pick up, and starting on page 1, I would race through it as fast as my eyes could carry me, until some demand, like washing my hands, or getting ready to go out, forced me to put it down, and any other way of reading would have seemed to me to be as bad as, in fact as exactly like, driving through a town or village without catching
its name, hence without being able to write it down, so that I had no way of feeling that I had actually been there. What made for a new sort of reading was to open the book at random, to read one page, and then perhaps the page before that, and then the page before that, or to leap a whole volume ahead and read a batch of pages, sometimes too fast to take any of them in. It was called, I soon learned, 'dipping into' a book, and it seemed not to matter that, when I had to put the book down, I couldn't, on coming back to it, always find where I left off, nor that I often found myself reading the same pages more than once, and with the sense of learning something new.

The reason initially I found *The Environs of London* such a rewarding book to dip into was that every place I had ever gone to on my walks, every place I had ever driven through on the weekends with my father at the wheel, every town or village whose name I had ever seen on a signpost, or read on the front of a bus, or noticed as somewhere shops, or garages, or estate agents had another branch, could boast of its own entry. Each entry had the same structure. It began, immediately after the place name, with a reference to the seat of some baronet, or of Mr so-and-so, a captain in the yeomanry, and it then went on to talk of the village itself, and the agricultural improvements that were under way, and of the tablets that were to be found in the old church, and, if it was a locality of substance, to the coaching inn. Woodcuts, some of them imperfectly printed, and with a great deal of air around the subject, showed parkland, and bridges under construction, and thatched cottages strung along a country road with a woman carrying a child on her shoulder staring, hollow-eyed, at the traffic that never passed. I read all such entries with avidity, and I soon found myself encouraged to daydream about Captain so-and-so's dinner parties, or about meeting the daughter of the house out riding on her pony, or sometimes, when the weather was icy, and I found joy in the way in which the frost loosened my permanent catarrh, about being a ploughman turning the long hard furrow. But soon I found that this invitation to casualness in my reading had another and more disturbing source, and this was the growing sense that, though every place I was reading about shared its name, altered perhaps by a minor difference in spelling, with a place I knew, they could easily not be the same place. So much had happened between then and now that the similarity in name could be no more than a coincidence massively repeated. Time, about which my neighbours in church sang so lustily, carried away, not only its sons, but also its places. It was, in part to acknowledge, in part to ward off, this conclusion that the habit of dipping into, dipping out of, the old guidebooks had its share of appropriateness.

And it was to a somewhat analogous conclusion that I found myself drawn when, now about 12 years old, adolescence pricked me, and I started to explore another, and what might have been expected to be for me a totally inaccessible, section of my father’s books. Inaccessible, for it was only a few years earlier that I had, for about six or nine months, suffered from such an intense fear of heights that I could not walk down stairs, and instead had to be carried down in what soon became, through the intensity of my sobbing, a state of total exhaustion. How was it then that, one early afternoon, I took advantage of the overcast weather, and of
some preoccupying event in another part of the house, and, pulling one of the wooden bar stools that my father had introduced into the house up against his bookshelves, at first cautiously, then less so, hauled myself up until I was half standing on the seat, and my hands were beginning to explore the rock-face of books? An explanation is called for, but all I can say is that I knew that, if only I straightened myself up and continued my ascent, I would find something that would fill a need in my mind, and that it was this knowledge, this need, that drove me forwards.

At first I had to satisfy myself with the books on the right-hand side of the shelf where my fingers were straying. Here were the memoirs of a few dandies of the turn of the century, Frank Harris and Boni de Castellane, and a copy of the commonplace book of the mysterious Comtesse Diane, but it was the books on the left-hand side of the shelf to which destiny was leading me. Slowly I crossed my right hand over my left hand, and, after the first happy encounter, nothing was ever the same again. I recall to this day the promise that a delighted boy made to himself that, whenever he was alone in the house, or could be certain that he would be undisturbed, he would return to these new pleasures.

I kept my promise, and my new discoveries did not disappoint me. Bound in exotic covers, one in the most delicate mauve paper with silver lettering, another in satanic black, another affecting the objectivity of a scientific text, their meaning only partially buried in a foreign language, these books offered me, as I clung to my inadequate footing, waiting for a door to open, or a floorboard to creak, all the stolen pleasures of instruction, and delight, and adventitiously the lure of danger. Two volumes that I took down most frequently, and which gratefully opened at the page at which they had last been shut, were a French translation of the Kama Sutra in a copy given to my father in 1907 by Percy Pitt, a violinist I believe, with copious endnotes by a Docteur Garnier of Marseille, an international authority on degeneracy, who listed with great precision the diseases that followed on each specific form of self-indulgence, and Le Vice et l’amour, a book in bad condition from having been read too often, which left tell-tale stains of black on my hands from the cheaply dyed binding. A work more unapproachable by me, partly through the unbearably coarse illustrations, partly through my almost complete inability to read German, was Sittengeschichte des Weltkrieges by Magnus Hirschfeld, inscribed to my father ‘von Ihren Kurt Weill’, dated September 1934.

If, as I knew, these books were for grown-ups, the question was how this phrase was to be understood, and the understanding I settled for was that grown-ups could read them with impunity because, for them, there was no danger that these books could represent, there was nothing left in the grown-up mind for them to arouse except a detached amusement, something that produced a slow, abstracted smile, and the wafting of a cigarette-holder across the open page, like a censer rocked before the altar of a religion that the world had outgrown. There was, in my imagination, no similarity between the fevered state into which these books threw me and the worldliness with which one of my father’s friends, or, for that matter, my father himself, would turn the pages, each time running his forefinger lightly
down the outer edge of the page. The need out of which I came to devour these books no more entered into this other reading of them than the routine with which my father started to order in a restaurant, first interrogating the waiter whether there had been any special delivery of plovers’ eggs or of white asparagus, and then always settling for the same thing, which, I believe, he had concocted – potted shrimps rolled up in smoked salmon with small triangles of thinly cut brown bread – was motivated by hunger.

Sometimes, when I was engaged in this illicit reading, my whole body shaking, I would try to envisage what my father would say were he to discover me in flagrante delicto. His first reaction would, I knew, be mockery, but I suspected that his second would be to insist that I didn’t understand what I was reading: it was ‘beyond’ me, and I came to the conclusion that there would be more truth to this than he knew. For, if certain words, which he could enunciate with a slow urbanity, precipitated me into a mild delirium, there must be some discrepancy between what they meant to me and what they now meant, which in turn was not what they had once meant, to the grown-up reader. And it was this shift in meaning that in time I came to think of as in every way comparable to the change in reference that, I had already concluded, had overtaken the place names in the 18th-century gazetteer, making it such a poor guide for a curious child trying to get around the paved roads of his suburban world.

As to my mother, one of the strongest memories I have of her is of late afternoon, after riding, or on being collected from school, going with her to a nearby town of some size, where, in the marketplace, behind iron railings, there was an ominous block of dark grey stone on which the kings of Wessex had been anointed: it was said that you could still see the stains where the oil had poured off their heads. We would park outside a small dress shop, which was ahead of its time in that its owner ordered dresses from Paris. I sat on a hard chair, while Suzy, a vivacious woman, thirty or somewhat more, with pretty earrings, and smelling of cigarettes, brought out dress after dress for my mother to try on. Each new dress she held up for inspection, tucking it under her chin, or breaking its fall by draping it from the waist down over the back of a small sofa, and she would say, ‘I think this is going to be perfect for you’, ‘I had you in mind when I got this from the collection’, ‘I’ve been keeping this one back for you’, or, as we came to the end of the line: ‘This, Connie, is you.’ Sometimes my mother rejected a dress out of hand, but, if she didn’t, and tried it on, she was always, when asked whether she liked it, less than fully positive, though to different degrees, and in consequence the dresses were sorted into rejects, probables, possibles, and those which needed to be tried on again. I remember one particular dress vividly, made of very fine, very dark blue cashmere, with a little sprig of daisies woven on it, and underneath the daisies the word ‘marguerite’, spelled with a small ‘m’, had been handstitched in pale blue wool. Every so often, I would pick up a dress out of the pile to which it had been assigned, and examine with great care the stitching, and how the shoulders were cut, and how the buttonholes had been made, in an attempt to see whether an incontrovertible way of reaching a decision could not be thought up. For a
period I wanted to be a dress designer. After an hour or so, my mother had settled for three or four, which she would take home on approval. If in the car my mother did not start to regret one in particular, she would be in high spirits. She would say to me conspiratorially, which I loved: ‘Don’t say anything to Daddy about this.’ She would add, ‘I can never make up my mind,’ and further add: ‘You know me.’ The truth is that I didn’t: but I knew that she couldn’t make up her mind.

Rarely did my mother talk about the one occasion, decisive for me, on which she had made up her mind. When she did, she would say, ‘I could have married many people,’ or: ‘Many people wanted to marry me.’ And then she was likely to add: ‘And I could have done much better for myself.’ It was an odd thing for her to say, since she cared so little about doing well, let alone better. After my father died, leaving precisely £186, she felt that she must find work for herself, and only one test counted: whether what she did would bring her into contact with people who would admire her. Of the various possibilities of marriage that she had foregone, she always returned to the son of the Dutch ambassador, and sometimes she showed me photographs of his house in the Hague, and of his Hispano-Suiza, and of herself in a long fur coat and boots, leaning against the bonnet, and laughing with her large grey eyes. The sticking point, she explained, had always been her mother, and this was where my father won. She could have married only someone who could accept her mother, which my father could. She spoke to her mother on the telephone perhaps twice a day, and they met frequently, but, as I recall things, every conversation, every meeting, was a quarrel, and they quarrelled as two people might who truly hated one another. My father accepted his mother-in-law in that she could come to the house whenever she or my mother wanted, and he paid all her bills. But they found nothing to say to one another.

Until I was thirty or so, I experienced life as traversed by a series of boundaries, which, once crossed, could never be uncrossed, for their passage left an indelible mark: some knowledge was acquired, some experience gained, innocence lost, a new shamelessness entered into.

One summer’s night, sitting in a shabby club in Crawford Street frequented by young burglars and male hustlers, a club of a kind where for many years I felt much at home, I watched two unshaven men play cards on a table laid with newspaper. Their eyes followed one another with deep suspicion, and they looked up only when a young, white-faced girl, fitted out in an overcoat too large for her, drew up a chair, and, putting down a mug of fresh tea on the newspaper, handed over some pound notes. They said something to her, and she, who had looked tense and vulnerable, suddenly let out a loud, coarse laugh. It was her first night ‘on the game’. During the worst days of the war there were young officers whom I had trained with and then lost sight of, and who reappeared in France or Germany, suddenly materialising in a sun-drenched field that stank of dead cows or in a small mud-filled copse where all the branches had been broken by shellfire. By the time I saw them, they had already survived their first patrol, or their first battle. They had a look of greyness around the eyes. They had received, and passed on, orders to kill, and it would never be the same. Or, in my
second term at boarding-school, there was a small, slender boy, endowed with magical prettiness, dimpled, lightly freckled, a Ganymede, who, every evening, as we congregated round the kitchen steps to put in special orders of eggs, would be encouraged by his circle of admirers to masturbate at night. He smiled elusively, someone whispered something in his ear, he seemed not to listen, and then, one Wednesday, the rumour passed round that, for the first time, he had come, and there was boisterous delight among his well-wishers. He had crossed his Rubicon.

In my own case, a painful number of such transitions were connected with the loss of faith, but the earliest, which was different, I experienced in the upstairs lavatory. It was when, for the first time, I was allowed, not just to go to the lavatory alone, but to leave it alone. Up till that moment, I had been required, when I was ready to do so, to get off the lavatory seat, hobble to the door, open it and shout: ‘Ready.’ But, if the sweeper was being used, or worse the hoover, I could not be heard, and, though I felt ignored, I had, as for much of my childhood, my own resources.

My father, who was not a tall man, had legs short for his size, and he had had a footstool made, painted white, with a cork top, to ease the situation. My father sat there and smoked, but, when I sat on the lavatory, and put my legs up on the stool, I was a king, King Canute, or a great prince, though also a bard. The stories I told myself were of tournaments, and of knightly encounters in which the combatants were represented by the tassels at either end of my dressing-gown cord, which I bashed together until the cleaning outside stopped, and help was on its way, and then one of the combatants took off his helmet, and capitulated with honour. Sometimes, not often, I told myself stories of shipwrecks, and other disasters at sea, which tracked more closely the movements of my bowels.

But one evening I was taken by surprise. I was told that I could clean myself, that I would be initiated into the mysteries of how, and that from that time onwards I would be on my own. First, I was asked to observe how the roll of lavatory paper was divided into separate sheets with perforated lines between them. Then I was instructed how to hold the roll, and told that I must first tear off three sheets in one, then fold them so that the fold ran through the middle of the middle sheet, and then I wiped myself. Then I folded that whole piece in two, and wiped myself with it a second time. Then I tore off just two sheets, and folded them along the perforated line, and wiped myself with them. When I tore off two sheets, there was no second folding, no second wiping. I was to go on using just two sheets until I was clean, and I was shown what a clean piece of paper looked like. Then I stood up, and, for the first time in my life, I could take it on myself to pull the chain: it was my decision. If I did, I mustn’t pull too hard, or too gently. I could, if I liked, turn round, and watch the paper go down the lavatory, and in Australia it would rotate the other way.

This small incident was probably the single greatest increase in personal responsibility that my childhood had in store for me. It is what I think of when I hear moral philosophers discuss
My father, Eric Wollheim, was born in Breslau on 13 December 1879, the son of Eugen Wollheim and his wife, who was his first cousin, but whose name I do not know. Indeed I know of the name Eugen only because my father used to recall with such delight that, when he visited St Petersburg before the Great War, he was called Eric Evgenovich.

I knew two facts about my father’s childhood. One was that his family doctor was the doctor of Friedrich Lassalle, the famous socialist and enemy of Marx. The other was that, when he had to walk to school in the bitter cold, he prepared himself by swallowing a mouthful of goose fat, and wrapping a sheet of brown paper across his chest under his shirt. I possess a photograph of my father and his elder brother and his sister, taken in 1884. The two boys have close-cropped hair, they are wearing wide white collars, short double-breasted jackets, dark pleated skirts like kilts and knee-length boots; the girl wears a slightly feminine version of the same clothes. I scarcely ever heard my father talk about his siblings. Just before he died, he decided to correspond with his niece, whose name I remember as Ilse de Neschelski, and who lived in Santiago de Chile.

I never knew what religion he was brought up in, though I believe that he was educated in a Catholic school. At some point after he came to England, it would have seemed to him inevitable that he should behave as a member of its established church. He was married in St James’s, Piccadilly, and sometimes he accompanied me to church. How deep this went was not a question that either of us was disposed to pursue, though for different reasons: I because, though, when I went away to school, I encountered boys who were Jews by religion and were thus, like Roman Catholics, excused from going to Abbey, it was not until very much later that I knew of the Jewish religion as a serious possibility of belief, he because his real views were those which he exposed to me only when, after having insisted that I should have a religious upbringing, he took me, by now 16, out to supper in the restaurant of the Savoy, told me that all religion was folly, asked me if I had read Freud’s *The Future of an Illusion*, and suggested that I should.

As the 1930s deepened, and anti-semitism swept through Central Europe, my father spent a great deal of time and money in getting not only his own family, but friends and acquaintances, out of Germany. At the same time, partly in response to my questions, partly to make his position clear, he insisted that to classify people as Jews had no basis in scientific fact, and that doing so was all but invariably the first step on the way to persecuting them: persecuting them, humiliating them, imprisoning them and – though I don’t remember whether his foresight went as far as this – exterminating them. He held that to classify oneself as a Jew was just as vacuous, just as dangerous. He once recalled an incident in Berlin when, as a young man, he had asked a policeman the way, and the policeman had said: ‘Why should I tell a Jewish dog like you?’

When I was a child, my father preached to me a doctrine of total obedience to one’s parents.
Our first quarrels, which began when I was 14, were about pacifism, and, after one such quarrel, which involved my leaving the Training Corps at school, he sent me a letter, which he had dictated to his secretary, and in which he said that he expected me to write to him, and say ‘Pater peccavi.’ But he also made clear to me that this subservience was required of the young only so long as they lived under the same roof as their parents, and were supported by them. Accordingly, if one wanted freedom, one should aim to leave home as soon as possible. I believe that this was what he did himself. He went to the Gymnasium in Breslau, and then, without going to university, he left Breslau, indeed Germany. I do not know whether the incident with the policeman played any role in his decision.

My father’s first move was to Paris. This was in the very late 1890s. After a childish desire to be a woodcutter, and wear a green jacket with wooden buttons, he formed two ambitions: one to be a lawyer, the other to be a theatrical impresario, and, either through force of circumstance or through choice, he became an impresario, and to this he brought two qualities. He had great natural powers of discrimination – he loved, in no matter what area, to discern fine differences of quality – and he possessed a mind of a distinctly legal cast. In Paris he joined the Marinelli agency, and in 1900 came to England, perhaps to open, certainly to run, their London branch, and this he continued to do until 1911, when he opened an agency in his own name with an office in Charing Cross Road. On arriving in England, he went to live in Brixton, but, by the time the war broke out, he was living in the Adelphi, then one of the glories of London. He once described to me the rooms he occupied, with, over the fireplace, what he referred to as a Fragonard. One Sunday morning, years later, we were walking to the station, and he started to wonder what had happened to the Fragonard, as though he had not thought about it in the intervening decades. He was much like that about things that he had once owned, or thought he had. As he was dying, he started to think about a triangular plot of land high up on the slopes of Montmartre, which he had been given in partial payment of a debt, by his friend Lartigue, the owner of the Café des Ambassadeurs on the Champs-Elysées, who also had a share in the casino at Biarritz.

Around 1905 or 1906, with a recklessness of which I otherwise never saw a trace, he threw up his career, and went off to the South of France to attach himself to one of the most famous courtesans of the period, La Belle Otero. He was in his twenties, she was 11 years older, and I have no conception of their life together, how it began, what it was like, why or when it ended. Was he her lover, was he her homme d’affaires, was he the butler, did he merely stand outside the iron gates to catch a glimpse of the famous dancer as she strolled among the bougainvillea and the myrtle?

My father listed in *Who’s Who in the Theatre* a number of artists he brought to England before the 1914-18 war, either as the deputy of Marinelli, or in his own person: they include Sarah Bernhardt, Madame Réjane, Karsavina, the Zancigs and Leo Fall, as well as the first production of Max Reinhardt’s *Sumurun*. All this was interrupted when the war broke out. My father, who was by this time a naturalised subject, but had been declared medically unfit
to serve, was not safe from the obloquy that fell on everything German. Dachshunds were kicked in the street, and my father, some time later, discovered that he had been reported to the police for signalling to enemy aircraft. Eventually he was asked to be the manager of a theatrical company that would tour the armed forces. It took him through the war, and it played a part in my coming to be.

My mother, Constance Mary Baker, was born on 9 March 1891 in 44 Gordon Square, the illegitimate daughter of William Henry Baker, who had a highly profitable career as a speculative builder of the vast rambling pubs that made late Victorian London a city of palaces, and Augusta Mary French. A few years after my mother was born, my grandfather moved his second establishment to a flat in a mansion block at 4 Cavendish Square, where he had a bath with a shower, a novelty which, according to my mother, he showed off to all the guests who came to dinner. This, and the careful way he arranged a rose in his buttonhole every morning, were the only specific memories she had of him. But she told me that he loved her to the point of idolatry: I know enough about a father’s love for a daughter to believe that.

My grandfather’s death in 1900 was a turning-point in the lives, certainly in the fortunes, of the second Baker family. Six months after his death Baker Brothers sued for bankruptcy. It was the end of the great period of affluence for the London pub and the London pub-owner. Family affairs further deteriorated through my grandmother’s marriage to a man called Dr George Howell, who was a mining engineer and said to be involved in potentially lucrative oil explorations in the Caucasus. Outwardly the model of lower-middle-class respectability, a pillar of Welsh Nonconformity, who played the organ in chapel on Sunday, short, with a bowler hat, pince-nez, a worn dark suit covered in stains, watch-chain and fob, spats, a grey moustache full of spikes, and a constant clearing of the throat, Uncle Pops, as I was expected to call him, was a total rogue: a swindler, a pathological liar, most likely a bigamist who certainly managed to make off with whatever money my grandmother still had left. For the first 16 years of my life, Uncle Pops intermittently lived with my grandmother. It was bad when he left, probably worse when he returned.

In 1909, my mother had money enough left by her father to be sent to a finishing school in Paris, 24 boulevard d’Inkermann, Neuilly, and it was there that she visited her last museum, and did her last reading. My mother would often say to me, ‘I’m not a great reader,’ and sometimes she would say: ‘I’m not really an intellectual.’ The facts that she was referring to were these: that, in Paris, she bought herself copies of Racine, Corneille and Molière. I still possess them, inscribed ‘Connie Baker Paris 1909’. Most of the pages are uncut. After Paris in 1909 my mother, to the best of my knowledge, never read a word. She never opened a book, a newspaper, a woman’s magazine, or anything I ever wrote.

On the completion of finishing school, a family council decided that my mother should become a milliner, and an opening was found for her in an establishment in Paris named Louise, which, rumours say, doubled as a high-class maison de passe patronised by the
Prince of Wales. However, my mother was determined to go on the stage, and she returned to London, and entered the Academy of Dramatic Art, as it then was. She finished her course, she adopted the name Constance Luttrell, which reminded her of the West Country, where both her parents were born, and sometimes induced in her fantasies of noble birth, and she joined the Gaiety Theatre, not as a chorus girl, but as a showgirl, an all-important difference. The outward difference was that chorus girls moved, and showgirls did not; inwardly it was a difference in respectability. Gaiety girls of both sorts were much courted, and much taken out by what were called ‘stage-door Johnnies’, who spent large sums of money, first on bribing the doorman to deliver flowers and a note to the girl of their choice, then, if the note was lucky, on buying the supper that this precipitated. My mother found a supporter, protector, attenuated lover, in the powerful figure of C.B. Cochran, a schoolfriend of Aubrey Beardsley, who ruled the entertainment side of the London theatre for nearly fifty years. Late in life, she told me that she never ‘went all the way’ with Cochran, and asked me, ‘Do you understand?’ as though the secrets of sexuality were known exclusively to a generation that professed to have little use for them.

My mother, by this period, was inclined to turn herself into an actress proper, and her chance came in 1914 when the war broke out, and, through Cochran’s intervention, she was invited to act in a theatrical company that would play to the troops. The arrangement lasted four years.

My parents were married at the beginning of 1920. My mother was a woman of great beauty with strong bones and deep-set eyes. My father was good-looking in the only way that I have really been able to think of men as good-looking: he was well-dressed. They spent their honeymoon at Gleneagles Hotel in Perthshire.

On the eve of her marriage, my mother was told by her uncle of her illegitimacy, and she went to my father, and was prepared to release him from his engagement vows: an idea that my father, who did not even understand her scruples, dismissed as ridiculous. My mother brought as her dowry a dog, her mother and, on and off, her brother, who represented the decline of the Bakers in a striking fashion. Uncle Ted, who was an exciting figure in my early days, almost entirely because he had travelled to so many places, was, as he liked to put it, ‘a rolling stone’. For some reason, he had, at an early age, discarded the name Baker in favour of that of Barrington, though he sometimes returned to Baker, even to Baker-Baker, and sometimes adopted another name, also beginning with B, which I have forgotten. Destined for the navy, he passed out as a midshipman, and early on was involved in a mutiny, in which a cruel captain is said to have been left on a desert island. For this he was obliged to leave the navy, according to one view with, according to another view without, a court-martial, and he joined the merchant navy, where he acquired a knowledge of wireless and telegraphy that was in excess of what was required. He spent many years in the East, and he had tales to tell that sounded as though they were out of Conrad or Lafcadio Hearn, whom he claimed as a friend, and he used to upbraid my father with the narrowness of his cultural horizon. My father regarded him as a disreputable drifter, and avoided speaking to him, even at the luncheon
table. For a number of years, Uncle Ted lived in a single room in Paddington with a fortune-teller named Madame Tsa-Tsa, and his only steady job was to act Father Christmas at Harrods. When he came down to lunch, he would ask my father if he could ‘help’ him with the train-fare back to London. His one long-term plan was to build a motorboat in which he would sail round Britain, being continuously photographed for a tabloid paper. The boat, or some version of it, was built, and, the first day in the water, it sank or caught fire.

My grandmother, when I first remember her, lived on Beulah Hill, Norwood, in half of an early Victorian house, made of creamy grey brick with a large bow-window, and wisteria clinging to the wall. At some moment, Uncle Pops moved in with her, and my grandmother had a nervous breakdown. All her hair fell out, never to grow back, and to recuperate she went to a nursing home at Broadstairs, which my father paid for. I remember being once taken to see her. The nursing home was a large building, painted white with dark tile-hanging, and we sat in the garden, which was high up on the cliffs, and had Devonshire tea with splits and clotted cream and jam. My grandmother was reminiscing about the West Country, when to our horror she swallowed a wasp, which had settled on the jam. The wasp stung her on the back of the tongue, which swelled up, and we were led to believe that her life was in danger, but a doctor, who was on call, came round and injected the tongue, and got rid of the swelling. My grandmother was wearing her new wig, and, on top of it, a hat, which, as far as I can recall, she was, from then on, never without. She was generally dressed in brown, and she wore layers of very loosely knitted cardigan. She carried around with her wherever she went a large tapestry bag with a tortoiseshell clasp, and in it she kept her knitting and her thick wooden knitting-needles. From a very young age, I used to imagine with great vividness the intense pain that I would feel if my testicles were caught in the bag as the clasp closed over it.

When my grandmother left the nursing home, she took a flat at the top of a Victorian house in Surbiton. Occasionally I would go and stay with her overnight, and I used to glorify these visits to myself by pretending that I had run away from home to stay with a poetry-loving aunt. A few years later, while my brother and I were waiting in the car outside the house, he spotted a sinister man at the window, and called him Boris Karloff. Uncle Pops had moved back in, and he stayed with my grandmother until they died within a few weeks of each other just after the war. My grandmother was 86. When my mother came to die in 1983, she was 94. They were a long-lived family.

After my parents married, my father made two decisions. He decided that he and his family would live in suburban Surrey, and he decided that my mother should leave the stage. I believe it to be clear that both were bad decisions.

I have set out the considerations that led my father to choose the suburbs of Surrey, but a more particular reason for the choice of Walton-on-Thames I discovered one Sunday on a walk with my father. As we passed a pair of crumbling lodge gates, and looked down a
straight avenue of bedraggled trees, about a hundred yards long, which led to a copse, above which could be seen a small clock tower, he told me that this was a house he had rented for several years for his parents before the Great War. According to an inscription incised into the lodge gates, the house was called the Wilderness, and it looked like an illustration to one of Maupassant’s short stories about Normandy. His parents must have led a somewhat incomprehensible existence, far from their friends, and not close to their son. They kept horses, and my father came down at weekends, and rode. At the beginning of the war, they went back to Germany: they lived through the war, and the hardships of the postwar period, and died, both of them in the same year I believe, in 1927. My father visited them most years, and once took my brother to see them.

As to the decision that my mother should abandon the stage, there were several possible reasons for this. My father might have feared her failure, he might have feared her success, he might have wanted her at home. Years later, my mother openly resented the decision, and in retrospect it was easy to see that it meant two things for her: it meant that she had to think of new directions into which to channel the enormous energy with which she had been endowed, and it also meant that she had to think of a new way, or new ways, of getting praise. The discharge of energy and praise were the two overwhelming needs of her life, and her misfortune was that, after she left the stage, she was never able to find any means of satisfying them jointly. She devised some sort of solution for each: neither was adequate in itself, and they defied co-ordination. They pulled against one other.

For praise, my mother came to depend increasingly on herself. If sometimes the words came out of the lips of others, it was because she forced people to say what she made it so clear she wanted from them. ‘You have to agree that . . .’ she would begin, or ‘You have to give it to me that . . .’, and it would turn out to be her originality, or her courage, or her independence, or her sense of humour, that we were being asked not to overlook. As to a way of consuming her energy, my mother – and I do not know how early it was in her married life that she thought it up, or why – hit on something the ultimate appeal of which may very well have been that in itself it meant nothing to her: it was cleaning the house. She devised a system, which was no ordinary system, and it must be understood that, throughout the period when she put it into practice, there were always two or three servants in the house who could have done, or could have shared, the work. As things were, their presence did little except to endanger my mother’s system, but that was not, from her point of view, so obviously a disadvantage.

At about nine o’clock in the morning, by which time my father, if he was in England, had left for London, my mother would put on an overall, she would tie a spotted scarf around her head, and she would start on her daily routine. She would begin with her own bedroom. The door would be shut, the readily moveable furniture would be put together somewhere in the middle of the room, and all the windows would be thrown open. Then, with a duster, she would brush the dust off all the tops and all the surfaces. When she was convinced that all the dust had been got out of its hiding places, and had settled on the floor, she would first use the
sweeper, or the Ewbank, with its beautiful picture of a lion in a roundel, to remove the top layer. Then there was the dust that had sunk into the pile of the carpet, and for this she relied on the vacuum cleaner. Any residual dust, which had not fallen onto the floor, or had fallen onto the floor but had not been sucked up either by the sweeper or by the vacuum cleaner, would probably have floated out through the window. The room was now clean – cleaned and clean – and so my mother felt at liberty to open the bedroom door, and start on the next task, which was also the biggest, for it took in, first, the corridor that curved round past the lavatory and the airing cupboard to the bathroom, next, the stairs which descended to the hall, and finally the hall itself. From her point of view, all this formed a single, though not a simple, unit: it was not simple because of the twists and turns within it, but it was a unit because there was no internal door that could be shut, and thus seal off one part of it from the rest, with the consequence that there was no way of stopping the circulation of dust or germs. Accordingly, once my mother had persuaded herself of two things, one was that all the doors opening off the landing and the hall were shut, and there were ten in all that had to be checked, and the other was that all the windows were open, the same sequence of duster, sweeper and vacuum cleaner was applied without there being any natural break, or any way of storing what she had done.

And it was here that the system was vulnerable. So long as my mother was still at the stage of cleaning her bedroom, alternatively once she had got past the landing, stairs and hall, and was cleaning either the dining-room or the drawing-room, there was comparative immunity: nothing could go deeply wrong. But what could only too easily happen, and, if it did, would nullify everything that she had done up till that point, was that, while she was working on the large unit, someone in one of the first-floor rooms who hadn’t noticed the stage she was at might unthinkingly open a door. And, when I say ‘open a door’, it was enough, on my mother’s calculations, for it to be opened the merest crack for the dust, the germs, to be able to creep back, and for my mother to feel, no, for her to know, that her work was ruined. Within minutes, she had carried her three aids, the duster, the sweeper, the vacuum cleaner, right up to the very top of the house, to the small, linoleum-covered landing outside the boxroom and the maid’s room, which, in the ordinary course of events, was not in her sphere, but was left to the maid to clean, but not when there had been a violation of the system, and what she was now called on to do was to set the process in motion from the very beginning, indeed from a point earlier than that at which it had started. By this means, my mother’s day was set back by something between an hour and a half and two hours. The hairdresser in London, or a friend whom she had arranged to meet for tea, or my father who had booked a table at the Savoy Grill for lunch, had to be informed, and the day reorganised. This happened about once every two or three weeks, and was the cause of my mother’s frequent latenesses.

I have said that the ease with which my mother’s method of house-cleaning could be set back, and most likely by someone who might have been expected to help her, was not necessarily a deficiency in her eyes. For what any such reversal made entirely clear was that it was a matter
of decision, a matter of her decision, when her work was finished, and she could stop, and run
her bath, and get dressed, and enjoy herself. It was her word, nothing else, not the evidence of
the eyes, not the touch of the finger – though my mother loved running her finger along
surfaces – that counted, and that she liked. The fact that failure deprived her of pleasure, that
it sent her back to the hoover and the sweeper and the duster for another long period, did not
much matter to her so long as failure was hers to adjudicate. It would be hard to exaggerate
how readily pleasure could recede as an aim in the life of this woman, who, in company,
presented herself as a dizzy hedonist, a huntress after pleasure with not another thought in
her head.

My mother never felt called on to account for the routine in which she was so inflexible until
one day there was a new arrival in the house who very much had her own idea of things. This
was the new governess. She was French, she seemed to me of a very great age, she had grey
hair in a bun, and eyes that did not focus, and her name was Mademoiselle de Saint-Germain.
Before coming to us, she had worked, evidently for many years, as a governess in a Prussian
family. I do not know how she was chosen. In opposition to my mother, and ultimately to my
father, Mademoiselle believed that it was the out-of-doors, the air that came from the trees
and the green things, the fresh air to which so much of my life had been sacrificed, that was
the danger: it was the source of disease and ill-health. In consequence, when she cleaned the
rooms that were her preserve, the nursery and the night nursery, she began by shutting the
windows, and then she opened the door onto the corridor, even if my mother was in
the course of cleaning it. When my mother objected, she formulated her opposition thus:
‘Madame, you believe that the germs are inside, and must be swept out. I believe that the
germ is outside, and must not be left in.’ My mother loved these words, and she repeated
them on every possible occasion, to me, on the telephone, at lunch to my father’s friends, and
she always put it as follows: ‘Mademoiselle said: “You believe that the germs are inside, I
believe the germs are outside.”’ My mother always quoted the words as Mademoiselle had
used them, and she never adapted them grammatically to herself as a speaker. She never said:
‘I believe the germs are inside, but she, Mademoiselle de Saint-Germain, believes that the
germ is outside.’

To a child, whose head was filled with the idea of religious faith, my mother’s insistence on
the use of direct speech seemed momentous. What, according to my mother, was really at
issue? Did she believe in the germs that she spent so much of her life trying to eradicate, or
did she not? Did it, or did it not, matter in her eyes that someone disagreed with her? When
someone disagreed with her, was it, or was it not, important for her to persuade this other
person of the error of her ways? For me these were the issues, as simple as that, but my
mother evaded them, just as she evaded the issue of religious faith itself, and she continued to
put her trust in phrases like, ‘I do what I do’, ‘That’s what I’m like’, ‘You can’t change what a
person’s like.’ I do not know that I wanted to change what my mother was like, or at any rate
not until many years later, by which time what I really wanted was to change her for someone
else, but I wanted to know, because I needed to know, why it was that what my mother spent so much of her life doing was so important to her.

And yet I continue to give a misleading impression if I make it seem that my mother regarded cleaning the house as this much, or that much, more important than other things that went on inside the house. It was alien to my mother to have a scale of things. What she thought, and required us to think, was that cleaning the house was serious, and nothing else was exactly that, and the way in which its seriousness showed itself was that it did not require an argument. What my mother did every morning was not something that might have to be altered or revised because of some discovery about the direction in which germs flowed, and if, in a way, this offended me, it did so in some measure because I too, in some part of my mind, had a view that was beyond discussion. This was my fear that, if things went on as they were going, my parents would go to eternal damnation – but I anticipate. My religious certainties rose to such peaks of anxiety only a while later.

Mademoiselle did not last long. The ways parted, and, if her task had been to teach me French, it would be closer to the truth to say, not that she failed, but that she never, as far as I was aware, embarked on the task. I remember only the four frequently intoned words, ‘Gargarisez comme il faut.’

Mademoiselle de Saint-Germain was succeeded by Miss King, who came from York, which won me over, not only because it was so far away and to the north, but because it had city gates which preserved their medieval names. Indeed no sooner had she arrived than she hung up a watercolour of Boothgate above the pitcher and slop-basin where I had to wash when it was thought unwise that I should brave the chill of the corridor and go to the bathroom. She had spent a few years at the Château de Joinville, a name I knew from Froissart. She wore a brooch with a painted cameo of the château, and it was the only ornamentation that she allowed herself. Her father, who was dead, had been a shopkeeper, and her aunt, called Olive Groves, sang operetta, and could sometimes be heard on the wireless with the BBC Light Orchestra. Miss King was gentle, helpful, and she wore shoes with holes in the soles because, as was discovered only years later, she sent her wages to the missionaries.

Miss King was really chapel, but she accompanied me to church, and she encouraged me in my zeal for the Book of Common Prayer. She got me to learn the Gospel, the Epistle and the Collect for each week, and, when I went into my parents’ bedroom to say good morning, I recited one of them – and I do not remember whether this was her idea or mine – to two bewildered people. Apart from religious belief, she had a general commitment to self-improvement. On our walks, she carried around with her the three thin volumes of Hugo’s German course, one of grammar, one of exercises, one of answers, and she kept them very neatly covered in brown paper. On the brown paper cover of one of the volumes, she had written in ink the two letters U and P, and I begged her to tell me what they meant. Sometimes, on one of our walks, I would break off from the fantasies I poured out to her,
would turn to face her, and I would threaten to make her life a misery with my persistent questioning until she confided the answer to me. She held out for two or three years, in the course of which I made many bold guesses. Finally one day she relented, and she gave me the answer: she had written UP in order to tell herself which way up the book should be. I was dumbfounded. This explanation had never occurred to me, and I could not decide whether this did, or didn’t, show that I was totally stupid.

If Miss King was proper and could be disapproving, it never led her to protest against the unbridled eroticism of the stories with which I deluged her on our walks. Perhaps my anatomical ignorance imposed so many barriers between my meaning and what I actually said that she never understood me, or perhaps it was her ignorance, which I suspect was even more profound than mine, that had the same ultimate effect. But I cherish the belief that she had a deep tolerance for life, and also some sense of the love I bore her. I do not recall that we ever quarrelled, or that harsh words passed between us, with the possible exception of the occasion when she was instructed to skip parts of Scott that were thought unsuitable for her to read out to me.

The most powerful moral lesson that she imparted to me was a disapproval of divorce. She thought divorce evil, and she taught me to avoid getting physically close to friends of my parents who had been divorced. I was led to avoid films in which divorce figured, and ultimately films that had divorced actors in them. I never felt that she had the same disapproval of irregular liaisons, with which life around me pulsed. I say this for the flimsiest of reasons, which is that when, years later, I read the story of Caroline of Ansbach’s last hours, and how she told George II that he must remarry, I felt, in a matter of seconds, completely sure that Miss King would, across the centuries that divided them, have approved of his tearful reply: ‘Non, non, je n’aurai que des maîtresses.’ It became dogma for me to believe that this strange, pasty-faced woman with the chilled features and the dripping nose, whose face has almost completely faded from my memory, who read to me the Waverley novels without any partisanship for Roundhead or Cavalier, Crusader or heathen, accepted all kinds of feeling that she herself had never experienced, or ever wanted to. She left us about the time I went to boarding school, aged 13, and briefly worked for the family across the road. Then war broke out, and, as soon as it did, she joined the ATS, and it is said that, within its ranks, she had a new lease of life, and found happiness. There is no one whom I have ever wished better.

Miss King read me, over the years, Scott, and Dickens, and Kingsley, and Harrison Ainsworth, and Charles Reade, all in a monotone, which I loved, and which friends of my parents mocked. Her own taste was, I believe, for books slightly more edifying, and I know that she had great admiration for a novel called John Halifax, Gentleman, which she read to herself several times over, and which I take to have been a work of some bleakness. It has a North Country setting, which I knew was significant, but I was never allowed to read it. Morality or virtue could also be A certificate.
Before the epoch of governesses, I had had a brief spell of school. It lasted four and a half days: Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday morning. It was, I believe, in the autumn after my fifth birthday, and the school was a local school, which my brother had just left in order to go to a boarding-school on the South Coast. It was called Ropers, presumably after the owner and headmaster. It was in Weybridge. On the third day of school, which long remained in my mind as the exemplar of what it was to learn something, we were asked to bring in an orange, which we were to think of as the Earth, and turning round the orange on its axis would allow us to understand many of the marvels of life: how sailing boats disappeared over the horizon, why we didn’t fall off the Earth, and why people in Australia did not stand on their heads.

Saturday was a half-day with lessons coming to an end at 12 or half past 12. We packed our small attaché cases, and waited on the pavement outside the school as if at a bus stop for parents to come in cars to pick us up. Seeing my mother drive up, and wishing to make her think that I was at ease in the school, or just wanting myself to feel at ease, I gave the boy standing next to me a tap on the arm. It was meant to be no more than a friendly nudge, as if I were saying, ‘I know you, remember me?’ but I miscalculated. It was as if I had challenged him to a duel, and, within a few seconds, the whole group of boys turned into a wild contorted mass of flailing arms, and book-bags, and satchels, overflowing the pavement and spilling out into the road. Most hands were pointed at me as the bully, the troublemaker, the fist-fighter. I scrambled into the car, and by the time I reached home, I felt feverish.

I have no direct recollection of what happened next, but I later learned that, over the weekend, my temperature mounted and mounted, and on the Monday or Tuesday I was diagnosed as having pleurisy. Ice-packs were put on my forehead, and I had the strange sensation of my thumbs growing to some enormous size. The curtains were drawn with a narrow crack of light at one end, and were not opened for several weeks. Trays appeared with soup, and barley water, and calf’s-foot jelly; large vases of carnations stood on the bamboo chest of drawers; smoke from the little container of incense de Bruges curled up into the ceiling; and there was a great deal of sweating, and changing of pyjamas, and rubbing of eau de Cologne on my body. For much of the day I listened to books being read to me or to the purr of the vacuum cleaner. I would doze off, and wake up, and the light would have started to fail. I luxuriated in my new-found weakness, like other boys might delight in their new-found strength.

Pleurisy turned out to be only the first of a series of illnesses, which occurred with no more than brief intervals between them, most of them normal childhood ailments, but assailing me with excessive ferocity, and with a frequency out of the ordinary, so that I had measles three times, which I was told was a record, as well as a threat to my eyesight. During one of these bouts, the curtains did not open for four or five weeks.

The most constant witness to my illnesses was the family doctor, Dr Barclay. I call him the
family doctor, but he was in effect my doctor. My father had his German doctor, but, for the first 17 or 18 years of my life, I do not remember that either my father or my mother spent a single day ill in bed. There was my brother with whom I might have been expected to share Dr Barclay, but either my memory is defective or he was not much of a patient. Dr Barclay was a man in, I imagine, his late forties. He had dark, glossy hair, carefully brushed back, a jet black moustache, small eyes, a freckled skin and a soft Highland accent. On my father’s instructions, he came to the house whenever my temperature reached 100°. Within a minute of the front door opening for him, he had bounded up the stairs with the same élan with which, a bare hour or so before, my father had raced down them and out of the house. There was a tap on my bedroom door, the door opened, Dr Barclay’s head appeared around it, a few steps were taken across the room, and he dropped down on the bed beside me, and, allowing his legs to swing loose for a moment or two, he pulled a thermometer out of his breast pocket, checked that it was shaken down, put it under my tongue, and fiddled with the stethoscope that he wore round his neck. Automatically I opened my mouth, and said, ‘Arrrh,’ and a shiny spatula held my tongue in place. Dr Barclay was confident in his judgment, and he was knowledgeable in what he prescribed, and, just before he left, he could always spare a glorious minute or two to discuss with me what I was reading. His truly momentous role in my life was to insist that I should at the appropriate time read the Waverley novels. He would say when.

For all the speed with which he came and went, Dr Barclay always looked around him for something in the way of paintings or furniture to admire, and he was famous in our area for the many codicils in his favour that old ladies attached to their wills. Some years later, I was back in his company when I read Mrs Dalloway, and came across the famous Harley Street specialist who, as he descends the 18th-century staircase, absent-mindedly taps the panelling to see if it is genuine. Dr Barclay did not live at that Olympian eminence, but he was keen to learn the ways of the world in so far as they had so far evaded him, and my father introduced him to his tailor, who made the tight, dark blue, double-breasted suits that from then onwards he always wore, the blue emphasising the black of his eyes. My father liked introducing people to his tailor, and the only time I went there, which was in later life in order to get a dinner jacket I had inherited altered, the cutter greeted me suavely, and said, with the slightest bow: ‘I remember your father very well. He did us the honour of introducing to us Monsieur de Diaghilev.’

During the lengthy period of convalescence from pleurisy, and the later illnesses, my father insisted that I should observe what he regarded as appropriate caution. My temperature had to be down to normal for 24 hours before I could get out of bed, and I had to spend at least another 24 hours, but preferably 48, indoors before I could go out. I was not permitted to drink water from the tap, and by my bedside was a bottle of Vichy-Célestins, which, with its curious fishy taste, always made me thirstier than before. I was apprehensive that one day my father would think that I was old enough to take my temperature, as he did his, in the anus.
School was out of the question, and it was this that introduced the regime of governesses, which lasted, I am inclined to think, about three years, and I went to school again only when I was about eight or nine, and even then Miss King stayed on. I do not believe that Miss King obliged me to follow any particular course of studies, but we slowly worked through the few schoolbooks she had with her, some of which she ordered specially from Hachette, and some of which had seen use at the Château de Joinville. When I had mastered one book, I went on to the next. I recall with delight the principal French reader we studied, with its chilly grey-blue binding, on which was superimposed a kind of Gothic tracery. Each lesson in the book was completed by a little story, in which some historical character inevitably acquitted himself with verve. What was called for from the protagonist was either a great act of courage or the witty overcoming of one of life’s difficulties. The dramatis personae whom I can recall included the Chevalier Bayard, le Roi Dagobert and St Eloi, Voltaire and his valet, la Pucelle, and Bertrand du Guesclin. When Voltaire’s valet stopped cleaning his master’s shoes in the winter, saying that they would only get dirty as soon as he went out in the rain, Voltaire stopped buying him food, and, when the valet complained, he was told that, if he was fed, he would only get hungry again. When St Eloi upbraided the good king for having so many mistresses and told him to remain faithful to his wife, the king asked the saint what his favourite food was, and, learning it was partridge, fed him partridge day after day, until the saint cried out: ‘Perdrix, perdrix, toujours perdrix.’ I liked the idea that life could be mastered so effortlessly, and these little moral stories almost reconciled me to growing up. There was also somewhere in the middle of the book a full-page illustration of Delaroche’s *Assassination of the Duc de Guise*, which suggested to me that death was a kind of falling over. Another favourite book of the time was *Little Arthur’s History of England*, which celebrated the lives of sad princes, and famous kings, and scheming ministers, and from which I learned a great deal, but mostly I learned something that it did not set out to teach, which was how easy it was to be altogether passed over by history, and to lead a life that would pass into nullity.

I have referred to some of the routines that convalescence precipitated, but there is one routine more directly connected with health which I have not mentioned, and this was the weekly giving of a laxative. My father took Epsom salts daily with breakfast; my mother took a weekly dose of a thick cream, made from paraffin, called Kayleenol, but I was not allowed to use either of these, though I didn’t at all mind their taste. Instead I had to take every Friday night, on going to bed, two teaspoonfuls, poured out from the bottle, of a thick mixture, which was dark brown, but, as it lay in the spoon, was edged with a purplish black, which was called California Syrup of Figs. The taste was heavy, sickly, morbid, and the smell completely portended it. Having to take the medicine from a teaspoon was a peculiarly cruel part of the ordeal, because it meant that, after the first teaspoon, when I closed my mouth to raise the saliva to rinse it clean, a stern voice said, ‘No, we’ve not finished yet,’ and I was expected to stand perfectly still, with my mouth left open, while the second teaspoonful was poured out up to the rim, and then tipped into me. Though I was told that I would get used to the taste, it got worse every week, until a moment was reached when the mere smell was so overpowering...
that I started to rebel. I screamed, I sobbed, and many times someone would be brought in to hold my arms. If, as became increasingly frequent, I was still struggling after ten minutes, the dose would be put off until the same time the next day, Saturday, and then, if there was enough rebellion on Saturday, matters would be postponed until Sunday. One week, the fight continued until Tuesday, and on Tuesday, when whoever was administering the medicine was momentarily out of the room, I tried to climb between the bars that were still on my bedroom window, and throw myself to the ground. From then onwards, some better way of ensuring ‘regularity’ was found. Meanwhile the curious colour and texture of the medicine became fixed for me in a thought which I found very hard to shake off for many years. The very hue and tonality of California Syrup of Figs seemed to me to be exactly reproduced in certain effects of the setting sun, and I came to the view that the sunset originated in God’s dipping His thick fingers in the medicine bottle, and then smearing them across the evening sky. It was a divine finger-painting. Sometimes I see a penumbra of California Syrup of Figs across the cheeks in Giotto, or wherever the shadow of Byzantium falls across Italian painting.

My father’s work, as I can now see in retrospect, changed to a considerable degree over the years of my childhood, and this certainly influenced the background against which I grew up. When I was very young, or up to the age of six, my father was largely occupied with the Diaghilev ballet. I believe that he met Diaghilev before the war, for he is said to have taken him to see Adeline Genée dance in 1912. Whether the original meeting took place in Paris or Saint Petersburg or perhaps even in London I do not know, but from 1918 my father acted as the ballet’s London manager, and also contributed to its survival in other places. He drew up the contracts, he made advance bookings with theatres, opera houses and music halls, and he endeavoured to raise money, to which end he acted as a go-between between Diaghilev and Lord Rothermere or the King of Spain. There was an almost daily exchange of lengthy telegrams. My father deeply admired Diaghilev, and he was, I feel, much drawn into his way of thinking and feeling. He was very sympathetic to the perfectionism, and I believe that he found the fury and the scenes of rage and jealousy very vital. At any rate in the moods that my father allowed himself to reveal, he was very different, and tended to fluctuate between amused calm and a very self-assured irritability, but this does not mean that he wanted the world to be so circumscribed: indeed he could himself on occasion give way to towering rage. My father was intrigued by Diaghilev’s superstition and by his fear of water, and no small part of the special prerogatives with which he was credited came from the fact, magical in my father’s eyes, that he was Russian. A journalist once asked my father in what way Diaghilev was so Russian, and my father, who had no great belief in national characteristics, said that to see this you had to watch the great man in a hurry, because, the more worried he was about time, the shorter and shorter steps he took, so that, in the end, he was at a standstill.

And yet I do not think that all this would have added up to so much if Diaghilev had not in the last resort conformed to my father’s fundamental demands on life, which brought him so much in conflict with me. Certainly the Russian Ballet represented for my father a lost
Arcadia, a worldly Eden of which the capital was pre-Great War Monte Carlo, but Diaghilev’s ultimate achievement was that he took hold of all this, and he wrenched it out of the realm of mere regret or nostalgia, with which my father had no sympathy, and he connected it with what people, some people, enough people, wanted to see. He turned it into what my father would have called, despite the debts with which it was encumbered, ‘a paying proposition’.

My father set store by a few mementoes of Diaghilev: two photographs, one head and shoulders with the chinchilla streak carefully turned to the camera, and the other standing with Cocteau, both signed in French, which was the language Diaghilev and my father spoke together; a malacca cane, which a burglar stole; and a watercolour by Picasso, which Diaghilev bought from a scene-painter for the ballet in order to give to my father, and which I still possess. Years later, when the picture came into my possession, I learned that it was the handiwork of the scene-painter himself, called, I believe, Laforge.

After the death of Diaghilev, my father refused to have anything to do with the ballet. The new Russian dancers did not know how to use their arms: they thought that their legs were the only thing that mattered. There was no one left to rehearse them: that is to say, there was no one left to rehearse each single scene over and over and over again, until everything was perfect, and, as my father recalled, the blood seeped out of the dancers’ toes. As to English dancers, my Anglophile father never believed that anything really good could come out of England. In consequence, throughout the 1930s, he concentrated on cabaret, and what had been his first attachment: music hall. He booked the cabaret for the Savoy and the Berkeley, and he became immersed in the daily life of the large hotel. He figured, he once told me, as a minor character, in Arnold Bennett’s Imperial Palace. He still found singers for Covent Garden, and he brought over whatever he could extract from the dying life of Central Europe: the musical extravagances of Eric Charrell, White Horse Inn, Waltzes from Vienna, Casanova, Kurt Weill’s A Kingdom for a Cow, the Ballets Joss.

Gradually Europe became a smaller and smaller pond in which my father could fish, and his whole way of life, of business, was imperilled. In early 1933 he was staying in Berlin, at the Kaiserhof or the Adlon, and, as he got into the old-fashioned lift, found himself alone with Hitler, and very slowly they travelled up several floors together. From that moment onwards he was a terrified man. I recall him on a Saturday night, crouched over the large walnut cabinet in which the radio was housed, smoking cigarette after cigarette, as he listened to the marathon speeches of Hitler, the fanfare, the angry rhetoric, the long ovations, the endless Sieg Heils, and, when all seemed over, the return of the Führer to the podium. At the same time, my father was aware that the part of the theatre he was interested in was being taken over by people with whom he had nothing in common: they were English-born, they did not conduct business over long and large lunches, they smoked cigars to prove they were rich, they had bad haircuts. One of the new lot had once been an office-boy of my father’s. Sometimes he could relent: he formed a more favourable opinion of George Black, who was already a tycoon, when he learned that he had read James Joyce.
In 1935 or 1936, in desperation my father, who thought that he owed it either to himself or to his family, decided to attempt to make his peace with the new regime in his native country, and he invited to England, and down to the house, the manager of a theatre in Munich. I remember the occasion vividly. I had just come in from a walk on which I had mistimed my visit to the lavatory, and had had what was called an ‘accident’. I went upstairs, and changed hurriedly, determined not to miss the visitor. Herr Müller was a small, sandy-complexioned man, with wavy fair hair, which was thinning and brushed back without a parting, and a slightly effeminate manner. He wore a single-breasted brown suit, a cream-coloured silk shirt, a dark red tie with a large knot, and, in the lapel of his jacket, there was a diamond-shaped button with a black swastika on a white ground. As I shook hands, I stared, rudely perhaps, at the small button. My father did not pursue the arrangements with Herr Müller, who had already explained that he could not, for reasons of state outside his control, employ Jewish actors or artistes. He was one of the politest men I ever met.

The further decline in my father’s fortunes lies outside the scope of my childhood.

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In his remarks about how difficult it is to get memoirs published nowadays, Thomas Jones doesn’t mention how easy it seems to be to get a thinly veiled roman à clef into print (LRB, 24 June). Bookstores are crammed full of first-person present-tense diary entries by graduates of British universities, slightly modified to resemble dramatic fiction. The fashion for putting ‘A Novel’ on the cover of books may come from an embarrassed awareness that they are actually memoirs.

Creative-writing tutors encourage student authors to ‘write about what they know’ and to ‘keep it real’. Perhaps our literary culture would be livelier if they dished out more sensible advice: write about what you don’t know, write only about people you’ve never met, in places you’ve never been to, for readers you’ll never know. Maybe then Richard Wollheim’s marvellous memoir (LRB, 15 April), which reminded me a bit of English translations of Proust, would never have made it into print. As things stand, however, it might have had an easier time getting published by a ‘major publisher’ if it were called ‘Germs: A Novel’.

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‘The lights dimmed, a hush, like the end of the day, fell on the audience, and the first
titles came up on the screen, and they could, just for a moment, be seen on the far side of the gauze curtains, as clear as pebbles through still water.’ Thus Richard Wollheim in his memoir (*LRB*, 15 April). I attended his lectures on perception in the 1960s, and am touched to discover that he, too, was taken in as a child by the illusion that cinema curtains are diaphanous.

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