

The *Sunday Times* Bestseller

Clive James

The Complete Unreliable Memoirs

‘Do not read this book in public. You
will risk severe internal injuries from
trying to suppress your laughter’

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Falling Towards England
May Week Was In June
North Face of Soho
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CLIVE JAMES

Unreliable Memoirs

PICADOR

To Rhoisin and Bruce Beresford
and the getting of wisdom

Andromache led the lamentation of the women, while she held in her hands the head of Hector, her great warrior:

‘Husband, you are gone so young from life, and leave me in your home a widow. Our child is still but a little fellow, child of ill-fated parents, you and me. How can he grow up to manhood? Before that, this city shall be overthrown. For you are gone, you who kept watch over it, and kept safe its wives and their little ones . . .

‘And you have left woe unutterable and mourning to your parents, Hector; but in my heart above all others bitter anguish shall abide. Your hands were not stretched out to me as you lay dying. You spoke to me no living word that I might have pondered as my tears fell night and day.’

Iliad, xxiv, translated by S. E. Winbolt,
from *The Iliad Pocket Book*, Constable 1911

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Preface

Most first novels are disguised autobiographies. This autobiography is a disguised novel. On the periphery, names and attributes of real people have been changed and shuffled so as to render identification impossible. Nearer the centre, important characters have been run through the scrambler or else left out completely. So really the whole affair is a figment got up to sound like truth. All you can be sure of is one thing: careful as I have been to spare other people's feelings, I have been even more careful not to spare my own. Up, that is, of course, to a point.

Sick of being a prisoner of my childhood, I want to put it behind me. To do that, I have to remember what it was like. I hope I can dredge it all up again without sounding too pompous. Solemnity, I am well aware, is not my best vein. Yet it can't be denied that books like this are written to satisfy a confessional urge; that the mainspring of a confessional urge is guilt; and that somewhere underneath the guilt there must be a crime. In my case I suspect there are a thousand crimes, which until now I have mainly been successful in not recollecting. Rilke used to say that no poet would mind going to jail, since he would at least have time to explore the treasure house of his memory. In many respects Rilke was a prick.

Premature memoirs can only be conceited. I have no excuses against this charge, except to say that self-regard is itself a subject, and that to wait until reminiscence is justified by achievement might mean to wait for ever. I am also well aware that all attempts to put oneself in a bad light are doomed to be frustrated. The ego arranges the bad light to its own satisfaction. But on that point it is only necessary to remember Santayana's devastating comment on Rousseau's *Confessions*, which he said demonstrated, in equal measure, candour and ignorance of self. However adroitly I have calculated my intentional revelations, I can be sure that there are enough unintentional ones to give the reader an accurate impression. I had an absurdly carefree upbringing. If my

account of it inspires disapproval, that can only serve to help redress the balance. One doesn't expect to get away with it for ever.

C.J.

1. THE KID FROM KOGARAH

I was born in 1939. The other big event of that year was the outbreak of the Second World War, but for the moment that did not affect me. Sydney in those days had all of its present attractions and few of the drawbacks. You can see it glittering in the background of the few photographs in which my father and I are together. Stocky was the word for me. Handsome was the word for him. Without firing a shot, the Japanese succeeded in extricating him from my clutches.

Although a man of humble birth and restricted education, he was smart enough to see that there would be war in the Pacific. Believing that Australia should be ready, he joined up. That was how he came to be in Malaya at the crucial moment. He was at Parit Sulong bridge on the day when a lot of senior officers at last found out what their troops had guessed long before – that the Japanese army was better led and better equipped than anything we had to pit against it. After the battle my father walked all the way south to Singapore and arrived just in time for the surrender. If he had waited to be conscripted, he might have been sent to the Western Desert and spent a relatively happy few months fighting the kind of Germans whose essential decency was later to be portrayed on the screen by James Mason and Marlon Brando. As it was, he drew the short straw.

This isn't the place to tell the story of my mother and father – a story which was by no means over, even though they never saw one another again. I could get a lot of mileage out of describing how the good-looking young mechanic wooed and won the pretty girl who left school at fourteen and worked as an upholsterer at General Motors Holden. How the Depression kept them so poor that they had to wait years to get married and have me. How fate was cruel to both of them beyond measure. But it would be untrue to them. It was thirty years or more before I even began to consider what my parents must have meant to each other. Before that I hardly gave them a thought, except as vague occurrences on the outskirts of a solipsistic universe. I can't remember my father at all. I can remember my mother only through a child's eyes. I don't know which fact is the sadder

WHICH FACT IS THE Sadder.

Anyway, my mother let our little house in Kogarah and we went to stay with my Aunt Dot in Jannali, another half hour down the Ulawarra line. This move was made on the advice of my father, who assumed that the centre of Sydney would be flattened by Japanese bombs about two hours after the whistle blew. The assumption proved to be ill-founded, but the side effects were beneficial, since Jannali was a perfect spot to grow up in. There were only a dozen or so streets in the whole area. Only one of them was paved. The railway line ran through a cutting somewhere in the middle. Everything else was bush.

The houses were made of either weatherboard or fibro. Ours was weatherboard. Like all the others, it was surrounded by an area of land which could be distinguished from the bush only because of its even more lavish concentrations of colour. Nasturtiums and honeysuckle proliferated, their strident perfumes locked in perpetual contention. Hydrangeas grew in reefs, like coral in a sea of warm air. At the bottom of the backyard lay an air-raid trench full of rainwater. I fell into it within minutes of arriving. Hearing a distant splash, Aunt Dot, who was no sylph, came through the back door like a train out of a tunnel and hit the lawn running. The door, a fly-screen frame with a return spring, made exactly the same sound as one of those punching-bags you try your strength on. Aunt Dot was attired in a pink corset but it didn't slow her down. She covered the ground like Marjorie Jackson, the girl who later became famous as the Lithgow Flash. The earth shook. I was going down for the third time but I can distinctly remember the moment she launched herself into the air, describing a parabolic trajectory which involved, at one point, a total eclipse of the sun. She landed in the trench beside me. Suddenly we were sitting together in the mud. All the water was outside on the lawn.

Usually my mother was first to the rescue. This time she was second. She had to resuscitate both of us. She must have been in the front of the house looking after my grandfather. He needed a lot of looking after. Later on my mother told me that he had always been a selfish man. She and Aunt Dot had given a good part of their lives to waiting on him. Mentally, he had never left England. I remember him as a tall, barely articulate source of smells. The principal smells were of mouldy cloth, mothballs, seaweed, powerful tobacco and the tars that collect in the stem of a very old pipe. When he was smoking he was invisible. When he wasn't smoking he was merely hard to pick out in the gloom. You could track him down by listening for his constant, low-pitched, incoherent mumble. From his carpet slippers to his moustache was twice as high as I could reach. The moustache was saffron with nicotine. Everywhere else he was either grey or tortoiseshell mottle. His teeth were both.

I remember he bared them at me one Christmas dinner. It was because he was

choking on a coin in a mouthful of plum pudding. It was the usual Australian Christmas dinner, taking place in the middle of the day. Despite the temperature being 100°F. in the shade, there had been the full panoply of ragingly hot food, topped off with a volcanic plum pudding smothered in scalding custard. My mother had naturally spiced the pudding with sixpences and threepenny bits, called zacs and trays respectively. Grandpa had collected one of these in the oesophagus. He gave a protracted, strangled gurgle which for a long time we all took to be the beginning of some anecdote. Then Aunt Dot bounded out of her chair and hit him in the back. By some miracle she did not snap his calcified spine. Coated with black crumbs and custard, the zac streaked out of his mouth like a dum dum and ricocheted off a tureen.

Grandpa used to take me on his knee and read me stories, of which I could understand scarcely a word, not because the stories were over my head but because his speech by that stage consisted entirely of impediments. 'Once upon a mpf,' he would intone, 'there wah ngung mawg blf . . .' My mother got angry with me if I was not suitably grateful to Grandpa for telling me stories. I was supposed to dance up and down at the very prospect. To dodge this obligation, I would build cubbyholes. Collecting chairs, cushions, bread-boards and blankets from all over the house, I would assemble them into a pillbox and crawl in, plugging the hole behind me. Safe inside, I could fart discreetly while staring through various eye-slits to keep track of what was going on. From the outside I was just a pair of marsupial eyeballs in a heap of household junk, topped off with a rising pall of sulphuretted hydrogen. It was widely conjectured that I was hiding from ghosts. I was, too, but not as hard as I was hiding from Grandpa. When he shuffled off to bed, I would unplug my igloo and emerge. Since my own bedtime was not long after dark, I suppose he must have been going to bed in the late afternoon. Finally he went to bed altogether.

With Grandpa laid up, I was the man of the house, except when Uncle Vic or Ray came home on leave. Uncle Vic was Aunt Dot's husband and Ray was her son, therefore my cousin. Uncle Vic was an infantry corporal stationed in New Guinea. Sometimes when he got leave he would bring his Owen gun home, minus the bolt. I was allowed to play with the gun. It was huge. I stumbled around pointing it at bull-ants' nests. The bull-ants, however, didn't bluff so easily. The only argument they understood was a few gallons of boiling water poured down their central stairwell. I once saw Uncle Vic administer this treatment, in revenge after half a dozen bull-ants stung me on the right foot. They were the big red kind with the black bag at the back. When that size bull-ant stings you, you stay stung. My foot came up like a loaf of bread. I just lay in the road and screamed. The same foot got into even worse trouble later on, as I

shall relate.

While I staggered around blasting the nasturtiums, Uncle Vic did a lot of enigmatic smiling. One day I struggled all the way down to the railway cutting so that I could show the gun to some local children I hoped to impress. They hadn't waited. I could see them climbing the hill on the other side of the railway line. I shouted to them, holding the gun up as high as I could, which I suppose was no height at all. They couldn't hear me. I think it was the first big disappointment of my life. When I came back dragging the gun through the dirt, Uncle Vic did a bit more of his enigmatic smiling. Talking to him years later, I realized why he was so quiet at the time. It was because he wasn't too thrilled about what he had seen in New Guinea. Japanese scouts used to sneak up on our sentries through the thick white morning jungle mist and punch meat-skewers through their heads from ear to ear.

Ray was more forthcoming, until he got sick. He was a fitter with the RAAF somewhere up there but after his first leave he never went back. He just stayed around the house in his dressing gown, getting thinner. He used to let me stand on his feet while he walked me around. The game was called Giant Steps. I loved it. Then the day came when he didn't want to play it any more. My mother told me he wasn't strong enough. I got into trouble at the dinner table when I asked him why he was holding his fork with both hands.

So really my mother was the only pillar of strength available. One parent is enough to spoil you but discipline takes two. I got too much of what I wanted and not enough of what I needed. I was a child who was picked up. The effects have stayed with me to this day, although in the last few years I have gradually learned to blame myself instead of circumstances. My mother had a strong will but she would have had to be Fabius Cunctator to cope with my tantrums when I didn't feel like going to school. Every second day I played sick and stayed home. Her only alternative was to see how far she could drag me. She would have had a better chance dragging a dead horse through soft sand. The school was a single-room wooden hut with twelve desks. Painted cream, it sat in half an acre of dirt playground about a mile from our house. Bushfires burned it down every couple of years but unfortunately it was easy to replace. The first year of school wasn't so bad. I liked Miss Dear. Usually I got more questions right than anybody else and was awarded first choice of blocks. I chose the set with the arches and the columns. I would go off on my own into a corner of the playground and build structures akin to the Alhambra or the Escorial, throwing a fit if any other child tried to interfere.

Even the best set of school blocks wasn't as good as the set I had at home. Passed on to me by Grandpa, they were satin-smooth Victorian creations of

inch-by-inch oak, every length from one to twelve inches, plus arches, Doric columns, metopes, triglyphs and sundry other bits and pieces. With them I could build a tower much taller than myself. The usual site was the middle of the lounge room. A length of cotton could be tied to one of the lower columns, so that I could retire into hiding and collapse the tower by remote control at the precise moment when Aunt Dot lumbered into range. It made a noise like Valhalla falling. She would have one of her turns – these needed plenty of space – and demand that I be sent to school next day.

Toys were scarce. A few crude lead soldiers were still produced so that children could go on poisoning themselves but otherwise there was almost nothing. It was a big event when my mother bought me a little painted red cow. Presumably it was English. I took it to school and lost it. Next day she came with me to school, wanting to find out what had happened to it. My carelessness with everything she bought me went on hurting her for years. She construed it, accurately, as ingratitude. From the sensitivity angle I was about as obtuse as a child can be. I was sensitive enough about myself, but that's a different thing.

School, passable for the first year, became unbearable in the second, when the kind Miss Dear was supplanted by a hard case called Miss Turnbull. Dark, cold and impatient, Miss Turnbull might have been the firm hand I needed, but already I was unable to cope with authority. I still can't today, tending to oscillate between nervous flippancy and overly solicitous respect. In those days, when I was about a third of my present height and a quarter of the weight, there was nothing to do except duck. I did everything to get out of facing up to Miss Turnbull. I had Mondayitis every day of the week. As my mother dragged me down the front path, I would clutch my stomach, cross my eyes, stick out my tongue, cough, choke, scream and vomit simultaneously.

But there were some occasions when I ended up at school no matter what I did. It was then revealed that I had Dropped Behind the Class. Words I could not recognize would come up on the spelling wheel. The spelling wheel was a thick card with a window in it and a cardboard disc behind. As you turned the disc, words appeared one at a time in the window. I remember not being able to pronounce the word 'the'. I pronounced it 'ter-her'. The class had collective hysterics. They were rolling around on the floor with their knees up. I suppose one of the reasons why I grew up feeling the need to cause laughter was perpetual fear of being its unwitting object.

From the start of Miss Turnbull's reign until the day we left Jannali, every morning I would shout the house down. For my mother, the path leading from the front porch to the front gate became a Via Dolorosa. My act reached ever new heights of extravagance. Either it worked or it didn't. If it didn't I would sit

in school praying for the bushfires to come early and incinerate the place. If it did I would either hang around the house or go and play with Ron, a truant of my own age who lived next to Hally the butcher down near the station. Ron was a grub. I was always being warned off him because he was so filthy. He and I used to squat under his house tweaking each other's ding, watching each other pee, and so on. I can't remember it all now. I suppose I have repressed it. If there was any sexual excitement, it took the form of intense curiosity, just as I was curious about my mother when we were in the bath together. I remember the shock of seeing Ray undressed. He looked as if he had a squirrel hanging there. I had an acorn.

Ron's wreck of a mother used to give us buttered bread with hundreds and thousands on it. It was like being handed a slice of powdered rainbow. They must have been a poor family but I remember my visits to them as luxuries. As well as the Technicolor bread and butter, there were vivid, viscid green drinks made from some kind of cordial. Ron's place would have been Beulah Land except for one drawback. They had a cattle dog called Bluey. A known psychopath, Bluey would attack himself if nothing else was available. He used to chase himself in circles trying to bite his own balls off. To avert instant death, I was supposed to call out from the front gate when I arrived and not open it until I was told that Bluey had been chained up. One day I opened it too early and Bluey met me on the front path. I don't know where he had come from – probably around the side of the house – but it was as if he had come up out of the ground on a lift. He was nasty enough when chained up but on the loose he was a bad dream. Barking from the stomach, he opened a mouth like a great, wet tropical flower. When he snapped it shut, my right foot was inside it.

If Bluey hadn't been as old as the hills, my foot would have come right off. Luckily his teeth were in ruins, but even so I was only a few tendons short of becoming an amputee. Since Bluey's spittle obviously contained every bacterium known to science, my frantic mother concluded that the local doctor would not be enough. I think I went to some kind of hospital in Sutherland. Needles were stuck into me while she had yet another case of heart failure. Bluey was taken away to be destroyed. Looking back on it, I can see that this was tough on Bluey, who had grown old in the belief that biting ankles was the thing to do. At the time I was traumatized. I loathed dogs from that day forward. They could sense my terror from miles away. Any dog could back me against a wall for hours. Eventually I learned not to show fear. The breakthrough came when I managed to walk away from a dog who had me bailed up against the door of a garage. Admittedly he was only a Pekinese about eight inches long, but it was still a triumph. That was more than a year ago.

2. VALLEY OF THE KILLER SNAKES

Such incidents must have been hell on my mother's nerves. I would have been enough of a handful even in normal circumstances but the sweat of looking after me was made worse by her uncertainty about what was happening to my father. She got some news of him when he was in Changi but after he was moved to Japan there was not much to go on. The mail from Kobe, when there was any, was so censored it looked like shredded lettuce. During the last part of the war she wasn't even certain that he was alive. In those circumstances it couldn't have been much help to her, having the kind of son who goes off and gets half-eaten by a dog.

Lesser catastrophes were no doubt just as wearing, since they happened all the time. My collection of marbles consisted mainly of priceless connie agates handed down by Grandpa. Ocean crystals, iced roses and butterflies in amber, they tumbled from their draw-string bag like a Byzantine avalanche. I took them out and lost the lot to a local thug called Mick Roach. Years older than I, Mick dated up clay-dabs against my connies. A clay-dab, as its name suggests, could be dissolved in water or squeezed flat with a thumb. Mick used steelies for taws. Steelies were ball bearings an inch in diameter. They blasted my defenceless cannon-fodder from the ring. On top of his superior artillery, Mick could actually play marbles, whereas I had no idea of what I was doing, otherwise I would not have allowed him to readjust the size of the ring for each go. When it was his turn, the ring was about four inches in diameter. When it was my turn, the Arunta tribe could have held a corroboree around its circumference.

I lurched home in tears, trailing an empty bag. My mother went berserk. She tried to shame Mick's parents into giving my marbles back, but Mick's father talked some confident nonsense about a fair fight. 'If your father was here,' said my mother with a strangely shaking voice, 'there'd be a fair fight.' I wish I could say that I shared her anger, but I think I was just embarrassed about the fuss. I wanted my mistakes forgotten, not faced up to – the foundations of a bad habit.

Quite apart from moral disasters, there was the question of my physical safety

Quite apart from moral disasters, there was the question of my physical safety. Even after Bluey's demise, there was still good reason to believe that I would do myself an injury if left unsupervised. I had a terrifying gift for carving myself up. Running around barefoot, I would go out of my way to jump on a broken bottle. Gashes caused by rusty corrugated iron were treated with Acriflavine, an antiseptic that turned the surrounding skin variously blue and yellow, so that I looked half ancient Briton, half Inca. The only asphalt road in the area led down to the railway line at about the same angle as a door-wedge. It might not sound a very perilous incline, but I was able to prove empirically that it was more than steep enough for a small boy on a tricycle to attain terminal velocity. The pedals became a vicious blur. There was no hope of getting my feet back on them. It was apparent that I would arrive at the bottom of the hill just in time to be flung onto the line in the path of a train even then looming out of the cutting. Hearing my screams, my mother came after me like the back half of Zeno's paradox about Achilles and the tortoise, if you can imagine Achilles in drag and the tortoise screaming its head off while balanced on a shaking bicycle seat with its legs stuck out. She caught up with me at the last moment. It was part of the pattern. I always survived, but only after scaring her to death.

And then there were Australia's natural wonders. Jannali was not quite the bush proper, but it was certainly an outer suburb. You could walk over the next hill and be back in the sort of country that the convicts used to die in when they ran away. Not that they would necessarily have died of hunger. There is plenty for you to eat. Unfortunately there is also plenty that wants to eat you.

By now I have grown used to the benevolence of the English countryside, where there are no natural hazards beyond the odd clump of poison ivy, a few varieties of inimical mushroom and half a dozen adders all of which wear number plates and have exclusive contracts with BBC television. Walking at ease in such an Augustan context, it is sometimes difficult to remember what it was like to inhabit a land crawling with danger. I have already mentioned the bull-ants. There were also snakes. Walking to school bare-footed along dirt paths lined with banksias and waratahs, I was always expecting to meet one of the snakes portrayed in the gaudily detailed charts which were hung up in the railway station and the post office. Luckily the only snakes I ever encountered were harmless civilians: the filing clerks and secretaries of the serpentine world. But Uncle Vic caught a full-sized fighting snake right outside our front gate. It was a black snake – one step worse than a brown snake. A black snake can kill an adult if it is big enough. This one was big enough. Uncle Vic pinned it to the ground in the middle but both ends of it went on trying to get at him.

The next step up from the black snake is the tiger snake. It was statistically

likely that at least a few tiger snakes were in our district, probably holed up in some shack and sending their girlfriends out to buy liquor. Over and above the tiger snake, so to speak, is the taipan. Luckily ours was not taipan country. Indeed at that time the taipan was not yet famous anywhere. Up in Queensland, in the sugar-cane belt, the taipan was soon to begin making headlines and getting its photograph in *Pix*. Tiger snakes and black snakes can't compete with taipans, but they are bad enough. Brown snakes are pretty bad. Allegedly harmless snakes don't look very benevolent either. I used to think about all this a lot on the way to or from school. Whether to run fast or tiptoe silently was a constant dilemma, which I tried to solve by doing both at once.

I also thought about spiders. Two of the worst Australian spiders are the funnel-web and the trap-door. One is even more lethal than the other but I can't remember which. It doesn't matter, because either can put a child in peril of its life. The funnel-web is a ping-pong ball in a fox-fur. It inhabits a miniature missile silo in the ground, from which it emerges in a savage arc, ready to sink its mandibles into anything that breathes. The trap-door spider is really a funnel-web plus cunning, since it conceals the mouth of its silo with a tiny coal-hole door. Both kinds of spider can leap an incredible distance. A woodpile might contain hundreds of each kind. If you even suspected the presence of either species in your garden you were supposed to report immediately to the responsible authorities. After the war an English immigrant lady became famous when she was discovered gaily swatting funnel-webs with a broom as they came flying at her in squadrons. Any one of them, if it had got close enough even to spit at her, would have put her in bed for a year.

I somehow managed to avoid meeting trap-door spiders or funnel-webs. Quite often I came face to face with a harmless relative, which Aunt Dot called a tarantula and I called a triantelope. Actually it was just a common garden spider called the huntsman, whose idea of a big thrill was to suck a wasp. The huntsman wove big vertical webs which I used regularly to walk into when heading tentatively down the back path to the lavatory after dark. Getting mixed up in the web, to which I knew the triantelope must be at some point attached, was a frightening sensation which I attempted to forestall by inching forward very slowly, with one hand held out. It didn't help.

But the real horror among spiders was more likely to be encountered in the lavatory itself. This was the red-back. The red-back is mainly black, with a scarlet stripe down where its spine would be if it were a vertebrate. Looking like a neatly rigged and painted single-seater that might once have been flown by von Richthofen, the red-back had enough poison in it to immobilize a horse. It had the awkward habit, in unsewered areas like ours, of lurking under the lavatory

seat. If a red-back bit you on the behind you were left with the problem of where to put the tourniquet and not long to think about it. Nor could you ask anyone to suck out the poison, unless you knew them very well indeed. I saw plenty of red-backs and actually got bitten by one, luckily not on the behind. I think it was a red-back. Certainly I told my mother it was. Once again the site of the wound was my right foot, which by this time must have been looking as if it belonged to Philoctetes. My mother knelt, sucked and spat. We were both frightened but she was not too frightened to act. She must have been getting tired, however, of being both father and mother.

After the first atomic bomb there was a general feeling that Japan had surrendered. The street was decorated with bunting. Strings of all the Allied flags were hung up between the flame trees. The Japanese missed their cue and all the bunting had to be taken in. Finally the Japanese saw the point and all the bunting was taken out again. Everybody was in ecstasies except my mother, who still had no news. Then an official telegram came to say that he was all right. Letters from my father arrived. They were in touch with each other and must have been very happy. The Americans, with typical generosity, arranged that all the Australian POWs in Japan should be flown home instead of having to wait for ships. My mother started counting the days. Then a telegram arrived saying that my father's plane had been caught in a typhoon and had crashed in Manila Bay with the loss of everyone aboard.

Up until that day, all the grief and worry that I had ever seen my mother give way to had been tempered for my ears. But now she could not help herself. At the age of five I was seeing the full force of human despair. There were no sedatives to be had. It was several days before she could control herself. I understood nothing beyond the fact that I could not help. I think that I was marked for life. I know now that until very recent years I was never quite all there – that I was play-acting instead of living and that nothing except my own unrelenting fever of self-consciousness seemed quite real. Eventually, in my middle thirties, I got a grip on myself. But there can be no doubt that I had a tiresomely protracted adolescence, wasting a lot of other people's time, patience and love.

I suppose it is just another sign of weakness to blame everything on that one moment, but it would be equally dishonest if I failed to record its piercing vividness.

As for my mother, I don't presume even to guess at what she felt. The best I can say is that at least they got the chance of writing a few words to one another before the end. In one respect they were like Osip and Nadezhda Mandelstam in the last chapters of *Hope against Hope* – torn apart in mid-word without even

the chance to say goodbye. But in another way they were not. My father had taken up arms out of his own free will. In Europe, millions of women and children had been killed for no better reason than some ideological fantasy. My father was a free human being. So was my mother. What happened to them, terrible though it was, belongs in the category of what Nadezhda Mandelstam, elsewhere in that same great book, calls the privilege of ordinary heartbreaks. Slowly, in those years, the world was becoming aware that things had been happening which threw the whole value of human existence into doubt. But my father's death was not one of them. It was just bad luck. I have disliked luck ever since – an aversion only increased by the fact that I have always been inordinately lucky.

Grandpa's death was easier for me to deal with. Everybody was ready for it. Grief was kept in bounds. There was no way of pinpointing the moment when he passed to the beyond. In his dark bedroom he merely turned into a slightly more immobile version of what he had already been for years. It was time to open the windows and let in the light. I was encouraged to take a look at the corpse – a wise decision, since it immediately became clear to me that there are more terrible things than dying a natural death. The old man merely looked as if he had been bored out of existence. Perhaps I got it all wrong then and have still got it all wrong now. Perhaps he died in a redemptive ecstasy after being vouchsafed a revelation of the ineffable. But I doubt it. I think he just croaked.

Ray was harder to be blasé about. We hadn't played Giant Steps for a long time. Eventually he was too weak to stand. He was taken away to the military hospital at Yaralla, where over the next few years he gradually wasted to nothing. He used to smile at me through the mirror mounted over his face as he lay in the iron lung. The smile took an age to arrive and another age to go away. It was like watching sand dry in the sun. I can remember being scolded for not caring enough. I think it was Aunt Dot who did the scolding. The unremitting gradualness of it all must have been hard for her to take. People's emotions are no less real just because they carry on a lot. Aunt Dot could do the mad scene from *Lucia* when her lemon-meringue pie collapsed. But there is no reason to believe that she felt her bereavement any the less for feeling little things too much. She was, and is, a good woman who would have mothered me if she had been called upon. Mothering, however, wasn't what I was short of.

My mother decided it was time to go back to our house at No. 6 Margaret Street, Kogarah, a place I couldn't remember having seen. There was nothing to keep us in Jannali, where losses appeared to be accumulating steadily. Changing schools was certainly no great wrench. There were no playmates I would particularly miss, except perhaps the unspeakable Ron. I was taken to a party

that year where there was a present for every child except me. It turned out that my present, a box of soldiers, had been mislaid. The mistake was quickly rectified. But it took all afternoon and half the night to coax me down from my tree. Definitely time for a change of scene.

Besides, Kogarah was more of a built-up area, and therefore, my mother reasoned, safer. It would even have the sewer on soon – an unheard-of luxury. The only problem was to get the tenants out. They had promised to move when asked, but by now there was a housing shortage and they didn't want to go. My mother, however, had lost too much. She wouldn't stand for losing her house as well. It had cost her and my father everything they had ever earned. She was firm about not letting the tenants break their agreement. Out they went and in we moved.

Even in my memory the house is small. Early on there were a lounge, two bedrooms, a kitchen-dining room, a bathroom and a back veranda, with laundry and lavatory built into the back wall. Later we had the back veranda enclosed with fibro and Cooper louvres so that it could count as a room too. Between the front fence and the paved street there was a concrete footpath and a piece of lawn, known as the front strip, which included a box-gum tree big enough for a child to swing upside down from and drop on its head. Every household mowed its own front strip. It was to be a constant source of shame to my mother that our piece of front strip was never as finely mown or sharply edged as the front strips of the next-door neighbours.

From the front fence to the house was the front lawn. There was a car's width of lawn down the right side of the house, leading in almost every case but ours to a garage. This was called the driveway whether you had a car or not. On the other side of the house was a much narrower passage between house and fence, just wide enough to walk through. Behind the house was a backyard. Most of this, in our case, was lawn: a mixture of buffalo grass, couch and tenacious crops of paspalum. There were passion-fruit vines growing on the fence where the garage should have been. In the opposite back corner was a peach tree, in which over the years I made various attempts, all unsuccessful, to build a tree house. There were patches of vegetable garden along all three edges of the backyard. These were devoted to the growing of the kind of vegetables I always refused to eat – chocos, beetroot, rhubarb and so on. Or is rhubarb a fruit? Despite my mother's imprecations, I could never see the point of the choco. Whatever you do with it, it's still nothing. It looks like an albino avocado and tastes like cellophane. Its only advantage lies in its cheapness. You can't stop chocos growing. It takes a flamethrower to keep them down.

The widest of these vegetable patches lay parallel to the back fence, beyond

which was a poultry farm inhabited by thousands of chooks all synchronized to wake you up at dawn. Later on the farm became a housing estate. Whatever lay beyond the back fence, I was always tunnelling towards it. The back patch was the site of my unflagging efforts to get back to the womb by digging into the earth. I started this at quite an early age, attaining more proficiency as time went on. My early burrows were simple dugouts roofed over with box tops, after which the earth was heaped back on. There was just room for me. I would persuade my mother to cover up the entrance and leave me down there all afternoon. It didn't matter if the thing collapsed – it was only a few inches of dirt. Older children had been known to try the same trick in sand dunes, with fatal results. She probably reasoned that it was better to let me indulge these fantasies where she could keep an eye on me.

Over the next few years, the back patch started looking like the Ypres Salient. I would dig complicated networks of trenches, roof them over, and continued tunnelling from inside, honeycombing the clay all the way down to the water table. Other boys in the street were fascinated. It became known that I was taking my Donald Duck comics down there and reading them by torchlight. They, too, turned up with armfuls of comics. Suddenly I had friends. I had stumbled on one of the secrets of leadership – start something, then let people know you are doing them a favour by bringing them in on it. Candidates for my tunnel club had to go through a probationary period of hovering on the outskirts. It was like being put up for the Garrick. Finally half the small boys in the district were spending the whole weekend somewhere under our backyard. Similar scenes must have occurred on the night of the Great Escape from Stalag Luft III. I overdid it when I started letting the little kids down there. Little kids, I should have known, ruin things. Geoffrey Teichmann was only about four years old. Crawling somewhere down around Level 7 leading off Shaft 4, he brushed against one of the fruit-case slats I used for pit-props. The whole system fell on him. Parents arrived from everywhere to dig the little twerp out. That was the end of that.

But my new-found acceptability was strictly a local phenomenon. School was still a nightmare. I went to Kogarah Infants' School and then to Kogarah Primary. They were both in the same place, near Kogarah station, more than a mile away on the trolleybus. The fare was a penny. The trolleybus went down Rocky Point Road, through a shopping centre called the Bundy, then turned left to cut across Prince's Highway and climb over the hill to the station, where it either turned around at the Loop or went on to Rockdale. There were shops at the Loop, including Parry's Milk Bar, the centre of local nightlife for years to come. Being bought a fruit sundae in Parry's late at night was pretty well the most

luxurious thing that could happen to you.

Two minutes' walk up the hill from the Loop was the school. I could make that two minutes last an hour – sometimes a whole day. If it had not been for another boy called McGowan, I would have been cast as the school's problem child. Luckily McGowan was so disturbed that I seemed unobtrusive by comparison. A ginger shambles, McGowan wore glasses with one lens covered up by brown sticky paper, presumably to correct a fault of vision. He screamed without provocation, frothed at the mouth, bit pieces out of other children and kicked teachers in the stomach. In the playground he would run at the supervising teacher while her back was turned, so that he would be going at full speed when she wheeled at the sound of his running footsteps. He was thus able to get plenty of force behind the kick. The teacher would be taken away on a stretcher. Eventually there were no longer any members of the staff willing to take on the job of supervising any classroom or playground with McGowan in it, so he was removed. That left me looking more conspicuous.

The only thing I liked about school was skipping around in circles until the music stopped, then lying down on the floor for Quiet Time. I was very good at Quiet Time. Otherwise it was all a bit hopeless. I piddled on the floor when it was my turn to sing. Conversely, I got caught drinking my daily bottle of milk in the lavatory. For some reason this was regarded as a fearful crime. My mother used to pick me up after school. One day we missed each other and I went home alone on the bus. Meanwhile my mother was going frantic at the school. There were mutual tears that night. Next day when I answered my name at the morning assembly roll-call, the headmistress said, 'Ah yes, that's the little boy who ran away from his mother.' Thanks a lot, witch. I kacked my pants on the spot.

The whole secret of kacking your pants, incidentally, is to produce a rock-solid blob which will slide down your leg in one piece and can be rolled away into hiding at the point of the toe. That way, your moment of shame can be kept to the proportions of a strictly local disaster. But if you let go with anything soft, it takes two teachers to clean you up and the whole affair attracts nationwide publicity. You get people interviewing you.

3. BILLYCART HILL

The name I answered to in my early years was Vivian James. Later on my mother gave me my choice of new first names and I picked Clive out of a Tyrone Power movie. She sympathized with the fix she and my father had got me into by naming me after Vivian McGrath, star of the 1938 Davis Cup squad. After Vivien Leigh played Scarlett O'Hara the name became irrevocably a girl's name no matter how you spelled it, so those few little boys who had been saddled with it went through hell. I just got sick of ending up on the wrong lists, being sent to sewing classes, etc. Children in Australia are still named after movies and sporting events. You can tell roughly the year the swimming star Shane Gould was born. It was about the time *Shane* was released. There was a famous case of a returned serviceman who named his son after all the campaigns he had been through in the Western Desert. The kid was called William Bardia Escarpment Qattara Depression Mersa Matruh Tobruk El Alamein Benghazi Tripoli Harris.

Things marginally improved when I was promoted, a year early, from the Infants' School to the Primary School. The embarrassments of co-education were at last left behind. No longer were we obliged to pair off and hold hands tweely when marching into the classroom – a huge advance on previous conditions. I achieved early promotion solely through being good at reading. The reason I was good at reading had nothing to do with school. In our last year at Jannali I had started to pick my way through Grandpa's musty old bound sets of *Wide World* magazine. Also there were bright yellow heaps of the *National Geographic*. In our first years at Kogarah, while searching my mother's room, I found the wardrobe half full of magazines. These were mainly *Picture Post*, *Lilli-put*, *Collier's*, the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Life* and *Reader's Digest*. I started off by looking at the pictures but gradually progressed to being able to read the text.

I can't remember what it was like not to be able to read English fluently.

Nowadays, if I am learning to read a new language, I try to savour the moment that separates not knowing how to from not knowing how not to. At the time, I simply found myself able to read. Over the next few years I absorbed everything in those few hundred magazines. I read them until there was nothing left to read and then read them again until the covers pulled away from the staples. The *Saturday Evening Posts* with the Norman Rockwell covers satisfied every demand of my aesthetic sense, the gustatory requirements included. I used to read them instead of eating. I felt about them the way Turgenev felt about the emblem book he wrote of to Bakunin, and made a part of Laretsky's childhood in *A Nest of Gentlefolk*.

I suppose if I had been John Stuart Mill I would have sought out a better class of reading matter. Indeed my father and mother had done a lot of fairly solid reading together: stacked away at the top of the cupboard in the hall were cheap sets of Dickens, Thackeray and the Brontës. For some reason I was never to seek them out, even in my teens. I always had an automatic aversion to the set books. Reading off the course was in my nature. My style was to read everything except what mattered, just as I ate everything except what was good for me.

In primary school I ceased being the class half-wit and became class smart-alec instead. This presented a whole new set of difficulties. Coming out first in the term tests attracted accusations of being teacher's pet. It was true, alas: Mr Slavin, although a fair-minded man, couldn't help smiling upon anyone who knew how to answer the questions. Too many boys in the class had trouble remembering their own names. Most of the heat was focused on an unfortunate called Thommo, who was caned regularly. For ordinary offences Thommo was caned by Mr Slavin and for more serious transgressions he was caned by the deputy headmaster. Mr Slavin was authorized to impart up to four strokes. Thommo usually required six even to slow him down. We used to sit silent while the deputy head gave Thommo the treatment outside in the corridor. The six strokes took some time to deliver, because Thommo had to be recaptured after each stroke, and to be recaptured he had first to be found. His screams and sobs usually gave away his location, but not always. One day the police came to the classroom and made Thommo open his Globite school case. It was full of stolen treasures from Coles and Woolworths: balloons, bulldog paper clips, funny hats, a cut-glass vase. Thommo was led howling away and never seen again.

Despite Thommo's fate, on the whole I would rather have been him than me. His manly activities merited respect. As teacher's pet, I was regarded with envy, suspicion and hatred. I had not yet learned to joke my way out of trouble and into favour. Instead I tried to prove that I, too, could be rebellious, untrammelled, dangerous and tough. To register, any demonstration of these

qualities would have to be made in view of the whole class. This would not be easy, since my desk was at the back of the room. There were five columns of desks with seven desks in each column. The five most academically able boys sat in the back five desks and so on down the line, with the desks at the front containing the dullards, psychopaths, Thommo, etc. The problem was to become the cynosure of all eyes in some way more acceptable than my usual method of throwing my hand in the air, crying 'Sir! Sir! Sir!', and supplying the correct answer.

The solution lay in the network of railway tracks carved into the top of each desk by successive generations of occupants. Along these tracks fragments of pencil, pen holders or bits of chalk could be pushed with chuffing noises. I also found out that the exposed wood was susceptible to friction. At home I was already an established fire-bug, running around with a magnifying glass frying sugar-ants. I had learned something of what pieces of wood could do to each other. This knowledge I now applied, rubbing the end of my box-wood ruler against the edge of one of the tracks. A wisp of smoke came up. Eyes turned towards me. The wisp became a billow. More eyes turned towards me. The billow was fretted with fire. Mr Slavin's eyes turned towards me.

He gave me his full four strokes. The pain was considerable, but the glory was greater. 'What's sauce for the goose,' he said as I tucked my smarting hands under my armpits, 'is sauce for the gander.' Mr Slavin's epigrams were distinctly sub-Wildean but he had a knack for trotting them out at precisely the appropriate moment. He might even have had an inkling of how much I wanted to be a goose.

This small triumph spurred me fatally towards bigger things. There was a craze on for dongers. Crazes came one after the other. There was a craze for a game of marbles called followings. There was a craze for cigarette cards: not the cards that used to come in packets of English cigarettes, but cards made elaborately out of the cigarette packets themselves. The cards had different values according to brands, with English Gold Flake scoring highest and Australian Craven 'A' scoring lowest. You flicked your cards at a wall. The one who finished nearest the wall got a chance to toss all the cards in the air at once. The ones that fell face up were his. Bottletops worked roughly the same way, except that the one who got closest to the wall stacked all the bottletops on his upturned elbow and then swiped downwards with his hand, getting to keep as many of the bottletops as he could catch between hand and wrist. It is difficult to describe and even more difficult to do. I always lost. I wasn't bad at cock-a-lorum, but falling over on the asphalt playground added painfully to my usual array of sores and scabs. The craze I hoped to be good at was dongers.

A donger was an ordinary handkerchief folded into a triangle. You held each end of the hypotenuse and twirled until the handkerchief had rolled itself tight. Then you held the two ends together in one hand while you rolled the fat centre part even tighter with the other. The result was then soaked in water to give it weight. The more reckless boys sometimes inserted a lead washer or a small rock. The completed donger was, in effect, a blackjack. Every playtime, with me hovering cravenly on the outskirts, donger gangs would do battle against each other. The brawls looked like the Battle of Thermopylae. Finally the teacher on playground duty would plunge into the mêlée and send everyone in possession of a donger up to the deputy headmaster to get six. With me hovering elsewhere, solo desperadoes would then creep up on their victims behind the teacher's back. The idea was to clobber the target and be walking in the opposite direction with the donger in your pocket before the teacher turned around. He always turned around because the sound of the donger hitting someone's head was unmistakable. It sounded like an apple hitting concrete.

I was very keen not to be among those victimized. It followed that I should become one of those doing the victimizing. To this end I built a donger and chose the target likely to win me the most fame. At one point in the circumference of the playground there was a low picket fence separating the boys' primary school from the girls' primary school. It was forbidden to linger at this fence. I noticed a girl using the fence as a whippy. She was leaning against it with her face buried in her folded arms while other girls hid. If some other girl got to the whippy while she was away searching, there would be a cry of 'All in, the whippy's taken.' But at the moment she was still busy counting to a hundred, I came at her in a long curving run, swinging the donger like a sling. Contact was perfect. She dropped as though poleaxed – which, to all intents and purposes, she had been. I ran right into the teacher's arms.

And so I kept my feared but wished-for appointment with the deputy headmaster. He was a tall, slim man in a grey dust-coat. I can't remember his name, but I can well remember his quietly sardonic manner. He pointed out to me that in hitting the little girl I had caused her pain, and that he was now about to show me what pain was like. The instrument I had employed on the little girl had been strictly banned. The same embargo, he explained, did not apply to the instrument he would now employ on me. I was inspecting this while he spoke. It was a long, thick cane with a leather-bound tip. Unlike other canes I had seen, it did not seem to be flexible. Instead of swishing when it came down, it hummed. The impact was like a door slamming on my hand. I was too stunned even to pee my pants. The same thing happened to the other hand. Then the same thing again happened to each hand twice more in succession. That would teach me, he

informed me, to hit little girls with dongers.

If he meant that it would teach me *not* to hit little girls with dongers, he was right. For one thing, I couldn't have lifted a donger, let alone swung one. When I tried to feed myself my play-lunch sandwiches, I kept missing my mouth. But at least the fame accruing to the maximum penalty had raised my status somewhat. I was never admitted to the inner circle of Kenny Mears, the school's most impressive bully. But for a while I was not so often among those bullied. Probably I was lucky not to be included among the oppressors. I admired Mears, but for his self-possession more than for his capacity to inflict suffering. He was completely without fear. Like Napoleon or Hitler, he seemed imaginative through having no idea of natural limits to his actions. He was a sawn-off Siegfried, a Nietzschean superman in short pants. He embodied Gibbon's definition of the barbarian, since his liberty was to indulge the whim of the moment, and his courage was to ignore the consequences. He was a frightful little shit.

But he had the kind of poise that I have always envied. He swore at the teachers man-to-man and could absorb an infinite amount of punishment without batting an eye. Indeed he never even blinked. Playing marbles, he made Mick Roach look like the Marquis of Queensberry. Mears fudged unblushingly. Wittgenstein defined a game as consisting of the rules by which it is played. If he had seen Mears in action, he would have realized that a game is further defined by what the dominant player can get away with. The basic rule of marbles is that the taw must be fired from outside the ring. If the firing hand creeps inside the ring before the moment of release, it's a fudge. Mears fudged more blatantly than his helpless opponents would have believed possible. Standing up instead of crouching down, he fell forward until his firing hand was almost touching the dates. Then he released his taw. The dates sang out of the ring and into his keeping. If anybody protested, violence would ensue. Nor was anyone allowed not to play. Years later I saw the film of *Guys and Dolls*. There is a famous scene where Nathan Detroit's floating crap-game moves to the sewers, and Big Julie from Chicago proposes to roll his own dice, which have no spots. When challenged, he produces a .45 automatic. I thought immediately: 'Mears.'

Mears's favourite means of persuasion was the Chinese burn. Grasping your hand in one of his, he would twist your wrist with the other. After having this done to me by boys older and bigger, I sought revenge by doing it to boys younger and smaller. But I quickly found out that I was naturally averse to being cruel. Reading the *Wide World* magazines, I had been excited by a chapter dealing with torture chambers. I still find it disturbing that sex and cruelty should

be connected somewhere in my instincts. But the human personality is a drama, not a monologue; sad tricks of the mind can be offset by sound feelings in the heart; and the facts say that I have always been revolted by the very idea of deliberately causing pain. Considering the amount of pain I have been able to cause without meaning to, I suppose this is not much of a defence, but to me it has always seemed an important point. I burned a lot of sugar-ants with my magnifying glass, but if the sugar-ants had spoken to me as they might have spoken to St Francis, I would have desisted soon enough. Having a character that consists mainly of defects, I try to correct them one by one, but there are limits to the altitude that can be attained by hauling on one's own bootstraps. One is what one is, and if one isn't very nice or good, then it brings some solace to remember that other men have been worse. At various times in my life I have tried to pose as a thug, but the imposture has always collapsed of its own accord. I could be coerced into hurting other people. I have done it by chance often enough. But I could never enjoy it.

At home things were a bit easier than at school. Once or twice I announced my intention of running away, but my mother defused the threat by packing me a bag containing peanut-butter sandwiches and pyjamas. The first time I got no further than the top of our street and was back home within the hour. The second time I got all the way to Rocky Point Road, more than two hundred yards from home. I was not allowed to cross Rocky Point Road. But I sat there until sunset. Otherwise I did my escaping symbolically, tunnelling into the poultry farm and surfacing among the chooks with a crumbling cap of birdshit on my head.

The teacher's pet image would have followed me home if my mother had had her way. She had a deadly habit of inviting the neighbours in for tea so that she could casually refer to my school reports a couple of hundred times. The most favoured recipient of these proud tirades was Nola Huthnance, who lived four doors down. Nola Huthnance was no mean talker herself, being joint holder, with her next-door neighbour Gail Thorpe, of the local record for yapping across the back fence – an unbeatable lunch-to-sunset epic during which there was no point at which one or the other was not talking and very few moments when both were not talking simultaneously. But not even Nola Huthnance could hold her own when my mother got going on the subject of her wonderful son and his outstanding intelligence. Long after I had been sent to bed, I would lurk in the hall listening to my mother extolling my virtues in the lounge room. Apparently Gogol's mother was under the impression that her son had invented the printing press and the steam engine. My own mother thought along roughly the same lines. I lapped it all up, but could see even at the time that such talk would do me no good with the locals, unless I cultivated a contrary reputation on my own

account.

Luckily, whether by being just the right age or by having more than my fair share of productive neuroses, I continued to think up the kind of games that most of the other children in Margaret Street were keen to get in on. Wet weather put an end to the tunnelling season, but it produced flooded gutters. In those days proper concrete kerbing had not yet been laid down. Water flowed down erratic gutters through the width of bare earth and clay between the front strip and the ragged-edged asphalt road. Swollen with rain, these gutters were ripe for having sticks and plastic boats raced down them. At the top of Margaret Street, beyond the T-junction with Irene Street, was a block of waste ground known as the quarry. Probably the convicts had once hacked stone there – Botany Bay was only about a mile to the east. The fall of ground from the back to the front of the block was only fifteen feet or so but to us it looked like Annapurna. In wet weather the water poured down the exposed rock face of the quarry and formed streamlets begging to be dammed. I used to build whole networks of mud dams, fanatically smoothing them off and facing them with pieces of fibro, so that they resembled the photographs of the Boulder and Grand Coulee dams in my *Modern Marvels Encyclopedia*. In the lakes formed by the dams I built harbours for plastic boats. Liberated from the confines of the bath, they could be pushed around in a more interesting seascape than that bounded by my soapy knees. There were secret bases under tufts of overhanging grass. Holding my face close to a boat as I pushed it, I could study the bow waves and the wake. The boats were only a few inches long but they looked like the *Bismarck* if you got near enough. I built roads along the docks and up through the foothills. Plastic, lead and tin toy cars could be pushed along them. Dinky Toys were rare at that time. A Triang Minic jeep – later lost, to my mother’s anguished disgust – was the star turn. Wound up, it could make progress even through mud. Other vehicles had to be pushed. With them it was all pretend.

But it was pretend in ideal surroundings. Other children brought their boats and cars, blundering into my ashlar revetments, gouging crude paths, botching together laughable garages and ludicrous U-boat pens. At first I told them to go and build their own dams. Then I resigned myself to having my work ruined. At the small price of an offence to my aesthetic instincts, I was able to rule the roost. Besides, with cheap labour available my schemes could be allowed to wax ever grander. Like Themistocles linking Athens with Piraeus, I walled in the whole area. My designs assumed the proportions of Karnak or Speer’s Berlin. I was the overseer, the construction boss, the superintendent of works. But even when my loyal slaves were toiling away in every direction, I would sometimes relapse into a detailed concern for a certain stretch of road or dockside,

smoothing it endlessly with the edge of my hand into an ever sweeter curve or sharper edge.

None of this meant that I was a good practical hand. For example, I could not build bilycarts very well. Other children, most of them admittedly older than I, but some of them infuriatingly not, constructed bilycarts of advanced design, with skeletal hard-wood frames and steel-jacketed ball-race wheels that screamed on the concrete footpaths like a diving Stuka. The best I could manage was a sawn-off fruit box mounted on a fence-paling spine frame, with drearily silent rubber wheels taken off an old pram. In such a creation I could go at a reasonable clip down our street and twice as fast down Sunbeam Avenue, which was much steeper at the top. But even going down Sunbeam my bilycart was no great thrill compared with the ball-race models, which having a ground-clearance of about half an inch and being almost frictionless were able to attain tremendous velocities at low profile, so that to the onlooker their riders seemed to be travelling downhill sitting magically just above the ground, while to the riders themselves the sense of speed was breathtaking.

After school and at weekends boys came from all over the district to race on the Sunbeam Avenue footpaths. There would be twenty or thirty carts, two-thirds of them with ball-races. The noise was indescribable. It sounded like the Battle of Britain going on in somebody's bathroom. There would be about half an hour's racing before the police came. Residents often took the law into their own hands, hosing the grim-faced riders as they went shrieking by. Sunbeam Avenue ran parallel to Margaret Street but it started higher and lasted longer. Carts racing down the footpath on the far side had a straight run of about a quarter of a mile all the way to the park. Emitting Shockwaves of sound, the ball-race carts would attain such speeds that it was impossible for the rider to get off. All he could do was to crash reasonably gently when he got to the end. Carts racing down the footpath on the near side could go only half as far, although very nearly as fast, before being faced with a right-angle turn into Irene Street. Here a pram-wheeled cart like mine could demonstrate its sole advantage. The traction of the rubber tyres made it possible to negotiate the corner in some style. I developed a histrionic lean-over of the body and slide of the back wheels which got me around the corner unscathed, leaving black smoking trails of burnt rubber. Mastery of this trick saved me from being relegated to the ranks of the little kids, than which there was no worse fate. I had come to depend on being thought of as a big kid. Luckily only the outstanding ball-race drivers could match my fancy turn into Irene Street. Others slid straight on with a yelp of metal and a shower of sparks, braining themselves on the asphalt road. One driver scalped himself under a bread van.

The Irene Street corner was made deathly perilous by Mrs. Dumbarton's

The Irene Street corner was made doubly perilous by Mrs Branthwaite's poppies. Mrs Branthwaite inhabited the house on the corner. She was a known witch whom we often persecuted after dark by throwing gravel on her roof. It was widely believed she poisoned cats. Certainly she was a great ringer-up of the police. In retrospect I can see that she could hardly be blamed for this, but her behaviour seemed at the time like irrational hatred of children. She was a renowned gardener. Her front yard was like the cover of a seed catalogue. Extending her empire, she had flower beds even on her two front strips, one on the Sunbeam Avenue side and the other on the Irene Street side – i.e., on both outside edges of the famous corner. The flower beds held the area's best collection of poppies. She had been known to phone the police if even one of these was illicitly picked.

At the time I am talking about, Mrs Branthwaite's poppies were all in bloom. It was essential to make the turn without hurting a single hair of a poppy's head, otherwise the old lady would probably drop the telephone and come out shooting. Usually, when the poppies were in bloom, nobody dared make the turn. I did – not out of courage, but because in my ponderous cart there was no real danger of going wrong. The daredevil leanings-over and the dramatic skids were just icing on the cake.

I should have left it at that, but got ambitious. One Saturday afternoon when there was a particularly large turnout, I got sick of watching the ball-race carts howling to glory down the far side. I organized the slower carts like my own into a train. Every cart except mine was deprived of its front axle and loosely bolted to the cart in front. The whole assembly was about a dozen carts long, with a big box cart at the back. This back cart I dubbed the chuck wagon, using terminology I had picked up from the Hopalong Cassidy serial at the pictures. I was the only one alone on his cart. Behind me there were two or even three to every cart until you got to the chuck wagon, which was crammed full of little kids, some of them so small that they were holding toy koalas and sucking dummies.

From its very first run down the far side, my super-cart was a triumph. Even the adults who had been hosing us called their families out to marvel as we went steaming by. On the super-cart's next run there was still more to admire, since even the top-flight ball-race riders had demanded to have their vehicles built into it, thereby heightening its tone, swelling its passenger list and multiplying its already impressive output of decibels. Once again I should have left well alone. The thing was already famous. It had everything but a dining car. Why did I ever suggest that we should transfer it to the near side and try the Irene Street turn?

With so much inertia the super-cart started slowly, but it accelerated like a

piano falling out of a window. Long before we reached the turn I realized that there had been a serious miscalculation. The miscalculation was all mine, of course. Sir Isaac Newton would have got it right. It was too late to do anything except pray. Leaning into the turn, I skidded my own cart safely around in the usual way. The next few segments followed me, but with each segment describing an arc of slightly larger radius than the one in front. First gradually, then with stunning finality, the monster lashed its enormous tail.

The air was full of flying ball-bearings, bits of wood, big kids, little kids, koalas and dummies. Most disastrously of all, it was also full of poppy petals. Not a bloom escaped the scythe. Those of us who could still run scattered to the winds, dragging our wounded with us. The police spent hours visiting all the parents in the district, warning them that the billycart era was definitely over. It was a police car that took Mrs Branthwaite away. There was no point waiting for the ambulance. She could walk all right. It was just that she couldn't talk. She stared straight ahead, her mouth slightly open.

4. THE FORCE OF DESTRUCTION

Such catastrophes distressed my mother but she wrote them off as growing pains. Other exploits broke her heart. Once when she was out shopping I was riding my second-hand Malvern Star 26-inch-frame bicycle around the house on a complicated circuit which led from the backyard along the driveway, once around a small fir tree that stood in the front yard, and back along the narrow side passage. Passing boys noticed what I was up to and came riding in. In a while there were a dozen or so of us circulating endlessly against the clock. Once again I could not leave well alone. I organized a spectacular finish in which the riders had to plunge into my mother's prize privet hedge. The idea was for the bike's front wheel to lodge in the thick privet and the rider to fall dramatically into the bush and disappear. It became harder and harder to disappear as the privet became more and more reduced to ruins.

Giddy with success, I started doing the same thing to the hydrangeas. Finally I did it to the fir tree, ramming it with the bike and falling through it, thereby splitting its trunk. When my mother came wearily down the street with the shopping she must have thought the house had been strafed. I was hiding under it – a sure sign of advanced guilt and fear, since it was dark under there and red-backs were plentiful. She chased me up the peach tree and hit me around the ankles with a willow wand. It didn't hurt me as much as her tears did. Not for the only time, I heard her tell me that I was more than she could cope with. I suppose there was a possibility that I somehow felt compelled to go on reminding her of that fact.

Bombing my bed didn't make me very popular either. It was a trick I learned while recovering from mumps. Climbing onto the top of the wardrobe in my room, I would jump off and land on my bed, which seemed an immense distance below. Actually it was only a few feet, but the bed groaned satisfactorily. Eventually there were half a dozen of us climbing up and jumping off in rapid succession. It was a mistake to let Graham Truscott play. He had a double chin even at that age and a behind like a large bag of soil. But it took him so long to

even at that age and a bedstead like a large bag of soil. But it took him so long to climb the wardrobe that it seemed unreasonable not to let him jump off it. The frame of the bed snapped off its supports with the noise of a firing squad and crashed to the floor with the roar of cannon. I sent everyone home and tried to restore the bed to its right height by putting suitcases under it, but all that did was cave in the suitcases. Once again it was very dark under the house.

And once again there was an element of panic in my mother's fury. It sprang, of course, from the fact that what we owned was all we had. My mother had a war widow's pension to bring me up on. It wasn't much. The Returned Servicemen's League, always known as the RSL, was a formidable pressure group in the post-war years but those servicemen who had not returned exerted no pressure at all. The Legacy Club threw a Christmas party every year. Otherwise the bereaved wives were paid off mainly in rhetoric, most of it emanating from the silver tongue of Robert Gordon Menzies, alias Ming, who went on being Prime Minister for what seemed like eternity. My mother never failed to vote for him. She had quite a lot of political nous, but Ming's patrician style numbed her judgement. Thus she went on remaining loyal to the Liberal Party, while the Liberal Party went on ensuring that her pension would never be so lavish as to encourage idleness.

She eked out her pittance by smocking babies' dresses. The smocking was done on a brick wrapped in cloth. The panel to be smocked was threaded on a long pin and the pin was in turn pushed through the cloth along the top edge of the brick. Then with a needle and thread she produced row after row of tiny stitches, the stitches forming exquisite patterns on the pink or blue cloth. She was paid piece rates. They were not high. She worked pretty well all day and often far into the evening while we listened to the radio. She would stop only for Jack Davey, who we were agreed was a great wit. Bob Dyer she found ridiculous, but listened to him just so that she could loathe him. After I went to bed she often went on working. Once a week she took the finished pieces up to the woman in Oatley who assembled the dresses. The round trip took the whole day. It was often during these absences that I perpetrated my worst crimes, such as the bed-wrecking incident. Right back at the very start, almost the first week we were in Kogarah, I distinguished myself by helping to restore the colour in a faded patch of the lounge-room carpet. I did this by rubbing a whole tin of Nugget dark tan boot-polish into the deprived area. By the time she got back from Oatley I was already in pre-emptive tears, having divined that the results did not look quite right. On such occasions she looked beyond anger, manifesting a sort of resigned desperation.

Gradually I learned that damaging anything around the house produced more emotional wear and tear than I could deal with. So I started damaging things

away from the house. I became adept at knocking out street lights. There was plenty of gravel lying around at the edge of the road. After dusk I could bend down, pick up a stone, flick it up at the light, and be halfway home before the pieces of shattered bulb hit the ground. These were small-time depredations but they led on to bigger things.

Every Saturday afternoon at the pictures there was a feature film, sixteen cartoons and an episode each from four different serials. The programme just went on and on like Bayreuth. The Margaret Street children would join up with the Irene Street children and the combined mass would add themselves unto the Sunbeam Avenue children and the aggregate would join the swarm of children from all the other areas all moving north along Rocky Point Road towards Rockdale, where the Odeon stood. In summer the concrete footpaths were hot. The asphalt footpaths were even hotter: bubbles of tar formed, to be squashed flat by our leathery bare feet. Running around on macadamized playgrounds throughout the spring, by summer we had feet that could tread on a drawing pin and hardly feel it.

When you got to the Odeon the first thing you did was stock up with lollies. Lollies was the word for what the English call sweets and the Americans call candy. Some of the more privileged children had upwards of five shillings each to dispose of, but in fact two bob was enough to buy you as much as you could eat. Everyone, without exception, bought at least one Hoadle/s Violet Crumble Bar. It was a slab of dense, dry honeycomb coated with chocolate. So frangible was the honeycomb that it would shatter when bitten, scattering bright yellow shrapnel. It was like trying to eat a Ming vase. The honeycomb would go soft only after a day's exposure to direct sunlight. The chocolate surrounding it, however, would liquefy after only ten minutes in a dark cinema.

Fantails came in a weird blue rhomboidal packet shaped like an isosceles triangle with one corner missing. Each individual Fantail was wrapped in a piece of paper detailing a film star's biography – hence the pun, fan tales. The Fantail itself was a chocolate-coated toffee so glutinous that it could induce lockjaw in a mule. People had to have their mouths chipped open with a cold chisel. One packet of Fantails would last an average human being for ever. A group of six small boys could go through a packet during the course of a single afternoon at the pictures, but it took hard work and involved a lot of strangled crying in the dark. Any fillings you had in your second teeth would be removed instantly, while children who still had any first teeth left didn't keep them long.

The star lolly, outstripping even the Violet Crumble Bar and the Fantail in popularity, was undoubtedly the Jaffa. A packet of Jaffas was loaded like a

cluster bomb with about fifty globular lollies the size of ordinary marbles. The Jaffa had a dark chocolate core and a brittle orange candy coat: in cross-section it looked rather like the planet Earth. It presented two alternative ways of being eaten, each with its allure. You could fondle the Jaffa on the tongue until your saliva ate its way through the casing, whereupon the taste of chocolate would invade your mouth with a sublime, majestic inevitability. Or you could bite straight through and submit the interior of your head to a stunning explosion of flavour. Sucking and biting your way through forty or so Jaffas while Jungle Jim wrestled with the crocodiles, you nearly always had a few left over after the stomach could take no more. The spare Jaffas made ideal ammunition. Flying through the dark, they would bounce off an infantile skull with the noise of bullets hitting a bell. They showered on the stage when the manager came out to announce the lucky ticket. The Jaffa is a part of Australia's theatrical heritage. There was a famous occasion, during the Borovansky Ballet production of *Giselle* at the Tivoli in Sydney, when Albrecht was forced to abandon the performance. It was a special afternoon presentation of the ballet before an audience of schoolchildren. Lying in a swoon while awaiting the reappearance of Giselle, Albrecht aroused much comment because of his protuberant codpiece. After being hit square on the power-bulge by a speeding Jaffa, he woke up with a rush and hopped off the stage in the stork position.

Everyone either ate steadily or raced up and down the aisles to and from the toilet, or all three. The uproar was continuous, like Niagara. Meanwhile the programme was unreeling in front of us. The feature film was usually a Tarzan, a Western, or the kind of Eastern Western in which George Macready played the grand vizier. At an even earlier stage I had been to the pictures with my mother and been continuously frightened without understanding what was going on – the mere use of music to reinforce tension, for example, was enough to drive me under the seat for the rest of the evening. At a later stage I accompanied my mother to every change of evening double bill both at Ramsgate and Rockdale – a total of four films a week, every week for at least a decade. But nothing before or since had the impact of those feature films at the Rockdale Saturday matinees.

In those days Johnny Weissmuller was making his difficult transition from Tarzan to Jungle Jim. As Tarzan he got fatter and fatter until finally he was too fat to be plausible, whereupon he was obliged to put on a safari suit and become Jungle Jim. I was glad to learn subsequently that as Jungle Jim he had a piece of the action and was at last able to bank some money. At the time, his transmogrification looked to me like an unmitigated tragedy. His old Tarzan movies were screened again and again. Many times I dived with Tarz off Brooklyn Bridge during the climactic scene of *Tarzan's New York Adventure*. In

my mind I duplicated the back somersaults executed by Johnny's double as he swung from vine to vine on his way to rescue the endangered Jane and Boy from the invading ivory hunters. In one of the Tarzan movies there is a terrible sequence where one lot of natives gives another lot an extremely thin time by arranging pairs of tree trunks so that they will fly apart and pull the victim to pieces. This scene stayed with me as a paradigm of evil. No doubt if I saw the same film today I would find the sequence as crudely done as everything else ever filmed on Poverty Row. But at the time it seemed a vision of cruelty too horrible even to think about.

I can remember having strong ideas about which cartoons were funny and which were not. Mr Magoo and Gerald McBoing-Boing, with their stylized backgrounds and elliptical animation, had not yet arrived on the scene. Cartoons were still in that hyper-realist phase which turns out in retrospect to have been their golden age. The standards of animation set by Walt Disney and MGM cost a lot of time, effort and money, but as so often happens the art reached its height at the moment of maximum resistance from the medium. Knowing nothing of these theoretical matters, I simply consumed the product. I knew straight away that the Tom and Jerry cartoons were the best. In fact I even knew straight away that some Tom and Jerry cartoons were better than others. There was an early period when Tom's features were puffy and he ran with a lope, motion being indicated by the streaks that animators call speed lines. In the later period Tom's features had an acute precision and his every move was made fully actual, with no stylization at all. Meanwhile Jerry slimmed down and acquired more expressiveness. The two periods were clearly separated in my mind, where they were dubbed 'old drawings' and 'new drawings'. I remember being able to tell which category a given Tom and Jerry cartoon fell into from seeing the first few frames. Eventually I could tell just from the logo. I remember clearly the feeling of disappointment if it was going to be old drawings and the feeling of elation if it was going to be new drawings.

But the serials were what caught my imagination most, especially the ones in which the hero was masked. It didn't occur to me until much later that the producers, among whom Sam Katzman was the doyen, kept the heroes masked so that the leading actors could not ask for more money. At the time it just seemed logical to me that a hero should wear a mask. It didn't have to be as elaborate as Batman's mask. I admired Batman, despite the worrying wrinkles in the arms and legs of his costume, which attained a satisfactory tautness only in the region of his stomach. But Robin's mask was easier to copy. So was the Black Commando's. My favourite serials were those in which masked men went out at night and melted mysteriously into the urban landscape. Science-fiction

serials were less appealing at that stage, while white hunter epics like *The Lost City of the Jungle* merely seemed endless. I saw all fourteen episodes of *The Lost City of the Jungle* except the last. It would have made no difference if I had seen only the last episode and missed the thirteen leading up to it. The same things happened every week. Either two parties of white hunters in solar topees searched for each other in one part of the jungle, or else the same two parties of white hunters in solar topees sought to avoid each other in another part of the jungle. Meanwhile tribesmen from the Lost City either captured representatives of both parties and took them to the high priestess for sacrifice, or else ran after them when they escaped. Sometimes white hunters escaping ran into other white hunters being captured, and were either recaptured or helped the others escape. It was obvious even to my unschooled eye that there was only about half an acre of jungle, all of it composed of papier mâché. By the end of each episode it was beaten flat. The screen would do a spiral wipe around an image of the enthroned high priestess, clad in a variety of tea towels and gesturing obdurately with a collection of prop sceptres while one of the good white hunters – you could tell a good one from a bad one by the fact that a bad one always sported a very narrow moustache – was lowered upside down into a pit of limp scorpions. Exotic locations left me cold. What I liked was the idea of possessing unlimited powers and yet blending undetectably into everyday life, although not so undetectably that ordinary people would not be able to tell at a glance who I was. The trouble with Superman, Captain Marvel, Captain Marvel Jr., Batman and the rest of the dual-identity squad was that no one thought much of them when they were in mufti. Lois Lane practically wore her lip out sneering at Clark Kent while the poor drongo stood there and took it. Billy Batson was always getting his crutch kicked. Bruce Wayne was derided as a playboy. None of that happened to me. Discreetly informing people one by one, I made sure everybody in the district knew that when dusk descended it was I, and nobody else, who became the Flash of Lightning.

5. ENTER THE FLASH OF LIGHTNING

Thus there was no fruitless speculation about my real identity as I streaked past in my green felt mask and black cape. Like Dracula, the Flash of Lightning made his appearance only after nightfall. In the hours between sunset and bedtime an imposing figure could be seen outlined against the stars. In less time than it took to pronounce his name in an awed whisper, he was gone, running down one side of the street and up the other, darting along driveways, clambering over back fences and making his inexorable progress from backyard to backyard. You would not have known, when this sinister avatar caught and slipped your startled gaze, that his mask and cape had been made by his mother.

Actually the Flash of Lightning's cape was almost his undoing. It was fastened at his neck by two short lengths of rope tied in a bow. Flitting awkwardly homeward over our backyard fence one night, I got the rope tangled around the top of a paling. The result should have been death by strangulation. There was a frantic, wordless struggle in which the Flash of Lightning's proverbial dignity was overwhelmed by a mortal urge to breathe. Just when it looked like curtains for the Flash of Lightning, the cape popped a seam and I dropped vertically into the choco patch.

But such failures were few. Generally the Flash of Lightning was a success. Other boys started appearing in masks and capes. Moments after the sun dropped they would come swooping towards me like fruit bats. Obviously everything was up to me. Standing around in mysterious attire, surrogates of the Flash of Lightning awaited their instructions. Meanwhile they announced their names. There was a Green Flash, a Black Flash and a Red Flash. Graham Truscott wanted to call himself the Flash of Thunder. I took pity on them all and gave them their assignments. These started off as harmless games of doorbell-ringing but became less cute with time. Throwing gravel on Mrs Branthwaite's roof

must have been agony for her, even though it was endlessly amusing to us. Films of Kristallnacht never fail to make me think of those brilliantly staged raids by the Flash of Lightning, in which a dozen handfuls of gravel would all land on Mrs Branthwaite's tiles only seconds before the perpetrators, magically divested of capes and masks, were back at home sitting around the Kosi stove and helping their parents listen to *Pick a Box*. The difference between mischief and murder is no greater than what the law will allow. All we were allowed, thank God, was mischief – and in retrospect that looks bad enough.

What I had going, of course, was a gang. Only lack of opportunity saved us from outright delinquency. There was a limit to what destruction we could cause, but everything within that limit sooner or later got done. Overwhelming temptation was provided by a sudden increase in the number of building sites. The bottom half of the street, towards the park, had previously been vacant blocks. These were suddenly all built on at once by the Housing Commission. The plan was to provide a lot of new houses in a tearing hurry. People at the top of the street started sneering at the people at the bottom of the street before the people at the bottom of the street had even moved in. Adults were agreed that this sudden influx would lower the tone. By night, and even by day if conditions were favourable, the Flash of Lightning and his gang made sure that work on the building sites proceeded as slowly as possible.

It is remarkable how much damage a group of small boys can do to a building site if it is left unguarded. In loose moments I might pride myself on possessing a creative impulse but I don't have to do too much introspection before being forced to admit that a destructive impulse is in there somewhere as well. Under my supervision, dumps of mixed lime were well seeded with bricks. A brick dropped from high up into soft lime makes a very satisfactory glurp. Studded with bricks like ice cream full of chipped chocolate, the lime quickly became unusable. We smashed tiles by the hundred. Porcelain lavatory bowls were reduced to their constituent molecules. Timber frames stood upright, waiting for brick walls to be formed around them. Using an umbrella as a parachute, the Flash of Lightning could jump from the top of one of these frames and land in a sandpit. Or the Flash of Lightning thought he could. The Flash of Lightning was lucky to land perfectly flat, so that he was merely winded instead of crippled for life.

That put a temporary end to my share in the marauding. But if we had all gone out every night and worked until dawn taking apart everything that had been put together, transformation would still have been inevitable. The district was changing. The poultry farm was sold up and subdivided into blocks of building land. Irene Street was extended through it, to join up with a new road called

Madrers Avenue, so that there were now two ways up to Rocky Point Road. This must have happened in fits and starts over the course of years, but I remember it as a surge of innovation. Concrete kerbing was laid down, so that everybody's front strip had two edges to be kept sharply defined instead of one. Most sensational change of all, the sewer came. Vast trenches were dug in which pipes were laid. My mother boldly proposed that one of the miraculous new devices should be installed not only in the outside lavatory but in the bathroom itself. The very notion spelled doom for the dunny man.

Ever since I could remember, the dunny man had come running down the driveway once a week. From inside the house, we could hear his running footsteps. Then we could hear the rattle and thump as he lifted the lavatory, took out the full pan, clipped on a special lid and set down an empty pan in its place. After more rattling and banging, there was an audible intake of breath as he hefted the full pan onto his shoulder. Then the footsteps went back along the driveway, slower this time but still running. From outside in the street there was rattling, banging and shouting as the full pan was loaded onto the dunny cart along with all the other full pans. I often watched the dunny cart from the front window. As it slowly made its noisome way down the street, the dunny men ran to and from it with awesome expertise. They wore shorts, sandals and nothing else except a suntan suspiciously deep on the forearms. Such occasional glimpses were all one was allowed by one's parents and all that was encouraged even by the dunny men themselves. They preferred to work in nobody's company except their own. They were a band apart.

Years went by without those running footsteps being acknowledged by any other means except a bottle of beer left standing in the lavatory on the closest visiting day to Christmas Day. Otherwise it seemed generally agreed that the lavatory pan was changed by magic. From day to day it got fuller and fuller, generating maggots by about the third day. To combat the smell, honeysuckle was grown on a trellis outside the lavatory door, in the same way that the European nobility had recourse to perfume when they travelled by galley. The maggots came from blowflies and more blowflies came from the maggots. Blowflies were called blowies. The Australian climate, especially on the eastern seaboard in the latitude of Sydney, was specifically designed to accommodate them. The blowies' idea of a good time was to hang around the dunny waiting for the seat to be lifted. They were then faced with the challenge of getting through the hole before it was blocked by the descending behind of the prospective occupant. There was no time for any fancy flying. Whether parked on the wall or stacked around in a holding pattern near the ceiling, every blowie was geared up to make either a vertical dive from high altitude or a death-

defying low-level run through the rapidly decreasing airspace between the seat and your descending arse. The moment the seat came up, suddenly it was Pearl Harbor.

Once inside, enclosed under a dark sky, the blowies set about dumping their eggs. The memory of the results has always, in my mind, given extra vividness to Shakespeare's line about life in excrements. God knows what would have happened if ever the dunny men had gone on strike. Even as things were, by the end of the week the contents of the pan would be getting too close for comfort. Luckily the dunny man was a model of probity. Never putting a foot wrong, he carried out his Sisyphean task in loyal silence. Only when he was about to leave our lives for ever did his concentration slip. Perhaps he foresaw that one day the sewer would come to everywhere in the world. Perhaps, in order to ward off these grim thoughts, he partook of his Christmas beer while still engaged in the task. Because it was on that day – the day before Christmas Eve – that the dunny man made his solitary mistake.

My mother and I were having breakfast. I heard the dunny man's footsteps thumping along the driveway, with a silent pause as he hurdled my bicycle, which in my habitual carelessness I had left lying there. I heard the usual thumps, bangs and heaves. I could picture the brimming pan, secured with the special clipped lid, hoisted high on his shoulder while he held my mother's gift bottle of beer in his other, appreciative hand. Then the footsteps started running back the other way. Whether he forgot about my bicycle, or simply mistimed his jump, there was no way of telling. Suddenly there was the noise of . . . well, it was mainly the noise of a dunny man running full tilt into a bicycle. The uproar was made especially ominous by the additional noise – tiny but significant in context – of a clipped lid springing off.

While my mother sat there with her hands over her eyes I raced out through the fly-screen door and took a look down the driveway. The dunny man, overwhelmed by the magnitude of his tragedy, had not yet risen to his feet. Needless to say, the contents of the pan had been fully divulged. All the stuff had come out. But what was really remarkable was the way none of it had missed him. Already you could hear a gravid hum in the air. Millions of flies were on their way towards us. They were coming from all over Australia. For them, it was a Durbar, a moot, a gathering of the clans. For us, it was the end of an era.

Once the new lavatories were installed, the bathroom became the centre of all ablutions. I no longer took a book to the outside lavatory and sat absorbed, the door thrown open to admit light. Just as well, because towards the end of the unsewered epoch I was caught in that position by Valma Chappelow, the girl from across the road. She was older than I was, and which made it worse. She

from across the road. She was older than I was too, which made it worse. She came pounding around the corner of the house on her way to borrow something that her scatter-brained mother had forgotten to buy when out shopping – bread, butter, milk, meat or some other frippery like that. Valma got a good look at me sitting there with my pants around my ankles. She made sure everybody in the district got to hear about it. She told her pen-pals. Years later at a party in Caringbah, more than twenty miles away by train, I met a stranger who knew all about it. If I went to live in the Outer Hebrides I would probably find the inhabitants all giggling behind their hands.

But the district didn't change as much as it stayed the same. As I grew older, my picture of where I lived grew wider and more complicated. The expanding of one's vision is usually enough in itself to generate a feeling that everything is falling apart. Nevertheless one had a sense of constancy even at the time, and looking back on it I can see that my whole childhood was remarkable for the amount of entertainment permanently on flow. All you had to do was turn the tap and bend your pursed lips to the bubbler.

Admittedly some of the local adults were terrifying. Gail Thorpe's husband Wally was a pastry cook whose business had failed. His principal means of revenge was to browbeat his wife, who went away for electric-convulsion therapy every year or so. The only result of the treatment was to alter the position of her nervous smile, so that instead of being on the front of her face it ended up under one ear. By the time it drifted around to the front again she was ready for another course of treatment. Wally also tormented his children in various ways. He would go on tickling his younger daughter, Carmel, long after the desperately sobbing child had begged him to stop. Watching these performances, I woke up early to the reality of human evil. News of mass political atrocity has always saddened me but never come as a surprise. The only time I tried to interfere with one of Wally Thorpe's divertissements, he swore at me for ten minutes on end at the top of his voice. I went home stunned. My mother did her best to tell him off but it was clear that at such moments she sorely felt her loneliness. That night was one of the few times I ever heard her say, 'I wish your father had come home.'

The Goodhews were likewise a bit of a pain. They were so protective about their sons, Darryl and Des, that they would trail them about, checking up on what was going on. This could be awkward when what was going on was a full-scale battle involving the throwing of stones and bits of fibro. These battles usually took place up in the quarry, with the defenders occupying foxholes in the heights and the attackers moving up through the lowlands from one clump of lantana to another. Very properly concerned about their children losing an eye, the Goodhew parents would invariably show up just in time to see one of their

the Goodhew parents would invariably show up just in time to see one of their little darlings sconed by a rock or sliced open by a whizzing piece of fibro. The fuss would take weeks to die down. According to Mr and Mrs Goodhew, their children were being led astray by the local toughs. In fact their own progeny were the worst of the lot. Darryl Goodhew could look wonderfully innocent when his parents were around, but he was a dead shot when they weren't looking. He once knocked Beverley Hindmarsh off her dinkey at an incredible range. The missile was a lump of sandstone. He was sharing a foxhole with me at the top of the quarry. It was the best foxhole: you had to crawl through a lantana tunnel to get to it. Halfway down Margaret Street, Beverley was a dot on the horizon when Darryl launched the rock. It was a long time on its way. I had lost sight of it long before she abruptly stopped pedalling and crashed sideways with awful finality. Darryl immediately ran towards the scene of the crime with a look of concern. His air of innocence was so persuasive that Beverley's parents never thought of blaming him. They would have blamed me if I had been stupid enough to emerge from the lantanas. I was already established as Beverley's persecutor, having pinched her bottom one day with a metal reinforcing clip stolen from a building site. It was meant to be a joke, but it took a piece out of her pointed behind. I got belted for that, and if I surfaced now I would get belted again. Besides, Darryl would undoubtedly have pointed the finger at me. So I stayed up there until the stars came out. Beverley suffered nothing more severe than shock and a badly bruised infantile bud. When you consider that the stone might just as easily have removed an eyeball, you can see that we must have had a guardian angel.

Otherwise the adults left us pretty much alone. On the weekends we made our big expeditions to the pictures, the swamp or the dump. In the afternoons and evenings after school we played in the street. We played cock-a-lorum from one side of the street to the other. We played a game with half a dozen sticks spaced out along the front strip and you were allowed to take only one step between every two sticks. You kept moving the sticks further and further apart until nobody was left in except some visiting kid built like a praying mantis. You had to do as many chin-ups as you could on the box tree. There were complicated bike races around the block. The older boys did a lot of elaborate riding up and down in front of the girls, who used to sit in line on the Chappelows' front fence. Warren Hartigan could sit on his bicycle backwards and ride past very slowly. They stopped giggling when he did that. Graham Truscott should never have tried it. A spoke from one of the wheels went right through his calf.

We played hidings and countries. In countries you threw a tennis ball in the air and ran, calling out the name of a country. Each player had the name of a country. If your country was called, you tried to catch the ball before it bounced

country. If your country was called, you tried to catch the ball before it bounced, whereupon you could throw it up again and call out somebody else's country. If you only caught it on the bounce, you had to . . . Forget it. The rules went on and on. All that mattered was to throw the ball high. Greg Brennan could put it into orbit. He lived next door but one. Nobody lived very far away. We played on and on through the hot afternoon into the brief dusk and the sudden nightfall. Towards sunset the adults would appear on the front porches and start watering the lawn. They would tune the nozzles to a fine spray, which would drift in the air at the first breath of the summer wind that came every night. Usually it was a nor'easter. Sometimes it was the Southerly Buster. The Christmas beetles and cowboy beetles held jamborees around the street lights, battering themselves against the white enamel reflectors and falling into the street. They lay on their backs with their legs struggling. When you picked them up they pulsed with the frustrated strength of their clenched wing muscles.

Before there was the refrigerator there was the ice-chest. A block of ice was loaded into it every couple of days. If you left a bottle of lemonade on top of the block of ice the bottle would sink in and get deliciously cold. We weren't rich but we had meat three times a day, even if it had to be rabbit. Before myxomatosis was introduced, the Australian rabbit was a lightly built racing model that made excellent food. Only in a protein-rich country like Australia could such a marvellous beast be looked down on. Leftover rabbit legs could be put in the ice-chest after dinner and eaten for breakfast next day. Surrounded with cold white fat, they looked like maps of Greenland and tasted like a dryad's inner thigh.

When the watermelon man came there was more melon than anyone could eat. You scooped the lines of black seeds out with your crooked finger and bit a face-sized piece out of the cool, crisp, red, sweet slice. Chomping away until your ears were full of sugar. Slurping and snarling until there was hardly a trace of pink left on the white lining of the rind. There was a kind of drink-on-a-stick called the Skybomber – a tetrahedron of deep green, lime-flavoured water frozen so hard that its surface had no grain. You had to suck it for half an hour before it gave in and became friable. Then whole layers of it would come away sweetly and easily in your numb mouth, as if the molecules had been arranged in strata, like graphite. Every time I see that shade of green I think immediately of Skybombers.

I'm sure it was aesthetically justifiable for Proust to concentrate on his piece of cake, but in fact almost anything can take you back. There is a rhapsodic stretch about ice cream in *La Prisonnière* that proves the point exactly. He imagines his tongue shaping the ice creams of long ago, and suddenly all the

past comes rushing back with authentically uncontrolled force. Elsewhere in the novel he keeps his memory on a tight rein. Herzen was closer to the truth when he said that every memory calls up a dozen others. The real miracle of Proust is the discipline with which he stemmed the flow. Everything is a madeleine.

6. DIB, DIB, DIB, DIB

Somewhere about this time I was in the Cubs. When the time came for graduation to the Scouts, I was not accepted, and thus became for the brief time before I tossed the whole thing in, the oldest Cub in the First Kogarah Wolf Cub Pack and probably the world. Lacking the precious gift of taciturnity, I could never achieve the grim face essential to success in paramilitary organizations. Considering this fatal flaw, it is remarkable how many of them I tried to get into. The Cubs were merely the first in a long line. My mother made my scarf. It had to be in First Kogarah colours – maroon with yellow piping. She made me a woggle out of leather. Every Cub had to have a woggle. It held your scarf on. As well as the woggle, there were special sock-tops – called something like fuggles – which always fell down. After you passed your Tenderfoot you got a wolf's head, or diggle, to wear on your cap. Also on the cap went a scraggle for each year of service. In addition to woggles, fuggles, diggles and scraggles, successful Cubs had the right, indeed obligation, to wear a whole collection of insignia and badges. The second in command of a sub-pack of six Cubs was called a Secunder and wore a yellow stripe on his sleeve. The commander of a sub-pack was called a Sixer and wore two stripes. A sixer in his final year would be so covered in decorations that promotion to the Scouts became a physical necessity, lest he expire under the weight.

Ruling over the whole pack was Akela. Her name was taken from *The Jungle Book*. She wore a brown uniform with a Scout hat. Otherwise she, too, was burdened down with woggles and fuggles. At the beginning of our weekly meetings, we Cubs would squat in a circle and worship her. While squatting, we made wolf-head signs with our fingers and pointed them at the floor. Then we chanted, 'Akela, we'll do our best. We'll dib dib dib dib. We'll dob dob dob dob . . .' This routine was climaxed by a mass throwing back of heads and emitting of supposedly vulpine howls. I used to get through the dibbing and dobbing all right but during the howling I usually rolled over backwards.

My lack of noise could possibly have stemmed from a never-to-be-satisfied

My lack of poise could possibly have stemmed from a never-to-be-satisfied wonderment about what dibbing and dobbling might actually consist of, but more probably it was just the result of an overwhelming love for Akela. I adored her. A schoolteacher in real life, she was a mother figure with none of the drawbacks. For her own part, she must have found me a problem, since I trailed her around everywhere. The theory of Scouting, or in this case Cubbing, was that boys should become independent through the acquisition of woodcraft and related skills. All I ever learned was how to attach myself to Akela's skirt. This made it hard for Akela and Baloo to be alone. Baloo the Bear was a young adult King's Scout who visited the pack once a month. Decorated like a combination of Boris Godunov and General MacArthur, a King's Scout in full regalia could be looked at only through smoked glass.

Baloo also accompanied us on camps. We went on a camp to Heathcote, in the National Park. My mother came along to help. I had talked her into coming by telling her that every other mother would be there and that the campsite was yards from the station. It was seven thousand yards from the station. Mine was the only mother large-hearted enough to contribute her services. The trek to the campsite was along bush tracks and down cliffs. Swinging white-lipped from vines, my mother vowed to pick a bone with me later. By the time we got to the campsite she was too far gone to expend any of her remaining energy remonstrating with me. She cooked the sausages while Akela and Baloo put up the tents. It took Akela and Baloo about an hour's walk in the bush to find each tent pole. Meanwhile my mother doled out the exploding sausages and bandaged the hands of those Cubs – all of them heavily decorated with badges denoting proficiency in woodcraft – who had burned themselves picking up aluminium mugs of hot tea.

That night it rained like the Great Flood. The river rose. Tents collapsed. All the Cubs ended up in one big tent with my mother. Akela ended up in a pup tent with Baloo. Shortly afterwards they were married. Presumably Akela gave birth to either a bear or a wolf. By that time I had left the Cubs. You couldn't get into the Scouts without a certain number of badges. My own score was zero. Besides, I couldn't face a change of Akelas.

The big change I couldn't get out of was being sent to a special school. In fourth class at Kogarah, when we were all about ten years old, we took an IQ test. It was the Stanford-Binet, on which I score about 140. On the more searching Wechsler-Bellevue I get about 135. Such results are enough to put me into the 98th percentile, meaning that 97 per cent of any given population is likely to be less good at doing these tests than I am. This is nothing to boast about. Intelligence starts being original only in the next percentile up from mine, where the scores go zooming off the scale. Time has taught me, too slowly alas.

that there is nothing extraordinary about my mental capacities. In my romantic phase, which lasted for too long, I was fond of blaming my sense of loneliness on superior intellect. In fact the causes were, and are, psychological.

At the time, of course, none of these questions came up. My mother was simply informed that her son had revealed himself as belonging to a category which demanded two years of special education in the Opportunity 'C' school at Hurstville. Opportunity 'A' schools were for the handicapped and Opportunity 'C' schools were for the gifted. At either end of the scale special schooling was a dubious privilege, since it involved travel by electric train. Hurstville was only three stops down the Illawarra line but even such a short voyage offered plenty of opportunities for sudden death. Mothers very understandably worried themselves sick about what their precious little sons might be getting up to on trains that conveyed whole generations of schoolchildren at dizzy speeds without benefit of automatic doors. For boys of any age it was considered mandatory to stand near doorways. For older boys it was compulsory to stand at the very edge of the doorway, holding the door open with their shoulders, draping their arms negligently behind their backs with their hands loosely grasping the door handle, and keeping balance with their feet and legs as the swaying train hurtled through cuttings and over viaducts. Stanchions had been provided every hundred yards. They were meant to hold up the power lines, but had the additional function of braining anybody who stuck his head out of the window. Everybody stuck his head out of the window, drawing it back again as a stanchion loomed.

Every second train was a through, meaning it did not stop at Carlton and Allawah but attempted to break the world land-speed record on an uninterrupted run from Kogarah to Hurstville or vice versa. At either end it was considered de rigueur to alight as early as possible. Anyone waiting for the train to stop was considered a cissy. The more athletic boys could languidly step off and hit the platform running flat out. If they mistimed it they ended up with a gravel rash starting at the forehead and extending all the way to the toes. The sport came to an end when the champion, a boy named Newell, got his stations mixed up and stepped off at Allawah from the through train to Hurstville. When we got the news about his injuries – his left femur, apparently, was the only bone that remained intact – we became somewhat meeker about leaving the train early. Nevertheless the deaths continued to run at the rate of one a year. It was another ten years before automatic doors were tried out even experimentally. Perhaps someone was afraid that the Australian national character would be weakened.

At Hurstville there was an Opportunity 'C' fifth and sixth class with about thirty of us freaks in each class. Otherwise the school was normal. The freaks strove to be even more normal than everybody else – an instructive example of

the Australian reluctance to stand out from the pack for any reason other than athletic skill. Some of our number, however, ranked as exotica no matter how hard they tried to blend into the scenery. There was a boy called Nelson, for example, who made Graham Truscott look emaciated. Nelson needed two desks. But he could play chess at an exalted level. So could almost everybody else in the class except me. I didn't even know the moves. A lot of the boys in the class wore glasses and had notes from their parents excusing them from soccer, swimming, running, jumping or even crossing the playground unattended. They were all drafted into the school's fife band. On sports day they spent the afternoon marching awkwardly backwards and forwards while playing 'Colonel Bogey' on their black wooden fifes. The total effect was pathetic in the extreme.

The fife players also tended to wear those cissy sandals that looked like ordinary shoes with bits cut out of them. Whenever I could get away with it I defiantly stuck to bare feet. This was not, I think, any kind of class-conscious social gesture. I had no inkling of class differences. In Australia there is a widespread illusion that there are no class barriers. In fact they exist, but it is possible to remain unaware of them. There are social strata whose occupants feel superior but there is almost nobody who feels inferior, probably because the poor are as well nourished as the rich. It never occurred to me that most of the boys in the class came from more privileged homes than mine. If I had been smarter it might have done. The evidence was abundant. Graham Slender brought expensive toys to school. His father had bought them for him in America. One of the toys was a machine gun that fired ping-pong balls. For a few delirious seconds he showered the astonished class with bouncing celluloid spheres before the gun was impounded. Robert Lunn, David Carnaby, John Elstub and I usually occupied the back four desks in the class. Lunn seemed inordinately well supplied with funds. Sometimes after school he would shout half a dozen of us to a cream-cake blow-out in one of the Hurstville tea shops. He and I both knew what a blow-out was, since we had both been reading English comics and boys' weeklies. Most Australian boys at that time read American comics but a few read English ones as well. With Lunn it was all in the family: his parents brought him up in the English manner and eventually he went to Sydney Grammar and after that to Duntroon. With me it was an accident. When I had a suspected case of diphtheria just after the war I was taken by screaming ambulance to South Coast Hospital near Bunnerong powerhouse for three unforgettable weeks of ice cream and lemonade. There were papers like *Tip-Top* and *Radio Fun* lying around in the playroom. I made my mother buy more of them. On visiting days my mother would arrive looking like a news vendor. It took the edge off having to pee in a jar.

From then on I read *Tip-Top* every week and later graduated to the *Wizard*, *Rover*, *Hotspur* and *Champion*. By the time I got to Hurstville school I was an expert on these papers and could discuss their contents endlessly. I certainly identified with characters like Braddock VC and Alf Tupper, the Tough of the Track. Braddock was a non-commissioned pilot who defeated the Luftwaffe single-handed but contemptuously refused all promotions and decorations except the VC, whose ribbon he wore half hanging off. Stuffed shirts were always objecting to his behaviour in railway carriages and then having to apologize when they found out he was the RAF's greatest hero. Alf Tupper trained on fish and chips and ran the first four-minute mile. While admiring the prowess of these demigods, I completely failed to realize that they were fantasy figures specifically aimed at Britain's lower orders. Perhaps Lunn had a better understanding but I suspect that he, too, was largely in the dark. There was a serial in the *Wizard* about a poor lad who with the aid of his tremendously self-sacrificing mother was able to attend a public school. He wore patched trousers and had to endure much scorn from the toffs but ended up Captain of Swimming, Cricket, Football, Debates and finally of the School itself. I don't think I really understood what this story was all about. After all, in Australia all the schools were public – or so it seemed. It never occurred to me that in an English context 'public' meant 'private'. Possibly because I was clueless, but more likely because the provocation simply wasn't there, I didn't develop any kind of chip on my shoulder until much later, so the social content of almost everything I was reading failed to register, even when social content was the only kind of content it had.

By this time I was starting to devour books as well as magazines and comics. I went Biggies-crazy and generally became an expert on aeroplanes. While the chess players were getting on with their chess I would be busy reading *Worrals Wipes It Off* or memorizing air-recognition charts. At the age of eleven I could recognize a photograph of any aircraft that had been built at any time in any country in the world. The Opportunity system gave its pupils plenty of time to develop such interests. The normal curriculum was dealt with in the morning and the afternoon was left free for the development of potentialities. Unfortunately like most educational concepts this idea yielded pretty thin results. No reflection on our teacher, Mr Davis – who had been a navigator in a Lancaster during the war and could turn a back somersault off the one-metre board – but learning to recognize aeroplanes is not the same as acquiring knowledge. The inevitable result was that those boys who were receiving some guidance from home flourished while those whose sole stimulus was the school did little more than fool around with 'projects'. Since the choice of project was left to us, the results

were hopelessly variable as to quality. One boy with bifocals would be turning an old washing-machine into a particle accelerator while the boy at the next desk would be cutting out pictures of giraffes. I've just remembered the name of the boy at the next desk. His name was Tommy Pillans. He was unhappy at home and committed suicide in his first year with us – the first premature death in my generation. His desk was empty for only a few days. Then there was a reshuffle. Perhaps part of Nelson moved into it. Anyway, that was Tommy Pillans. Gone without a ripple. Not for the last time, I accommodated myself with ease to the idea of someone vanishing.

As well as glasses, John Elstub had all the other attributes of dampness – shoe-like sandals, knee-length khaki shorts, fife and a purse full of notes from his mother saying that he was not to be exposed to direct sunlight. The only day he ever appeared on the soccer field he ran away from the ball. He was the son of an academic of some kind and spent his time at home absorbing the contents of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*. He always knew the answers but had a way of calling out 'Sir! Sir!' that not even Sir could stand. Elstub was a standing joke. Yet he was reading *Ulysses* while I was learning to tell a Messerschmitt Bf. 109E from a Bf. 109F. (The Bf. 109E had struts supporting the tailplane and the Bf. 109F didn't.) I was invited to Elstub's house once. There were a lot of pre-war American aviation magazines lying around. I asked if I could borrow them and when I got home I cut them up and pasted the best pictures in my scrapbooks. Next day at school I presented Elstub with the *fait accompli* and he said it was all right. It never occurred to me at the time that he had behaved well and I badly, or that what I had done would have been considered thoughtless in someone half my age. I was simply convinced that aircraft were my department and that those magazines had no business being in Elstub's possession.

During the afternoons at school I spent a lot of time constructing sandpit battlefields full of lead soldiers. Later on, copying the school newspaper in *The Fifth Form at St Dominic's*, I started a wall magazine to which everyone was invited to contribute. I usually decided that hardly anybody's contributions were up to standard except mine. At the annual exhibition day, held in the school library, my sandpit battlefield made a huge impact. While all the parents stood devoutly around, I explained the strategic picture and announced that token detonations had been arranged in order to represent the effect of artillery fire and tactical bombing. Actually Slender, a dab hand at such matters, had sown the sand with bungers which could be set off in sequence by touching a wire to a battery. Slender was under the sand-tray with the battery. At the rehearsal we used Kwong Man Lung penny bungers and everything went all right. But for the performance proper Slender had planted something more ambitious – fourpenny

bungers the size of a stick of dynamite. On top of this he got nervous and touched the whole lot off at once. The Korean War was in progress at the time and the parents must have thought that the Chinese communists had arrived in Hurstville. One man jumped into his wife's arms – an extraordinary role-reversal which I would have laughed at if I had not had a mouth full of sand. It was cowardly of Slender not to come out.

The wall magazine was rather better received. Verbally it was derivative in every respect, with stories about heroic wartime fliers, athletes training on fish and chips and stoic young schoolboys rising above their patched trousers to become Captain of the School. Nearly all of it was written by me. But I shared responsibility for graphic design with David Carnaby. In the wall magazine, as in his notebooks, Carnaby had a subtle touch with lettering and a ravishing sense of colour. We usually shared the awards for the best set-out and decorated exercise books. I still like to think that my own lettering had a firmness of outline that his lacked. The grand designs were all mine. But he was unbeatable on tone and detail. Everything he did breathed a pastel elegance. It often happens that we are most touched by what we are least capable of. Evanescent delicacy is not the quality in the arts that I admire most, but it is often the characteristic by which I am most reduced to envy. Nowadays I know exactly what enchantment is being worked on me by Alain-Fournier's hedgerows or Monet's water lilies. I can put 'Miroirs' on the turntable and willingly succumb. I know that I can't do it myself but nowadays I can live with the knowledge. In those days I would look over Carnaby's shoulder and wonder if it was worth going on at all.

But go on I did, finding success easy. I was made class captain – a clear endorsement of my personality and attainments. There was thus no pressure on me to change my ways, which remained selfish, noisy and maladroit. At that time I was as big as, or bigger than, the boys around me, so it was not entirely absurd when I presumed to dominate them. As the teacher's representative I could usually make them toe the line, confident in the knowledge that it was less trouble for them to obey than to resist. My biggest coup was to maintain discipline through the long rehearsals for the Queen's visit. This involved months of drill for every school in Sydney, so that finally when everything was put together in the Showground the Queen and Prince Philip would be stunned by a coordinated display of callisthenics and flag-waving. For two days before the actual event we shone our shoes, polished our belts, had our teeth filled, etc. On the day itself the school transferred en masse to the Showground, where our display team, with me as front right marker, lined up with hundreds of other such teams to await inspection by the Royal Party.

We stood for hours in the boiling sun. The Royal Party was running late.

Children were fainting left and right, as if their serried ranks were subject to sniper fire. Suddenly there was a screech of tyres in the distance. The Queen and her consort screamed past us in a Land Rover. I remember that they were standing up. Each held on to the top of the windshield with one hand while giving the famous mechanical wave with the other. How their hats stayed on was a mystery, since they were travelling only slightly slower than a Formula One Grand Prix racing car. There were not too many details to remember, but it was evident that the Queen's complexion really was as advertised – peaches and cream. We then got on with our display. It was a measure of my almost psychopathic self-consciousness that I felt the Queen's eyes on me as I waved my flag. But I performed creditably, as did my team. Not counting Nelson, who had fainted long ago and been carried away on a couple of stretchers.

Generally it is our failures that civilize us. Triumph confirms us in our habits. I would probably have abused my power had I been given any. Fortunately my role as class captain was all responsibilities and no privileges. The most onerous duty was to keep order when Mr Davis was out of the room. I tried to do this by shouting 'Shut up!' at the top of my voice. Eventually I could stun the whole school by sheer lung-power. Otherwise, until the end of my stay there, Hurstville Opportunity 'C' hardly changed me at all, probably because what was going on at home was so intense.

I had enrolled myself in a family. The family were called the Meldrums and lived in Sunbeam Avenue. Mr Meldrum was a plumber. He and Mrs Meldrum had produced three children, all boys: in descending order of age they were Gary, Neil and Craig. There was also an Alsatian dog called Ruth, whom I will get to in a minute. All six of them lived in a house not much bigger than ours. Mr Meldrum wore a blue working singlet at all times. He was regarded in the district as something of a gypsy. In fact he was simply the most original man for miles. He made hardly any money but there was more going on in his house than in anybody else's. He had turned all the boys into good swimmers. Gary was exceptionally good and got his picture in the papers for swimming a mile at the age of ten. Neil was a bit of a black sheep and Craig was simply dense, but even they were encouraged in their interests. Neil was mad about stamps and Craig was held by Mr Meldrum to be a promising biologist. In fact Craig's biological studies consisted mainly of picking up privet grubs and eating them. He would also tuck into the occasional centipede. Mrs Meldrum's understandable hysteria at such moments would be overwhelmed by Mr Meldrum's gusto. He was the first man I ever met who had that. In short, he was a ready-made father figure.

The Meldrums taught me to swim. Mr Meldrum, Gary and Neil took me down to the creek in the park. Reeds lined the banks and willows kissed the surface.

The water was as brown as oxtail soup but Mr Meldrum said that any water was clean if you could catch healthy fish in it. All the Meldrums could swim across the creek underwater. To me it seemed a fabulous distance. Gary showed me how to hold my breath and keep my eyes open underwater. I could see his hair floating. Inside an hour I was dog-paddling. Mr Meldrum threw his own boys up in the air to turn back somersaults. Then I rode on Gary's shoulders, Neil rode on his father's, and we had battles in the shallow water.

That was just the start. I think I was eight years old, or perhaps nine. Over the next few years I spent more and more time at the Meldrums'. I would bolt my dinner and scoot around to their place in time to join them for a second dessert. Thus I laid the foundation of my uncanny ability to inhale a meal instead of eating it. Another bad aspect was the inevitable encounter with Ruth. Like all dog-owning families, the Meldrums regarded their four-footed friend as some kind of genius. Ruth was Mr Meldrum's blind spot. He seemed to think that his house would not be safe without Ruth to guard it. Apart from an abundance of life there was nothing in the house worth stealing. Nor, had there been, would Ruth have ranked as an early choice to stand sentinel. She was undoubtedly ferocious enough, but was no brighter than any other dog. She vented most of her fury on the family and its close acquaintances. If any burglars had turned up she would probably have ignored them, or else let them in and minded their tools. For me, on the other hand, she never failed to go through her entire repertoire of savagery. While I waited, yelling weakly, on the outside of the trellis gate in the side passage, Ruth would hurl herself against the inside of it like a piledriver and try to bite a piece out of it big enough to get at me through. I would stand petrified until a few of the Meldrums turned up, clubbed their pet into submission and dragged it back out of sight. Upon receipt of a written, signed guarantee that Ruth had been stapled to the ground with croquet hoops, I would advance trembling and join the family for dessert, tea and games.

There were scraps of dog-meat on the floor of the back veranda but Mr Meldrum's Rabelaisian spirit turned the chaos and squalor into luxury. He was a great one for word games after dinner. As a natural diplomat he was able to cope with the fact that I often turned out to be better at these than his own sons. Seeking his favour, I was too keen ever to try less hard. When the word games were over Mr and Mrs Meldrum would listen to the wireless in the lounge while the rest of us would try to cross the spare room in the dark without getting caught by the guard. You took turns being guard. The spare room lay at the end of the corridor and I remember it as being the size of the Grand Salon in the Louvre, although I suppose it could have been no bigger than a box room. Old cupboards and other articles of furniture were stored in it. It could be blacked out

perfectly, so crossing it undetected was a test of the ability to move silently while consumed with fear. Neil had a scary trick, when he was guard, of dressing up in some frightening costume and suddenly switching the light on. The mere possibility of his doing this was enough to make the hair rise on my neck the way it did at the pictures when the music indicated tension or impending doom.

On Saturday afternoons Mr Meldrum led expeditions to the Domain. The Domain, or Dom, was an old swimming baths opposite Woolloomooloo on the south side of Sydney Harbour. We got off the train at St James and walked to the baths through long lanes of Moreton Bay fig trees. At the Dom we changed into blue vees and swam. The benches on the bleached wooden catwalks of the Dom were weighed down with ancient wrecks soaking up the sun. Men older than John D. Rockefeller or Pope Pius XIII shuffled dazedly around, their vees draped approximately across their shrivelled loins, their skins burned so brown that their sprinklings of black skin cancers looked like currants in a fruitcake. But the main point was that they had lived a long time. Mr Meldrum was obviously right about the preservative effects of sea water.

Mr Meldrum, Gary, Neil and Craig always did well in the swimming races. To me it seemed too much like hard work. I had some of the knack for swimming but I lacked the will. My main reason for going to the Dom with the Meldrums was to be able to go home with them afterwards. On the way back through the trees to St James station Mr Meldrum bought huge paper bags full of fruit. We gorged ourselves on grapes and plums and had battles with the Moreton Bay figs lying around in thousands on the grass. On the train there were more word games. Laved and cured by salt water, fed to repletion with unadulterated fruit, we were in a state of grace.

For the rest of the weekend Gary was the ringleader. While Mr Meldrum was off doing the extra jobs which were obviously all that kept the bailiffs from the door, Gary was the one who led the great treks to Botany Bay or the dump at Tempe. Down at the bay in the early winter mornings we used to watch the fishermen pull in the nets and were usually given a few yellowtail or bream to take home. Before they built the refinery at Kurnell the bay used to be as full of fish as when Banks and Solander first stepped ashore. At Tempe dump I uncovered choice items for what was to become one of the world's leading collections of old piston rings, rusty egg-beaters, quondam bed-springs and discarded transmission components for Sherman tanks. I shall not attempt to describe my mother's joy when I lugged this stuff home, staggering out of the sunset long after she had called the police. A dump in those days, before plastics had conquered the world, was a treasury of precious metals.

It was Gary who led the first, historic expedition to Kingsford Smith aerodrome, always known to us by the name of the suburb near where it was situated, Mascot. The aerodrome was only a few miles distant – in fact our house was quite near the first set of approach lights to the main runway – but walking all the way there and back seemed a feat comparable in daring to anything contemplated by Burke and Wills. As for Mascot itself, it was simply fairyland. Until well along in my teens I went there almost every weekend, just to watch the aircraft land and take off. ANA and TAA were flying mainly DC-3s and DC-4s. The arrival of the first DC-6 was a big event. The first Stratocruiser flight to arrive from America was greeted with national rejoicing. The TAA ground staff let us take a look inside a Convair 240. Gary found the *Southern Cross* standing in a hangar with its tyres down. I suppose after Smithy's last flight they just wheeled it in there and left it. Standing with her nose tilted snootily upward in the gloom, the old blue Fokker tri-motor looked romantic past belief. There was no one in there with her except us. Gary couldn't get the cabin door open. But on a nearby stretch of waste ground there was the wingless hull of an amphibian Catalina. The guns had been taken out but the turrets and blisters were still in her. We used to climb inside and play wars for hours. Gary and I were pilot and navigator. Neil had the nose turret and Craig was the waist gunner – a good position for him, since among the ribs and stringers there were plenty of spiders to be caught and eaten. Defending Mascot from Japanese and German attack, we shot down hundreds of Zeros and FW190s.

The Meldrums' back veranda was a combination of dormitory, playroom and workshop. All three of the boys had their beds there. Each bed had its own set of shelves for a headboard. Neil's shelves held his stamp albums and catalogues. Craig's were a teeming, pulsing nightmare of chicken embryos and legless frogs. Gary's shelves were full of balsa model aircraft made from kits. Solid balsa kits are unheard-of nowadays, when all the skill required to make a model aircraft is a light touch with the plastic parts and a steady hand with the glue. In those days you matched a block of balsa against a rudimentary diagram and got going with a razor blade, which sliced your thumb as readily as it carved the balsa. If the result was recognizable as an aeroplane, you were an expert. If your thumb was recognizable as a thumb, you were a genius. Gary worked fast and accurately. He built a Ju.88, a Hawker Sea Fury, a Heinkel He.111, a Kitty Hawk, a Chance-Vought Corsair . . . I can remember them all. He would have had an air force if he had looked after them. But when he got tired of having them around he soaked them with dope and set fire to them. The glue came in a tube and was called Tarzan's Grip. If I close my eyes I can remember how it felt to squeeze the last tiny transparent blob from the malleable lead tube.

7. EROS AND THE ANGEL

It was love, of course. Gary was older than I was, sure of himself, capable at everything he tackled. I suppose my sexuality would have awoken by itself but he was certainly in on the beginning of it, although by the time I was getting passionate about him he was getting passionate about girls. Having already started masturbating without knowing even vaguely what I was at, I was delighted to discover that someone else did it and even got visible results. While I was still coming nothing but air Gary was able to conjure a whole vichyssoise into being. It probably never occurred to him that our mutual masturbation sessions were looked forward to by me, and looked back on afterwards, with a romantic, jealous fervour that could keep me awake for hours. Neil did his best to keep us apart out of what seemed to me sheer spite. I grew to hate Neil.

I don't think Gary was in any way homosexual or even bisexual. He was just bung full of juice, and attracted by the idea of initiating me in the ways of sex, which he was able to find out about at a precocious rate, since girls found him very attractive. After a day of battles with willow bows and reed arrows in the bush and swamp on the far side of the park, Gary would be the one who spotted the pairs of lovers parking their cars and heading for the ferns, wherein they would disappear by the simple expedient of lying down. Gary was the one who had a name for what they were up to. Neil was the one who made the mistake of firing an arrow. Reed arrows were dry, brittle and weightless until we tipped them with a piece of copper wire driven into the capillary left by the missing pith. Having no tail, the arrows lacked accuracy, but they could go a surprisingly long way if the bow was any good. Neil had spent a long time selecting his bow. It was strung so taut that it played a note when he plucked it. We were observing a distant area of ferns into which a courting couple had vanished some time before. In a low voice, Gary was imparting the unbelievable information that they were playing with each other in order to have babies. It was a fascinating speech until interrupted by a soft twang.

It would have been had enough if the man had stood up with one hand holding

It would have been bad enough if the man had stood up with one hand holding the arrow and the other holding his behind. Unfortunately it was the woman. The man was running towards us, buckling his belt. We lost him by ducking into the swamp. Even then Neil's insane giggle might well have given us away. Apart from Kenny Mears, Neil was the first example I ever encountered of someone who lacked any idea of a given action having necessary consequences. If he felt like hitting you with an axe, he hit you with an axe. Once Gary and I built a tepee in the backyard. Craig sat inside it pretending to be an Indian, an impression he reinforced by preparing himself a light snack of worms and woodlice. The rest of us danced around the tent pretending to be other Indians attacking. Neil had a garden stake for a spear. He hurled it full force at the tent. Craig came screaming out of the tent with the garden stake sticking straight out of his kidneys. It often happened that way. Neil would have a brainwave and shortly afterwards you would hear the sirens.

My erection-consciousness was exacerbated by Gary, who harped on the words 'big' and 'fat' until they became automatically funny. Whenever anybody used either of these words in conversation, Gary would smile at me and I would snicker uncontrollably. Similarly uncontrollable was my virile organ, which chose the most inconvenient moments to expand. For some reason riding on the top deck of the trolleybus led to a spontaneous show of strength. On the lower deck it didn't happen. I rode on the lower deck whenever possible, but sometimes I was forced upstairs, where my short trousers had a lot to cope with from the moment I sat down. Placed casually across my lap and held down with one negligent arm, my Globite school case kept things covered until we got to Kogarah station, but getting off the bus was a problem. If the bus terminated at Kogarah I could wait until everybody else had alighted, but if it was going on to Rockdale then I had to disembark come what might. There was a choice of carrying my school case unnaturally in front of me or else hopping along doubled over. At school there was the desk to hide under. As far as I could tell, nobody else at Hurstville had the same problem. It wasn't until I got to high school that cock-consciousness spread to fill the whole day.

At school there were friendships and crushes, but nothing physical except the usual business of walking around arm in arm. At home there was rampant sexuality, most of it centred on Gary. But if I was queer for him, it was the outward expression of an inward yearning for the feminine. My dreams were all of girls, even if I didn't, at that stage, connect what I dreamed of doing to them – I remember fantasies of being pressed against them very tightly – with what I actually did in Gary's company. Not long after the war, when I was just starting at Kogarah Primary, my mother took me for a week's holiday at Katoomba. The hotel was called the Sans Souci – the same name, confusingly, as a suburb just

near Kogarah, on the George's River. But Katoomba was a long way away, in the Blue Mountains, surrounded by famous tourist attractions like the Scenic Railway, the Three Sisters, the Everglades gardens at Leura and the Jenolan caves. Another husbandless mother staying at the hotel had a daughter my age who wore lace dresses. I christened her Lacy Skirts, after Gary's best guinea pig.

Lacy Skirts was my first case of the *visione amorosa*. I lurked for hours near her staircase just to get a glimpse of her. Somehow I managed to get to know her and we played chasings around the hotel. Rarely touching her, I had such an awareness of her physical existence that my chest hurt every time I looked at her. I never spoke of my feelings and so never found out what she felt for me, but I can remember clearly (probably because the vision was to keep recurring, each time with a different object, for many years to come) that my obsession was as transforming and exalting as whatever passed through the heart of Augustine Meaulnes in the brief time he spent with Yvonne de Galais. A picture of Lacy Skirts is no longer in my head, but my adoration for her is still the central memory of that holiday – a fair measure of intensity, since a lot else happened. I got earache on the bus to Jenolan as it wound around the mountains. Touring the limestone caves, I was in frightful pain, and was already crying when I ran off into the bush to pee. Running back to the bus again, I tripped over in full sight of everybody and fell into a patch of giant stinging nettles. Pelion was piled on Ossa. Happening one on top of the other, the earache and the nettles constituted an almost biblical attack on one's equilibrium. Job wouldn't have stood for it. But concentrate as I might, I can't recall the pain, whereas when I think of Lacy Skirts, even though I can't bring back her face, I can recall exactly the sensation of beatitude. We forget the shape of the light but remain dazzled for ever.

My next amorous vision was the Pocket Venus. Again we were on holiday, this time at a resort on the Hawkesbury River called Una Voce, which was pronounced Ewna Vose even by its proprietors. Being by then almost eleven years old, I was better able to stay out of my mother's hair. If there were any patches of giant nettles, I managed to walk around them, instead of falling in. It was my mother who gave my vision its name. We were having lunch in the dining room on our first day in residence when a small adolescent girl walked in. She had on a soft pale pink blouse, white shorts and gold sandals laced up the calf, in the manner of a miniaturized, tennis-playing Greek goddess. Sitting there in my short trousers with my feet nowhere near touching the floor, I instantly realized that my lack of years was an irreversible tragedy. There seemed no hope of making her aware that I was alive. I lurked in the corridors waiting for an opportunity to walk suddenly past her. There was, of course, no question of actually addressing her in words. As I remember it, my plan was to attract her

attention by the intensity of my walk. The idea was to look so lost in thought that she would be unable to resist asking what the thought was. Alas, she resisted successfully for days on end, despite the fact that she was unable to travel far in any direction without having her path abruptly crossed by a short, swiftly moving philosopher.

When I wasn't hanging around the corridors I was immersed in the swimming pool, waiting for her to appear so that she could be impressed by my ability to swim across and back underwater. Since the pool was no bigger than a sheep dip this was scarcely a great feat, but with the exception of the Pocket Venus everyone sitting around the pool was ready to agree, when prompted, that I had the amphibian properties of a platypus. The Pocket Venus was never there to agree about anything. On the day she finally showed up, she was wearing a light blue satin one-piece costume and looked more beautiful than the mind could bear. Desperate for recognition, I took a deep breath and went into my act. The stress of the moment, however, caused me to take this deep breath under the surface instead of above it. Having travelled about a yard, I emerged with my hair in my eyes and my lungs full of water. Exercising heroic self-control, I did not cough or splutter, but managed a terrible half smile which was meant to indicate that I had just thought of something important enough to warrant interrupting an otherwise inevitably successful assault on the world swimming record. When my vision cleared, the Pocket Venus was no longer there. She had changed her mind and gone back up to the guest house. Such moments should have been educational but unfortunately there is nothing to indicate that self-consciousness can be lessened by proof of the world's indifference.

Every night there was a social in the ballroom. Wallflower was an insufficient word to describe me. I was a wallshadow, a wallstain. In order to conceal my short trousers I stood behind things. Boys only a few years older than I were dancing with her – actually *touching* her. But those few years were an unbridgeable chasm. On the far side of the abyss lay long trousers, an Adam's apple, depth of voice and tallness of stature. On the near side lay bare knees, a piping treble, sweaty hands and a head that stuck out at the back. For months that grew into years I was to spend a good part of every day checking my profile with two mirrors, hoping to find my chin sticking out more and the back of my head sticking out less. I envied boys with no backs to their heads. Even today I envy James Garner. At all costs I had to minimize the number of occasions on which the Pocket Venus could see my head from the side. I modified my approach in the corridors so that my head was always pointing straight at her even when my body was in profile. I was lucky not to walk out of a window, instead of merely into a waiter carrying a tray of custards and junkets. Even then

she didn't notice me.

She finally noticed me on the second last day of the holiday. It was in the ping-pong room – a context in which noticing me was hard to avoid, since I had developed a style of play so elaborately baroque that I must have looked like one of those Russian girl gymnasts who dance with a ribbon. Every stroke of the bat was counterbalanced with an upflung pose from the other hand. The general effect, I later realized, must have been more comic than impressive: mere virtuosity, however precocious, could not have attracted such crowds. On the other hand it was impossible to imagine the Pocket Venus being cruel. It must have been kindness that led her to pick up a bat and ask if she could play. She was bad enough at it to make us an even match. We played half that day and all the next morning. I talked endlessly, trying to fascinate her. At least twenty years were to go by before I began realizing that there is no point in such efforts – what women like about us is seldom something we are conscious of and anyway people don't want to be charmed, they want to charm. I probably couldn't have managed things worse, but for a wonder she seemed to like my company, despite my never falling silent except when we touched (it was permissible to brush against her slightly when changing ends) or when she bent over to pick up the ball. When she did that I caught such glimpses of the lace edges of her panties under her shorts that I was drained of all motion. Suddenly I was a dead mackerel. She would straighten up with the ball in her hand and find herself confronted with someone who looked as if he had been zapped with a death ray or injected with cement.

Reality dispelled the dream only to the extent of revealing my light of love to be a nice, ordinary girl. I fell more in love than ever and could hardly breathe for grief when the boat took me and my mother away and left the Pocket Venus behind. The Hawkesbury had flooded during our stay and was by then almost up to the front porch of the guest house, so she was only a few feet away from me as we waved goodbye. Dropping away on the fast-flowing muddy current – the whole flux dotted thickly for miles with countless oranges from the ruined orchards – I looked back on her as she grew smaller, already embarked on the rearward voyage that would take the details of her inexpressibly sweet face beyond the reach of my memory.

No, there was never any real question about which sex I would love when the time came. But not for years would the time come, and in the meanwhile I was as queer as a coot. For most of my two-year stretch at Hurstville I led a double life. At home there were vividly physical encounters with Gary, involving a good deal of mutual masturbation, which must have been a lot more interesting for me than for him, since he had something you could get a grip on, and which

produced tangible results. At school I formed crushes on the other boys. In an English public school such passionate attachments would presumably have led to buggery, rape, torture and perhaps death, but in a Sydney day school there was not much that could happen. Nevertheless the emotions were real, although it was often embarrassing to discover that they were not reciprocated in equal strength, or indeed at all. I was far keener on walking with my arm around Carnaby, for example, than he was on walking with his arm around me. But at least he took me home to show me his Dinky Toys, of which he had an amazing collection. There were avowals of inseparable companionship. I did the avowing and he nodded, or at any rate didn't shake his head.

Other boys in the class might have been more forthcoming but I was interested only in the optimates. In my fancy, we were a band of brothers – the Boys in the Back Desks. On the last day of school our class, 6A1, had to provide two teams for a Softball tournament against the regular sixth class, called 6A. There was a first team and a second team. Despite my position as class captain, I somehow ended up in the second team along with all the duds in weird sandals, while the optimates headed off together over the horizon, never to be seen again as a group. I was so disappointed I couldn't even cry. For days afterwards I turned the disaster over and over in my mind, trying to think of how I might have managed things differently. I even told my mother about it. Her advice was to forget it, since the day would come when I would look back on it and laugh. She was only half right. The day eventually came when I could look back on it without howling in anguish, but closer to equanimity than that I never came. Far bigger things have gone wrong for me since, but nothing has ever seemed so unfair. I can see why it hurt then. What is hard to see is why it should still hurt now.

Behind this apparent disaster lay a real disaster, unappreciated by me at the time. My marks had won me a bursary to Sydney Boys' High School. If I had gone there I might have been educated in some of the ways of a gentleman. I suppose that was not much of a loss. More to be regretted was that I might have been educated in some of the ways of Latin, Greek, English literature, or indeed anything. That Sydney High School counted as one of the so-called Great Public Schools was a side issue. The central point to notice was that its academic standards were unquestionable. The same could not be said of Sydney Technical High School. Unlike Sydney High, which was well situated near Moore Park, Sydney Tech was a tumbledown collection of old buildings in Paddington, a district which was still fifteen years from being rediscovered by the conservationists, and which was at that time still largely inhabited by prostitutes too jaded for the brighter lights around the docks. Nor was it GPS. Instead it was

CHS, or Combined High Schools – a difference its representatives spent a lot of time saying didn't matter. Nor would it have mattered, if Sydney Tech had truly been able to claim any special distinction. As it was, however, those parents who sent their boys there under the impression that they would receive outstanding instruction in mathematics and the sciences were being hoodwinked. Sydney Tech might have been a good school before my time there. For all I know it has been a good school again since I left. But while I was in attendance it was mediocre at best.

But my wanting to go there wasn't the place's fault – apart, that is, from the fact that Carnaby was on the way there too. Elstub was bound for Sydney High, naturally enough: he knew what he wanted and his father knew that that was the best place to get it. Lunn was bound for Sydney Grammar – another suitable choice. Carnaby had a marked gift for mathematics, so Sydney Tech made some kind of sense for him. But it made no sense for me to choose Sydney Tech just because Carnaby was going there. As so often happens, however, the irrational motives were the decisive ones. The rational motive – that I thought I wanted to be an aeronautical engineer – I could have been talked out of if it had been properly explained to me that Sydney High produced more of those than Sydney Tech did. But the urge to follow Carnaby was proof even against my mother's distress, which was understandably torrential. The news that Sydney Tech had a squadron of air cadets put the matter beyond question, as far as I was concerned. I imagined myself at the controls of a Mustang taking off from the school playground.

My mother wanted me to have all the prestige that Sydney High would undoubtedly bring. She didn't want to have to go around hoarsely insisting that Sydney Tech was really something rather marvellous. With Sydney High there was nothing to insist about. Everyone knew that Sydney High was as good as you could get. And Sydney High, which people fought to get their sons into, had asked me to enrol! How could I not? She didn't get it. For months she kept on and for months I fought back. She was right, of course, but it didn't help. I owed it to her as a reward for all her work. It would have been better if I had given in. It would have been better still if the means had existed to make me do the right thing no matter how determined I was on doing the wrong. But on her own she was no match for me. I just wore her down.

8. THE IMITATION OF CHRIST

Thus, by a long battle of attrition, the matter was decided. But the beginning of my first year at Sydney Tech was still a long way away, at the far end of the school holidays. By this time the Meldrum boys had become regular attendants at Kogarah Presbyterian Church, which was situated about halfway between Prince's Highway and the station. Mr Meldrum, a rationalist, would have disapproved of this development. Unfortunately Mr Meldrum was no longer around. A load of pipes had slid off his flat-bed truck and pinned him to a wall. He was brought home to die. The process took several weeks. By now a seasoned campaigner, I had prudently withheld from him the vital last tenth of my affection, so I was well able to survive the shock: indeed I hardly noticed it, since by some inexplicable coincidence I took to calling at the Meldrum house with steadily decreasing frequency. Others, notably Mrs Meldrum, were less well armoured against fortune. She was prostrated. Not just to get some relief from their presence, but also to prepare them against an uncertain world, she started sending her boys to church. After a decent interval I followed.

Kogarah Presbyterian Church was a solid purple-brick and red-tile affair with plaster interiors. Standing opposite the St George District Hospital, it was handily placed to entertain the polio patients with massed singing of 'Onward, Christian Soldiers'. Many a surgeon must have paused gratefully during a tricky operation to relish the top notes of our resident coloratura, Mrs Pike, as she howled above the choir like a dingo with its paw caught in a trap. Scalpels must have frozen in mid-slice as the Boys' Brigade bugle band came marching by, emitting a rich collection of wrong notes and raspberries. One way and another the whole of Sunday and half the rest of the week saw the wee kirk teeming with activity. It was a whole way of life. I plunged into it gladly, egged on by my mother. I was supposed to be Church of England, but she wouldn't have minded if I had been going to a mosque, as long as I went.

My previous Christian experience had been confined to an interdenominational Sunday School run by the Purvis family at their house

interdenominational Sunday School run by the Purvis family at their house halfway down Sunbeam Avenue. Mrs Purvis played the piano and Mr Purvis showed 16mm films of aborigines being converted. In the early part of the film the aborigines were shown standing around naked with a crotch full of shadows and looking glum while flies camped on their faces. In the later part of the film they were wearing trousers and smiling like Loretta Young. It was Christ who had made the difference. They had taken Him into their hearts, whereupon the flies had upped stakes and moved on. When the lights went up Mr Purvis would launch into an attack on beer and Catholicism. He pronounced beer bee-ar. The legionaries who pee-arsed Christ's side with a spee-ar had undoubtedly been enslaved to bee-ar. A sure sign of Catholicism's fundamental evil was that it required the drinking of wine even in church, wine being mee-arly another form of bee-ar. Mr Purvis would then get us to sign the pledge all over again and send us home with a warning not to be kidnapped by nuns.

But the Purvises' Sunday School was strictly short pants, striped T-shirt and bare feet. We would have grown out of it anyway, even if Mrs Purvis hadn't died of cancer. The piano having fallen silent, there was nothing for Mr Purvis to do except remarry, move to Melbourne and start again. He became famous years later as an anti-Catholic campaigner, warning of attempts by the Vatican to invade Canberra. Once again he had films to prove it. Nuns were shown scurrying darkly down side streets, while a familiar voice on the soundtrack talked of how the Roman menace loomed ever more nee-ar, and of the growing fee-ar that it would soon be hee-ar.

Kogarah Presbyterian Church was the big time. On Sunday morning there was Sunday School, followed by church, at which the Boys' Brigade would frequently put in an appearance with snare drums rattling in approximate unison and dented bugles giving out random fragments of late Schönberg. In the early evening there would be church. Then there was a Fellowship meeting for older adolescents and young adults. This would be followed by church again, featuring a full-scale sermon from the Reverend C. Cummings Campbell, whose name was the inspiration of many a leaden joke ('the Campbells are Cummingses, yes they are,' etc.) and whose oratory bored the pigeons out of the roof. If you threw in and averaged out all the Harvest Festivals, preparations for Harvest Festivals, special study sessions for Sunday School teachers, special missionary group studies for Fellowship Study Circle leaders and so on, it would be possible to say that the devout young communicant could count on spending most of each week in constant attendance, with the odd break for meals. On Saturday night there was usually a Fellowship social. On Thursday night the Boys' Brigade drilled in the church hall. At one time or another, as I grew older, I took part in all these activities. starting with Sunday School and the Boys' Brigade.

Sunday School was a waste of time from the religious angle, but had conspicuous social value. A hundred children broken up into ten groups of ten, we learned the fundamental disciplines of sitting still for an hour while an older person told boring stories. Apart from the chance to take home a deckle-edged sticker, stick it in a book and bring the book back to be marked, there was no action. The stickers had luridly coloured biblical illustrations on them. There was also a catechism to be learned. Prizes were to be won for learning it. Thus the memory was tested, if not the religious sense. Over the next five or six years I won every possible prize, up to and including the rarely awarded Cummings Campbell Bible, without experiencing, or even needing to pretend I had experienced, a moment of religious belief. Among the teachers, the few genuine believers were manifestly as crazy as Mr Purvis. Any sign of true devotion among the pupils was regarded as bad taste. Eventually I was to become a teacher myself and make a practice of getting the holy stuff over as soon as possible so that I could get on with telling stories about Pearl Harbor or the campaign in the Western Desert. No pupil ever complained.

But that's to jump the gun. As a new Sunday School pupil I learned how to sit still with girls present. As a probationary recruit in the Boys' Brigade I learned how to march up and down. The Boys' Brigade was a paramilitary organization emanating, like the Scouts, from England, but with the emphasis on parade-ground drill rather than on woodsy lore. The uniform had to be imported from England. It consisted of forage cap, white cartridge pouch and brass-buckled belt, the whole thing worn over khaki shorts and navy blue shirts, although in winter we were expected to wear dark suits. One of the main attractions of belonging was that the merit badges, worn on the right sleeve, were made of what looked like solid silver. In practice these tended not to arrive from England even after repeated notifications that they had been won, but you could always live in hope. Another main attraction was that you got the chance to blow a bugle or bang a drum. It was with high expectations, therefore, that I set off for my first evening on parade.

My manner of dress perhaps showed questionable judgement. As a new recruit I was not entitled to wear Boys' Brigade uniform even if it had been available. To compensate I eked out my shorts, shirt and sandals with a few extras. On my head I put one of Ray's old RAAF forage caps with its flaps down. The cap was covered with about a hundred badges of various kinds, many of them celebrating our recent alliance with the Soviet Union. There were several portraits of Stalin. On my chest I wore my father's campaign medals – not just the ribbons, but the medals entire. Usually I was allowed to wear these only on Anzac Day when we went into town to watch the march, but my mother

had given me a special dispensation. On my belt was a holster containing a Ned Kelly cap pistol fully loaded. A multi-purpose jack-knife completed the ensemble. Since I was still quite small the jack-knife weighed me down on one side. I thought better of it and took it off. My mother persuaded me that the medals were perhaps gilding the lily, so I took those off too. The rest I kept.

Kindly Captain Andrews, the senior officer, forbore from comment on my appearance. There wasn't much he noticed by that stage. Having grown old in the task, he tended to daydream. I fell in at the low end of a long line, which then divided itself into four sections of half a dozen boys each. Everyone started off as a private. The mere ability to turn up once a week ensured one's eventual promotion to lance corporal. If your voice broke it was enough to make you a full corporal. To become a sergeant you had to pass a few exams. Beyond that lay the dizzy privilege of officer status, featuring long trousers and a cap with ribbons hanging down at the back. Down at my end of the scale it all looked very impressive, but even while occupying a rank more lowly than private I could see that Captain Andrews wasn't too hot at drill. When he said 'About turn!' we about-turned. When he said 'About turn!' again we about-turned again. He then showed us how we should have done it. Facing towards us, he ordered himself to about-turn. By rights, upon completion of this manoeuvre, he should have been facing away from us, so that we could see his back. Instead he would end up facing sideways, so that we could see him in profile. Quickly he would add a few shuffles to take him round the rest of the way. Gary was the corporal at the head of my section. I could see his shoulders quaking every time Captain Andrews got it wrong. That got me started. Thus a sense of the ridiculous was inculcated, at an early age. For years to come I found almost everyone ludicrous except myself.

In fact the Kogarah Presbyterian Church Company of the Boys' Brigade was a shambles. Annually we came last in the district drill competition, even when it was held in our own hall. Our bugle band terrorized not just the hospital but the whole area, with bitches whelping at its strident dissonance. Not long after I joined there was a Display Night, held in conjunction with Girls' Brigade. My mother was horrified to discover that her tiny son was last in a line of crouching small boys over which, or whom, large girls awkwardly dived before turning a forward roll on a mat. Her fears were justified. Graham Truscott's older sister Maureen was built like Fatty Arbuckle and looked no lovelier for being clad in black sandshoes, blue shorts and a singlet like a two-car garage. As proud parents sat open-mouthed on the surrounding benches, she came hurtling out of the back annexe, along the corridor, through the connecting door, into the hall, up to the springboard and into space. She drove me into the floor like a tack.

Artificial respiration got my breathing started while Captain Andrews and the Rev. C. Cummings Campbell attempted to calm my mother with a few ill-chosen words.

Such incidents were too common to be thought remarkable. At the District Athletics Carnival held at Trumper Park our company got no points. Count them: none. In the swimming carnivals Gary was our only swimmer ever to reach the finals of anything. As part compensation there was a great deal of rod-walloping. Masturbation, whether solo, mutual or of competition standard, was rife. So was petty theft. After a hard evening of copying Captain Andrews's about-turns we would all race down to Parry's milk bar, there to ingest the milkshake of our choice and rob the lolly counter when Mr Parry wasn't looking. The only time Mr Parry ever caught one of us he contented himself with delivering a white-lipped lecture. It was a wonder he didn't call the police. Anywhere in the world, immigrant shopkeepers have a particular horror of being robbed by the locals. It hurts to work so hard and suddenly discover that some of your customers subscribe to Proudhon's idea about property being theft. If Proudhon had been running the milk bar he would probably have reacted far worse than Mr Parry. Luckily for us, Proudhon had been dead since 1865.

The other half of my double life had more hesitant beginnings. It wasn't that I hated Sydney Tech. I just didn't connect with it. On weekday mornings I put on my school uniform. It consisted, reading from bottom to top, of black shoes, grey socks, grey worsted short-pants suit with school pocket badge, blue shirt, tie in the school colours of maroon and sky blue and grey felt hat with hat band in school colours. Add in the enamel school lapel badge and you had an awful lot of maroon and sky blue. Exercise books, pencil case, pens, technical-drawing set and Vegemite sandwiches went into the inevitable Globite school case. Lugging this, I rode the trolleybus to Kogarah station and caught the train to Central. Other Sydney Tech boys were already on the train from stations further down the line. As we got closer to town, more joined. Boys from Sydney High also got on. Their colours were chocolate and sky blue. Age for age, they seemed slightly taller than our lot, with clearer skins. They were quieter and read a great deal. At Central they caught one tram while we caught another. They went to Moore Park and we went to Paddington. Nobody except a few aesthetes had any idea at the time that Paddington's terrace houses were desirable residences. Gentrification lay far in the future. The only paint on show was kack brown and the cast-iron balconies looked like scrap metal waiting to be taken away. It wasn't a slum area like Redfern – which during the Queen's visit had been masked off with hessian so that she would be unable to see it from the royal train – but it was pretty grim. Sydney Tech was in the grimmest part and looked

even grimmer than its surroundings. The playgrounds were entirely asphalt: not a blade of grass. A solitary Moreton Bay fig tree in the lower playground was the only touch of green. Jammed between the dilapidated two-storey buildings, even less prepossessing 'temporary' single-storey buildings cut the playground space down to nearly nothing. In the open air there wasn't enough bench space for the whole school to sit down at once. We had to have lunch in two shifts.

Disaster struck on the first day, when Carnaby was assigned to a different class. In quiet desperation I sought out his company in the playground, but often he lunched in the other shift and always he was surrounded by new friends. So it had all been for nothing.

I didn't even get accepted for the Air Cadets. The fact that I knew more about air recognition than anyone else in the world counted as nothing beside the further fact that I had an unacceptable level of albumin in my blood. An independent pathologist wrote a note saying that my level of albumin was all right for me but the RAAF doctor wouldn't listen. If such an injustice had happened to me earlier it might have helped arm me against capricious Fate, but I was too spoiled to profit from the disappointment. Many, many years were to go by before I learned the truth of Noël Coward's comment about the secret of success being the capacity to survive failure.

Soon enough I made new friends in my own class, but not in the same way as Carnaby did. His natural authority was reinforced by early maturity. Either that year or the year after, his voice broke. He had acne for about two days and simultaneously grew a foot taller. During this period almost everyone except me did something similar. I obstinately stayed small. Nobody looked up to me any longer. In that first year the only thing that made me worth knowing was my good marks. The teachers weren't brilliant but they were conscientious. Besides, there was a certain flywheel effect carrying over from Hurstville, where we had been ahead of the curriculum. At the half-yearly examinations I averaged in the high nineties, coming third in the class. Things might have gone on like that for a good while longer if it had not been for Mary Luke.

I was coping with physics and chemistry well enough while Mr Ryan was still teaching them. But Mr Ryan was due for retirement, an event which was hastened by an accident in the laboratory. He was showing us how careful you had to be when handling potassium in the presence of water. Certainly you had to be more careful than he was. The school's entire supply of potassium ignited at once. Wreathed by dense smoke and lit by garish flames, the stunned Mr Ryan looked like a superannuated Greek god in receipt of bad news. The smoke enveloped us all. Windows being thrown open, it jetted into what passed for a playground, where it hung around like some sinister leftover from a battle on the

Somme. Shocked, scorched and gassed, Mr Ryan was carried away, never to return.

Back from his third retirement came Mary Luke. A chronic shortage of teachers led to Mary Luke being magically resurrected after each burial. Why he should have been called Mary was a datum lost in antiquity. The school presented him with a pocket watch every time he retired. Perhaps that was a mistake. It might have been the massed ticking that kept him alive. Anyway, Mary Luke, having already ruined science for a whole generation of schoolboys, came back from the shadows to ruin science for me.

Mary was keen but incomprehensible. The first thing he said at the start of every lesson, whether of physics or chemistry, was, 'Make a Bunsen burner.' He was apparently convinced that given the right encouragement we would continue our science studies in makeshift laboratories at home. So we might have done, if we could have understood anything else he said. Unfortunately 'Make a Bunsen burner' was his one remaining fathomable sentence. In all other respects his elocution made my late grandfather sound like Leslie Howard. The same comparison applied to his physical appearance. How could anyone be that old without being dead? But there were definite signs of life. The mouth moved constantly. 'Combustioff off magnesioff,' Mary would announce keenly. 'Magnesioff off oxidoff off hydrogoff off givoff off.' Worriedly I slid the cap off the inverted jar and ignited the gaseous contents to prove that hydrogoff had been givoff off. Carefully I drew the apparatus in my book, already aware that these preliminary experiments would be the last I would ever understand.

Perhaps I was never cut out for chemistry. But I had a right to think that physics might have lain within my scope. I impressed Mary with my precocious knowledge of the planets, which I could name in their order outwards from the sun. Mary looked momentarily blank at the mention of Pluto, but otherwise he seemed well pleased. A novel rearrangement of his lips took place which I guessed to be a smile. The teeth thereby revealed featured eye-catching areas of green amongst the standard amber and ochre. If only we could have stuck to astronomy. Instead, Mary sprang optics on us. 'Thoff angloff off incidoff,' he informed us, 'equoff thoff angloff off reflectioff.' We fiddled dutifully with pins and mirrors. I had the sinking feeling of being unable to understand. The moment of breakdown came when Mary started exploring the different properties of concave and convex mirrors. I couldn't see which was which when he held them up. More importantly, I couldn't tell the difference when he said their names. 'Thoff miroff off concoff,' he explained carefully, 'off thoff miroff off convoff.' Proud of having made things clear, he smiled fixedly, giving us a long look at his wrecked teeth. What was going *on* in that mouth of his? I could

see things moving.

But some of the other boys seemed to understand Mary even if I couldn't, and anyway in the straight mathematical subjects I had no excuse. The teaching might have been uninspired but it was sound enough. Besides, if I had had any mathematical talent I probably wouldn't even have needed teaching. As things were, I remained good at mathematics as long as mathematics remained arithmetic and algebra. I was passable at trigonometry. But when calculus came in, the lights went out. My average marks gradually started to shelve downwards. Things weren't helped by the weekly classes in woodwork and metalwork. I could handle technical drawing well enough, helped by my skill at lettering, but when I entered the workshop I was a gone goose. Metalwork was bad: anything I put in the lathe refused to come out true. It would start off as a cylinder and end up as a blob. So much for my dream of building new jet engines to outclass the Rolls-Royce Avon and the Armstrong Siddeley Sapphire, of designing aircraft whose power and beauty would enrol them among the masterpieces of Sydney Camm, Kurt Tank and Willy Messerschmitt. Woodwork was even worse. Nobody whose hands are not naturally dry can ever be a good carpenter, and I suffered badly from sweaty hands. My hands started to sweat with fear from the moment I put on my calico apron. By the time the woodwork teacher had finished explaining what we had to do my hands would be dripping like taps. Wet hands leave a film on wood that renders it hard to plane. Our first job was to make a breadboard. The breadboard had to be made from half a dozen lengths of wood glued together edge to edge. For this to succeed the edges had to be planed true. I kept on and on from week to week, planing away at my half-dozen pieces. It took me an entire term of classes before I got them true. By that time they were like chopsticks. When I glued my breadboard together it was the right length but only two inches wide. You couldn't have cut a French loaf on it.

At the end of second year my average mark was down into the eighties. Suddenly I had lost my role. Being bright could have saved me from the ignominy of not growing tall. Growing tall could have saved me from the ignominy of not being bright. As things were, I was losing on all counts. In every subject except English and German I was obviously going nowhere. German was all right for a while. At Sydney Tech there were only German and French to choose from. Typically I chose the less beneficial. It was taught by a huge, shambling teacher we called Lothar, after Mandrake the Magician's assistant. He was a nice man but charmless. I found it easy to keep level with Hans Kuckhoff, an immigrant from some unheard-of country whose family spoke German at home. Kuckhoff and I shared a desk and compared erections while Lothar concentrated on battering declensions into the heads of the slower

boys. *Der den des dem. Die die der der.* It was back to the Cubs.

In English I shone – fitfully, but sufficiently to keep my morale from collapsing altogether. Our teacher in the early years was ‘Jazz’ Aked. He also doubled as our music teacher: hence the nickname. ‘Jazz’ taught English according to the curriculum. The curriculum was prescriptive. There were grammar, parsing and Latin roots to be learned. Without resorting to violence, ‘Jazz’ had a way of getting results. Eventually I learned to parse any sentence I was given. I couldn’t do it now, but the knowledge is still there somewhere at an unconscious level. It was invaluable training. On top of that, he set good essay subjects. My essays were sometimes read out to the class. I was thereby established all over again as teacher’s pet, but at least it was *something*, in those dreadful days when everyone else seemed to be doubling in size overnight, while simultaneously acquiring an Adam’s apple like a half-swallowed rock, a voice like Wallace Beery and a case of acne like the boiling surface of the sun. Such are the pangs of being left behind – that you can die of envy for cratered faces weeping with yellow pus.

9. MILO THE MAGNIFICENT

My mother kept on assuring me that I would 'shoot up'. She was not to know I was one of the kind that acquires altitude gradually, with no sudden alteration of the hormonal levels. My testosterone was on a drip feed. In the long run this saved me from anything more revolting than the odd pimple and left me slightly taller than average, but at the time it seemed like a disaster, especially considering that my self-consciousness about girls had abruptly attained new heights, mainly due to the influence of Milo Stefanos. Half the quarry had been sold off as a building block. A house had been built: palatial by our standards, since the garage was underneath, which effectively gave the place two storeys. The Stefanos family had moved in. Hard-working New Australians, they ran a milk bar down at Brighton, on Botany Bay. Their eldest son, Philip, was already a young man and had attained some renown as a tennis player. Even older than Gary, he was beyond my reach. But their second son, Milo, was my age. He was still in short pants like the rest of us, except that in his case the short pants bulged and pulsed as if he had a live rat stuffed down them. Milo was precocious in every sense.

By now Gary was giving most of his spare time to rebuilding the rusted wreck of a War Department 500cc side-valve BSA that was eventually to become his first motorbike. He had left Kogarah Intermediate High School after the Intermediate Certificate and become an apprentice fitter and turner. The balsa-aeroplane days were over. He even left Boys' Brigade. I still visited him a lot and expanded my interest in aeroplanes to an interest in cars and motorbikes. I was buying and memorizing *Flight*, the *Autocar* and the *Motorcycle* every week. At that time they were still substantial publications. I acquired an immense theoretical knowledge. But it was gradually becoming clear to me that theoretical knowledge was not the same as practical capacity. Gary could strip and reassemble a gearbox. All I could do was hand him the spanners. His hands were covered with grease. Cutting oil, I noticed, looked rather like sperm, but

opportunities for checking this comparison were growing fewer all the time. Finally it became clear that Gary nowadays preferred doing that sort of thing with girls. Sensitive to my jealousy, he was slow to tell me, but finally the news was too big to hold in. In part recompense for my loss, I was told details. But the girls were Gary's age or older and it all happened somewhere else. There was no hope of joining in.

With Milo it was different. You could get in on all of his adventures, even the supreme one. Milo not only had access to everything, he enjoyed proving it. He had a lot in common with his compatriot Alcibiades. At the back of his garage were stacked hundreds of cartons of cigarettes – stock for the shop. Milo would appropriate the odd carton of Ardath or Craven 'A' to his own use. I thus started smoking at an early age, although it was some years before I dared do it in public. Milo smoked in public while he was still in those challenging short pants. Towards sunset he would appear at the front of the house, his crotch bulging softly in the twilight, and airily smoke a cigarette while combing his hair. Milo combed his hair constantly. Since he smoked constantly too, he spent a lot of time coughing quietly with his eyes screwed up. He looked like a small cloud preening itself. Gathering rapidly like the fast-falling Pacific night, Milo's followers grouped around him. Some of us sat on the front fence. Others did handstands and standing long-jumps on the front strip. Still others rode their bicycles along a complicated route down one of the Margaret Street footpaths and up the other. The route just happened to pass the front of the Chappelows' house, where the girls were gathered. It was rare for the girls actually to join us at that hour. Instead they pretended not to notice, the riders pretending not to notice them. Meanwhile Milo loaned out examples from his unparalleled collection of Carter Brown detective magazines. Carter Browns were famous for containing sex scenes. Pale by later standards, this was nevertheless unmistakably some kind of pornography. Erections were to be had while reading it.

Most sensationally of all, Milo had access to Laurel Smithers. Laurel lived in what used to be the house inhabited by the poultry farmers. Now that the poultry farm was gone and all the land built over, the old farmhouse on the hill was the only truly ramshackle house in the district. In effect that meant that it was the only building for miles which had any aesthetic interest at all, but since there was nobody within the same radius who had any notion of what aesthetic interest might happen to be, the house was universally regarded as a blot on the landscape. It had weatherboard walls and a corrugated-iron roof, upon which, after dark, the missiles of the Flash of Lightning and his masked companions would often rain. Quailing under this bombardment, the poultry farmers, their

occupation gone, either died off or moved out, or a mixture of both. The Smithers family moved in. Mr Smithers spent most of the day husbanding his energy, while Mrs Smithers potted about busying herself with light household tasks, such as breaking stones with a sledgehammer or forging new springs for the Model 'A' Ford museum piece they called a car. Laurel was their daughter. She was Allowed to Run Wild. Yacking over the back fence, our mothers were agreed, and went on agreeing, that Laurel would surely Get Into Trouble. They had the right idea, but were using the wrong tense. Laurel was already seizing every opportunity to be sexually interfered with by Milo. Indeed interference could go no further. They were at it continually. The only reason the adults didn't tumble straight away was that Laurel was already well embarked on her teens, whereas Milo was only just turning twelve. They comforted themselves with the thought that Milo would not know how. They couldn't have been more wrong. Not only did Milo know how, he was giving lessons.

The word in use was 'root'. Milo used to root Laurel standing up in the back of the garage. He also used to root her lying down in the back of the garage. On special occasions we were all invited to watch. One by one and two by two, half the boys in the district would make their way to Milo's garage on a Saturday afternoon. Inside the garage the atmosphere was tense, mainly because about fifty pairs of lungs were breathing it. Lost in admiration, envy and cigarette smoke, we all watched Milo perform. It was hard to say what Laurel was getting out of it. If she was standing up she looked at us over Milo's heaving shoulders as if we were strangers she was encountering in the street. If she was lying down she looked at the ceiling as if engaged in a long-term entomological study of the spiders inhabiting the rafters. The only evidence that she was not indifferent to the whole process was the way she kept coming back for more.

On very special occasions the rest of us were invited to join in. This only happened when Laurel was 'in the right mood'. If it turned out, after an hour or two of being pounded by Milo, that Laurel was in the right mood, everyone queued up and took a turn. The queue shuffled forward quite rapidly since Laurel would allow even the most fervent admirer only a few seconds inside the sanctum which she had otherwise dedicated to Milo in perpetuity. Only once did I dare join the queue. It was a complete fiasco. The erection which in other circumstances I had so much trouble getting rid of failed to materialize. It was an early instance of First Night Failure, made worse by the fact that it was happening in the early afternoon, when everyone could see – or would have seen, if I had not been so careful to unveil the timorous article only during my last step forward and to rehouse it as soon as I stepped back. Nor was my recalcitrant organ content with merely not inflating. It shrivelled up the way it

did after I had been swimming. Laurel was too aphasic to be openly contemptuous. Standing on tiptoe, I pretended to push myself inside her, copying the grunting noises I had heard from Milo and some of the others. It is even possible that Laurel was fooled. I, however, was not.

The incident was just one more piece of evidence bolstering the case for my physical abnormality. When in a state of excitement I could just about convince myself that I was sufficiently well endowed. But to detumescere was the same as to disappear. Other boys seemed to be the same length 'on the slack' as they were when erect, the only difference being that the thing hung down like a length of hose instead of climbing like an extension ladder. Milo, needless to say, was a case in point. On the rare occasions when his uncircumcised tonk was hanging limp, it was still as thick as a third thigh. At full stretch, it was the size of a Japanese midget submarine.

As bad luck would have it, Laurel from then on confined her favours to Milo exclusively, so I never got a second chance. But I still had good reason to be grateful to Milo, since it was in his company that I first came up with something more substantial than a sharp pain and a puff of air. As a masturbator Milo was if anything even more impressive than as a lover. Smoking casually with one hand, he employed the other to stimulate himself, his only problem being how to choose the most satisfactory grip. If he held the near end there was apparently a certain loss of sensitivity, so that the process might occupy a minute or even more. If he held the far end he could get results in a matter of seconds, but his arm would be at full stretch. There was no mistaking the moment when Milo was on the point of unburdening himself. You could practically hear the stuff coming. He could have put out a fire with it. With due allowance for scale, I was matching him stroke for stroke one day when suddenly I produced something. It was the only clear-cut sign of puberty I was ever to be vouchsafed. My pride knew no bounds. Even Milo was impressed – a generous reaction, since the stuff was all over one of his best Carter Browns. But the change of status might as well have been metaphysical for all the difference it made to the size of my dick when dormant. At school this problem aggravated all my other problems. After our PT sessions I lingered elaborately in the changing room so that I could duck into the communal shower after everybody else had come out. If I could manage a semi-erection everything was all right. I didn't mind joining in the towel-flicking if I had something to show. Unfortunately a semi-erection is no more easily achieved by will than a full-sized version. So I had to do a great deal of loitering.

It was an eternal anxiety. In a class full of cock-watchers, I had to keep something between my shrinking twig and a hundred prying eyes, all the while

contriving the deception so that it never seemed deliberate. Emerging from the shower with a towel draped casually around me, I had to put on my underpants before I took off the towel, but make it look as if I was taking off the towel before I put on my underpants. The result was a Gypsy Rose Lee routine of extraordinary subtlety. I calculated the sight lines and the lighting like Max Reinhardt or the Black Theatre of Prague. Either I was never spotted, or what I had down there looked less underprivileged than I thought. According to Hemingway, when Scott Fitzgerald proclaimed himself worried about the size of his tool (and we have only Hemingway's hopelessly unreliable word that this ever happened) the tall writer told the short writer that anybody's prong looks small when the owner looks down on it. On behalf of my younger self I would like to agree, but at the time I spent many an anxious hour in front of my bedroom mirror and there could be no doubt that my tussle looked the same from the side as it did from on top – i.e., like a shy silkworm.

As self-consciousness approached its dizzy peak, I spent so much of my spare time checking up on myself in mirrors that there was hardly any left over for little matters like homework. A dressing table, strangely enough, was among the few pieces of furniture in my room, which by now was a small library of books about aircraft, cars, motorcycles and war. The table beside my bed, which had previously housed my laboratory – which is to say, the collection of malodorous junk I had brought back from the dump – was now stacked with carefully filed and cross-referenced technical magazines. The cupboard off which we had all once dived onto the bed was now mainly a bookcase, in which such titles as *The Dam Busters* and *Reach for the Sky* took pride of place. On the walls, which my mother had tolerantly always allowed me to decorate as I pleased, coloured tracings of Disney characters had been joined by elaborate cut-away drawings of aircraft, so that you had a Dornier Do. 17 unloading its bombs on Donald Duck. The room was like the cell of a machine-mad monk. The only human touch was the half-length portrait on one wall, which turned out on closer examination to be the dressing-table mirror containing my reflection. Almost always the reflection was in profile, as I held up a hand mirror at an angle in front of me in order to see what I looked like from the side. Why did the back of my head stick out so far? Why did my jaw stick out so little? As all the boys around me started turning into men, I began to wonder if perhaps I was not doomed to look boyish for ever.

Even at its best, Sydney Tech was simply a waste of time. But even at its worst, it mainly just got me down, rather than driving me to despair. Had it been a boarding school I would probably have been in real trouble. As things were, most of my agonies were self-inflicted through an excess of inward-turned imagination. Unfortunately misery is not relative. For some reason the school

imagination. Unfortunately misery is not relative. For some reason the school prided itself on its achievements in rugby union. It always finished high in the CHS competitions and occasionally fielded a team which could lick the best of the GPS teams, although Sydney High always remained the unbeatable enemy. For most of my school career I was obliged to play House football, which was a joke. The very idea of dividing the school into houses was another joke. I was a member of Williams House. Nobody seemed to be bothered by the fact that no building existed which could be described as Williams House or even Williams Hut. In fact Williams House consisted exclusively of the yellow singlets its members wore during athletics competitions. Dyed at home by mothers commanding various techniques and materials, the singlets covered the range of all possible yellows from fresh butter to old urine. Wearing mine, I came third in the heats and second last in the finals. Once I had been a fast runner, but that was before I started to shrink.

House football took place in a park only a few miles' brisk march from the school. As a cold wind whipped across the grass, the two teams would position themselves in expectation of the opening whistle. The start of each half was the only time when the eye could detect even an approximation of positional sense. The moment the whistle blew, thirty small boys would gather around the ball, forming a compact, writhing, many-legged mound which during the course of what seemed like hours would transfer itself at random to different parts of the field. I was somewhere in the middle, praying it would end.

But there was worse to come. On days when a Grade football team had a bye, its members would be brought to our park so that they could practise dodging tackles. They ran down the field while we tried to tackle them. It went without saying that they were bigger, faster and more skilful than we were. The real nightmare was when the First Grade side turned up. The star of First Grade was Reg Gasnier, already tipped as the brightest schoolboy rugby prospect in years. Indeed he toured England the following year with the Australian Rugby League side. Merely to watch Gasnier run was to die a little. He was all knees and elbows. His feet scythed outwards as he ran, like Boadicea's hubcaps. There seemed no way of tackling him without sustaining a compound fracture. Up and down the field he steamed while we ran at him from different angles, only to bounce off, fall stunned, or miss completely as he sidestepped. He was beautiful to watch if you weren't among the prospective victims. The way he shifted his weight in one direction while swerving in the other was a kind of poetry. Regrettably it was also very painful if experienced at close quarters. I can well remember the first time I was deputed to tackle Gasnier. He was three times as heavy as I was, although, density having the relationship it does to dimensions, he was of course only twice as high. There were only a couple of hundred people

he was of course only twice as high. There were only a couple of hundred people watching. Gasnier appeared out of the distance like an express train moving unhampered by rails. I ran at him on a despairing collision course. Casually he put his hand in my face. My head stopped while the rest of me kept going, so that I spent a certain amount of time supine in midair before falling deftly on my back. While I was being resuscitated on the sidelines, Gasnier kindly materialized in my blurred vision and explained that the thing to do was keep my head low so that he could not palm me off. The next time I tackled him I kept my head low. Sidestepping with uncanny ease, he put his hand on the back of my head and pushed my face into the ground. So much for the friendly advice. When they picked me up, or rather pulled me out, there was an impression of my face in the turf that you could have made a plaster cast from. It would have looked disappointed but resigned.

None of this would have mattered if I could have kept up with the swimmers. Swimming had, after all, always been my best thing. The hours and days spent in the creek and the Dom with the Meldrums had paid off in a certain fluency of style. When I was twelve years old I used to hold my own in races across the creek against a local boy who subsequently was to take the silver medal for the hundred metres freestyle at the Melbourne Olympics. At the time when I could keep up with him we were the same size. By the time of the Olympics he was six feet three inches tall and could close his hand around the grips of two tennis rackets. But it wasn't just a matter of height. There was the question of attitude. I simply found excuses never to start training. After Mr Meldrum's death, and with Gary playing a less important part in my life, I felt able to attend Ramsgate Baths on the weekends. Ramsgate Baths was a set of tiled pools fed by seawater from Botany Bay. Since the water was confined and remained unchanged for days on end, Mr Meldrum had frowned on Ramsgate Baths as unhealthy. He was, of course, absolutely right. The water in each pool would be green on the first day, orange on the second day and saffron the third. The whole place was one vast urinal. But there were diving boards, sands pits and giggling swarms of girls wearing Speedo swimming costumes. The Speedo was a thin, dark-blue cotton one-piece affair whose shoulder straps some of the girls tied together behind with a ribbon so as to tauten the fabric over their pretty bosoms. On a correctly formed pubescent girl a Speedo looked wonderful, even when it was dry. When it was wet, it was an incitement to riot.

At Ramsgate Baths, weekend after weekend, year after year, I would show off with the clown diving troupe, dive-bomb near the edge of the pool to drench the girls, do mildly difficult acrobatic tricks, smoke and comb my hair, There were a whole bunch of us who wasted all our time in this fashion. We were masters of the flat racing dive and the quick. flashv fifty-five yards. Any one of us would

have sunk like a rock had he attempted a second lap, but we could all do an impressive tumble turn. When the whistle blew for races and the real swimmers appeared in their tracksuits, we repaired to the sandpit, there to tell what we imagined were dirty jokes and share a fanatically casual cigarette with the more daring girls. Erections were either hidden or flaunted, depending on one's reputation for effrontery. I hid mine, either by draping a towel over my trunks as additional camouflage or just lying prone in the sand until the embarrassing acquisition went away. Sometimes this took a whole afternoon, but there was certainly nothing better to do. Falling for – not just perverting on, but actually and rackingly falling for – a pretty girl in a Speedo certainly beat any thrills that were being experienced by the poor bastards who were swimming themselves to jelly in the heats and semi-finals. So, at any rate, I supposed. Every few minutes you could hear the spectators roar as they goaded some half-wit onward to evanescent glory. Meanwhile I concentrated on the eternal values of the way a girl's nipples hardened against her will behind their veils of blue cotton, or the way the sweet skin of her thigh near the groin might be the vellum mounting for a single black hair like the escaped mainspring of a pygmy timepiece.

The same sort of dichotomy prevailed at school. The school swimming team trained hard at North Sydney Olympic Pool. The rest of us went by toast-rack tram to Rushcutter's Bay, Redleaf Pool, Bronte or Coogee. The first two were small net enclosures in Sydney Harbour: they offered little except weeds around your legs and the constant challenge of dodging jelly-blubbers. But Bronte and Coogee pools were both beside ocean beaches, so that after the regulation hour of splashing around to no purpose and/or practising for the Bronze Medallion you could change back into uniform, have your name ticked off the roll, rush down to the dressing rooms on the beach, change back into trunks and head for the surf. The first pair of flippers made their appearance in those years. I had a big pair of green adjustables with straps that hurt – a characteristically bad buy – but I could catch waves with them well enough. Afraid of sharks but pleased to be at one with the elements, I surfed until I was exhausted. There were half a dozen of us, wastrels all, who thus used to consume the spare hours of every Wednesday afternoon after compulsory swimming – the beauty of our activities being, needless to say, that they were not compulsory. Frank Griffiths was our master spirit. Like Milo he was something of a lurk-man, but he had the additional quality of humour. In class he used to charm his way out of trouble. I began to see that there were advantages to playing the fool. In the surf he was completely at home. His skin was as slick as a duck's feathers. Broad-shouldered and long-legged, he could have been a competition swimmer if he had wanted to. But he didn't want to, any more than the rest of us.

For one thing, it was too much like work. For another, even if you did the work there was no guarantee of success. The best swimmer in our school was Peter Case. He trained about a hundred miles a day. He had gills. Every year from first year through to fifth he was champion. But he never finished higher than fourth in the CHS carnival. One year I watched him at North Sydney Olympic pool. He was in the same 440 race as Ion Henricks, who was then at Fort Street, and already well on the way to his Olympic gold. Henricks won by almost a length of the pool. Case was impressive to watch but you could see the strain. Henricks seemed to expend no effort whatsoever. He glided frictionless, as if salt water were interstellar space. Each arm was perfectly relaxed as it reached forward over the water, stiffening only when it became immersed. Each of his lazily waving feet seemed a third long section of the leg to which it was so loosely attached. The bow wave in front of his nose curved downwards on its way back, leaving a trough of air in which he occasionally breathed. He annihilated distance at a rate of about twenty strokes to the lap and tumbled like a porpoise running between wickets. He swam as if dreaming. It was clear that he had been born to swim. There was no point in even trying to compete. Contrary to the pious belief, where sports are concerned the important thing is not to have taken part, but to have won.

Nevertheless Case and his fellow swimmers, together with all the other star athletes, formed an elite within the school no matter how mediocre their performances outside it. If Case was worshipped, you can imagine what happened when John Konrads arrived. Even in his first year he was already nearly six feet tall. Still only eleven years old, he broke the school senior 880 record at his first carnival. He would have won every other senior event if he had been allowed to compete, but the 880 was the only one he was allowed to enter, and then only because there was no race at that distance in his age group. Upon being lapped for the second time, Case – then in his fifth and final year – retired with a broken heart and headed for the showers, the only healthy man I have ever seen limping with both legs. Not long afterwards Konrads went on to capture a sheaf of world records and become recognized as the greatest male swimmer on Earth. I am pleased to report, however, jumping ahead a bit, that in my last year at Sydney Tech I was privileged, in my capacity as prefect, to book him for running in the playground.

10. THE SOUND OF MUCUS

Even if I had possessed the will and the weight to be an athlete, an essential part of the wherewithal would still have been missing. Although I looked in the bloom of health, I was racked by colds throughout my adolescence. Indeed it was just one long cold that never went away. I produced mucus in thick streams. I carried half a dozen handkerchiefs and they were all full by the end of the day. Kleenex had already been invented but had not yet penetrated to Kogarah, where people still put a cold in their pockets. I was putting an epidemic in mine. Finally the floods of green slime and the interminable snuffle drove my mother to consult the local GP, Dr Bolton, who prescribed a course of penicillin injections. Over the next few years I was shot full of millions of units of penicillin. I built up a tremendous resistance to penicillin and an unquenchable fear of the hypodermic syringe – the latter phobia being destined to become a key factor, later on, in my long truancy from the dentist. I shook at the mere idea of being stuck. The actuality should have been just a dull thud in the upper arm, but I tensed up so much that the needle bounced off. Dr Bolton had to screw it in like a bradawl.

This went on for a couple of years with no diminution in the snot supply. Quite the contrary. No matter how hard I blew there was always more up there. This unabated deliquescence was gradually joined by such additional features as sharp pains above and behind the eyes. At the baths I couldn't submerge more than a few feet without feeling the extra pressure. Rather fancying myself as a diver, I was disappointed to find myself confined to the one-metre board. Not that I would ever have accomplished much from the three-metre board – an innate lack of daring guaranteed that – but one of my chief pleasures in life was to descend from a great height and somersault while making contact with the water at the very lip of the pool. This activity was known as dive-bombing. An expert could make an impact like a 500-pounder, saturating the spectators over a range of many yards. There came a day when I surfaced in the puddle of spume produced by a particularly effective dive-bomb and found my face hurting so

produced by a particularly effective dive-bomb, and found my face hanging so much I could hardly get out of the water. For a while I thought that I had hit the tiled edge of the pool with my head.

Dr Bolton finally decided that my sinuses needed a wash. First he probed them extensively, using a stick wrapped in cotton wool soaked with local anaesthetic. This was the least funny thing that had ever happened to me, not excluding the time when I had had an abscessed tooth extracted and been sneered at by the dentist merely because a spout of pus had hit him in the eye. Dr Bolton's immortal line, 'You may feel a bit of discomfort,' still strikes me today as ranking among the understatements of the century. In a way he was right. What I felt wasn't pain so much as pressure. It was as if a wardrobe were being crammed up my nose. When he yanked out the stick and started to sluice the violated interior, I began a sobbing fit that lasted for some time. I went home traumatized. After visits to the dentist I usually tucked into a packet of Minties and a few bars of Cherry Ripe, secure in the knowledge that it would be a year before I had to go again. But with the sinuses I was on constant call. I had to keep up the treatment. Dr Bolton went on probing and sluicing for what seemed to me like years, until one day, on his way up my nose, he met a polyp coming down.

Polyps, or proud flesh, apparently favour the sinuses as growth areas. If I stuck my finger up my left nostril I could feel it entirely blocked by a convex meniscus the texture of Bakelite. This was the vanwall of what Dr Bolton assured my mother could be anything between a platoon and a battalion of polyps. Dr Bolton also assured her that a simple operation under local anaesthetic would be enough to clear the matter up. My mother, strongly supported by a silent tantrum I was staging in the background, suggested that I might be spared some suffering if the operation was done under general anaesthetic. 'No need for that,' Dr Bolton assured her. 'He'll only feel a bit of discomfort.'

After only a few weeks of sleepless waiting I found myself seated in Dr Bolton's surgery. Dressed in a white coat, he was on another chair facing me. First he did the familiar number with the dope-soaked stick of fairy floss. I found this as hilarious as always. Then he got up there with a pair of long-nosed forceps. They were slim to look at but by the time they were in my head they felt like heavy wire-cutters. It all lasted for centuries and I did a lot of crying. When I glanced into the kidney-shaped enamel basin on the table, it was heaped high with what would have looked like freshly cooked tripe if it had not been streaked with blood. My mother was waiting in the reception room when I came out. She had an awful look on her face. I have learned to recognize that look since. It is the way we look when someone we love is suffering and we can't help.

The operation was so traumatic that I spent the next year doing my best to conceal the fact that it had not worked. But there was too much mucus to hide and the pain both above and below my eyes formed a pair of invisible hot iron spectacles that kept me awake. Dr Bolton at last referred me to a specialist. He, too, was fond of a preliminary probe or two with the fairy floss, but at least this time there was not a suggestion that the operation should be a sit-down. He wanted me down and out. I have never minded general anaesthetic. I rather relish the dreams. When I woke up, my head felt clear for the first time in years – perhaps the first time ever, since I could not remember when I had ever breathed so easily. There was some heavy bleeding, which the specialist staunched by stuffing my facial cavities full of gauze. This was only mildly amusing and the removal of the blood-caked gauze a few days later was even less so, but my new-found happiness was unimpaired. I went on suffering more than my share of colds, but the bad days ended with that operation. I can still remember the specialist's kindly look. Dr Bolton, who assisted at the operation, told me later that he had never seen such instruments: some of them had had little lights on them.

That has been the sum total of my ill-health to date: one adolescent brush with sinusitis. I didn't even have a severe case. To cure Joan Sutherland of the same thing, they had to slice her open along the top gum and cut through the bone behind her face. So I got off lightly. But the feeling of being helplessly dependent on medical skills is one I have never forgotten. Only in thoughtless moments do I take my strong constitution for granted. When I see sick, crippled or deformed people in the street, I always feel that the reason why they have too little luck is that someone gave me too much.

My hopes of heroism fading, I was obliged to find a new role, especially when I started ceasing to be a star even at English. 'Jazz' moved on, a martinet came in and I froze up. I was still near the top of the class, owing to my unusual powers of parsing, but I hardly stood out. Luckily a certain gift of the gab opened the way to a new career as a joker. The small boy is usually obliged to be amusing just as the fat boy is usually obliged to be amiable. I cultivated a knack of exaggeration. Lying outrageously, I inflated rumour and hearsay into saga and legend. The price of fame was small but decisive. I had to incur the accusation of being a bull artist – a charge that any Australian male of any age wants to avoid. But I wanted notoriety more. Rapidly I acquired it. From a small circle of listeners in class, I progressed to a large circle of listeners in the playground. Bigger boys came to mock and stayed to listen. Adapted from a recently seen film, my story of the Okinawa kamikazes lasted an entire lunchtime and drew an audience which, if it had not come equipped with its own sandwiches, would

have had to be fed with loaves and fishes.

My new line in yarn-spinning was an expansion of the same trick that I had been working in Sunday School. All I had done was throw caution to the winds. I had also mastered the art of laughing at myself a fraction of a second before anybody else did. Climaxing a story of my close personal acquaintance with Rommel, I produced a pair of old sand-goggles from my pocket. This convinced the smaller boys, but the older boys were not fooled. Before they could laugh, I beat them to it. I ran with the hares, hunted with the hounds and never left a swing except to step onto a roundabout. Gradually even the most scornful among my listeners came to accept that what Jamesie said wasn't *meant* to be true – only entertaining. If it wasn't that, key figures drifted away, and soon everyone else was gone along with them, leaving me alone with my uneaten sandwiches. It was my first experience of the difference between clicking and flopping.

Riding the crest, I diversified, exploiting a highly marketable capacity to fart at will. Thus I became an all-round entertainer. Somehow, perhaps by osmosis, I had learned this invaluable knack from Milo, who could fart the opening bars of 'Blue Moon'. The first time he performed this feat to a select audience in the back of his garage, the effect was shattering. Suddenly we were all outside in the sunlight, staggering around gasping with combined suffocation and astonishment. Using the Zippo cigarette lighter he had stolen from his father, Milo would set a light to his farts, producing a jet of flame rivalling that emitted by the oil refinery at Kurnell, across the bay. I was never able to match Milo for sonority and melodic content, but I did manage to acquire the knack of letting one off whenever I wanted to. By mastering this skill I set myself on a par with those court jesters of old who could wow the monarch and all his retinue by unleashing, as a grandstand finale, a simultaneous leap, whistle and fart. Unable to extend my neo-Homeric storytelling activities from the playground to the classroom, I could nevertheless continue to hog the limelight by interpolating a gaseous running commentary while the teacher addressed himself to the blackboard. The essential factor here was volume control. My contributions had to be loud enough to amuse the class but not so strident that they caught the teacher's ear. They were bound to catch his nose eventually, but by that time they were untraceable, since I never made the mistake of either looking proud or overdoing the angelic innocence. While the teacher stood there with his nostrils twitching and scanned the room for malefactors, I stared inscrutably into the middle distance, as if lost in the middle of a quadratic equation.

Two bacon rolls and a custard pie were my undoing. Tuckshop lunches were a dangerous substitute for home-cut sandwiches, since they generated a less controllable supply of wind. Fred Pickett, the best of our maths teachers, was

filling the board with some incomprehensible account of what happened to a locus on its way up the abscissa. I was waiting for a suitable cue. The whole secret of raising a laugh with a fart in class is to make it sound as if it is punctuating, or commenting upon, what the teacher is saying. Timing, not ripeness, is all. 'And since x tends to y as c tends to d ,' Fred expounded, 'then the differential of the increment of x squared must be . . . must be . . . come on, come on! What must it flaming *be!*' Here was a chance to give my version of what it must be. I armed one, opened the bomb bay and let it go. Unfortunately the results far exceeded the discreet limits I had intended. It sounded like a moose coughing. The shockwave and gamma radiation left people in nearby desks leaning sideways with both hands over their noses. Picking up a blackboard duster, Fred spun round, took aim and hurled it with one flowing movement. There was no question about his choice of target. Concentric circles of outward-leaning victims pointed back to me as surely as all those felled trees in Siberia pointed back to the meteor's point of impact. The duster impinged tangentially on my cranium and clattered to the floor. Within seconds I was on my way to the deputy headmaster. I was carrying a note inscribed with the numeral 6, meaning that I was to be given six of the best.

The deputy head, Mr Dock, inevitably known as Hickory, lacked inches but made up for them with agility. A short, round man, he had a long, thin, whippy cane and would have looked like Bobby Riggs serving an ace if he had not prefaced his wind-up and delivery with a short swerving run starting in the far corner of the room. He didn't waste time talking. He just opened the note, glanced at it and reached for the cane. Suddenly I wanted desperately to urinate. 'C-c-c-c-c-can I go to the t-t-t-t-toi-toi-toilet?' I asked bravely. To his great credit Hickory let me go. Perhaps he was not the psychopath he was cracked up to be. Perhaps he just didn't want a puddle on his floor. I raced downstairs and made it to the urinal approximately in time. My return up the same stairs was glacial, nay asymptotic, but Hickory kindly appeared on the landing to encourage me over the final stages. Since the rules stipulated that the hands be hit alternately, for each stroke Hickory had to change corners of the room before running up to serve. He covered a lot of ground. I found the shock of each impact nothing like as bad as the anticipation. Unfortunately the aftermath was worse than anything that could be imagined. I zigzagged back to class with my hands buried between my thighs. But even in the midst of my agony, I was already secure in the knowledge that fame was assured.

11. A PRONG IN PERIL

Thus I served out my remaining years at school – as a clown. It never made me especially popular, but at least I avoided unpopularity. At the end of each school year it was a bespectacled owl called Schratah who got tied to the flagpole and pelted with cream cakes. The most I can say for myself is that I didn't throw any of the cakes. But I can't pretend that I wasn't glad somebody else was being picked on instead of me. I would have found victimization hard to bear. Why Schratah didn't commit suicide was a constant mystery to me. It wasn't, after all, that they hated him for being Jewish and a foreigner. They hated him for himself.

Never shooting up with the suddenness I had been promised, I never stopped gradually growing either, until eventually it dawned on me that I was as tall as everyone else, with the necessary exception of the athletic heroes. Still checking up in the mirror, I came to realize that my neck was now if anything thicker than my head, although the back of my skull still protruded instead of sloping forward like Superman's. There had also been a mildly encouraging improvement in the behaviour of my tool. After prolonged immersion it still shrivelled up to the size of a jellybean, but otherwise – although I was in no danger of standing on the end of it – it was at least visible. Indeed nowadays it seemed always to be in one of two conditions: erect and semi-erect. The Smithers family had moved hurriedly away, amid rumours that Milo had finally and irrevocably Got Laurel Into Trouble. It didn't occur to me, or probably even to Milo, that such things could be attempted with any other girl except her. Ordinary girls could be kissed and fiddled with but there was no question of Going All The Way. Australia was still one of the most strictly moralistic societies in the Western world. As a natural corollary, rape was endemic. Every day and ten times on Sundays, the tabloid newspapers carried stories of young men being sentenced to life imprisonment for rape. Most of them seemed to deserve it, but sometimes you wondered. I was especially impressed by the front-page stories about a young photographer who had taken twelve models down into the National Park near

photographer who had taken twelve models down into the National Park near Heathcote and raped them all. Apparently he rendered them helpless with a roll of Elastoplast, releasing them one at a time from bondage in order to slake his fell desires. It occurred to me that either the young man or the Elastoplast must have had magic properties. But if the same thing ever occurred to the judge and jury, there was no hint of it. The rapist was taken to Goulbourn jail and locked up to begin paying the slow price of his depravity. He's probably still there now.

Margaret, in the next street, would let me kiss her. Her mouth seemed to be always full of water and she had a way of bumping your teeth with hers, so that you were spitting chips of enamel afterwards, but she felt round and warm to hold, if you didn't mind the dribble. Jan, across the street, was pointedly eager to be kissed and even mildly interfered with, but her eyes crossed so badly that you kept wondering if she had seen something in the distance – a police car, for example. Shirley, down the street, was the most exciting of the local girls. At spin-the-bottle parties she was the number-one target. She had a fully developed figure and a marvellous hot, yielding mouth. I spent half an hour kissing her one night, pinning her against the wall in the driveway of her house. I had to go home in a running crouch, like a black-tracker. Shirley was so passionate that she might have cooperated if one of us had seriously tried to seduce her. But nobody our age had the nerve. It was an older boy from another district who had the privilege of taking Shirley's virginity, which must have felt as clean and crisp as the first bite of a sweet apple. His name was Barry Tate. Sensationally in command of his own car – a black Hillman Minx – he came booming down the street each evening after another easy day's work doing whatever it was he did. He had a concave chest and a rich, multi-coloured collection of pimples, but there was no getting past the fact that he also had his own car. He would take Shirley away in it to park down among the dunes at Doll's Point or Ramsgate. Somewhere out there, a long way beyond our envious reach, she must have yielded him her all. Apart from Boys' Brigade, in which I became a less and less prominent participant, my church activities took up a steadily greater proportion of my spare time, principally because there were girls involved. I had one case of the amorous vision after another. Once I had graduated into long trousers, I even felt it possible to translate such adoration into real acquaintanceship. Christine Ballantine, alas, was beyond my hopes. She was almost beyond even my dreams. Short in the leg but unbelievably lovely in the face, she looked like the top half of a Botticelli angel. I burned tunnels in the air adoring her from afar. I even slogged through church twice in an evening, just to look at her as she sat in the choir. This was no mean tribute to her beauty, since the second sitting of church included a full-scale sermon from the Rev. C. Cummings Campbell. Quoting

liberally from *A Man Called Peter* and various religious savants with three names each, the Rev. Campbell would unload from the pulpit a seemingly fathomless cargo of clichés. Meanwhile I drank in Christine's beauty, its every movement of lip and eyelid more pleasing to God than anything the Rev. Campbell would ever say.

Little Sandra McDougall I actually managed to touch. She was a tiny, sweet-looking blonde with a deep, grating voice like Mr Chifley, the late lamented leader of the Labor Party. The standard heavy teasing informed her of my love. With shyness on my side and understandable reluctance on hers, we got to the hand-holding stage. Unfortunately my sinuses, not yet cured at that time, ruined everything. No sooner had I picked up her white-gloved hand than I had to put it down again in order to blow my nose in whatever section of my sodden handkerchief had been used least. Behind the veil depending from her frangipani-bedecked hat, her large blue eyes would shut in what I hoped was modest sympathy, but suspected to be disgust. Eventually she took to tapping her foot while I honked and hooted. Finally she turned away.

But later on, with my health improved, the end of school approaching and some recognizable version of late adolescence approaching along with it, I began to find some of the older girls not entirely averse to being fumbled with. This was a revelation. That a mad girl like Laurel might do everything made it seem more likely, not less, that ordinary well-brought-up girls would do nothing. And yet here they were, letting you put your hand on their breasts or even – in advanced cases – between their thighs. It was a kind of warfare, with no-go areas and free-fire zones. Breast fondling could go on for some time, but when it noticeably led to a deeper stage of heavy breathing then it had to stop. Thigh stroking could go on for only a short time at one go, although the hand was allowed back again at a decent interval after removal. A really determined assault might have burst through all these conventions but I would probably have been scared to death if they had suddenly ceased to be operative. Carol Pascoe, for example, didn't seem to know the rules. There was always a race to take her home after Fellowship meetings or socials. A few times I won it, usually by booking her up a week in advance. She had no inclination to remove the exploratory hand or even, as I was stunned to discover, the exploratory finger, which could work its will unchecked until numbness set in, leaving you with the disturbing sensation of having only nine fingers left. Meanwhile Carol would be bumping and grinding with her mouth open and her eyes closed. It was vaguely frightening, although one of course pretended otherwise. A dozen of us, comparing notes, loudly agreed that Carol was the Best to Take Home. Reg Hook showed us the condom that he planned to use on her. He had a detailed

plan to dispel what was left of her innocence. As Reg later recounted it, the plan – involving himself, Carol, a blanket and a Doll’s Point sand dune at midnight – unfolded with ridiculous ease. In a trice Carol was lying there, sobbing with need. Unfortunately Reg was under the impression that you had to unroll the condom before putting it on. Since the rest of us would have done the same in his place, we were hardly in a position to point out his mistake.

Eventually a Scottish immigrant boy called Dorber gave Carol what she wanted. Thick of accent, repellent of epidermis and wise in the ways of the Glasgow slums, Dorber was an unlikely member of Fellowship or indeed of any organization more benign than the Parachute Regiment. But then he was not in search of religious instruction. He was out to use what we had been wasting. Our idea of the successful climax to an exciting evening was to limp home with a throbbing crotch and a finger smelling like a fishing smack. Dorber’s ambitions were less oblique. He wanted everything, and in several cases, to our flabbergasted disapproval, got it. Still, at least I had some tangible evidence that I was normally endowed. The only problem was to find the opportunity, courage and purpose which would allow of the endowment being put to use. The problem was almost solved for ever during a fortnight away at a National Fitness camp somewhere up in the bush. I attended this camp as part of a Sydney Tech contingent which included Griffiths and others among the freaks and wastrels. I never bothered to find out at the time precisely what National Fitness was or what aims it was supposed to pursue, but in retrospect I can see that it was a reasonably benevolent outfit promoting the concept of *mens sana in corpore sano* on what it imagined to be an international scale. The camp, constructed along military lines, consisted of weatherboard huts scattered through the bush and linked up with winding paths. There were several hundred boys present, including a hefty representation from Nauru Island. So black they looked blue, these were some of the best-looking boys in creation. The one to whom all the others deferred, although never with servility, was Detudame, son of the Chief of Nauru.

Nowadays, Detudame is chief himself. I saw him on television recently and was pleased to note that he had acquired a weight problem closely resembling my own. At the time I am talking about he was already pretty bulky, but it was all dark muscle, subtly catching tangential light like polished hardwood. His retinue called him Det for short. Within minutes we all did. He had Napoleonic charisma combined with infinite charm. Through the black and white crowd that surrounded him at all times I snatched glimpses from a distance, awed by the amusement that spontaneously came into being around him and which he could silence with a frown. He and the Nauruans played a strip-tease game in which

the object was to keep your clothes while all around you were losing theirs. While he was doing the same to you, you whipped your hands suddenly from behind your back and confronted your opponent with any one of three symbols: scissors, paper, rock. Scissors cut paper but broke on rock. Paper covered rock but was cut by scissors. If you lost, you had to remove an article of clothing, even if it was the last thing you had on. When Det lost – which he seldom did, being a mind-reader – he stripped just as willingly as his subjects. But on the one occasion when he was forced down as far as his underpants, he insisted on going behind a bush. While his entourage rolled around in hysterics, all we saw was the royal Y-fronts being waved in the air. Thus the future monarch's dignity was preserved. It will be apparent that I am talking about the kind of brother I would have liked to have, and I suppose miss even now.

This is a generous appreciation on my part, considering that Det and his friends brought me to the edge of catastrophe. One night we were playing Hunt the Lantern. I forget the rules. Probably I have repressed them. The relevant facts are simple. I was fleeing at full tilt through the pitch dark on a zigzag path between the gum trees. Det and a couple of his more carnivorous-looking pals were after me. Equipped with excellent night vision and the ability to run silently even over dead leaves, they were bad dreams straight out of lames Fenimore Cooper. Suddenly I heard Det's voice shouting at me to look out. I thought it was a ruse and crammed on more speed. With stunning abruptness some kind of silent landmine blew me straight up in the air. The stars raced past my eyes in parallel streaks, like the tips of porcupine quills. I landed sitting down, having performed the best part of a double forward somersault in the piked, or wrecked, position. Det and his friends arrived, vaulting unerringly over the barbed-wire fence that I had just tried to run through.

The fence had had three strands. The top strand had caused a certain amount of damage across my lower chest. The bottom strand had torn a few holes in my upper shins and knees. The middle strand had apparently done nothing more than tear my khaki shorts across the crotch. When they got me to the first-aid centre it was soon agreed that the shock was a worse threat than the cuts. The cuts were treated with the mandatory daubing of Acriflavine, tufts of cotton wool being left on the wounds so that scabs would form neatly under the gauze bandages. The shock was treated by wrapping me in a blanket and leaving me there to spend the night. When everyone was gone I reached up, switched the light back on and snuck a look under my shorts. I had discouraged all attempts to remove them, but it couldn't be denied that a dull ache was emanating from that area. What I had felt, however, paled beside what I now saw. My tonk was sliced open on one side to what looked like a mortal depth. It was as if the captain of

the *Titanic*, a few minutes after the encounter with the iceberg, had been lowered by the heels and given a sudden underwater close-up of the trouble he was in. The wound wasn't bleeding. It was just gaping. Hurriedly I covered it up again and stared at the ceiling, simultaneously pretending I hadn't seen what I had seen and wondering desperately what to do.

I chose to do nothing. In the event this proved to be the right decision, but it was prompted by nothing except cowardice. The mere thought of a doctor putting stitches in my tussle made me cross and uncross my legs very rapidly – or would have done, had I dared move them. So for days on end I kept my secret, snatching a look at the disaster area as often as I could. It was inspiring to see how quickly the antibodies rallied to the task. It was like a speeded-up film. Rapidly the whole area turned bright white, then pink. The gash itself, after first filling up with dark blood, tightened into a crisp scab that clicked satisfactorily when I tapped it with a fingernail. Before the remaining week of camp was over, it was obvious that my much-abused saveloy was out of danger. Even at this time, this was a relief. Looking back, I almost faint at the sheer range of implication. Another quarter of an inch on those barbs and my subsequent love life would have consisted entirely of bad scenes from *The Sun Also Rises*.

12. ALL DRESSED UP

As the final years of school flowed turgidly under the bridge I became increasingly lost. Now that I had at last grown up, my comic persona no longer quite fitted. For many years I was to remain a prisoner of my own, like a ventriloquist taken over by his dummy. Even today, unless I watch myself carefully, I take refuge in levity. Only self-discipline keeps my face straight. In *War and Peace*, if I were not allowed to identify with Andrey or even Nikolai then I suppose I would settle for Dolokhov. I would even try to be pleased if it were pointed out that I was in fact Pierre. But the man I can't help recognizing myself in is the unfortunate Zherkovim, who makes an untimely joke about the defeated General Mack and receives the full blast of Andrey's wrath.

Anyway, there is no point in carping now. My clever lip won me whatever popularity was coming to me at the time, so that I was able to go on finding myself welcome, or not unwelcome, among Griffiths' surfing parties and the school YMCA team that competed annually for the Pepsi-Cola Shield. Indeed among the latter crew I at last found myself a measure of sporting stardom, since the vaulting I had so painfully learned at Boys' Brigade was something of an advance on anything the other Centurions (that was the name of our team) could improvise uninstructed. My feet-through and flying angel-roll on the long box were instrumental in bringing the Pepsi-Cola Shield home to Sydney Technical High – a fact duly announced at school assembly. It didn't sound much of an achievement (and in fact was even less of an achievement than it sounded, since the teams we had defeated looked like pages from a Unesco pamphlet about the ravages of vitamin deficiency) but it was something. I also managed, at the eleventh hour, to be chosen for Grade football. It was only Third Grade, which consisted mainly of rejects from Second Grade, but you were given a fifth-hand jersey to wear and travelled about, meeting similarly decrepit sides from other schools. My position was five-eighth: what in Britain would be called a stand-off half. I had just enough speed and agility to tempt myself into trouble, but not enough of either to get out of it. My short career was effectively finished in a

enough of energy to get out of it. My short career was effectively finished in a game against Manly, whose two enormous breakaways, like the clashing rocks of mythology, hit me from different directions while I was wondering what to do with the ball. Semiconscious and feeling like an old car after it has been compressed into a block of scrap metal, I scored against my own side on the subsequent move and thus acquired the tag 'Wrong Way' James.

But at least I was able to have 'Third Grade Football 1956' embroidered in blue silk under the school badge on the breast pocket of my maroon blazer. Senior boys were encouraged thus to emblazon their achievements. My paltry single line of glory looked insignificant enough on its own and ludicrous beside the listed battle honours of the true sporting stars, which extended below their pockets onto the blazer itself. 'First Grade Football 1954. First Grade Football 1955. First Grade Football 1956. CHS Swimming 1952. CHS Swimming 1953 . . .' My lost companion Carnaby had a block of blue print on his blazer that looked, from a distance, like a page of heroic couplets. As for the Captain of the School, Leslie Halyard, it was lucky he was seven feet tall, since his credits went on and on like the titles of an epic movie.

The blazer was an important item of equipment. I bought mine after I was elected one of the school's eighteen prefects. I came in at number seventeen on the poll, one ahead of the school bell-ringer. Without the Third Grade football credit I never would have made it, and would thus never have enjoyed the heady privilege of supervising detention or of booking other boys for running in the playground. Admission to the rank of prefect was my sole latter-day school success. In other respects I might as well not have come to school at all. Indeed most of my clothes looked as if they had already left. By this time young men's fashions were reflecting the influence of *Rock Around the Clock* and *Don't Knock the Rock*. Another influence was the lingering impact of the bodgie era, which had occupied the immediately preceding years. The bodgies had favoured a drape-shape rather like the British Teddy-boys, with shoes the size of Volkswagens and a heavily built-up hairstyle razored square across the neck. The American tennis manager Jack Kramer also played an important part in shaping our appearance, even though his palpable influence was confined to the apex of the head. His flat-top haircut was faithfully reflected by what occurred on top of our own craniums, where each hair rose vertically to the level of a single, imaginary horizontal plane and then stopped dead. Even Halyard, normally conservative in his attire, turned up one day with the top of his head looking as if it had been put through a bandsaw. Griffiths set up a barber shop in the prefects' room and gave us his skilled attention, checking the results with a T-square. Well greased with Brylcreem, the side panels of our haircuts were left

to grow long and be swept back with an octagonal, many-spiked plastic rake which looked like the inside of an Iron Maiden for butterflies. At the back, above the straight-as-a-die bottom line, a muted duck's arse effect occurred, further echoing the just-vanished bodgie ideal and directly presaging the incoming cultural onslaught of *77 Sunset Strip*, among the first programmes to be shown on Australian television. Continuing to read downwards, we come to the drape-shape jacket. The emphasis was on heavily padded shoulders and a waistless taper towards a hemline on the lower thighs. Cut to my personal specifications, the drape of my own jacket was so tastefully judged that you had to look for several seconds before noticing how a supernumerary set of shoulders, sloping at a steeper angle, started where the real ones ended. Shirt and tie were something assertive from a shop near Museum station called Scottish Tailoring, the pink, cerise or Mitchell Blue shirt flecked with white and the multi-banded iridescent slub tie cut square at the bottom like a decapitated coral snake. Scottish Tailoring also supplied the peg-top bottle-green slacks with the fourteen-inch cuffs and the personalized fobs. Socks were usually chosen in some contrasting colour to the shirt. I favoured mauve socks myself, since they interposed an arresting bravura passage between the bottle-green cuffs and the quilt-top ox-blood shoes with the half-inch-thick crêpe soles. Moving, the shoes made a noise like cowpats at the moment of impact. Stationary, they allowed their occupant to lean over at any angle. You will understand that I am describing a representative outfit for day wear. In the evening I dressed up. Somewhere else, in the parallel universe inhabited by the Australian equivalent of the middle class, boys of my age must have been learning to feel at ease with their advantages. Doubtless I would have found theirs a world of stultifying conventionality, had I known it. But I never knew it. The essence of a class system is not that the privileged are conscious of their privileges, but that the deprived are conscious of their deprivation. Deprived I never felt. I had neither the insight nor the power of observation to realize that there might be another breed who recognized each other simply by the untroubled, unquestioning way they shared good manners, well-cut clothes and shoes that never wore out. I didn't feel disadvantaged. I just felt lost. Conforming desperately with my nonconformist outward show, inwardly I could find nobody to identify with – certainly not Marlon Brando in *The Wild One* or James Dean in *Rebel Without a Cause*. The inarticulacy of those two heroes would have been a blessed retreat. Instead I was the captive of my fluent tongue. The effort of being continuously diverting left me limp. I never doubted that those were the only terms on which I would ever be accepted.

Close friends would probably have been there had I really wanted them. But that would have taken time from the daily task of playing to the gallery. To that,

the only alternative I could ever countenance was solitude. Very occasionally I went out with Gary on the pillion of the BSA 500, but by now the refurbished one-lunger was disturbingly fast. Even in top gear the separate ignition strokes were still audible, but the vacuum behind me swelled my shirt out like a spinnaker, the airstream was hard on the eyes and when we heeled over in the corners I thought the speeding asphalt was coming up to hit me in the ear. Eventually he sold the 500 and bought a BSA 350 OHV which he started to adapt for racing. No matter what he did with it, it would never be as quick as the AJS 7Rs that dominated its class, but it was still a demanding machine with expensive tastes. There was no longer much room in his life for me.

My mother and I still went to every change of programme at both Ramsgate and Rockdale Odeons, so we were seeing at least four movies a week. She sat there dutifully through the war films, even though she despised most of them. She got really angry at John Wayne in *Sands of Iwo Jima*. Musicals she couldn't take, but she still sat there, generously keeping me company while I envied Gene Kelly and doted on Cyd Charisse. She even sat still for Betty Hutton, though she would rather have had her teeth drilled. In fact the only film she ever walked out of was *Hot Blood*, an epic of gypsy life in which Cornel Wilde and Jane Russell stared significantly at each other through the flickering light of the campfire, very occasionally raising their arms above their heads as if to check up on the current state of their own armpits, although it turned out that they were only getting ready to dance. My mother and I quarrelled frequently but we reached a comforting unanimity on such matters as what constituted a lousy picture. She could be very funny about poor Mario Lanza. She took her revenge over antipathetic film stars by getting their names wrong. Muttering imprecations at Dolores Day and Susan Hollywood, she was good company as we walked home through the night along Rocky Point Road. For years the mere mention of Elizabeth Scott, renamed Elspeth Scott, was enough to send us both into hysterics. I wish our closeness could have been at least partly due to a conscious effort from me. On the contrary, it was only our apartness that was fuelled by my will. She knew that I was doing badly in my last years at high school. I knew she was right, but didn't want to admit that I had made a mistake. When we clashed, the talk and the tears went on for hours, leaving both of us exhausted.

So at most it was a family of two, except for Christmas, when we always went to visit Aunt Dot in Jannali. Aunt Dot laid on a Christmas tree and an enormous Christmas dinner, eaten as usual at noon on Christmas day. The fatted calf scarcely ranked among the hors d'oeuvres. Everything was still as scalding hot as the day Grandpa spat the zac. The same trifles, plum puddings and lemon-meringue pies. Decorated with cotton-wool snow, brittle globular doodads and

strings of tinsel, the tree shed dry green needles and presents for me. Another highlight of the trip was a visit around the corner to some distant relatives called the Sturrocks. The size of troglodytes and older than the hills, they crouched in the stygian depths of their weatherboard house and croaked greetings. All their lives they had gone on putting on clothes without ever taking them off. I believe they were spontaneously combustible, like those people in Dickens. The whole of Christmas was a solemn ritual but my mother and my aunt needed to be close even when they got on badly. Their brothers had never been much use to them, so they supported and comforted each other as their losses mounted. I would have been proud of both of them if I had had any sense. Lacking that, I withdrew into myself and counted the hours until I could be alone again.

At school and church I got by as an entertainer, but it was a solitary's way of being gregarious. I was never really at ease in company. Nowadays I am at last blessed with friends so close that I don't even feel the need to try, but at the time I am talking about such friendships belonged to other people. I observed them enviously from a distance. It was only in my own company that I could switch off the act. Until the Glaciarium closed down I used to go skating alone there twice a week all through the winter, on Wednesday afternoon after school and for two sessions on Saturday. I bought a second-hand pair of Puckmaster ice-hockey skates. They were a typically bad buy, although not as bad as the football boots that were three sizes too big and finished my Boys' Brigade soccer career before it began, since I had to run some distance before the boots started to move. The hockey skates were merely clapped out in the heels and soles, so that the screws pulled out and the blades parted company from the boots at critical moments. But on the days when my skates stayed together I was perfectly content, circulating endlessly while ogling that prettiest of all sights, the line formed by the behind and upper thigh of a girl skater. I never went to classes and could perform no tricks more complicated than a 'three', but I had a flash turn of speed. During the fast skating periods I could run quickly enough in the turns to lay my inside hand on the ice – the surest way of pleasing the crowd, especially if another skater removed your fingers. As usual, I was trying hard to look good, but there were also moments of genuine, monastic solitude. Talking contentedly to myself I would circle with the crowd, zigzagging to hold my speed down and tucking one hand inside my windbreaker, like Napoleon. Perhaps Napoleon found out that he had chicken pox the same way I did. It was a hot day outside, the ice was covered with an inch of slush, there were thousands of people jamming the rink, the loudspeakers were playing 'Don't Let the Stars Get In Your Eyes' and I discovered I had a little bubble on my stomach. Two little bubbles. Scores of little bubbles. I left immediately, guilty with the realization that I had infected the whole Glaciarium. It closed soon

with the realization that I had infected the whole Glaciarium. It closed soon after, probably as a direct result. Since there was no other ice rink nearer than San Francisco, I hung up my skates.

But there was also my bicycle. Simultaneously with my first long trousers had arrived a scarlet 28-inch-frame Speedwell to replace the old brown 26-inch-frame rattletrap on which I used to tilt quixotically with the privet hedges. The frame of the new bike was not fully tapered but with my eyes half closed I could almost call it a racing bike, especially after I had it equipped with white-wall tyres and three-speed Sturmey-Archer hub gears. At the beginning the saddle was flush with the crossbar. By the time of my final year in school the saddle was extended to its full height. I had given the bike's appointments a lot of thought. The gear-change trigger was placed next to one of the brake levers at the end of the ram's horn handlebars, so that changing down was like firing a gun, while all I had to do to change up was flex my knuckle. Impressively clad in striped T-shirt, sandshoes and khaki shorts with rolled-up legs, I rode many miles every weekend. I could be at Mascot aerodrome in a few minutes, at the George's River bridge in half an hour. Sometimes I rode all the way to the National Park, just so that I could coast down Artillery Hill. Boys got killed trying that: it was a long, long hill. The idea was to go down without ever touching the brakes and at the end to go streaking across the dam without any change in the stoic expression. No expression could have been more stoic than mine. The speed of the airstream was enough to distort my features until they looked like what happened to the rocket crew in *Destination Moon*, but underneath I was still heroically stoic. It was an important test, which I passed, although typically I was unable to do so without posing.

So I got used to travelling alone. It was hard on my mother, who earlier on had always been good at setting up interesting trips. She would sort out the details of trains, buses and boats, so that without effort I would find myself beside her watching the aborigines diving for coins at La Perouse, or howling along through the latticed girders of the Hawkesbury River bridge in the Newcastle Flyer. On the boat to Bundeena she got seats for us in the prow so that I could lean daringly over and watch the porpoises as they appeared, disappeared and reappeared in our bow-wave, sinking to spin around each other and rising in quick succession to blow a squirt of aerated water that sprinkled your delighted face like angel spit. Now *there* was a gang worth joining. My mother told me that there was nothing in the sea, not even sharks, that could hurt them, and that there was nothing they wanted to hurt. Those were the days when she could still tell me things. The breeze caught her hair and pulled it back. She looked like Garbo in *Anna Christie*. When the water grew shallow enough for

the sand to be clearly visible the porpoises peeled away and left us together.

But now I knew it all and couldn't bear to be told, not even by myself. I shouted down my own conscience when it tried to inform me that I was well on the way to securing a Leaving Certificate which would scarcely rank as a dishonourable discharge. Even English had gone completely sour on me. I had my name down to take the English Honours paper. Big joke. I was fully qualified to answer anything that might be asked about Erle Stanley Gardner or Leslie Charteris, but beyond that I was perfectly clueless. None of the dozen books a week I had been taking out of the local public library had anything to do with literature. Nor was the teacher assigned to the Honours class likely to spot the discrepancy between my knowledge and the tests about to be made of it. He was, in the first place, a librarian. He was, in the second place, geriatric. He might have been Mary Luke's older brother. Where Mary started every lesson with instructions on how to make a Bunsen burner, Dewey – short for Dewey Decimal System – always began by showing you how to open a new book from the centre so that reading it would not distort the spine. The book's spine, not yours. He was probably sound on that one subject but on anything else he was a dead loss. While he burred aimlessly for his allotted hour, I spent the time memorizing all the parts of the Moto Guzzi V-8 racing motorcycle engine. But I was already well aware that not even so prodigious a feat of memory would do me any good. It was the older boys, the ones who could do the maths, who would go on to design and construct the beautiful machines. While I read about cars, they were already buying them, taking them apart, putting them back together and driving them around. On the other hand, I was no longer any good at English either.

I entered the examination hall with the same feelings the RAAF pilots must have had when they flew Brewster Buffaloes into action against the Japanese – underpowered, outgunned, fearful and ashamed. I left the examination hall fondly recalling how well I had felt going in. The mathematics papers I had expected to find incomprehensible, but it was unmanly to find the English Honours paper equally opaque. It was full of questions about people I had never heard of. Shakespeare's name I recognized almost instantly, but who was George Eliot? What had he written? I could do none of it. Simpler than going home would have been to catch a tram to the Gap and jump off. I spent weeks reassuring my mother that everything would be all right, while simultaneously indicating that if everything turned out not to be all right it would be no true measure of my real ability or future prospects. But when the results appeared in the *Herald* the bluff was over. I got an A and five Bs. The A was in English: it meant that I had failed my Honours paper outright but had been above average in

the ordinary paper. Since the average mark for the ordinary English paper had been set to coincide with the linguistic attainments of Ginger Meggs this did not count for much. The five Bs meant that I had wasted my time for a lustrum each in five different mathematical subjects – a total of twenty-five man-years straight down the drain. About all that I had managed to achieve was matriculation. It sounded like micturition and meant even less. Practically anybody could matriculate. But you needed several more As than I had achieved if you were to get a Commonwealth Scholarship, and without one of those there was not much hope of acquiring a university education. I was a total failure.

There was no longer any hope of dissuading my mother from the conviction that she had been right all along. Even in the dust and flame of the debacle, it was obvious that English had been my best subject, or at any rate my least worst. In the mathematical subjects which had been supposed to further my engineering career I had scored almost nothing. I fought back with all the petulant fervour of one who knows that he is in the wrong. In my heart I had long known that the other boys would be the engineers. But where did that leave me? What was the thing I was supposed to do, now that it was proved I could do nothing else?

At this point, like the Fairy Godmother, the Repatriation Commission stepped in. The Australian government never got around to doing very much for war widows, but in a weak moment it had developed a soft spot for war orphans, who could claim a free university education as long as they matriculated. Far from having to meet Commonwealth Scholarship standards, they needed only to obtain the number and quality of passes that might be appropriate for an apprentice bottle-washer. By this absorbent criterion, I was in. All I had to do was apply. Even then I almost managed to persuade myself that I wanted to go to the University of Technology. If I had prevailed in this wish my mother would undoubtedly have ended it all under the wheels of a trolleybus. Luckily the Repat. wasn't having any. Sydney University it had to be. They advised an Arts course. Since I thought this meant drawing, at which I had always been rather good, I signed on the dotted line.

In retrospect it seems incredible even to me that I had come so far and remained so ignorant. It was not just that I was nowhere compared with an English sixth-former or an American prep-school graduate. I was nowhere compared even with my fellow Hurstville alumni who had gone to Sydney High. When I met Elstob on the train he was reading *The Age of Anxiety* and I was reading *Diving to Adventure*. Knowing nothing, I scarcely suspected what I was missing. Barely realizing what a university was, I looked forward to it as something vague on an indeterminate horizon. The immediate task was to survive as an office boy in the L. J. Hooker organization, my first proper job. In

my senior high-school years I had tried several different jobs during the school holidays. The most disastrous was as a shop assistant in Coles, where I rapidly discovered that I was incapable of dealing with impatient customers without becoming flustered. Merely to discover that the anodized aluminium tray I was supposed to wrap was wider than the wrapping paper was enough to set me darting about distractedly in search of wider paper or a narrower anodized aluminium tray. In just such a frenzy I ran into a display stand on which were carefully arranged hundreds of cut-glass bowls, dishes and plates. The stuff proved to be amazingly durable, which raised questions about the composition of the glass. Instead of shattering, it bounced. But it bounced everywhere, and before the last piece had stopped rolling I was on my way home. I had a similar job in Herb Horsfield's Hobby House, but rather than sell wind-up toys to wind-up customers I retreated into the toilet and read *The Caine Mutiny*. When Herb finally realized that he was making no sales at all when I was in charge he reluctantly opened discussions about terms of separation. He quite liked me, which was foolish of him in the circumstances.

L. J. Hooker's was a bigger thing all round. By this time my mother was in despair of my ever accomplishing anything. She had no idea what a university Arts course might be but she had every reason to suppose that I would make a hash of it. L. J. Hooker's, on the other hand, was the fastest-growing real-estate firm in Australia. If I applied myself I might work my way up. If only to blunt the edge of the disappointment in her eyes, I resolved to knuckle down. In the three months before university started, I would prove myself as an office boy to myself, my mother and the world.

The main office of L. J. Hooker's was situated in Martin Place, just near the Cenotaph. I got off the train at Wynyard every morning, walked to the building, descended to the basement, hung up my coat, picked up my scissors and applied myself to the thrilling task of cutting out all the L. J. Hooker classified ads in that day's *Herald*. It took most of the morning. The rest of the day I pasted them into a big book. At set intervals I also delivered mail all around the building, thereby giving myself the opportunity to die of love for the boss's secretary, a tall, ravishingly voluptuous girl called Miss Wiper. Every day, delivering the mail to her, I would greet her with a suave one-liner gleaming from the polish of twenty-four hours' sleepless rehearsal. 'Hi, patootie,' I would pipe casually, 'how goes it?' Her answering smile invariably floored me completely. I would enter her office looking as relaxed as Ronald Colman – if you can imagine Ronald Colman wearing quilted shoes the size of small cars – and leave it crawling and sobbing. It seemed to me at such moments that my love was being answered. Actually, I now realize, something more interesting was happening. A

kind woman was enjoying, mischievously but without malice, the spectacle of awkward young manhood searching for a voice and manner. Where is she now? What lucky man did she marry?

But love for Miss Wiper is an insufficient explanation for how thoroughly I became alienated from the task. If I had been blessed with a gift for self-knowledge, I would have clearly recognized myself to be unemployable. As it was, this and many other attempts had to run their disastrous course before I at last learned that I am good for what I am good for and for nothing else. It was only by an accident of timing that I was able to resign from Hooker's before I got the boot. Every Friday after work I had to take the mail – which was all contained in a special large envelope – across Martin Place to the GPO and drop it in the slot. Then I had to take another large envelope full of copy for the weekend's classified advertising around the corner to the *Herald* building and leave it at the desk. On the Friday before the week I was due to leave, I paid both these calls, hopped on the train at Wynyard and was off to Kogarah for the usual weekend of quarrels, movies and long, lonely bike rides. Since we had no telephone, I did not have to answer for my latest achievement until Monday morning, when I got to the office and found a note on my desk from Miss Wiper asking if I could come up and see her as soon as it might be convenient.

Pausing only to comb my hair for half an hour, I translated myself to her office, the first lines of an off-hand speech already vibrant on my lips. She forestalled me with the information that it was L.J.H. – meaning Mr Hooker himself – who was requesting my presence. I had barely time to die the first nine hundred of a thousand deaths before I was in the great man's office and face to face with him across a desk which I at first thought was tapered at the sides, until I realized it was so big that my stunned vision was being struck by the perspective. There was nothing on top of the desk except L.J.H.'s folded hands and two empty envelopes. 'The famous Mr James, isn't it?' enquired L.J.H. This was the time to tell him that I was not the famous Mr James at all, but was in fact Group Captain the Baron Waldemar Incognito of the Moldavian Secret Service on a sensitive diplomatic mission which, alas, demanded that I should leave immediately by the nearest window. Unfortunately the words would not come, partly because my tongue had spot-welded itself to the roof of my mouth. 'Luckily the GPO and the *Herald* both got on to us while there was still time,' L.J.H. reassured me. 'A pity, in one way. You realize our weekend classified advertising involves several hundred thousand pounds' worth of business. It would have been the biggest mistake any office boy had ever made anywhere in the world. You would have been in Ripley.' By Ripley L.J.H. meant a newspaper feature called *Believe It or Not*, in which the readers were asked to

marvel at such phenomena as a man who had cut down a gum tree with his teeth, or an office boy who had put half a million pounds' worth of classified advertisements through the wrong hole.

L.J.H. stood up. He looked very large. He also, I was pathetically relieved to note, looked very kind. He had his hand stuck out. At first I thought he was inviting me to read his palm, but then I realized he was saying goodbye. 'Something tells me that we'll be hearing more from you one day. Perhaps in some other line of work. You're going to the University, I believe.' It was a statement, not a question, but it gave me a chance to say something. 'Nyengh.' L.J.H. generously chose to ignore this further evidence that he was dealing with a Venusian, just as he had chosen to ignore the distilled water dripping from my hand. 'It's a good life. You'll find yourself there.' I was on my way out, going backwards. The oak door was shut. I was alone with Miss Wiper. Silently she offered me a Mintie.

13. LET US REJOICE, THEREFORE

Freshers and freshettes arrived at the university a week before full term in order to be inducted into the academic life by means of lectures, displays, film shows and theatrical events. The period was known as Orientation Week, a title which confused me, since I failed to see why the Far East should be involved. The university motto was *Sidere mens eadem mutato*, which loosely translated means ‘Sydney University is really Oxford or Cambridge laterally displaced approximately twelve thousand miles.’ In fact the differences were enormous. For one thing, there were few colleges: the overwhelming majority of students arrived in the morning and left in the evening. In the Arts course you could read several subjects, rather like the American system. The way to pass exams was to reproduce the lectures. Personal supervision – the heart of the Oxbridge system – scarcely existed. There was a Union for debates and a certain amount of strained singing in which *Gaudeamus igitur* featured prominently, but on the whole the emphasis was on pushing forward to get one’s degree. With careers as lawyers or upper-echelon schoolteachers in mind, the Arts students were even more dedicated to exam-passing than anyone else. There was a day shift and a night shift, both toiling away nervelessly towards their nine passes. It took some of them the maximum allowable nine years, but they all got there. Nobody who wanted to pass ever failed, not even the beautiful, elegantly groomed, ineffably dumb girls from Frensham who had been sent along to acquire some elementary culture before resuming their inexorable progress towards marriage with a grazier. Any real originality of mind or behaviour was confined to the astrophysics department or the medical school, which both ranked high in world standing. The huge Arts faculty placed as little emphasis on the human imagination as was consistent with the study of its products.

Even for Australia, the late 1950s were an unusually apolitical, conformist period. Nevertheless a certain amount of eccentricity took place. There were about two dozen illuminati who dominated the student newspaper *honi soit*,

edited and contributed to the magazines *Hermes* and *Arna* and produced, directed and acted in plays put on by SUDS (the Dramatic Society) and Players (the other dramatic society). Making a career out of failing first-year Arts on an annual basis, this coherent little group were hard to miss during Orientation Week, since they were continually trotting up and down Science Road in order to take turns manning the publicity booths relating to their various activities. The booth for *honi soit* was called the Flying Saucer, since it was a circular plywood creation with a pointed roof. It was only about six feet in diameter but at the moment of my arrival it was crammed with these exotic creatures, the like of which I had never seen. Nor, I think, had they seen anything quite like me. I had turned up in my school blazer, but in order to indicate that I was a man of parts I had pinned my Presbyterian Fellowship badge to the lapel, alongside the Boys' Brigade badge in my buttonhole. A brown briefcase contained sandwiches. My haircut looked like an aircraft carrier for flies.

But at worst they were seeing an extreme example of a known type, the clueless fresher. I, on the other hand, was seeing something I could not even compare with other examples of itself. I hadn't known that people were allowed to look like this. The women had long, stringy black hair, heavy eye make-up and smoked cigarettes no hands. The men smoked their cigarettes in long holders. They affected flannel shirts, corduroy trousers and the kind of long-nosed desert boots which I was subsequently informed were called brothel-creepers. During this first encounter I could see nothing of these people below waist level, since only their upper works showed above the counter of the Flying Saucer. But their tightly packed heads, arms and torsos were sufficiently extraterrestrial to leave me numb with awe. 'My God,' cried the shortest of the men, 'it's a Christian! Come and work for *honi soit*. We need a broad spectrum of opinion. You could offset the influence of Wanda here. She's a witch.' The girl referred to as Wanda coughed her assent, projecting a small puff of ash. 'My name is Spencer,' said the same short man again. He had jug ears, horn-rimmed glasses and a crew cut. 'Sign here and report for duty at the office tomorrow morning. It's around that corner. A sort of hut arrangement in Early Permanent Temporary. Here is a sample copy of the paper. Those badges are distorting the shape of what would be a perfectly good jacket, if it were a different colour and cut.'

Threading my way in a daze through the other booths, a good quarter of which were magically staffed by the same rattle-taggle team I had just met in the Flying Saucer, I entered the Union building, mechanically bought a tie dotted with the University crest and sat down in the reading room to look at my sample copy of *honi soit*. Half of it seemed to be written by Spencer. There was a short

story by him of which I could make little and some poems of which I could make even less. One of the poems was about Rimbaud's cigar. Who was Rimbaud? Yet in another way I saw the point instantly. The vividness of the language was extraordinary. Even when crammed into meticulously symmetrical verse forms every sentence sounded like speech. I can't say that my future course was set there and then, but neither can I say that it wasn't. I was so excited that my badges rattled. There were sparks coming off my lapel.

Later that day I attended the Sex Lecture and laughed knowingly along with all the other nervous virgins. I joined both the Film Group and the Film Society, though I had no idea how they differed. I joined almost everything. I wondered where I could buy a pair of brothel-creepers. Every time it all became too much I retreated to my bolt-hole in the Union reading room and looked at *honi soit* again. The cartoons were amazingly good. They were signed 'Huggins'. Everybody who counted seemed to have only one name. Every other leather chair in the reading room was similarly occupied by a freshman looking, I was relieved to note, not much more at ease than myself. Indeed few could smoke as confidently as I, although everyone was trying. It was like a bush fire in there.

I headed for home bamboozled with smoke and strange, unfocused dreams. At tea I blew smoke into my mother's face and explained that at University one was expected to join in a wide range of extracurricular activities in order to broaden one's outlook. I sketched reassuring verbal pictures of how I would explore caves with the Speleological Society and jump with the Parachute Club. My mother doubtless had the look of someone whose troubles are only just beginning, but my mouth was too far open for my eyes to notice anything.

Next day I turned up at the *honi soit* office bright and early, several times tripping adroitly on the short flight of steps. I was wearing my new brothel-creepers, bought on the way up the hill from Central Station. My old ox-blood quilt-tops were in my briefcase. I had chosen a pair of brothel-creepers with very long toes. They must have looked, to the independent observer, rather like the footwear of a peculiarly unsubtle clown. Certainly it was hard to climb stairs in them without turning sideways, so my arrival in the office proper was somewhat crablike. The Flying Saucer crew were all in there, plus a few more I was seeing for the first time. Wanda was still smoking no hands. Spencer was sitting at a typewriter. A tall man looking like an illustration of a kindly young history master in an English public school was standing beside him.

'Good morning,' said Spencer without ceasing to type. 'This is Keith Cameron.' The tall man said, 'How do you do. Sandwich?' 'You aren't expected to take one,' said Spencer. 'Cameron is merely being polite. Wanda you already know. The man in the suit is John Bottomley.' Bottomley was conservatively

tailored for the year 1908. He wore spats. ‘The man in the other suit is Jim Howie.’ Howie was dressed and groomed for the grouse moors. ‘Wanda will show you how to edit copy. Meanwhile Cameron and I will get on with this diverting lampoon for the next issue. On behalf of us all Howie and Bottomley are hatching a plot to unseat the editor, who is an idiot. For a blessing he is not present. A no-confidence motion concerning the editorship will be put at a special meeting in the Wallace Theatre this afternoon at three o’clock. Here is Maurice Grogan.’

Grogan swung into the office by one hand, which was reverse-gripped around the upper door-frame. He wore nothing on his superbly muscular body except a Speedo the size of a G-string, a pair of the kind of sandals known as Hong Kong thongs and a beard. He jumped up on a desk and crouched, gibbering and snickering. Nobody seemed to notice. I sedulously copied everybody else’s indifference while Wanda showed me how to sub-edit the readers’ letters. To do this she had to use her hands – my first evidence that they were not paralysed. When she pointed things out she did not always point to the right place because her eyes were screwed up. Ash fell from her cigarette, which she allowed to grow remarkably short during the course of her lesson. I was afraid her face would catch fire. Meanwhile the conspirators conspired and the creators created, both colloquies being punctuated by low growls and high-pitched squeals from Grogan. As they worked, Cameron and Spencer kept up an exchange of allusive wit that I found at once daunting and exhilarating. Spencer called something Firbankian. Who, what or where was Firbankian? I was lost, yet not in the usual way of feeling that I ought to be somewhere else. Somehow I knew that I was in exactly the right spot.

‘Shall we lunch at Manning or the Forest Lodge?’ asked Spencer. ‘Let’s remember,’ said Cameron, ‘the importance of remaining sober.’ ‘Not as important as having a drink,’ said Bottomley. ‘And besides, we’ll never get the fool out anyway. A gesture is the most we can hope to achieve.’ With me attached, the whole caravan moved across Parramatta Road, up a flight of steps and along the street to a pub called the Forest Lodge, which during opening hours was the daytime headquarters of the artistic set. We all trooped through the back gate while Grogan swarmed over the wall. Again nobody took any notice. I was later to learn that Grogan was Spencer’s steady date. Spencer was bisexual but least unhappy with Grogan. The same applied to Grogan vis-à-vis Spencer. For a long time I was incapable of grasping any of these facts, being under the impression that homosexuality was some kind of rare disease. I am glad to say that incomprehension gave way to tolerance without any intervening period of bigotry. But enlightenment lay far in the future, and for the time being I was as

innocent as Queen Victoria when young.

As in all Australian pubs at the time, the beer came in two kinds, New and Old. New was made yesterday and Old was made the day before. I asked for a schooner of New, manfully not betraying the fact that it was the second drink of my life. It differed from the first drink in that I was able to sip it without gagging. It still tasted like camel's pee. I closed my eyes so that nobody would notice they were crossed. But my ears were functioning perfectly. They had never had so much to listen to. The brain between them could process only the odd scrap of the information that was streaming in through the aural receptors. I had never heard such conversation. What kind of car, I wondered, was a Ford Madox Ford? What sort of conflict was an Evelyn War? At the mention of *Decline and Fall*, I advanced the name of Gibbon. Cameron gently explained that the book in question was written by the aforesaid War, spelt Waugh. Had I not read anything by him? Who was my idea of a good modern novelist? I said Nicholas Monsarrat. There were snorts all round at this. All present snorted audibly. Wanda snorted visibly. Spencer cast his eyes to the sky. But Cameron saved my face by insisting that there were good reasons for admiring Monsarrat, especially in his less famous works such as *HMS Marlborough Will Enter Harbour*. I would find, however, Cameron assured me, that Waugh's early novels were unbeatable for comic invention. 'How can you talk about Waugh when I'm reading Firbank?' Spencer asked a cloud. 'Here's Huggins.'

Through the gate walked the most artistic-looking young man I had ever seen in my two days' experience of artistic young men. He was all pale suede and corduroy. The ends of a loosely knit scarf dangled almost to the ground. He had a folio under his arm. Surrounding a face so handsome it was like a cartoon, his hair was blond and abundant. He was smoking a cigarette about two feet long. Within seconds he was seated, sipping at a beer glass held in one hand while he sketched with the other. He did a group sketch of everybody present. I was staggered – by the speed of his hand, by the quality of what it produced, and by the fact that I was included in the result, which I was allowed to keep. That night I pasted it onto my wall at home, airily explaining to my mother that it was the work of my friend Huggins, whom I knew quite well, since he was a close acquaintance of mine, and had in fact sat beside me during the vitally important meeting in which the editor of *honi soit* had retained his position only by a hair's breadth. Actually, I now realize, any condemnation emanating from my new acquaintances had the effect of vociferous advocacy, just as anything they favoured was automatically doomed. Spencer's speech had clinched the issue. He mentioned Cocteau, Kleist and Lord Alfred Douglas. The chairman imposed a gag and put the motion to a vote. It was lost by five hundred and sixty votes to

eight. I was one of the eight.

From that day my university career proceeded on two separate paths, one of them curricular and the other not. In my new desert boots, but still retaining my Fellowship badge, I attended lectures in my four first-year subjects, English I, Modern History I, Psychology I and Anthropology I. One among hundreds, I sat taking elaborate notes. I see no reason to mock myself in retrospect for so slavishly writing everything down: nearly all of it was news to me, and some of it was to prove permanently useful. The lectures on phonetics, for example, were a painless way for a writer to pick up essential knowledge about what sounds really rhyme even when they look as if they don't, and what sounds really don't rhyme even when they look as if they do. Twenty years later I am still drawing on that knowledge every day. Nor was I in any position to scorn elementary lectures on the time shift in *A Passage to India*, since I was not yet fully divested of the impression that E. M. Forster's principal creation had been Horatio Hornblower. As for *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, I certainly needed help there, having been only dimly aware that Ireland was a Catholic country.

Modern History helped to make me less clueless on such points. The English component of the History course was occupied mainly with Tudor constitutional documents. To the suitably unprepared student it could not have been duller. But the European side of things introduced me to the Anabaptists, the Medici, the Habsburgs and a charming group of bankers called the Fuggers. Even here, though, I had trouble establishing a perspective. What had been so wonderful about the Renaissance? Why had Burckhardt bothered even to the extent of being wrong about it? But my pen raced on, unhampered by the mind's doubts. I didn't even know enough to know that what I now knew meant nothing without the knowledge that was meant to go around it.

Anthropology lectures were full of references to Evans-Pritchard, Radcliffe-Brown and Margaret Mead. The set books had titles like *Growing Up in New Guinea*, *Structure and Function in Primitive Pago-Pago* and *Having It Off In Hawaii*. Every time evolution got a mention, the girls in the audience who belonged to Sancta Sophia College would put a conscience-saving mark at the top of the page and discreetly cross themselves. Since they ran to angora twin-sets, this last move would involve a gentle but tangible-looking self-inflicted pressure on their cosily enclosed bosoms, which in several cases were of notable size and shape. Watching one especially pretty Catholic girl called Noeleen Syms thus delicately caressing her own breasts, I sucked so thoughtfully on my biro that I was favoured with a sudden, solid mouthful of black ink. For the next week I had lips like a silent-movie star and teeth like the Mikado.

Psychology was taught by a faculty composed exclusively of mechanists,

behaviourists and logical-positivists. They would have made Pavlov sound like a mystic had he been foolish enough to show up. He must have heard about how boring they were, since he never appeared, but it was not for want of having his name invoked. The whole faculty salivated en masse at the mere mention of him. As so often happens, dogmatic contempt for the very idea of the human soul was accompanied by limitless belief in the quantifiability of human personality. On the one hand we were informed that there was no ghost in the machine. On the other we were taught how to administer tests which would measure whether children were well adjusted. But quite a lot of solid information was embedded in the pulp. Since there was nothing I did not write down and memorize, the real information was still there years later, when all the theoretical blubber surrounding it had rotted away. A synapse, after all, remains a synapse, even after some clod has tried to convince you that Michelangelo's talent can be explained in terms of the number and intensity of electrical impulses travelling across it. Or do I mean a ganglion?

Thus I applied myself. At that time a genuinely important man, Professor John Anderson, was head of the Philosophy Faculty and still delivering his famous lectures on logic to first-year classes, but typically I had failed to set my name down for the only subject that might have stimulated a mental component more intricate than mere memory. As it was, I did not sustain the full impact of Anderson's realism until some years later. For the time being it was taxing enough to absorb elementary information about palatal fricatives, gametes, Dyak kinship patterns and the theological significance of Zwingli. Walled in behind a stack of books with titles like *We of the Wee-Wee* and *Dropping Your Lunch in the Desert*, I sat at the back of the Wallace Theatre with a fairly steady set of companions. Most of them had already graduated out of school blazers into sports coats, but it was plain that in their case raffishness would go no further. Less square than the out-and-out exam-passers, they were still not bohemians. They were ex-GPS and lived in fashionable harbourside suburbs like Bellevue Hill and Rose Bay. Without exception they were on their way to becoming lawyers. For them, Arts was a couple of easy years before the real work started. Some of them drove MG TCs. Their real life happened away from the university, but they talked about it while they were there. Admiring their relaxation, I was glad to be in with them and vaguely hoped that some of their ease would rub off on me.

On the way to lectures, during lectures and after lectures they all watched girls, awarding points for prettiness of face, size of chest, etc. Twenty years later they are probably still talking the same way and doing the same things. They were lucky enough to get set in their ways early. I warmed to them because they

knew exactly what they were and liked being it. Their self-assurance, I need hardly add, was no virtue in itself, and to admire it was an admission of inadequacy on my part. Doubtless I would have warmed to the Waffen-SS for the same reason. Luckily the group in question happened to be harmless. Gilbert Bolt was the ringleader, mainly through being even less energetic than the rest of them. Leading from behind was a technique I had not previously encountered. Somehow, without lifting a finger, he made ordinary things amusing. He looked half asleep most of the time. Raising an eyebrow about a millimetre was his way of advising me to calm down.

Perhaps the Bellevue Hill mob were my anchor to windward, because simultaneously I was becoming more and more involved with the aesthetes. Except for the Film Society, I soon came to have no other extracurricular activity. Nor did I last long as an active member of the Film Society. Their screenings took place at lunch-time in the Union Hall, a highly atmospheric neo-Gothic nightmare of a place which was unforgivably pulled down a few years later. Everybody was there. Members of the Film Society sat in the minstrel gallery while the common herd sat in the hall proper. Before the house lights dimmed an old 78 of Bunk Johnson and George Lewis performing 'When the Saints Go Marching In' was played over the public-address system. I was proud to be among those in the gallery but it was fated that I should join the majority below. There were two full-sized 35mm projectors. We manned them with a crew of two, stripped to the waist because of the heat. I found it hard to keep the carbon arc burning at the right intensity. When the picture got dark, I overdid it with the readjustment, so that the picture got too bright. I never noticed a stoppage until the film melted. On the screen, Alan Ladd and Virginia Mayo would turn to stone and be suddenly overwhelmed by bubbling gravy. A junior member was supposed never to be left alone in the box but in practice the senior crew member was often outside in the gallery palpating his girlfriend.

If I had had help, the fourth reel of *Simba* would probably never have got away from me. The take-up reel fell off its spindle, leaving me a clear choice of shutting down the projector or else letting the film pile up on the floor. I chose the second course, unaware of just how much volume a reel of film occupies when unwound. When it was time for the next reel change, my senior colleague, whose name was Pratt and who was sitting outside in the gallery, retrieved his hand from his girlfriend's blouse and opened the door to the box. He was expecting to see me and the projectors. Instead he was confronted with a pulsing, writhing wall of celluloid. I was somewhere inside it. It was at least half his fault. But screening *Tales of Ugetsu* with its reels in the wrong order was entirely my responsibility, since I was in charge of film preparation that day. I

suppose I marked the reels wrongly. Hardly anybody noticed the difference, but I realized that it was time to dismiss myself from the Film Society and join its public.

Anyway, I had started to begrudge any of my spare time that was not spent with the bohemians. The Union Revue would have been enough on its own to win my allegiance to their cause. By some act of folly Spencer and Cameron had been placed in charge of the revue for that year. They called it *Flying Saucers*. Between them they wrote all the scripts. They also appeared in most of the songs and sketches. The decor, by Huggins, was brilliant when you could see it. Spencer, however, had designed the lighting. Little would have been visible even if those Film Society members who were operating the dimmers had contrived to stay sober. There was great emphasis on dry ice, so that slow billows of mist crept from the stage into the auditorium, which gradually came to resemble a polar landscape in which people had been embedded up to the neck. Ultraviolet light made the actors' teeth glow green through the white fog. Instrumental music came from an electronic synthesizer played by Pratt. Vocal music was by Palestrina. There were at least two sketches about Virginia Woolf. A third sketch might have been about her, but was more probably about Gertrude Stein. Grogan played Alice B. Toklas, or it could have been Vita Sackville-West. Wanda was either in the cast or kept crossing the stage for some other reason. Bottomley and Howie, sharing the one pair of large trousers, purported to be a mutation. They mouthed abstract dialogue, partly as a forecast of how language might deteriorate in the aftermath of an atomic war, partly in deference to the fact that nobody had got around to actually writing the sketch. A tall, beautiful girl called Penelope White came on wearing a gown composed of shaving mirrors. She announced, in a voice like a chainsaw hitting granite, that her song had not been written yet, but that Spencer had asked her to recite a poem. She recited it. I subsequently learned that it was by John Crowe Ransom. During her recitative, Spencer stood on one leg in the background, softly tapping a gong.

Interval was longer than the first half, which in turn was longer than the second half, although it was hard to tell when that was over. The audience, except for myself and my companion, had left long before. My companion was a girl from Kogarah Presbyterian Church Fellowship called Robin Warne. Afterwards I took her home to Carlton, telling her, during the long train trip, that Spencer and Cameron believed in pitching their work at a level which would force the audience either to confess itself inadequate or else translate its prejudices into violence. I quoted Spencer to the effect that an audience should be challenged, not coddled. When Robin announced that she hadn't understood or enjoyed a single moment of the evening from start to finish, I countered with

Spencer's favourite word: 'Precisely.'

She burst out laughing when I tried to kiss her and didn't speak to me the following Sunday, but I didn't notice. I was too busy planning that year's Kogarah Fellowship revue, which I called *Unidentified Flying Objects*. As producer and director I appointed myself sole scriptwriter and cast myself in every sketch. Lacking adequate supplies of dry ice, I set fire to some rags in a plastic bucket. Graham Truscott, decorated with a joke moustache of his own devising, was in charge of sound, which consisted of a jewel from my recently begun modern-jazz collection – an EP record featuring Maynard Ferguson and Clark Terry engaged in a long attempt to damage each other's hearing. I had tested this particular disc a few hundred times on my mother and could vouch for its challenging effect. As the trumpeters interminably wailed and shrieked, I improvised monologues in which such names as Ford Madox Ford and Ronald Firbank figured prominently. The audience stormed the exits.

That same week, the Fellowship newspaper, of which I was editor and leading contributor, was largely devoted to a long article extolling the virtues of atheism. I had cribbed this almost word for word from the preface to *Androcles and the Lion*, one of the set books for English I. Shaw had enchanted me with his rationalist blarney. It was fitting that my shallow faith should have been uprooted by a toy shovel. The Reverend C. Cummings Campbell asked me along for afternoon tea at the Manse. Still coughing from his evening at the one and orformance of *Unidentified Flying Objects* (handicapped by a pair of lungs which had been poisoned at Ypres, he had been among the last to fight his way out of the hall), he nevertheless managed to contain his anger. Instead of booting me immediately into the street, he began by gently suggesting that I might care to offload some of my more onerous responsibilities, such as the editorship of the Fellowship newspaper, until I had worked out of my system what was plainly 'the influence of that man Anderson'. As usual I was careful to resign a split second before being fired. I told him that I did indeed need time to think, and that perhaps it would be better if for the nonce I were to absent myself altogether. He heaved what would have been a sigh of relief if it had not turned into a coughing fit. My last vision of all things Presbyterian was of the piece of sponge cake – it had pink icing – which I had parked uneaten on the edge of my saucer.

Showing my usual capacity to walk away without a qualm, I left it all behind upon the instant: the bugles and the drums, the vaulting horse and the oak pews, Christine Ballantine's eyes like a pleading fawn and Mrs Pike's voice like a strangled fowl. I had no doubts that I was through with it all for ever. My cocksureness must have been terrible to behold. Night after night I reduced my

mother to tears with my intellectual arrogance. Copied sedulously from Spencer, but potentiated by an insensitivity that was all my own, my forensic style was as intransigent as Vyshinsky's. Ferociously I attacked my mother's lingering, atavistic determination to go on believing in something. If she didn't believe in anything specific, I insisted, why couldn't she just believe in nothing? Triumphantly I refuted her arguments, never recognizing that they were true feelings and amounted to a deep intuition of the world, which in the long run we must see to be purposeful if we are to live in it at all.

I suppose that first year at university was just about the most ridiculous phase of my life. It was love again, of course, but this time I was in love with all of them. I copied Spencer's walk, talk and gestures. I copied the way he wrote. I copied the way Keith Cameron read: Spencer, lost in the toils of a fully bisexual love life and a chronic deficiency of funds, hardly ever read anything except science fiction. I soon realized that his *pronunciamentos* on literature in general were based on the most evanescent acquaintance with its individual products. But Cameron, who already had a BA degree and was qualifying to begin an MA, had an impressive private library of modern literature. I devoured it author by author. Spencer had told me *Four Quartets* was the greatest thing written in recent times. I practically memorized it, but was bewildered to find that Spencer had switched his allegiance to Edith Sitwell. Cameron was less capricious. His level head was the necessary corrective to Spencer's influence. Huggins I admired for grace, ease, creative fertility and plethora of beautiful girlfriends. He was always promising to let me have one of them when he had finished with her, but somehow it never came about. This was lucky in a way, because I would scarcely have known how to behave. I had a girlfriend of my own, an Arts I student called Sally Vaughan: sweet, pretty, decent and intelligent. There was a lot of heavy petting going on but she was a Catholic, I was an idiot and there was nowhere to take her anyway. She lived with her parents in Mosman, across the harbour. I still went home every night, although later and later as the year wore on, especially after I had discovered in myself a liking for the effects produced by several schooners of New consumed one after the other.

In the Forest Lodge I drank with the Bellevue Hill mob and the aesthetes. With Spencer, Huggins, Grogan and Wanda (Cameron was a teetotaller) I visited my first King's Cross cafes and became acquainted with wine. There was more of the same stuff at Lorenzini's, a wine bar where the university writers made contact with the intelligentsia of the town. Lex Banning, the spastic poet, was often to be found there. But the place where all the half-worlds met was the Royal George Hotel, down in Pyrmont. The Royal George was the headquarters of the Downtown Push, usually known as just the Push. The Push was composed

or several different elements. The most prominent component was, or were, the Libertarians – a university free-thought society consisting mainly of people who, like the aesthetes, failed Arts I on a career basis, but in this case as a form of political protest against the state. Endorsing Pareto's analysis of sexual guilt as a repressive social mechanism, the Libertarians freely helped themselves to each other's girlfriends. They had their own folk singer, Johnny Pitts, a hairy dwarf who every few minutes would flail his guitar, launch into a few bars of some barely comprehensible protest song about working conditions on an American railroad and fall sideways.

The next most prominent component was the aesthetes themselves, minus Keith Cameron but plus some specimens who were no longer to be seen around university, their nine years having finally run out. Without exception they were on the verge of writing, painting or composing something so marvellous that they did not want to run the risk of injuring it by rational analysis. As well as the Libertarians and the aesthetes there were small-time gamblers, traditional-jazz fans and the homosexual radio-repair men who had science fiction as a religion. A pick-up jazz band played loudly in the bar. The back room had tables and chairs. If you stuck your head through the door of the back room you came face to face with the Push. The noise, the smoke and the heterogeneity of physiognomy were too much to take in. It looked like a cartoon on which Hogarth, Daumier and George Grosz had all worked together simultaneously, fighting for supremacy.

Nothing feels more like home than the place where the homeless gather. I was enchanted. Here was a paradise beyond the dreams of my mother or the Kogarah Presbyterian Church Fellowship. Here was Bohemia. I had friends here. Everyone in the Push borrowed money from everybody else. Happily I joined the circuit, forming a bad habit I was not to conquer for many years. Even in the rare evenings when Spencer or Huggins did not turn up, there was always Bottomley to talk to and borrow from, since this was the place where he made contact with his fellow gamblers. One of them was six feet six inches high and nicknamed Emu. Apart from his being permanently a thousand pounds in debt and in fear of his life, there was nothing remarkable about Emu except his mistress, but she was very remarkable indeed.

Her name was Lilith Talbot. About thirty years old, she was classically beautiful, with a discreetly ogival figure and a river of auburn hair. She was softly spoken and always elegantly dressed – two qualities which by themselves would have been enough to make her unique in those surroundings. What she saw in Emu was one of the great mysteries. Some said, crudely, that it was a matter of physiology: others, that it was an attraction between opposites. I adored her, first of all from afar, then from progressively closer to. She was

admired her, first of all from afar, then from progressively closer to. She was openly delighted with my naive worship of all these people whose every secret she had known for years. She was probably also, I now realize, secretly delighted with my absurdly affected mimicry of Spencer. She accused me of being in love with him. I hotly denied the charge, even though it was partly true, and counter-attacked, greatly daring, by telling her that I was in love with her, which was wholly true. I tried to content myself with the prospect of a Platonic relationship. Not only was she entirely loyal to Emu, but Emu had friends who were almost as frightening as his enemies. The world of crime started just where the Push finished, and often the edges overlapped.

By this time my first poems were coming out in *honi soit*. They were, of course, the most abject pastiche, but my first appearance in print led me to an excess of posturing beside which Nerval walking his lobster would have been as inconspicuous as the Invisible Man. A symphony in corduroy velvet, smoking cigarettes the length of a blow-gun, I casually sprinted into Manning House, spread out a dozen copies of the paper, and read myself with ill-concealed approval. Even the patience of the Bellevue Hill mob was strained. They voted that I should no longer be heard on the subject of literature. Since the aesthetes grew equally tired of hearing their own opinions coming back at them, I was left with only Sally to berate during the day, and Lilith to harangue in the evening. They were bemused and long-suffering respectively. Heinrich Mann, writing about Nietzsche, remarks at one point that self-confidence often precedes achievement and is generally strained so long as it is untried. No self-confidence could have been more strained than mine. Underneath it, needless to say, lay gurgling indecision. The contradictions were piling up to such an altitude that it was getting hard to see over the top of them. On the one hand I was a petty-bourgeois student, on the other a libertarian bohemian. Sobbing into my beer in the Royal George, I predicted doom for myself in the forthcoming examinations. By day I nursed my hangover and meticulously took notes, wondering what the Push was up to. What was I missing out on?

When the exam results came out, I was deeply shocked to find that I had passed in both Anthropology and History, was listed in Order of Merit for English – i.e., midway between a pass and a credit – and had secured an outright credit in Psychology. Obviously the examiners had been moved to find their own lectures being returned to them in condensed form. Apart from Huggins, a star student in Architecture, none of the aesthetes had ever done as well in a lustrum as I had done in a year. I was neck and neck with the boys from Bellevue Hill. This made me feel guilty and alarmed. Which was I, a conformist or a nonconformist? I could feel my own personality coming apart like the original continental plates. Getting drunk was no solution even though my mother was

continental plates. Getting drunk was no solution, even though my mother was charmingly willing to accept the consequent behaviour as evidence of fatigue brought on by too much study. As I collapsed in the porch at midnight, having fallen over every garbage bin on the way down the street, I would explain to her that the Habsburgs had been too much for me. In a dressing gown with the hall light behind her, she looked down at her son, doubtless wondering what he was turning into. I was wondering the same thing.

Could there be such a thing as a virgin sophisticate? Had there ever been a man of the world who came home every night to his mother? Fate resolved this latter anomaly with brutal speed. My number came up and I found myself conscripted for National Service.

14. BASIC TRAINING

National Service was designed to turn boys into men and make the Yellow Peril think twice about moving south. It was universally known as Nasho – a typically Australian diminutive. Once you were in it, four years went by before you were out of it: there was a three-week camp every year, plus numerous parades. But the most brutal fact about Nasho was the initial seventy-seven-day period of basic training, most of which took place at Ingleburn. Each new intake of gormless youth was delivered into the hands of regular army instructors who knew everything about licking unpromising material into shape. When we stepped off the bus at Ingleburn, they were already screaming at us. Screaming sergeants and corporals appeared suddenly out of huts. I stood clutching my Globite suitcase and wondered what had gone wrong with my life. While I goggled at a screaming sergeant, I was abruptly blown sideways by a bellow originating from somewhere behind my right ear. Recovering, I turned to face Ronnie the One.

His real name was Warrant Officer First Class Ronald McDonald, but he was known throughout the army as Ronnie the One. Responsible for battalion discipline, he had powers of life and death over all non-commissioned personnel and could even bring charges against officers up to the rank of captain. His appearance was almost inconceivably unpleasant. A pig born looking like him would have demanded plastic surgery. His brass gleamed like gold and his leather like mahogany, but the effect was undone by his khaki drills, which despite being ironed glass-smooth were perpetually soaked with sweat. Ronnie the One dripped sweat even on a cold day. It was not just because he was fat, although he had a behind like an old sofa. It was because he was always screaming so hard. At that moment he was screaming directly at me. ‘GED YAHAHCARDP!’ Later on a translator told me that this meant ‘Get your hair cut’ and could generally be taken as a friendly greeting, especially if you could still see his eyes. When Ronnie was really annoyed his face swelled up and turned purple like the rear end of an amorous baboon

turned purple like the rear end of an amorous baboon.

For the next eleven weeks I was running flat out, but no matter how fast my feet moved, my mind was moving even faster. It was instantly plain to me that only cunning could ensure survival. Among the university students in our intake, Wokka Clark was undoubtedly the golden boy. Already amateur middleweight champion of NSW, he was gorgeous to behold. But he couldn't take the bullshit. What happened to him was like a chapter out of *From Here to Eternity*. They applauded him in the boxing ring at night and screamed at him all day. That summer the noon temperature was a hundred plus. Ronnie the One would take Wokka out on the parade ground and drill him till he dropped. The reason Wokka dropped before Ronnie did was simple. All Ronnie had on his head was a cap. Wokka had on a steel helmet. The pack on his back was full of bricks. After a few weeks of that, plus guard duty every night that he wasn't boxing, even Wokka was obeying orders.

You couldn't fight them. Even the conscientious objectors ended up looking after the regimental mascot – a bulldog called Onslow who looked like Ronnie's handsome younger brother. It was like one of Kenny Mears's games of marbles: nobody was allowed not to play. I could appreciate the psychology of it. The first task when training new recruits is to disabuse them of the notion that life is fair. Otherwise they will stand rooted to the spot when they first come up against people who are trying to kill them. But my abstract understanding of what was going on impinged only tangentially on the concrete problem of getting through the day without landing myself in the kind of trouble that would make the next day even more impossibly difficult than it was going to be anyway.

Something about my general appearance annoyed Ronnie. There were a thousand trainees in the intake but I was among the select handful of those whose aspect he couldn't abide. I could be standing in a mess queue, Ronnie would be a dot in the distance, and suddenly his voice would arrive like incoming artillery. 'GEDDABIGGAHAD!' He meant that I should get a bigger hat. He didn't like the way it sat on top of my head. Perhaps he just didn't like my head, and wanted the whole thing covered up. The drill that I had learned in Boys' Brigade saved my life. When it came to square-bashing, it turned out that the years I had spent interpreting Captain Andrews's commands had given me a useful insight into what Ronnie was likely to mean by his shouts and screams. When Ronnie yelled 'ABARD HARGH!' I knew almost straight away that it must mean 'about turn'. Thus I was able to turn decisively with the many, instead of dithering with the few.

On the parade ground Peebles drew most of the lightning. So uncoordinated that he was to all intents and purposes a spastic, Peebles should not have been

passed medically fit. But since he had been, the army was stuck with him. After a month of training, when Ronnie shouted, 'ABARD HARGH!' nine hundred and ninety-nine soldiers would smartly present their backs and Peebles would be writhing on the ground, strangled by the sling of his rifle. For Peebles the day of reckoning came when he obeyed an order to fix bayonets. This was one of Ronnie's most frightening orders. It had the verb at the end, as in German or Latin. In English the order would have sounded something like: 'Bayonets . . . fix!' Bellowed by Ronnie, it came out as: 'BAHAYONED . . . FEE!' The last word was delivered as a high-pitched, almost supersonic, scream. It was succeeded on this occasion by another scream, since Peebles' bayonet, instead of appearing at the end of his rifle, was to be seen protruding from the back of the soldier standing in front of him. After that, they used to mark Peebles present at company parade every morning but lose him behind a tree on the way to battalion parade, where he was marked absent.

My kit, not my drill, was what got me into trouble. For once in my life I had to make my own bed every morning, without fail, and lay out for inspection my neatly polished and folded belongings. Since the penalty for not doing this properly was to have the whole lot thrown on the floor and be obliged to start again, I gradually got better at it, but I never became brilliant. National Servicemen had to wax and polish their webbing instead of just powdering it with blanco. It was a long process which bored me, and the same fingers which had been so tacky at woodwork were still likely to gum up the job. The problem became acute when it was my platoon's turn to mount guard. Throughout the entire twenty-four hours it was on duty, the guard was inspected, supervised, harassed and haunted by Ronnie the One. The initial inspection of kit, dress and rifle lasted a full hour. Ronnie snorted at my brass, retched at my webbing and turned puce when he looked down the barrel of my rifle.

'THASSNODDAGHARDRIVAL!' he yelled. He meant that it was not a guard rifle. 'ISSFULLAPADAYDAHS!' He meant that it was full of potatoes. I looked down the barrel. I had spent half a day pulling it through until it glowed like El Dorado's gullet. Now I saw that a single speck of grit had crept into it.

In the guardhouse we had to scrub the floors and tables, whitewash the walls and polish the undersides of the drawing pins on the notice board. When we went out on picket we could not afford to relax for a moment, since Ronnie could be somewhere in the vicinity preparing to do his famous Banzai charge. At two o'clock in the morning I was guarding the transport park. It was raining. Sitting down in the sentry box, I had the brim of my hat unbuttoned and was hanging from the collar of my groundsheet, praying for death. I had my rifle inside my groundsheet with me, so that I could fold my hands on its muzzle, lean

my chin on the cushion formed by my hands under the cape and gently nod off while still looking reasonably alert. I had calculated that Ronnie would not come out in the rain. This proved to be a bad guess. I thought the sentry box had been struck by lightning, but it was merely Ronnie's face going off like a purple grenade about a foot in front of mine. I came to attention as if electrocuted and tried to shoulder arms. Since the rifle was still inside my groundsheet, merely to attempt this manoeuvre was bound to yield Peebles-like results. Ronnie informed me, in a tirade which sounded and felt like an atomic attack, that he had never seen anything like it in his life.

The inevitable consequence was extra kitchen duty. I can safely say that I did more of this than anybody else in the battalion. While everybody else was out in the donga learning to disguise themselves as anthills and sneak up on the enemy, I was in the kitchen heading a crack team of cleaners composed of no-hopers like Peebles. The kitchen was as big as an aircraft hangar. All the utensils were on an enormous scale. The smallest dixies would be four feet long, two feet across and three feet deep. Lined with congealed custard and rhubarb, they took half an hour each to clean. The biggest dixie was the size of a Bessemer converter and mounted on gimbals. I was lowered into it on a rope. When I hit the bottom it rang like a temple gong. After the kitchen sergeant was satisfied that the dixie was shining like silver he pulled a crank and I was tipped out, smothered in mashed potato.

It must have been while I was inside the dixie that I missed out on the chance to volunteer for Infantry. That was how I found myself in the Assault Pioneers – the one specialist course that nobody sane wanted to be on, since it involved landmines, booby traps and detonators. In the long run the lethality of the subject proved to be a boon. National Service was winding to an end by that stage – ours was to be the last intake – and the government didn't want any mother's sons getting killed at the eleventh hour. So instead of burying mines for us to dig up, they buried rocks. While our backs were turned, they would bury a hundred rocks in a careful pattern. We would move through the area, probing the earth with our bayonets, and dig up two hundred. It wasn't as glamorous as being in, say, the mortar platoon, but I came to appreciate the lack of excitement, especially after we were all marched out to the range and given a demonstration of what the mortar specialists had learned.

The mortars in question were the full three inches across the barrel – not the two-inch pipes that had little more than nuisance value, but really effective weapons which could throw a bomb over a mountain and kill everything within a wide radius at the point of impact. A thousand of us, including the colonel and all his officers, sat around the rim of a natural amphitheatre while the mortar

teams fired their weapons. All looked downwards at the mortars with fascination, except for Ronnie the One, who was down with the mortars looking upwards, tirelessly searching for anyone with too small a hat. Team after team loaded and fired. The bomb was dropped into the mortar and immediately departed towards the stratosphere, where it could be heard – and even, momentarily, seen – before it dived towards its target, which was a large cross on a nearby hill. You saw the blast, then you heard the sound. It was a bit like watching Ronnie having a heart attack on the horizon.

Every team did its job perfectly until the last. The last team was Wokka Clark and Peebles. They had to do *something* with Peebles. If they had put him in the Pioneers he probably would have bitten the detonator instead of the fuse. It went without saying that he could not be allowed to drive a truck or fire a Vickers machine gun, especially after the way he had distinguished himself on the day everyone in the battalion had had to throw a grenade. (One at a time we entered the throwing pit. The sergeant handed you a grenade, from which you removed the pin. You then threw the grenade. When he handed Peebles a grenade, Peebles removed the pin and handed the grenade back to him.) The safest thing to do with Peebles was team him up with Wokka, who was so strong that he could throw the base plate of a three-inch mortar twenty yards. All Peebles had to do was wait until Wokka had done the calibrations and then drop in the bomb. He must have done it successfully scores of times in practice. He did it quite smoothly this time too, except that the bomb went in upside down.

If you were to rig a vacuum cleaner to blow instead of suck and then point it at a pile of dust, you would get some idea of what those thousand supposedly disciplined men did a split second after they noticed the bomb going into the mortar with its fins sticking up instead of down. They just melted away. Some tried to dig themselves into the earth. Some started climbing trees. But most of us ran. I was running flat out when an officer went past me at head height, flapping his arms like a swan. Ronnie stopped the panic by shouting ‘HARD!’, meaning ‘halt’. The noise could have been the bomb going off, but since it was unaccompanied by shrapnel it seemed safe to pay attention. Everyone turned and looked down. Ronnie picked up the whole mortar, base plate included, shook out the bomb and handed it to Peebles. Silence. Wokka still had his hands over his eyes. Peebles dropped the bomb in the right way up. The mortar coughed. There was a crackle in the sky and a blast on the hill. Then we all marched thoughtfully back to camp.

By now I had made a career out of being a private. Having made the mistake of supplying all the right answers in the intelligence test (since it was exactly the same test that I had been studying in Psychology I, this was no great feat), I was

at first put under some pressure to become an officer, or failing that an NCO. But it soon became clear to all concerned that I was a born private. I had revived my joker persona as a means of ingratiating myself with my fellow conscripts. I had no wish to lose their approval by being raised above them. Nor was I morally equipped to accept responsibility for others. But I did manage to get better at being the lowest form of life in the army. I was a digger. I learned the tricks of looking neat without expending too much energy. And although it would have been heresy to say so, I actually enjoyed weapons training. I had the eyes to be good at firing the .303 rifle, but not the hands. Yet I relished being instructed on it. And the Bren was such a perfect machine that there was avid competition to specialize. I never got to the stage of wanting to sleep with one, but must admit that there were times when, as I eyed the Bren's sleek lines, I discovered in myself a strong urge to fiddle with its gas-escape regulator.

The weapons sergeants were all regular soldiers with combat experience, usually in Korea. There was virtue, it seemed to me, in listening when they talked. They were wise in their craft. Every few intakes one of them got shot by a National Serviceman. None of them wanted to be the one. After surviving a long encounter with half a million glory-hungry Chinese it makes no sense to be finished off by some adolescent pointing his rifle at you and saying, 'Sergeant, it's stuck.' They were particularly careful when it came to instructing us on the Owen machine carbine. This was the same gun I had once carted around Jannali. The Owen cocked itself if you dropped it and shot you when you picked it up. It disgorged fat, 9mm slugs at a very high rate of fire and the barrel clawed up to the right during the burst. If due precautions were not taken, the man on the left of the line would mow down everyone else, including the instructor. The sergeants were very cautious about whom they put on the left, and always stood well to the left themselves. Some of them stood so far to the left they were out of sight. Without exception they refused to let Peebles fire the thing at all. They parked him behind his usual tree on the way to the range and faked his score.

I also enjoyed drill. Einstein once said that any man who liked marching had been given his brain for nothing: just the spinal column would have done. But I wasn't Einstein. Since most of one's time in the army is wasted anyway, I preferred to waste it by moving about in a precise manner. It was better than blueing my pay packet at a pontoon game in the lavatories. As fit as I would ever be in my life, I could fling a Lee-Enfield .303 rifle around like a baton. When I was ordered to volunteer as right front marker for the exhibition drill squad, I sensibly said yes. Saying no would have immediately entailed being lowered into the big dixie, so it was scarcely a courageous decision.

The drill squad was one of the star items on the big day. Visiting brass and proud parents lined the parade ground. Dressed in white singlets, khaki drill

proud parents lined the parade ground. Dressed in white singlets, khaki cum trousers, gaiters and boots, ninety-nine strapping examples of bronzed young Australian manhood all took their time from me. We looked like an erotic dream by Leni Riefenstahl. Ronnie gave the orders in his usual mixture of Urdu and epilepsy, but by now I could read his mind. Miraculously dry-handed in the heat, I put the .303 through its paces. It was all a matter of not worrying. Just let the body remember. It wasn't until the routine was over and we were marching off to a storm of applause that the thought occurred to me: they had done it. They had got what they wanted out of me. But on the other hand I had got what I wanted out of them. I had acquired my first real measure of self-sufficiency, which is something other, and quieter, than mere self-assertion, and probably the opposite of being self-absorbed.

That night the whole drill squad was given leave. Blazing with brass and polished green webbing, I got off the train in Sydney after sunset and headed straight for the Royal George, marching an inch above the pavement in my mirror-finish boots. There was a roar of scorn as I entered the back room. Cries of 'Fascist!' rose from all sides. But for once I was sure of myself. Nobody looking as unappealing as the Libertarians was in a position to sneer at the starched perfection of my KDs. Johnny Pitts flailed his guitar, launched into a few bars of some barely comprehensible protest song about American militarism and fell sideways. Grogan, saluting wildly, jumped up and down on a table. Once again he was clad in nothing but G-string Speedo and thongs. Spencer was pretending to be dazzled by my beauty. Everyone was in character. It all passed me by, because I had noticed that Emu was not present. Lilith Talbot was unaccompanied.

I suppose it was just my lucky night. Emu, it transpired, was somewhere in the Blue Mountains, hiding from some people who had threatened to dip him by the heels in Hen and Chicken Bay, a part of the harbour much favoured by grey nurse sharks. From the goodness of her simple heart, Lilith told me straight away that it would be a pity if we did not take advantage of this opportunity to complete my basic training. But it could happen only once, and there must never be a word to anyone, or my death would follow shortly upon hers. Did I understand that? Transfixed by the shape of her mouth, I nodded dumbly. We walked out of the room together – a sound tactic, since it looked too intimate to be anything but innocent. And if I couldn't believe my luck, all those other helplessly dotting males would be doing their best not to believe my luck either.

On the ferry to Kirribilli we sat on a bench in the prow. It was a warm night in late summer. The breeze would have ruffled Lilith's hair if her hair had been less heavy. A junkyard of light, Luna Park spilled ladders of pastel across the water, the Big Dinner roaring like a wounded dragon. Under the deck of the Harbour

the Big Dipper roiling like a wounded dragon. Under the arch of the Harbour Bridge, the ultraviolet beacon that guides the big ships through the dark sent out its cobwebs of lapis lazuli above our heads. I made Lilith look up at it. She let me kiss her. I didn't know it was allowed. I kept expecting a squad of MPs to appear and place me under arrest.

But there was just us. Walking up the hill was like being shown into Olympus by a resident. Everything she had on must have weighed about two ounces all told. A pale-blue cotton dress and a pair of gracile high-heeled white sandals were all that I could see. I didn't know what to do with my hands, but somehow everything was all right. It went on being all right when we got to her place. Really the house belonged to Emu. It was his one tangible asset. Lilith had a room in it of her own, although even here there were signs of Emu's pre-eminence. A crate of empty beer bottles against the wall could belong only to him. The same applied to the 16 lb shot on top of the cupboard. In a previous incarnation Emu had been GPS shot-put champion.

Lilith opened the curtains towards where the sun would be when it came up. It seemed that nothing but darkness was there now. But when she turned out the light, there was still enough illumination to reach her. She took her dress off over her head and stood there while my eyes began the long task of getting used to seeing what before they had only imagined. For Lilith, her own beauty was a sufficient reason to exist. I would like to be able to say that we celebrated her loveliness together. In fact I hardly knew what I was doing. She was more tolerant than I was capable of realizing. I had no idea of delay, and would not have been able to do much about it even if I had. It was all too exciting. What an older and wiser man would have made last for hours was all over in seconds. I gave a spasmodic lurch and kicked the cupboard. The shot rolled off the top of it and fell into the crate of beer bottles. I was too pleased with myself to care. Lilith Talbot is among my fondest memories. And you can stop thinking that she's a figment of my imagination. Of course she is.

15. VERY WELL: ALONE

The last week of basic training was spent on bivouac at Singleton. The whole battalion camped out in the donga. Our company was instructed to storm and fortify the top of a mountain. My Pioneer platoon was ordered to dig a command post out of the virgin rock. Since there was no dynamite, we had to do it with picks and shovels. After six days the command post was three inches deep. If the battalion had been commanded by leprechauns it would have been an ideal headquarters. I didn't care. I could still taste Lilith. Periodically there was a tremendous hullabaloo as a pair of RAAF Sabre jets went past below us. They were pretending to strafe the infantry who were fitfully shooting blanks at each other down in the valley.

Around the campfire at night I was the expert on sex. I was still a long way away from learning that the main difference between an adult and an adolescent is the ability to keep secrets. I betrayed Lilith dreadfully, even to the extent of telling them her real name. But everybody else was too drunk to notice. The mortar platoon kept us in fresh meat. Accidentally on purpose they blew a cow to smithereens. One moment it was grazing contentedly and the next it was spread all over the landscape. Every platoon got a smithereen each. We roasted it over the fire and washed it down with wine bought in bulk from a vineyard in the next valley. The wine was so raw that it left your tongue looking like a crocodile-skin handbag.

A fat soldier called Malouf had stolen my position as chief joker. He sang a hundred choruses of 'Old King Cole' and fainted into the fire. But in my new role of sex expert I had enough confidence to serve out my time. It was steep up that mountain. We slept under groundsheets rigged as pup tents. It was advisable to pitch your tent in close contact with the trunk of a stout tree, otherwise you could end up as part of an avalanche. With my feet sticking out of one end of the tent and my head out of the other I looked straight up at the stars. There were stars between the stars. The mountain air was unmixed, as in Dante's Paradise: you could see to the edge of the universe. The Southern Cross was so brilliant

you could see to the edge of the universe. The Southern Cross was so brilliant that it dripped. You could have picked it out of the sky and hung it around a young nun's neck. I had never felt more alive. From miles away below came the occasional snapping of dry sticks and what sounded like the muffled howl of a wombat being raped. It was Ronnie, Banzai-charging the sentries.

Buoyant with well-being, I returned to civilian life. Between the top of Margaret Street and our front gate my mother came to meet me. I knew that look, so my mental defence mechanisms were already going into action when she told me that Gary Meldrum had been killed the day before racing his motorbike at Mount Druitt. I learned the details later on. He had been leading a pack of AIS 7Rs when his telescopic front fork collapsed on a bend. The bike went up in the air with its throttle stuck open and when it came back down again he was lying underneath it. The chain cut his throat and he died instantly.

I walked my mother inside and made her a cup of tea. I didn't feel anything at all except a sense that I was falling upwards from the past. It was all going away from me. I could feel a vacuum plucking at the back of my shirt. After the funeral service at Kogarah Presbyterian Church I cried noisily in the street but it was the kind of reflex that would have pleased the Sydney University Psychology Department, since it was unconnected with anything going on in my head. I began to suspect that I might have nothing in there except scar tissue, or else a couple of loose wires that should have been touching each other but weren't.

Being a mother's boy is a condition that can be fully cured only by saying goodbye to mother. Nevertheless I did not entirely revert. I was soon having my bed made for me again, but I managed to keep something of my new-found independence. Justifying callousness as necessary for survival, I did pretty much what I pleased. The rest of my university course was a steadily accelerating story of possibilities explored and studies neglected. Lilith and I were just friends again, alas. On the other hand she had spoiled me for little girls who, in the charming jargon of that time, did not come across. So I left Sally Vaughan in tears, went in search of something less complicated, and had my wishes granted often enough to ensure that the moment of real involvement in somebody else's life went on being put off into the indeterminate future, whose outline looked as hazy as ever. All that I could be sure of was that some form of writing would play a part in it.

I went on to become literary editor of *honi soit*, with a page of my own to look after every week. Almost invariably I filled it with my own productions. Some of them were so pretentious that even today I can't recall their tone without emitting an involuntary yell of anguish. But a certain fluency accrued from the

sheer exercise, and inevitably a certain notoriety accrued along with it. There was a shimmering before my eyes. Narcissus was beginning the long process of getting his reflection in focus.

The need to be approved of aided my progress, if progress it was. I never stopped admiring the talent of Spencer and Keith Cameron, but gradually at first, and then quicker all the time, my own activities took a different course. The desire to amuse overcame the desire to shock. By my second year I was already writing a good proportion of the Revue, and by my third year I was writing almost half of it. Against my will but according to my instincts, I recognized that when I mimicked Spencer's mannerisms I made no connection with the audience, and that when what I wrote was my own idea, the audience laughed. I tried to hold them in contempt for that, but could not quite succeed. So I tried to hold myself in contempt instead, but could not quite succeed at that either. It was already occurring to me that in these matters practice might be wiser than theory.

If only everything had been clearer. If I had read Sartre at that stage I might have learned that the obligation to create one's life from day to day was an inescapable responsibility. Luckily I read Camus instead. Here was my first mature literary enthusiasm: instead of merely having my prejudices confirmed, I was disabused of them. Camus offered consolation by telling you that yours was not the only personality which felt as if it was lying around in pieces – every life felt like that from the inside. More importantly, he offered a moral vision that went beyond the self. 'Tyrants conduct monologues above a million solitudes.' I looked at a sentence like that until my eyes grew tired. It wasn't poetry. So why was it so poetic? How did he do it? And where could I buy a coat like his? I tilted my head to the same angle, practised lighting a Disque Bleu so that the flame atmospherically lit the lower half of my face and planned to die in a car crash.

The immature enthusiasms continued along with the mature ones. I went crazy for Ezra Pound. I unhesitatingly incorporated the manic self-confidence of his critical manner into my own prose. Since my ignorance far outstripped even his, I was lucky not to fall further under his spell. Once again instinct was wiser than thought. Even when I was drunk with awe at the sheer incomprehensibility of the *Cantos*, I was simultaneously delighting in the clear, strong, sane talent of MacNeice. When I came to read Yeats I soon saw what real grandeur was, and realized that Pound's grandiloquence was not it.

The Great Gatsby helped teach me what a real prose style was like. I read it over and over. Even at that early stage I could see that if it came to a choice between Hemingway and Fitzgerald, I would take Fitzgerald – not just because his cadences were more seductive, but because he was less sentimental. I never

let it come to the choice, preferring to admire them both. I went mad on the Americans generally. E. E. Cummings made me drunk. Mencken's sceptical high spirits seemed to me the very tones of ebullient sanity. It went without saying that there was no question of being interested in Australian culture as such. Nobody had given it a thought in the last twenty years.

Having finished reading Keith Cameron's library, I started reading the university library, which was named after someone called Fisher. In those days Fisher Library was housed in a building which looked like the little brother of Milan Cathedral and formed part of the Quad. But even when I was wearing a groove up and down the library stairs I was always careful not to read anything on the course. If the syllabus said Beaumont and Fletcher, I read Mencken and Nathan. If it said Webster and Ford, I read Auden and Isherwood. Life would have been so much simpler had I done what I was asked that today I never stop wondering why I didn't. Two or three of the English lecturers were of world class. I assiduously contrived never to learn anything about Old English. I faked my way through that part of the course by memorizing the cribs. It was only my ability to conjure a fluent essay out of thin air that got me admitted to the third year of the honours school. That, and the incidental benefit of reading Shakespeare morning, noon and night. There, for once, I got the horse before the cart.

Psychology I gave up at the end of the second year, just before it gave up me. When it came to statistical analysis, I was helpless. A deep spiritual aversion to the whole subject might also have had something to do with it. Not even Freud appealed. I could see the poetic fecundity of his imagination, but as an actor in a real-life Oedipus play I felt free to question his teleological sophistry. Undoubtedly, my father having mysteriously been killed, I had inherited exclusive rights to my mother's favours. But to suggest that either of the two survivors had in any way desired such an outcome was patently ludicrous. I got through the psychology examinations on a 'post' – i.e., a viva voce after having written a borderline paper. I would not have been granted even the 'post' if it had not been for my clinical case study. During the course of the year we had to assemble an elaborate case study of some real person. My clinical study was little Toni Turrell, sexy Shirley's sister. Five minutes into the Wechsler-Bellevue intelligence test I realized that little Toni was a hopeless moron who would yield up the same personality profile as a block of wood. So I excused her from any further tests and cooked up the whole thing. It was, if I may say so, a brilliantly convincing job. 'Toni: A Case Study' was my first attempt at a full-length fictional work. (This book is the second.)

Anthropology also moved to a natural demise at the end of the second year. It

was only a two-year subject anyway. Having absorbed the contents of *Frigging Around in Fiji* and regurgitated them at the appropriate moment, I was rewarded with the minimum pass. Education I, which I sat in my second year, I failed outright. I can see now that this result was an instinctively correct estimate of the subject's importance, but at the time it fitted in with a familiar pattern. Since my mind, or at any rate my heart, was already on some other path, I was not as worried as I might have been about the growing evidence that my attention was wandering from my work. But for my mother the whole meandering dereliction was all too disturbingly recognizable, especially now that I was more often arriving home early the next morning instead of late that night, and then late the next night instead of in the early morning.

Between my second and third years I tried to recoup my position in the parental eye by getting a job in the long vacation. I was accepted as a trainee bus conductor. The buses were green Leyland diesels operating out of Tempe depot. The easy routes went overland to places like Bexley and Drummoyne. The difficult routes went through the city. I found the job fiercely demanding even on a short route with a total of about two dozen passengers. I pulled the wrong tickets, forgot the change and wrote up my log at the end of each trip in a way that drew hollow laughter from the inspectors. The inspectors were called Kellies, after Ned Kelly, and were likely to swoop at any time. A conductor with twenty years' service could be dismissed if a Kelly caught him accepting money without pulling a ticket. If a hurrying passenger pressed the fare into your hand as he leapt out of the back door, it was wise to tear a ticket and throw it out after him. There might be a plainclothes Kelly following in an unmarked car.

Days of fatigue and panic taught me all over again that I am very bad at what I am not good at. We worked a split shift with four hours off in the middle of the day. Effectively this meant that we were on the job twelve hours a day, since there was nothing else to do with the four hours off except hang around the depot. I got so tired I used to sleep the whole four hours on a bench in the billiard room. Once I conked out with a lighted Rothmans in my hand. I dreamed of a bushfire burning down Jannali school with Miss Turnbull still inside it. I woke to face a cloud of smoke. The whole front of my shirt had burned away. The billiard room was full of conductors and drivers who had been placing bets on when I would wake up. The white nylon singlet I had been wearing under the shirt was scorched the colour of strong tea.

I lasted about three weeks all told, which meant that I hardly got past probation. The routes through town were more than the mind could stand even in the off-peak hours. In peak hours the scene was Dantesque. All the buses from our depot and every other depot would be crawling nose to tail through town

while the entire working population of Sydney fought to get aboard. It was hot that summer: 100°F every day. Inside the bus it was 30° hotter still. Hammering up Pitt Street in the solid traffic at about ten miles an hour, the bus was like the Black Hole of Calcutta on wheels. It was so jammed inside that my feet weren't touching the floor. I couldn't blink the sweat out of my eyes. There was no hope of collecting any fares. At each stop it was all I could do to reach the bell-push that signalled the driver to close the automatic doors and get going. I had no way of telling whether anybody had managed to get off or on. My one object was to get that bus up Pitt Street. Passengers fainted and just hung there – there was nowhere for them to fall. The air tasted as if it had just been squirted out of the safety valve of a pressure cooker full of cabbage. In those circumstances I was scarcely to blame. I didn't even know where we were, but I guessed we were at the stop just before Market Street. I pressed the bell, the doors puffed closed, and the bus surged forward. There were shouts and yells from down the back, but I thought they were the angry cries of passengers who had not got on. Too slowly I realized that they were emanating from within the bus. The back set of automatic doors had closed around an old lady's neck as she was getting on. Her head, wearing a black veiled hat decorated with wax fruit, was inside the bus. The rest of her, carrying a shopping bag with each hand, was outside. I knew none of this at the time. When I at last cottoned on to the fact that something untoward was happening and signalled the driver to stop, he crashed to a halt and opened the automatic doors, whereupon the woman dropped to the road. She was very nice about it. Perhaps the experience had temporarily dislocated her mind. Anyway, she apologized to me for causing so much trouble. Unfortunately the car just behind turned out to be full of Kellies. Since it would have made headlines if a university student had been thrown off the buses for half-guillotining a woman of advanced years, I was given the opportunity to leave quietly. Once again this failed to coincide with my own plans only in the sense that I had already resigned. In fact I had made my decision at about the same time as the old lady hit the ground.

16. FIDGETY FEET

Nor, in my last year, did I prove to be any better as a student than I had been as a bus conductor. I no longer saw fit to attend any lectures at all. But my extracurricular activities flourished, following the principle that I could be infinitely energetic in those areas where it didn't matter. The Revue that year had my name in the programme thirty-two times. As well as writing most of the sketches, I was assistant producer to a man called Waldo Laidlaw, an advertising executive who was prominent in fringe theatre. Spencer and Keith Cameron despised Waldo's stylishness but I couldn't help being fascinated. He ranked as the local Diaghilev. Under his aegis, the Revue's costumes and decor took on an unmistakably self-confident look – a fact which could be easily detected by the naked eye, since Waldo was in favour of turning the lights right up. Most of the numbers I wrote were so embarrassing that I can't recall them even when I try, but others had the sort of half-success with the audience that fans the desire to go further.

By now I was writing a good half of *honi soit* every week. The letters column was full of protests about things I had written. The letters of protest were nearly all written by me. A certain kind of cheap fame accumulated, in which I pretended not to wallow. More significantly, the *Sydney Morning Herald* asked me to review books. The editor was Angus Maude, who at the time was serving out the bleak years after Suez, before returning to Britain and resuming his climb to influence. I owe Angus Maude a great deal. The bread of exile must have been bitter enough without having my cocksure ignorance to cope with on top of it. The first reviews I wrote for him were too pig-headed to be publishable. His simplest course would have been to forget the whole idea. But by a series of gentle hints he induced me to write within the scope of what I knew, so that I could turn out a piece which, while it did not fail to be dull, was at least seldom outright foolish.

Tom Fitzgerald, editor of a new literary-cum-political weekly called the

Nation, was the next to pick me up. He had already hired Huggins. Fitzgerald treated me with great patience. A man of real learning, he also had the gusto to value keenness even when it was uninformed. In Vadim's, the King's Cross coffee bar where he held court, I would join the table late at night and pipe fatuous comments from my position below the salt. The other, more venerable literary men present stared deep into their glasses of Coonawarra claret or hurriedly reminisced, but Tom went on being tolerant even after the catastrophic week when I succeeded in reviewing the same book both for his magazine and the *Herald*. The Gaggia espresso machine hissed and gurgled. The six-foot blonde waitress swayed and swooped. Huggins blew in with a sheaf of new drawings. This was the life. The Royal George started seeming less attractive, especially when you considered that Emu was likely to be sitting in it. He had a new way of staring at me that made me feel cold and sticky, like a very old ice-cube.

Getting my name in the papers helped ease the transition from the last year of university to the first year of real life. My honours degree in English was scarcely of the highest grade, but there was no need to tell my mother that the result was really less impressive than it looked, and besides, in the same week that the results came out the *Herald* offered me a job. I was only to be assistant to the editor of the magazine page of the Saturday edition, but it felt unsettlingly like success. As if to redeem myself for betraying their uncompromising standards, I spent many evenings that summer with Spencer and Grogan, bucketing across the Harbour Bridge in Grogan's wreck of a Chevrolet to crash parties on the North Shore. Unfortunately I found it less easy than they did to hate what was to be found there. The young men of the North Shore might exceed even the Bellevue Hill mob in their partiality for cravats and suede shoes, but some of the girls were uncomfortably appealing. I resented their gentle manners but not from superiority. What unsettled me about the people of the North Shore was the way they all knew each other. I was, am and will continue to be until the grave, incurably envious of all families.

But I was flattered to find that my name was already known. While Grogan was being thrown out and Spencer was being aloof in a canvas chair beside the swimming pool, I would be queuing at the wine cask or holding forth near the barbecue. It seemed to me that the girls hung on my words. It seemed that they were positively leaning sideways to drink them in. Then the lawn would swing up and hit me. After just such an exploit a girl called Françoise drove me back to town. She was a diplomat's daughter. Infuriatingly she could read Latin, French and German, looked marvellously pretty and would not let me sleep with her. She offered something called Friendship instead, which I grudgingly accepted.

After vomiting into the glove compartment of her Renault Dauphine, I felt I owed her the time of day.

My year at the *Herald* can be briefly recounted. The editor of the Saturday magazine page was a veteran journalist called Leicester Cotton. He was a sweet man whose days of adventure were long behind. We shared a partitioned-off cubicle just big enough to hold two desks. While he got on with choosing the serials and book excerpts which would fill the main part of the page, it was my task to rewrite those unsolicited contributions which might just make a piece. All I had to do was change everything in them and they would be fine. Apart from the invaluable parsing lessons at school, these months doing rewrites were probably the best practical training I ever received. Characteristically I failed to realize it at first. But gradually the sheer weight of negative evidence began to convince me that writing is essentially a matter of saying things in the right order. It certainly has little to do with the creative urge per se. Invariably the most prolific contributors were the ones who could not write a sentence without saying the opposite of what they meant. One man, resident in Woy Woy, sent us a new novel every month. Each novel took the form of twenty thick exercise books held together in a bundle. Each exercise book was full to the brim with neat handwriting. The man must have written more compulsively than Enid Blyton, who at least stopped for the occasional meal. Unlike Enid Blyton, however, he could not write even a single phrase that made any sense at all.

But the contributors most to be dreaded were the ones who came to call. Down-at-heel, over-the-hill journalists would waste hours of Leicester's time discussing their plans to interview Ava Gardner. Any of them would have stood a better chance with Mary, Queen of Scots. Even the most sprightly of them was too far gone to mind spoiling the effect of his wheeler-dealer dialogue by producing in mid-spiel a defeated sandwich from the pocket of his grimy tan gabardine overcoat. One character used to drop in personally in order to press for the return of articles which he had never sent. Another was in charge of a pile of old newspapers so heavy that he had to drag it. He was like a dung beetle out of Karel Čapek. Our office was a transit camp for dingbats. Every form of madness used to come through that door. It was my first, cruel exposure to the awkward fact that the arts attract the insane. They arrived in relays from daylight to dusk. For all the contact they had with reality, they might as well have been wearing flippers, rotating bow ties and sombreros with model trains running around the brim.

No wonder Leicester was relieved when his old journalist friend Herb Grady dropped in. Herb Grady bored me stiff with his endless talk of old times but at least he looked normal. He used to come in every morning about an hour before

lunch, which he took in the Botanical Gardens. He was retired by then, so I assumed that the small leather case he always carried contained sandwiches and a Thermos of tea. I could imagine the tea growing cold even with its silver shell as Herb reminisced interminably on. Leicester didn't seem to mind, however. Then one day, as Herb was getting up to leave, the hasp on the leather case snapped open and the sole contents fell clattering to the floor. It was a single ice-skate.

Probably because I found the work easy to cope with, I felt as if I were marking time. Like most people who feel that, I hung around my old haunts. That year I directed the Union Revue. Despite my tenaciously lingering pretensions, those items emanating from my pen attained a hitherto unheard-of perspicuity. I also discovered within myself a knack of delegating authority – which essentially means recognizing your own limitations and deputing others to do well what you yourself would only muck up. The show was called *A Rat up a Pump*. It came in on budget and showed a profit. The audience, if it did not go home happy, at least stayed to the end. At the back of the hall I preened unobtrusively, praying that one of the actors would get sick so that I could go on instead. The one who did was the cast midget. Since all the sketches he was in depended for their point on his diminutive stature (he was about eighteen inches high in his elevator shoes) trying to get his laughs was something of a challenge.

It was the only challenge of that year. Even Françoise finally yielded, although wisely she never ceased to be suspicious. I rather liked the idea of being thought of as a shit – a common conceit among those who don't realize just how shitty they really are. In retrospect I wonder that she put up with me for a single day. The boredom must have been tremendous, since on top of all my other affectations I was going through an acute Salinger phase, starting off as Holden Caulfield and ending up as Seymour Glass. She managed not to burst out laughing when I casually declared my intention of learning Sanskrit. She no doubt guessed that some other influence would drive that remote possibility even further into the distance, although it could have given her no pleasure to discover that my next persona, when it arrived, had been borrowed from Albert Finney in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*. Lurching from the cinema with my hands crammed into my pockets to guard them from the northern cold, I waited for my breath to form a cloud before my face. Since it was ninety in the shade, this was not on the cards, but the Flash of Lightning was a long time hanging up his cape.

Things were getting a bit too easy. On the other hand, there was growing evidence that they were also getting a bit meaningless. There was nothing I knew worth knowing. Françoise was a model of tact, but occasionally she would unintentionally reveal that she had actually read, in the original language, some

of the authors upon whose lack of talent I pronounced so glibly. Unable to fool her, I could not hope to go on fooling myself. Slowly it began occurring to me that the ability to get things done was a combination of two elements, the desire to do them and the capacity to take pains. The mind had to be both open and single. I had always shared the general opinion that Dave Dalziel, one of my student contemporaries, was faintly ludicrous, since he was so fanatical about films that he kept notebooks in which every film he saw was graded according to twenty different criteria. Then he suddenly started making a film using all his friends as actors. It took a year to complete. I had turned down his invitation to write the script. Someone else did it instead. When I saw the film I was envious. It was no more awful than my own work. More importantly, it was *there*. Abruptly I realized that Dave Dalziel was there too. What he had done once he would do again. It also occurred to me that those who had laughed at him loudest were the least likely ever to do anything themselves. Not that Dave kept his public short of reasons to shake their heads over him. One weekend about a dozen car-loads full of aesthetes and theatricals drove south to hold a bush picnic near Thirroul. I was braced in the back of Grogan's Chevrolet along with Bottomley and Wanda. Spencer was in the front seat, navigating. Navigation consisted of tailing the car in front – never easy with Grogan driving, since he was unable to go slower than flat out. Despite looking as if it had been gutted by a hollow charge, the Chevrolet could do a true eighty. Dave's Jaguar Mk IV went past us as if we were standing still. Dave was standing back to front on the driving seat with his head, shoulders and torso all protruding through the sunshine roof. He was waving a bottle of wine at us. That night around the campfire I learned that his long-legged girlfriend had had one foot on the accelerator, one hand on the wheel and the other hand inside Dave's trousers. Something else he told me that night was that he believed his future lay in England. He seemed to know exactly where he was going. Thoughtfully I helped to put the fire out by hurling on it and crawled into a sleeping bag with Wanda. Kissing her was like cleaning an ashtray with your tongue.

Huggins came back from a trip to Europe. In London he had actually met T. S. Eliot. Within a month he was on his way to New York, riding in one of the Boeing 707 jet airliners which had by now succeeded the old Stratocruisers, Super Constellations and Douglas DC-7s in the eternal task of shaking our house to its foundations. In Huggins I could clearly see the reality of talent, as opposed to the rhetoric of pretension. What he said he would do, he would do. What he did was in demand. He was on his way.

Something told me it was time to move. I still don't know what it was. Is it restlessness that tells us we are not at rest? Such questions invite tautologies for

answers. Actually we all got the same idea at once. It was just that I was among the first of that particular generation to make the break. Suddenly everyone was heading towards England. We were like those pelagic birds whose migratory itinerary is pricked out in their minds as an overlay on the celestial map, so that when you release them inside a planetarium they fly in the wrong direction, but still according to their stars. I drew my severance pay from the *Herald* and bought a £97 one-way passage on a ship leaving at the very end of the year. As I should have expected, my mother, when I gaily informed her of my plans, reacted as Dido might have done if Aeneas had sent a barber-shop quartet to tell her that he had decided to leave Carthage. She was simultaneously distraught and insulted. But my callousness won out. Plainly I would get my way even in this. How could I be sure of that, unless I had been spoilt? So it was all her fault, really.

In that summer of 1961 I was seldom home to be made impatient by what I considered her unreasoning grief. During the week I slept on sundry floors, infested the coffee bars and swam with Françoise at Bronte and Bondi. At the weekends I went north with the Bellevue Hill mob to Frank Chine's old house at Avalon. Gilbert Bolt's cousin used the place as a weekender. Consisting mainly of verandas, it could sleep half a dozen people comfortably and a dozen uncomfortably. We swam all day at Palm Beach, got drunk at night and were woken in the morning by the whip birds and the kookaburras. The girls wore sandals, white shorts, T-shirts and a dab of zinc cream on their noses. Walking back from the shops with meat for the barbecue, they were apparitions in the heat haze, dreams within a dream. I never drew a sober breath. The mosquitoes who found a way inside my net at night got too drunk to find their way out again. On Christmas Eve I woke at ten in the morning with a shattering hangover to find that my bare feet, which had been tilted skyward over the rail of the veranda, were burned shocking pink on the soles.

The last days ticked away. I packed in an hour, carefully ignoring all advice about warm clothes. The ship sailed on New Year's Eve of 1961. She was called the *Bretagne* – an ex-French 29,000-ton liner now flying Greek colours. The point of departure was the new international terminal at Circular Quay. After nightfall the farewell party swarmed all over the deck. All around the quay echoed the confused noises of music, laughter, sobbing and regurgitation. The water around the ship was lit up so brightly it was as if there were lights below the surface. It was a cloudy pastel green, like colloidal jade. The deck was jammed. Hundreds of people were leaving and thousands had come to see them off. Johnny Pitts should have been going. His intention had been to go to Cuba and 'fight for anarchy'. Unfortunately in the place where his passport application

required him to state his profession he had put 'Anarchist'. So he was not allowed to leave.

But the whole Push had turned up anyway. If the Push didn't crash it, it wasn't a party. They brought the Royal George jazz band with them. All the Bellevue Hill mob were there. One of the two rugby players sharing my cabin was of their number. Some of the Bellevue Hill mob were there to say goodbye to me as well. Spencer and Keith Cameron, Wanda and Bottomley turned up specifically to wish me luck. My mother was there. Françoise was there too, not saying very much. Probably she was still pondering my valedictory oration of the day before. On Bondi beach, with her neat body sheltering me from the sandy prickle of the Southerly Buster, I had intrepidly told her that I would be gone five years, and advised her to forget me. I suppose I expected to be admired for this heroic stance. As with all instinctive role-players, my first expectation was that other people would recognize the scene and play their part accordingly. Nor, to be fair to myself, could I see why anybody should miss me. Excessive conceit and deficient self-esteem are often aspects of each other.

The last craneloads of shish kebab and moussaka came swinging aboard. The party was reaching its frenzied height. The jazz band shouted 'Black Bottom Stomp'. I stood crammed into a bunch with my mother, Françoise, the ever-polite Keith Cameron and half a dozen other well-wishers. Every other passenger was surrounded by a similar tight circle. Suddenly a narrow path of silence opened towards us through the crowd. She always had that effect. It was Lilith. She might have said 'Armand Duval, where are my *marrons glacés*? but all she said was 'Hello.' After suavely introducing Françoise to her as my mother and my mother as Françoise I steered her to the rail.

'Won't Emu miss you?' I croaked offhandedly.

'He knows all about you,' she said, looking down into the bright water. 'Don't worry. I told him that if he killed you I'd never speak to him again.'

'Why did you let me?'

'I just liked your slouch hat. What do you call that thing in it again?'

'A bash.'

'Anyway, by the time you get back, I'll be old.'

'Don't be silly,' I said, believing her. She turned around and looked up at the deck of the Harbour Bridge. I followed her gaze. She was looking at the blue cobweb. Then we did one of those quick, awkward kisses where each of you gets a nose in the eye.

Then she was gone, the crowd making a path for her as it always did. A siren went. They piped all visitors ashore. Drunks fell off the gangplanks. Could my loved ones tell from my eyes how much less I felt than they did? Catching my

streamer as she stood with thousands of others at the rail of the dock, my mother was as brave as if she had never done this before. Which ship was it that she was seeing? Was it her husband or her son who stood at the other end of the swooping ribbon that grew straight, then taut, then snapped?

The lake of white light between the ship and the wharf grew wider. Behind the crowd on the roof of the dock I could just see Grogan jumping up and down. He appeared to have no clothes on at all. As the year turned, the tugs swung the ship's prow down harbour. From the stern I watched the lake of light divide into two pools, one of them going with me and the other staying. Passing between the Heads was like being born again.

17. THAT HE SHOULD LEAVE HIS HOUSE

The voyage was too tedious to be described in detail. Apart from the one occasion that I stepped over the border into Queensland, it was the first time I had ever been outside the confines of NSW. But the sense of adventure was nullified by the living conditions on the ship. Even a luxury liner is really just a bad play surrounded by water. It is a means of inducing hatred for your fellow men by trapping you in a confined space with too few of them to provide variety and too many to allow solitude. The *Bretagne* was all that and less. Every acceptable girl on the ship was being laid by a crew member before the ship was out of the Heads. This was a replacement crew who had all been flown out from the Persian Gulf. The previous crew had walked off the ship at Melbourne after one of the officers had shot an albatross.

With my two footballing companions I inhabited a phone-booth-sized cabinette on Deck Z, many feet below the waterline. One wall was curved. It was part of the propeller-shaft housing. If one of us wanted to get dressed the other two had to go back to bed. After we cleared the Barrier Reef we ran into a gale and spent a day heeled over at about twenty degrees from the vertical. One of the footballers chucked into the washbasin. The contents of his stomach, which had included two helpings of rhubarb crumble and custard, congealed in the basin. When the ship righted itself the surface of the solidified chunder remained at an angle, not to be removed until we docked in Singapore.

In Singapore we went by trishaw to Raffles, where I grandly ordered a round of lager for the three of us. The bill came to £47 – nearly all the money I had. What little cash was left over I spent on a taxi to Changi. The jail was full of Chinese pirates. They were guarded by Gurkhas. The Gurkha warrant officer showed me around. In this place the Japanese commandant had deliberately withheld supplies of rice polishings while the POWs wasted away from vitamin deficiency. In this place my father had weighed as much as I had when I was ten

generosity. In this place my father had weighed as much as I had when I was ten years old. I tried to imagine him having the dead flesh cleaned out of his ulcers with a heated teaspoon. I could not. It was all gone. He was gone. In Changi I realized that I would never find my father as he had been. It was no use looking. One day, in my imagination, he would return of his own accord.

On the way out of Singapore harbour the captain misunderstood the pilot. The ship went the wrong side of a buoy, hit a sandbar and turned towards the wharves. The anchors were dropped and the brakes were applied to the chains, but the ship's momentum was not easily checked. The links of the chains glowed cherry red. When they were hosed down the water was instantly transformed into geysers of steam. On the dock the stevedores in black shorts and flat conical hats looked up to see a 29,000-ton liner coming straight at them. They headed for the tall bamboo. The ship stopped just in time. A diver went down to check the damage. He surfaced to announce that one of the propeller shafts had a kink in it. Guess which one.

At reduced speed the ship limped across the Indian ocean. The Greek entertainments officer entertained us by organizing Greek dancing displays, in which the prettier girl passengers showed us the skills they had learned from the crew during the day. The skills they had learned from the crew during the night we were left to imagine. Greek dancing consists of a man holding up a handkerchief, striking a masculine attitude and performing some extremely boring steps until a girl grabs hold of the other end of the handkerchief and performs some steps even more boring than his. Then a lot of other girls hold hands with each other and perform some steps which make everything you have previously seen look comparatively exciting. I would much rather have done lifeboat drill, but all the lifeboats had long ago been painted into position so that not even dynamite could possibly have released them. This was an additional factor to be considered when you tried to imagine – or rather tried not to imagine – the number of sharks who were following in our wake, passionate for leftover baklava.

For some reason the swimming pool, just when we needed it, was emptied, never to be filled again with anything except beer cans thrown into it by the circles of formation drinkers who sat cross-legged on the deck chanting, 'Who took the cookie from the cookie jar?' Then the ship stopped altogether. The temperature was roughly that of the surface of the sun, which didn't look very far away. Praying for release at the ship's rail, I watched a turtle go past on its way to the Red Sea. That was where we were supposed to be going, but we weren't. That night, as every other night, the film was *The Naked Jungle*, in which Charlton Heston and Eleanor Parker battle the killer ants of South

America. The next day there was Greek dancing. The day after that, the ship moved.

Aden was a revelation. Until then my belief in God's indifference had been theoretical. In the Crater of Aden there were things on show that might have made Christ throw in the towel. Certainly there were wounds he would not have kissed. Beggars whose faces had been licked off by camels proffered children whose bones had been deliberately broken at birth. Catatonic with culture shock, the passengers of the good ship *Bretagne* bought transistor radios and binoculars. With the radios they could drown out the hum of flies and with the binoculars they could look somewhere else.

The Suez Canal still featured some wrecks from 1956. Lacking the cash to join an expedition to Cairo, I stayed on the ship as it crawled through to Port Said. Nasser's MiGs went by, up above the heat. I was down inside it. Port Said was like Coles or Woolworths, without the variety. Three products were on sale, all of them cranked out by a factory on the edge of town. They sold fake leather whips, fake leather wallets and fake leather television pouffes. The fake leather was made of compressed paper. The passengers of the *Bretagne* emptied the shops, which filled up again just behind them. Nasser's police were omnipresent, making sure nobody got hurt. Nobody was going to interfere with you as you purchased the wherewithal for whipping yourself and counting your money while watching television. You were safer than in St Mary's Cathedral. The only danger was of being driven mad by Nasser's charismatic gaze. His portrait was everywhere.

We missed out on Tangiers because of the pressing urgency to keep a date with the dry dock in Southampton. But we did have half a day in Athens. On the Acropolis I watched one of my compatriots carve his name into the Parthenon and heard another ask where the camels were. The girl passengers raced into town to buy hats with pom-poms and handkerchiefs for Greek dancing. But I felt no less ignorant than my compatriots. The stone drapery on the caryatids seemed to give off its own illumination, as if the bright sun penetrated the surface before being reflected. It infuriated me that I couldn't read the inscriptions. Their clear, clean look only increased my suspicion that the real secrets of the tragedies and the Platonic dialogues, which I had thought I knew something about, lay in the sound of the language, and that until I could read that I would know nothing. I was right about that, but confirmation lay far in the future. Now there was nothing to do except return to Piraeus and commit myself into the hands of the sons of Pericles for the last leg of the voyage. I don't suppose the lump of rock outside the harbour would have looked any more significant if I had known that its name was Salamis.

The *Bretagne* wasn't much of a ship. On her next voyage back to Australia she hit the bottom of the harbour again, this time in Piraeus. She caught fire and burned out. There was nothing left but the hulk, which had to be blown up. But her job was done. She had got me to England. In the Bay of Biscay on our last afternoon at sea she ran before the gale, clumsily hurdling the enormous swell. By midnight she was in the Channel. Undetected from the bridge, I crouched out on deck in the prow, waiting to see the lights of Southampton. They materialized about an hour before dawn. They were just coloured lights and it was very cold. I had never been so cold. White stuff was falling out of the sky. At first I thought it was manna. The ship ground to a halt and waited for morning. It shook gently on the vibration of the girl passengers saying farewell to the crew. I went back down to Deck Z, lay on my bunk and wondered what would happen next.

What happened next is another story. This story I had better break off while I still have your patience, if I do. The longer I have stayed in England, the more numerous and powerful my memories of Sydney have grown. There is nothing like staying away for bringing it with you. I have done my best to tell the truth about what it was like, yet I am well aware that in the matter of my own feelings I have not come near meeting my aim. My ideal of autobiography has been set by Alfieri, whose description of a duel he once fought in Hyde Park is mainly concerned with how he ran backwards to safety. Perhaps because I am not even yet sufficiently at peace with myself, I have not been able to meet those standards of honesty. Nothing I have said is factual except the bits that sound like fiction.

By the time this book is published I will be forty years old. When I left Sydney I boasted that I would be gone for five years. I was to be gone three times that and more. During that time most of those who came away have gone back. Before Gough Whitlam came to power, having to return felt like defeat. Afterwards it felt like the natural thing to do. Suddenly Australia began offering its artists all the recognition they had previously been denied. It took a kind of perversity to refuse the lure. Perhaps I did the wrong thing. Eventually fear plays a part: when you are too long gone, to return even for a month feels like time travel. So you try to forget. But the memories keep on coming. I have tried to keep them under control. I hope I have not overdone it, and killed the flavour. Because Sydney is so real in my recollection that I can taste it.

It tastes like happiness. I have never ceased to feel orphaned, but nor have I ever felt less than lucky – a lucky member of a lucky generation. In this century of all centuries we have been allowed to grow up and grow old in peace. There is a Buster Keaton film in which he is standing around innocently when the facade of a house falls on him. An open window in the facade passes over his body, so

that he is left untouched.

I can see the Fun Doctor juggling for us at Kogarah Infants' School. One of the balls hits the floor with a thud. Then what looks like the same ball lands on his head. I can hear the squeak that the mica window panels of the Kosi stove made when I scorched them with the red-hot poker. When Jeanette Elphick came back on a visit from Hollywood they drove her around town in a blue Customline with her new name painted in huge yellow letters along the side: VICTORIA SHAW. On Empire Night when we threw pieces of fibro into the bonfire they cracked like rifle shots. Every evening for weeks before Empire Night I used to lay my fireworks out on the lounge-room carpet, which became impregnated with the smell of gunpowder. Peter Moulton kept his fireworks in a Weetabix carton. On the night, a spark from the fire drifted into the carton and the whole lot went up. A rocket chased Gail Thorpe, who was only just back from therapy. She must have thought it was all part of the treatment.

At the Legacy Party in Clifton Gardens I got a No. 4 Meccano set. On hot nights before the nor'easter came you changed into your cossie and ran under the sprinkler. At Sans Souci baths I dive-bombed a jelly blubber for a dare. If you rubbed sand into the sting it hurt less. Bindies in the front lawn made you limp to the steps of the porch and bend over to pick them out. Sandfly bites needed Calamine lotion that dried to a milky crust. From Rose Bay at night you could hear the lions making love in Taronga Park. If the shark bell rang and you missed the wave, you were left out there alone beyond the third line of breakers. Every shadow had teeth. Treading water in frantic silence, you felt afraid enough to run Christ-like for the shore.

At the Harvest Festivals in church the area behind the pulpit was piled high with tins of IXL fruit for the old-age pensioners. We had collected the tinned fruit from door to door. Most of it came from old-age pensioners. Some of them must have got their own stuff back. Others were less lucky. Hunting for cicadas in the peppercorns and the willows, you were always in search of the legendary black prince, but invariably he turned out to be a redeye. The ordinary cicada was called a pissier because he squirted mud at you. The most beautiful cicada was the yellow Monday. He was as yellow as a canary and transparent as crystal. When he lifted his wings in the sunlight the membranes were like the deltas of little rivers. The sun shone straight through him. It shone straight through all of us.

It shone straight through everything, and I suppose it still does. As I begin this last paragraph, outside my window a misty afternoon drizzle gently but inexorably soaks the City of London. Down there in the street I can see umbrellas commiserating with each other. In Sydney Harbour, twelve thousand

miles away and ten hours from now, the yachts will be racing on the crushed diamond water under a sky the texture of powdered sapphires. It would be churlish not to concede that the same abundance of natural blessings which gave us the energy to leave has every right to call us back. All in, the whippy's taken. Pulsing like a beacon through the days and nights, the birthplace of the fortunate sends out its invisible waves of recollection. It always has and it always will, until even the last of us come home.

Clio James



Falling Towards England

More Unreliable Memoirs

'James is the funniest man we have:
he is a master' *Observer*

Clive James

FALLING TOWARDS
ENGLAND
Unreliable Memoirs II

PICADOR

in association with Jonathan Cape

To Chester and John Cummings

I had already noticed with various people that the affectation of praiseworthy sentiments is not the only way of covering up reprehensible ones, but that a more up-to-date method is to put these latter on exhibition, so that one has the air of at least being forthright.

Proust, *Le Temps retrouvé*

All censure of a man's self is oblique praise. It is in order to show how much he can spare.

Johnson

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Preface

This is the second volume of my unreliable memoirs. For a palpable fantasy, the first volume was well enough received. It purported to be the true story of how the author grew from infancy through adolescence to early manhood, this sequence of amazing biological developments largely taking place in Kogarah, a suburb of Sydney, NSW, Australia. And indeed it *was* a true story, in the sense that I wasn't brought up in a Tibetan monastery or a castle on the Danube. The central character was something like my real self. If the characters around him were composites, they were obviously so, and with some justification. The friend who helps you dig tunnels in your back yard is rarely the same friend who ruins your summer by flying a model aeroplane into your mother's prize trifle, but a book with everybody in it would last as long as life, and never live at all.

As for the adults, they were shadows, but that was true to how children see, and my mother, in particular, was too much of an influence on my life for me to appreciate at that age – or at any subsequent age, for that matter. Her quiet but strenuous objections to *Unreliable Memoirs* arose from my depiction, not of her, but of myself. Apparently I was not the near-delinquent portrayed, but a little angel: to suggest otherwise reflected badly on her. The insult was not meant. Perhaps I should have pointed out more often that without her guidance and example I might have gone straight from short pants to Long Bay Gaol, which in those days was still in use and heavily populated by larcenous young men who had chosen their parents less wisely.

Unlike my mother and my father, who were robbed by history of a rounding to their youth, I had come peacefully to my middle years and wanted to celebrate my good luck, or at any rate atone for it, by evoking a childhood blessed enough to be typical. But the typical, for even the most high-minded male child, does not exclude the revolting. I tried to leave some of that in. One might argue that I should have made a more thorough job of it. A Scots lady ninety-three years old sent me a charming letter saying that when young in Ayrshire she had done all

the things I did. The book must have been read aloud to her, by someone who knew which pages to pass over in silence.

To tell my story in the belief that I was remarkable would have been sufficiently conceited. To tell it in the hope of being universal was possibly even more conceited, not to say pretentious. He who abandons his claim to be unique is even less bearable when he claims to be representative. But at least he has *tried* to climb down. There is a story by Schnitzler, called 'History of a Genius', about a butterfly so impressed by how far it has come in one day that it resolves to dictate its autobiography. Yet Schnitzler, so greatly generous about human beings, sells the butterfly short. The butterfly's only mistake is to imagine itself unusual. The story of its day would be well worth having, and all the more so if it realised that millions of its fellows shared the same career. Usual does not mean ordinary. A butterfly's compound eyes, which can see in the infra-red, are no less extraordinary because every other butterfly has them. The same applies to human memory. When I hold my hands as if in prayer and roll a pencil between them, I can smell the plasticine snakes I made in Class 1B at Kogarah Infants' School. There is nothing ordinary about that.

Far from being all done in a day, my own story is of a late developer: one who, deficient in natural wisdom, has had to learn everything by trial and error. In this book my errors continue, but in a different context. In Sydney I had come of age but still had a lot to learn. In Europe I forgot what little I knew. London in the Sixties, it was generally believed, had sprung to life. Lost somewhere in the hubbub, I either marked time or went backwards. Readers who grew up faster, wherever they did so, might still recognise in these pages something of what they went through in order to become what they now are. Those whose personalities were handed to them in one piece might shake their heads. There are such people, and often they are among the saints, but they are denied the salutary privilege of remembering what they once were, before they knew better. It is possible that they are also denied knowledge of where the human comedy begins, in the individual soul. But I wouldn't want to be caught suggesting that the past dissolves in mirth. Things happen that can't be laughed off. Our hero is a bit older in this book, and the same ways are not necessarily so winning.

Not that I have registered here the full squalor of my past derelictions, some of which I can't begin to recall without an involuntary yell to quash the memory. But to confess would be an indulgence, and there are bigger sinners growing old in Paraguay. Young Australian men living in London drank a great deal but broke nothing except the hearts of young Australian women. Feminism as a mass movement was imminent but had not yet arrived; women were still exploitable; and men duly exploited them. For the sons of the Anzacs this wasn't

a very noble chapter, and the girls who suffered, should they read this book twenty years later, might justly complain that I have glossed it over. For them to know that the crassness of their young men was waiting for them at home was bad enough, without encountering more of the same when they arrived abroad. Some of them might find their faintest outlines here, sharing a false name, catching someone else's bus to work in Lambeth or Fulham. No disrespect is intended: quite the opposite. The full complexity of the human personality is something I no longer presume to sum up, or even to suggest.

I can't remember having been *consciously* insensitive. I can hardly remember being consciously anything, except cold. It was all a bit like being on the Moon: you moved forward because you were falling forward. The clear path is revealed later, looking back. Which doesn't mean that one disclaims responsibility for one's actions. We are what we have done; and besides, we can't deny it without giving up our pride. 'For my part, since I have always admitted that I was the chief cause of all the misfortunes which have befallen me,' wrote Casanova in his old age, 'I have rejoiced in my ability to be my own pupil, and in my duty to love my teacher.' Did knowing himself to be vain make him less vain? Leaving the metaphysics to others, he died writing his life story – which, considering the other things he might have died doing, was not the least dignified way he could have gone. What a swathe he would have cut through Kogarah! A thought to keep the reader's expectations in proportion as I begin this account of my impact on England, drawn there by gravity like a snowflake to the ground.

London, 1985

C.J.

I

Soft Landing

When we got off the ship in Southampton in that allegedly mild January of 1962 I had nothing to declare at customs except goose-pimples under my white nylon drip-dry shirt. This was not because I had been prudent in my spending but because I had spent the last of my money in Singapore, plus twenty pounds I had borrowed from one of my cabin mates – and which I still owe him, come to think of it. The money had gone on a new suit which I didn't actually have with me in my luggage. The tailors in Singapore's Change Alley had taken my measurements and promised to send the finished suit after me to London. This had seemed like a sensible arrangement, so I had handed over the cash, thereby depriving myself of any leeway for a spending spree later on in Aden. I thus missed out on the chance, seized by most of the other Australians of my own age on the ship, to be guided by the expertise of Arab salesmen in the purchase of German tape-recorders and Japanese cameras at a fraction of the price – something like five-fourths – prevailing in their countries of origin.

In the crater of Aden, while my compatriots knowingly examined the Arabic guarantee forms for machines whose batteries were mysteriously unavailable, I hovered in the heat-hazed background, sullenly attempting not to catch the remaining eye of a beggar whose face had otherwise been entirely chewed off by a camel. It had been very hot in Aden. In England it was very cold: colder than I had ever known. The customs men did a great deal of heavy-handed chaffing about how you cobblers couldn't really call this a winter, ho ho, and what we would look like if there really was a winter, har har, and so on. Their accents were far funnier than their sense of humour. They all seemed to have stepped out of the feature list of an Ealing comedy for the specific purpose of unpacking our luggage and charging us extra for everything in it. My own luggage consisted mainly of one very large suitcase made of mock leather – i.e., real cardboard. This compendium was forced into rotundity by a valuable collection of tennis shorts, running shorts, Hawaiian shirts, T-shirts, Hong Kong thong rubber

sandals, short socks, sandshoes and other apparel equally appropriate for an English winter. The customs officer sifted through the heap twice, the second time looking at me instead of at it, as if my face would betray the secret of the illicit fortunes to be made by smuggling unsuitable clothing across half the world.

As the people all around me were presented with huge bills, I gave silent thanks for being in possession of nothing assessable for duty. The ship's fool – a pimply, bespectacled British emigrant called Tanner who was now emigrating back the other way – was near tears. In Aden and Port Said he had bought, among other things, two tape recorders, a Japanese camera called something like a Naka-mac with a silver box full of lenses, a portable television set slightly larger than an ordinary domestic model but otherwise no different except that it had a handle, a stuffable leather television pouffe for watching it from, a hi-fi outfit with separate components, and a pair of binoculars so powerful that it frightened you to look through them, especially if you saw Tanner. Most of this gear he had about his person, although some of it was packed in large cardboard boxes, because all this was happening in the days before miniaturisation, when an amplifier still had valves. The customs officer calculated the duty owing and confronted him with the total, at which he sat down on his boxed telescope and briefly wept. It was more money than he had in the world, so he just signed away the whole mountain of gear and walked on through a long door in the far side of the shed.

A few minutes afterwards I walked through the same door and emerged in England, where it was gently snowing on to a bus full of Australians. There was a small cloud in front of my face which I quickly deduced to be my breath. The bus was provided by the Overseas Visitors' Club, known for short as the OVC. The journey by ship, the bus ride to London and a week of bed and breakfast in Earls Court were all part of the deal, which a few years later would have been called a Package, but at that time was still known as a Scheme. The general thrust of the Scheme was to absorb some of the culture shock, thus rendering it merely numbing instead of fatal. As the bus, which strangely insisted on calling itself a coach, headed north – or west or east or wherever it was going, except, presumably, south – I looked out into the English landscape and felt glad that I had not been obliged to find my way through it unassisted.

The cars seemed very small, with no overhang at either end. A green bus had 'Green Line' written on it and could therefore safely be assumed to be a Green Line bus, or coach. The shops at the side of the road looked as if they were finely detailed painted accessories for an unusually elaborate Hornby Dublo model railway table-top layout. Above all, as well as around all and beyond all,

was the snow, almost exactly resembling the snow that fell in English films on top of people like Alastair Sim and Margaret Rutherford. What I was seeing was a familiar landscape made strange by being actual instead of transmitted through cultural intermediaries. It was a deeply unsettling sensation, which everybody else in the coach must have shared, because for the first time in twelve thousand miles there was a prolonged silence. Then one of the wits explained that the whole roadside façade would fold down after we had roared by, to reveal factories manufacturing rust-prone chromium trim for the Standard Vanguard. There was some nervous laughter and the odd confident assurance that we were already in the outskirts of London. Since the outskirts of London were well known to embrace pretty well everywhere in the south of England up to the outskirts of Birmingham, this seemed a safe bet.

A few ploughed fields presented themselves so that the girls, still pining for members of the ship's crew, might heave a chorus of long sighs at the bunny rabbits zipping across the pinwale corduroy snow. After that it was one continuous built-up area turning to streetlight in the gathering darkness of what my watch told me was only mid-afternoon. Enveloped in many layers of clothing, people thronging the footpaths seemed to be black, brown or, if white and male, to have longer hair than the females. High to the left of an arching flyover shone the word WIMPEY, a giant, lost, abstract adjective carved from radioactive ruby.

There was no way of telling, when we arrived, that the place we were getting off at was called Earls Court. In those days it was still nicknamed Kangaroo Valley but there were no obvious signs of Australia except the foyer of the OVC, crowded with young men whose jug ears stuck out unmistakably from their short haircuts on either side of a freckled area of skin which could be distinguished as a face, rather than a neck, only by the presence of a nose and a mouth. Here I was relieved to find out that I had been assigned to the same dormitory room as my cabin mates, at a hostel around the corner. So really we were still on board ship, the journey from the OVC foyer around the corner to the hostel being the equivalent of a brisk turn around the deck, while carrying a large suitcase.

The snow was falling thickly enough to replenish a half-inch layer on the footpath, so that my black Julius Marlowe shoes could sink in slightly and, I was interested to notice, be fairly rapidly made wet. It hadn't occurred to me that snow would have this effect. I had always assumed snow to be some form of solid. In the hostel I counted up my financial resources. They came to just a bit more than ten pounds in English money. Ten pounds bought quite a lot at that time, when eight pounds a week was a labourer's living wage and you could get a bar of chocolate for threepence, a chunky hexagonal coin which I at first took

to be some form of washer and then spent a lot of time standing on its edge on the bedside table while figuring out what to do next. Improvising brilliantly, I took some of the small amount of money over and above the ten pounds and invested in an aerogramme, which I converted into a begging letter and addressed to my mother, back there in Sydney with no telephone. Her resources being far from limitless, I did my best not to make the letter too heartrending, but after it was finished, folded and sealed I had to leave it on the radiator for the tears to dry out, after which it was wrinkled and dimpled like an azure poppadum.

Dinner in the hostel made me miss the ship-board menu, which until then I would have sworn nothing ever could. What on earth did a spotted dick look like before the custard drowned it? A glass mug of brown water was provided which we were assured was beer. I sipped fitfully at mine while everybody else watched. When I showed no signs of dengue fever or botulism, they tried theirs. Having rolled inaccurately into my bunk, I discovered, like my two cabin mates, that I couldn't sleep for the silence of the engines.

Next day there was still a tendency to cling together. I was in a three-man expedition that set out to find Piccadilly Circus by following a map of the Underground railway system, starting at Earls Court station. To reach the station we had to travel some way on the surface, keeping a wary eye out for hostile natives. It was a relief to find that in daylight at any rate a sizeable part of the local population was Australian. At that time the Earls Court Australians had not yet taken to carrying twelve-packs of Foster's lager, and the broad-brimmed Akubra hat with corks dangling from the brim was never to be more than a myth, but there was no mistaking those open, freckled, eyeless faces, especially when they were sticking out of the top of navy-blue English duffle-coats religiously acquired as a major concession towards blending into the scenery. My own duffle-coat was bright yellow in colour and would not have helped me blend into anything except a sand dune, but luckily it was hanging in my cupboard back in Kogarah, Sydney. Or unluckily, if you considered how cold I felt in my light-green sports coat with the blue fleck. Or would have felt, if I had been less excited. But we were going down in a lift through a hole in the ground to another hole in the ground which would take us under London to Piccadilly Circus. Piccadilly! I even knew what it meant. It was a tailor's term, something to do with sleeves. No doubt the tailors had started a circus when times got tough.

Knowingness evaporated when the tube train pulled into the station. The train was so small that for a moment I thought it was a toy – another component of the Hornby Dublo table-top layout, except this time under the table. You almost had to bend your head getting into it. The electric trains in Sydney were sensibly

provided with four feet of spare headroom in case any visiting American basketballer wanted to hitch a ride without taking off his stilts. He might have stood out because of his colour, but at least he wouldn't be bent over double. In this train he would be bent over double, but at least he wouldn't stand out because of his colour. Half the people in the crowded carriage seemed to be black or dark brown. They were dressed just the same as the white people and often conspicuously better. I had entered my first multiracial society, all for the price of a tube ticket. If I had come from an apartheid country, I would have had a kit of reflexes that I could have set about modifying. But coming from a monotone dominion whose Aborigines were still thought of, at that time, as something between a sideshow and an embarrassment, I had nothing to go on except a blank feeling which I hoped was receptivity. A sperm whale feeding on a field of squid – not giant squid, just those little squidlets that form its basic diet – cruises along with its mouth open, taking everything in. That was me, open-mouthed to new experience. The sperm whale looks the same when drowning, of course: going down and down with its gob wide open and the pressure building up and up. By Knightsbridge we were making nervous jokes about a journey to the centre of the earth. The escalators leading to the surface at Piccadilly were like sets from *Things to Come*. Then we popped out of the ground and stood rooted to the mushy pavement by the Sheer Englishness of it all. 'Coca-Cola' said a wall of neon, glowing as if day were night – a fair assessment of the overcast morning.

But Eros was sufficiently evocative all by himself and we set off for Buckingham Palace with high hearts, going by way of Nelson's Column and the Admiralty Arch. The Mall showed pink through the churned slush, St James's Park was a spun-sugar cake-scape with clockwork ducks, and a flag on the Palace indicated that She was at home. The Guard obligingly began to change itself just as we arrived, the Coldstreams handing over to the Grenadiers. Tourism was still under control at that time so it was possible to catch the odd glimpse of the participating soldiers, instead of, as now, seeing nothing except the rear view of Norwegians carrying full camping apparatus and holding up cameras to fire blind over the hulking back-packs of other Norwegians standing in front of them. Needless to say we did not regard ourselves as tourists. Whatever our convictions, we were children of the Commonwealth, not to say the Empire. One of us rather embarrassingly stood to attention. It was not myself, since I was a radical socialist at the time, but I understood. It was something emotional that went back to Chad Valley tin toys, Brock fireworks and the every-second-Christmas box of W. Britains lead soldiers. I remembered my set of Household Cavalry with the right arms that swivelled and the swords

held upright, except for the troop leader whose sabre stuck out in line with his extended arm while his horse pranced. When his arm worked loose and fell off I wadded it back on with a gasket of cigarette paper. I can remember remembering this while the band played 'British Grenadiers', and can remember how wet my eyes were, mainly from the cold that was creeping upward from my feet. At first they had been numb. Now they felt like something Scott of the Antarctic might have made a worried note about in his diary if I had been a member of his expedition. As the officers on parade screamed at each other nose to nose from under their forward-tilting bearskins, it began occurring to me that the climate was going to be a problem.

Or part of a larger problem, that of money. There was more sightseeing in the next few days, with the National Gallery putting everything else in perspective. Indeed it put its own contents into perspective, since here again, even more strikingly, there was a discrepancy between the actual and what had been made familiar in reproduction. The Rokeby Venus, for example, was supposed to be the size of half a page in a quarto art book, not as big as the serving window of Harry's Café de Wheels at Woolloomooloo. She looked a bit murky at that stage – they cleaned her a few years later, and perhaps overdid it – but her subtly dimpled bottom, poised at the height of the viewer's eyes, made you wonder about Velázquez's professional detachment. Though most of the rooms in the gallery were still a mystery to me, I was confident enough, or ignorant enough, to decide that Art with a capital 'A' was going to be a source of sensual gratification on all levels. At the Tate Gallery I was relieved to find that the Paul Klee pictures were roughly the same size as in the books. But just to reach the galleries by tube was costing money, and meanwhile time was running out.

There was a grand total of eight pounds left and it didn't help when I lost the lot, along with my prize yellow pig-skin wallet, at Waldo Laidlaw's wedding party. Arriving out of the sky in his usual grand style – absolutely nobody else you knew could afford to fly – Waldo instantly married one of the girls from my ship. Apparently it had all been arranged back in Australia. The party was in the as-yet-unfurnished shell of a ground-floor flat in that part of Camden Town where you could overlook Regent's Park if you could find your way on to the roof. In Waldo's words, overlooking it was easy, because you couldn't see it. All the Australian advertising types were there, the women unattainably well-groomed and the men sporting Chelsea boots, an elastic-sided form of footwear I had not previously encountered. I was the only one dressed for the Australian summer, with three T-shirts and a pair of running shorts on under my Hawaiian shirt and poplin trousers. Feeling the heat of the crowded room, I took off my jacket, left it in the bedroom on the bed with the overcoats, and prepared to

dance.

A hit record called 'Let's Twist Again' was playing over and over. Several people among the sophisticated throng had already reached exhibition standard in dancing the Twist. I think I could have matched them through sheer inspiration, but my shoes were in bad shape and tended to stick where they were, cruelly restricting my rate and radius of swivel. In the kitchen there were big tins of brown water you could open with your thumb. I treated the stuff with the contempt it deserved, pronouncing its alcoholic content to be minimal. Pronouncing its alcoholic contender be mineral. Pronouncing my own name with difficulty. After kneeling in the toilet for some time with my head resting in the bowl I felt fighting fit again and all set to lie down. It was then that I found my wallet missing and did my best to spoil Waldo's celebration by telling him that one of his guests must have lifted it from my jacket. It was courteous of him to arrange a lift home for me instead of throwing me in the canal. When I sobered up a couple of days later it became evident that the wallet must have first of all dropped through the large hole which had developed in the bottom of my jacket's inner pocket and then fallen through the detached lining into the street before I even got to the party. It was still a good jacket otherwise though, with leather buttons like scout woggles.

So the week at the OVC hostel was all used up. One of my cabin mates, the one who had stood to attention in front of Buckingham Palace, moved out to fulfil his ambition of becoming a British officer who would protrude from the top of a rapidly moving armoured car while wearing a beret. At Sydney University he had been an actor but it was now clear that this training had always had no other purpose except to further the attainment of his real aim in life. Though his hyphenated surname would probably have got him the job anyway, it couldn't have hurt his chances that he wore clothes like Dennis Price and talked like Terry-Thomas. I had little patience with his hunger for military tradition but hated to see him go. My other cabin mate was in London to study music. Having made his arrangements, he now moved off and started doing so. Talking grandly of my intention to take a small flat in Knightsbridge, I managed to get some loose change off him before he left, but not enough, and since he was the very man I had touched in order to finance the Singapore suit I could scarcely dun him for a more substantial contribution. A postal order from home would be another week arriving. The snow in Hyde Park was not deep enough for me to build an igloo and my suitcase, although absurdly large when carried, was too cramped to live in. So I lugged it around another corner and occupied the living-room floor of two girls from Sydney's North Shore who had known me at university. After a year in London they were still in Earls Court. I was in

no position to mock their lack of enterprise. They were well brought up, well spoken, well equipped and well organised – too well organised to put up with a permanent hobo camp on their parlour carpet. Curmudgeonly, this reluctance, because each evening after helping to drink their wine I generously offered to sleep with either or both. But they shared their meals with me, stuffed my shoes with paper before drying them in the stove, advised me on the purchase of a blue duffle-coat, and helped me look for somewhere to live.

Gently they discouraged my notions of seeking a maisonette in Bayswater or a mews house in Belgravia. There was a bed and breakfast boarding house in Swiss Cottage that wanted only three pounds ten shillings a week. When my postal order came, the girls very kindly drove me there. It was a long way from Kangaroo Valley and when their Volkswagen Beetle splurged away along the overlapping lines of grey slush I stood in the snow beside my mock leather suitcase and felt that I was ashore at last. My boats were burning and I was too far inland to see the flames. I resolved to grow a beard.

Beyond the Valley of the Kangaroos

My new home was nondescript, in the strict sense of there being nothing to describe. Wallpaper, carpets and furniture had all been chosen so as to defeat memory. About twenty people were in residence. Most of them were failed South African and Rhodesian farmers with an accent so harsh it made mine sound like Sir John Gielgud's. You met them not only at breakfast but in the evening as well, all sitting together watching 'Tonight' on television and shouting at the black man who sang the topical calypso. We were downstairs together because there was nothing we were allowed to do upstairs in our rooms alone. The list of rules forbade cooking in one's room, taking already cooked food to one's room, or taking food that did not need cooking to one's room. No visitors were allowed in one's room at any time for any reason: if one died, one's body would be allowed to decompose. Breathing was allowed as long as it made no noise. The same applied to sleep. Anyone who snored would wake up in the street. The proprietor had not made the mistake of retaining the original thick internal walls. They had been replaced by twice as many very thin ones, through which he and his lipless wife could accurately hear, and, some lodgers whisperingly warned me, see.

The danger of noisy sleep, however, was largely obviated by the difficulty of sleeping at all. One blanket too few had been carefully provided, and the central heating, although it visibly existed, was cold to the touch and had to be topped up by a two-bar radiator which failed to glow the first time I switched it on. When I nervously complained about this it was pointed out to me that the radiator was on a meter. Having never seen a meter before, I had thought that the grey machine squatting heavily in the corner was part of the house's electrical system. In a way it was, but making it function was up to me. I put in a shilling and the radiator came on. Gratefully I took off my top layer of T-shirts and running shorts, preparing for bed. The radiator went off. When I put in a florin

the radiator glowed and fizzed for a bit longer but what the meter really liked was an enormous half-crown piece, a beautiful coin whose aesthetic appeal was enhanced by its then considerable purchasing power. I hated to see it go, and felt even worse, an hour or so later, when the meter, by instructing the radiator to dim out, signalled that it would like another coin the same size. The whole idea of paying to keep warm would have struck me as ludicrous if I could have stopped shivering. My teeth chattering like castanets, I doubled the thin pillow over my head to muffle the noise, so that it must have seemed, to my landlady poised outside in the corridor, as if I had ceased rehearsing for the title role in *Carmen* and started pain-training a rattlesnake.

My plan had been to take a low-paying menial job during the day and compose poetic masterpieces at night. After due reflection I decided that it would be preferable, at least initially, to take a high-paying job in journalism and sacrifice a small proportion of the masterpieces to expediency. From the editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Angus Maude, I had a letter of introduction to one of the *Herald's* previous editors, John Douglas Pringle, like Maude an Englishman but unlike him now back in London and editing the *Observer*, a newspaper whose every issue I had devoured in Australia six weeks late, and which I was now able, with admiration increased still further by understanding, to read on the day of publication. I had vowed never to use this letter of introduction, which Maude had pressed on me against my declarations of artistic purity. Crammed randomly among the socks in my giant suitcase, it had become rumpled, but a glass ashtray heated at the radiator soon ironed it relatively smooth. Cleaning up the scorched ashtray with my toothbrush took somewhat longer. Armed with the letter and with a tartan tie thoughtfully added to the Hawaiian shirt, I went to see Pringle at the *Observer's* building in Blackfriars. Eyeing my incipient beard with what I took to be grudging appreciation of its bohemian *élan*, he asked me what languages I could read and I said English. He asked me what I wanted to do and I said write features. As I asked my duty-free Rothmans filter on to his carpet, he pointed out that he already had a building full of young feature writers who could read at least one foreign language, wrote perfectly acceptable English and had the additional virtue of knowing quite a lot about Britain, since they had been brought up in that country, i.e. this country. My ejection from his office followed so shortly upon my entrance into it that the two events were effectively continuous. What made it more galling was that I could see his point. There wasn't really very much I could contribute to British journalism. On the other hand there probably wasn't very much it could contribute to my artistic development, so perhaps this was less a set-back than a reprieve.

Back at what I had by now learned to call my digs, the problem of laundry loomed large. Open at the foot of my bed, the giant suitcase had nothing left in it that had not already been classified at least twice as too dirty to be worn, and some of my socks were twitching where they lay. So I bundled the whole heap into one of the landlady's threadbare pillowcases and crunched off along a pavement of newly refrozen slush to the nearest launderette, otherwise known as the coin-wash, or – inaccurately but more evocatively – the bag-wash. (Strictly speaking it was only a bag-wash if you left somebody else holding the bag, and if you stayed to tend the machine yourself it was a coin-wash, but as usually happens, the fine semantic point gave way before the attractions of sonority.) The launderette had two rows of seats down the middle, back to back, so that everyone could watch his or her machine. The place was jammed and I had to wait for both a machine and a seat. During the waiting time I read the instructions. Large coins would be required for the machine and smaller ones to obtain a cup of soap. When my turn finally came I loaded the machine with a convincing nonchalance, poured in a cup of soap and sat down between two South Africans who were smiling to themselves. I could tell they were South Africans because (a) when they talked across me it was like being beaten up, and (b) two people from any other nation would have arranged to sit beside each other if they wanted to conduct a conversation. After ten minutes of going *gwersh gwersh* my machine proffered an explanation of why my companions had been smiling, snorting and clubbing each other with verbal truncheons of crushed Dutch. The window in the front of the machine having whited out completely, the flap in the top popped open and a gusher of suds began gouting out, enveloping the machine and advancing inexorably across the floor. It was an albino volcano. The South Africans were beside themselves and I was between them. They even laughed with that accent. Finally the woman in charge of the establishment came wading through the foam and added the antidote, some form of contra-detergent which killed the suds off inside the machine. I was handed a squeegee with which to contain the gleaming cloud around it.

After the second rinse, my clothes were ready to be slopped into a plastic basket and transferred to a centrifuge which would rid them of excess water. I was interested to note, during the transfer, that my shirts had taken on some of the colour of my socks. The South Africans had noticed this too and were reaching across my temporarily empty seat to hit each other with rolled-up copies of the *News of the World*, having apparently given up hope of reducing each other to unconsciousness by voice alone. The rattle of the centrifuge drowned out their merry cries. Next came the tumble drier, which required a large coin for half an hour's tumble. It had a bigger window than the washing

machine and gave you a better show, but at the end of it most of my clothes still felt wet, so I put in another coin and set them tumbling again. Resolving to bring a book next time – Prescott's *The Conquest of Mexico* in three volumes would be about the right length – I occupied myself with observing how the yellow tint of the window was making my whites look tea-coloured instead of the pale bluish-grey they had been when I put them in. When the drier at last finished its second stint I opened the window and found that all my drip-dry shirts had indeed gone slightly saffron in colour – clearly as a preliminary to catching fire, because they were so hot I could hardly touch them. There was a riot of harshly accented laughter in the background.

When I got the shirts back to what I hated to call home, they proved to be not just aureate in hue, but brittle in texture. I put one of them on and a cuff broke off. The nylon polymer had been transformed into some friable variety of perspex. Another worrying aspect was the pillowcase, which I should have washed along with its contents. I would have to sleep holding my nose. But at least my personal linen was now fragrant enough to allow me a night out with the Australians at a party in Melbury Road, on the Holland Park side of Kensington High Street. This was perilously close to Earls Court, which I had vowed never to enter again, but as an evening's distraction it beat watching television with the Voortrekkers. The previous evening there had been a play about a black African freedom fighter earning the respect of the security police by his bravery. Whenever the weary policemen stopped hitting him there were shouts of protest from my fellow lodgers. The uproar reached a climax when the black was allowed to make his dying speech without being assaulted. 'Thet's what's *rewning* Efrica,' said a voice from a winged chintz chair, 'litting a keffir talk to them like thet.' Another chintz chair agreed. 'Thet's right,' it said. 'They mist not be allowed to enswer *beck*.'

Far from sure why I had come to England at all, I was nevertheless certain that it hadn't been in order to hang out with my compatriots, but unaccountably I now craved their well-modulated tones. With a gallon tin of brown water under each arm I climbed the stairs to the top-floor flat of a house in Melbury Road which had held a large Australian expatriate contingent since the time of the Pre-Raphaelites, one of whom had rented the studio in the back yard. There were fifty duffle-coats draped over the banisters and about a hundred people frantically twisting inside the flat itself, data which suggested that each couple had arrived sharing the one coat. The girl to whom I had sworn eternal fealty was half the world away and I was feeling friendless, but this new style of dancing, in which the partners did not actually touch each other, was a heaven-sent opportunity to move in on other men's women. I had been practising the

Twist in my room and because of the necessity to remain undetected by the landlady's sonar I had developed a finely calculated frictionless style, in which my feet trembled noiselessly on the spot while the rest of my body alternated between drying its back with an imaginary towel and pointing out the approach of hostile aircraft. All this was done in a closed-eyed trance, but I can't believe that I looked any more ridiculous than the rest of the men and certainly I inflicted far fewer injuries through inadvertent karate blows with the flying feet, although, my rapidly and randomly extended pointing fingers were admittedly apt to make contact with somebody else's eyeball. A polite squeal resulting from just such an infringement brought me face to face with one of my erstwhile girlfriends, who had already been in London for a year, working as an editorial assistant for a publisher. Unfortunately she had embraced Catholicism in the interim, which turned out to mean that I was not allowed to embrace her. It was quite an accommodating broom cupboard that I backed her into – much larger than the sort of thing we had been used to in Sydney – but she warded off my beer-breath, bristle-chin importunities with a regretful knee and insisted on going home with the English publishing type who had brought her, some woofling galah with a Morgan.

Next evening I took her to see *Hiroshima mon amour* and we became the only couple in history ever to see that film and not get into bed together afterwards. We sat on it instead. Her bed-sitting room in Chalk Farm was cosy enough if you didn't mind the crucifixes. 'You saw nothing in Hiroshima.' You can say that again. She looked prettier than ever in all that wool. Even her tights were made of wool. It became clear that they would stay in place. But she was generous with something more substantial – practical assistance. Rupert, the goof in the Morgan, was looking for a free-lance copy editor. With my *Sydney Morning Herald* training I could do it on my head. Helping myself to more of her wine, I explained my firm intention not to compromise. But the duty-free cigarettes were running low and at this rate even my bed and breakfast would soon be too expensive. A temporary sell-out might be advisable. Having finished off her reserve bottle of banana-skin Beaujolais, I took the typescript she had given me and set off on foot through the cold, foggy night towards Swiss Cottage. Navigating by a sure Australian instinct for the lie of the land, I saw quite a lot of Maida Vale, and got home in good time to be locked out.

The typescript was for a children's book about dinosaurs. 'As massive as a modern home and weighing many tons, Man would have been dwarfed by these massive creatures . . .' I spent the next two days sorting out tenses, expunging solecisms and re-allocating misplaced clauses to the stump from which they had been torn loose by the sort of non-writing writer for whom grammar is not even

a mystery, merely an irrelevance. Short of rewriting the thing entirely, I couldn't have done the job better, so it was with confidence that I posted the doctored script, together with a covering letter stating that a mere thirty pounds a week would be about the right rate, in view of the fact that I would be working only casually, in between my own literary projects.

Hampstead Heath was a slush curry of dead leaves but lent itself readily to the creative meanderings of young writers with high expectations and cold hands stuffed into duffle-coat pockets. In the next few days I joined this ambling band, ploughing a lonely furrow to criss-cross with theirs. On a park bench padded with newspapers I sat shivering while a new kind of poem formed in my notebook. It was a poem I could understand. Until then, most of my poems had been devotedly incomprehensible. Now they were becoming comprehensible, a transformation that would have allowed me to detect their sentimentality if they had not been so true to my feelings, which were sentimental. But I was warmer than I would have been in my room, and when inspiration failed I could always make the short pilgrimage to Keats's house. It looked compact and elegant among the leafless trees – compact and elegant like him. He wrote the 'Ode to a Nightingale' there, but although I was mad about his odes at that time, the ode I was maddest about was the one on Melancholy. *Sudden from heaven like a weeping cloud*. I thought of that line when I was walking down Froggnal and the rain caught me with nowhere to hide. So I got back home soaked, just in time for the evening post, which informed me that I hadn't got the editorial job. Apparently what I had written in my covering note – that the thing needed rewriting entirely – was what I should have done. So once again I had been saved from selling out. Drying myself in front of the radiator while the meter ate half-crowns like Smarties, I tried to feel relieved, but it was getting less easy all the time.

Soul for Sale

Never, I had vowed, would I sell my soul to an advertising agency. Not even if I was starving. Not even if I had no ceiling over my head. Yet starvation was only one step down from the breakfast I was getting every morning, and the ceiling over my head had South Africans on the other side using it as a floor. Waldo invited me to a party he was throwing for all his flash new friends in English advertising. I went along in order to be disgusted by their materialist values. There were plenty of materialist values on display, starting with the traffic jam of early production model E-type Jaguars parked out in the street. The men were reasonably easy to sneer at, with their elastic-sided, chisel-toed Chelsea boots and girlish length of hair. As usually happens in such circumstances, the real challenge was presented by the women. One of them was called Brenda and she was so glossily pretty that it was hatred at first sight. Unfortunately she was clever and funny too, so it was not easy to remain hostile. She was married to some pipe-sucking Nigel who tried to interest me in how David Ogilvy had once told him that if you fouled the air in somebody's bathroom, all you had to do was strike a match and the atmosphere would instantly return to its pristine sweetness, even if the bathroom were as big as an aircraft hangar. I can remember this with such clarity only because I was in the process of falling in love with his wife at the time. But she was married, and would have been even more frightening if single. It was clear just from what she had on her that it took a lot of money to run such a woman. The time had come for a modification of values. Faust was ready to negotiate. Casting Waldo as Mephistopheles, I drew him aside and asked him how to set about becoming a copy-writer. Since he had had to endure my callow jibes against his profession many times in the past, it was big of him to answer this question with useful information instead of the horse laugh. Apparently there was a vacancy coming up at Simpson, Sampson, Ranulph and Rolfe. He would get me through the door and from then on it would be up to me.

Reassured, I danced a few times with Brenda and tried not to be disappointed when she had to leave early with a gouged eye. She and Nigel climbed into a ludicrously small new car calling itself a Mini. With my bump for technology I could tell straight away that such a glorified toy would never catch on, but still I couldn't imagine anything more desirable than being in a very small car with a girl like Brenda. All it would take would be a few scintillating jingles, and vroom-vroom. 'You'll *piss* it in,' said Waldo. 'Just remember to cover your mouth when you belch and don't stub your fags out on the Axminster.'

Waldo was as good as his word and I had barely a day to prepare my spontaneous utterances before reporting to St James's Square and being ushered into the suave presence of SSRR's senior partner and creative chief, the legendary P.H.S. 'Plum' Rolfe. He had Hush Puppies on his feet and a tweed tie around his neck, but the tie was loose and his feet were on his desk, so it was possible to relax – something I would not otherwise have found easy to do, because I was a bit worried about my wardrobe. The suit from Singapore had still not arrived and by now I had begun to wonder if the green sports coat and the wrecked shoes were quite the thing, especially as my scorched drip-dry shirts tended to shatter no matter how carefully I buttoned them up, making my façade look like a vandalised housing development unless I not only arranged the tartan tie to cover the damage but contrived to keep it that way while lounging casually in a chair. But Rolfe seemed to like my poems. While he was opening my old Sydney University magazines to the places marked, I tried a few rehearsed spontaneous utterances and he liked them too. It was even more encouraging when he turned out to like the unrehearsed ones still better. He told me to send him a five thousand word essay on why I wanted to be an advertising man and then come back again in a fortnight.

Having written the essay that same evening, I went next morning to the Mayfair branch of the Bank of NSW and raised a £50 overdraft on the strength of being a hot job prospect for a top agency. Since I had no account at the bank and was clearly opening one only in order to see the assistant manager and touch him for a loan, it will be appreciated that my powers of persuasion were benefiting from a surge of confidence. No doubt the beard helped. Looking less like an oversight by now and more like an act of defiance, it must have presented an overwhelming challenge to the assistant manager's bourgeois inhibitions. I should have asked him for a hundred.

A small part of the ensuing desert of vast eternity I was able to spend marching from Aldermaston with Waldo's advertising contingent. Actually we didn't march from Aldermaston. Like 90 per cent of the marchers we marched from just outside London, but it was called marching from Aldermaston and felt

wonderful. That was the whole point, I need hardly say: feeling wonderful. The whole thing was essentially a religious festival. It wasn't politics, it was performance. I was aware of this even at the time, since my radical socialism, which in my own eyes made me an implacable outsider like Bakunin, necessarily included a deep hostility to the Soviet Union, which I already knew, long before Solzhenitsyn's revelations, to have been a murder factory on a scale barely hinted at by Khrushchev's speech to the 20th Party Congress in 1956. No amount of stupidity on America's part could allay the uncomfortable feeling that unilateral nuclear disarmament had no more in common with multilateral nuclear disarmament than insanity had in common with sanity. But solidarity between opposites being possible for as long as it remains ineffective, the party got bigger and louder while you watched. I danced along with the Ban-the-Bombers because they were the nicest people. I even sang with them, which was the ultimate tribute to their sweetness, because those songs were terrible. 'Ban the Bomb, it's now or never / Ban the Bomb, for ev-er more!' Actually I just moved my lips. Like a Shadow Cabinet Minister pretending to sing 'The Red Flag' at a Labour Party Conference, I was too bashful to pronounce the words. But I was there, acting out a fantasy because it was more fun than what I knew to be truth. Brenda was there too, of course, and the chance to stride along beside her would have taken me on a pilgrimage to Lhasa if necessary. It turned out she had all the same doubts as I had but was there because of Nigel, who was there because everybody else was. If the Sixties ever had a real beginning, an emblematic event that set the tone for an epoch, that was it – thousands upon thousands of nice people all behaving as if the irritable shrugging off of awkward facts was a kind of dance. Indeed just such a dance soon came in on the heels of the Twist, and was called the Shake.

Flushed with virtue, I turned up in St James's Square on the appointed day with my shirt cuffs protruding just the correct inch from the sleeves of my green jacket, an adjustment made easier by the fact that they had parted company from the actual shirt. The Singapore suit, had it arrived in time, would undoubtedly have been an advantage, but once again Mr Rolfe looked reassuringly bohemian, smoking no hands while he leafed through my essay. He had never read a more convincing case, he said, for how primal creativity could be combined with a job in advertising. He had no doubt that I could write Australia's answer to *Paradise Lost* in the evenings while concurrently promoting cornflakes all day. What he and Messrs Simpson, Sampson and Ranulph were after, however, was someone who wanted to do nothing else except promote the cornflakes. They wanted someone for whom the poetry was not separate from the cornflakes, but actually *in* the cornflakes and *of* the cornflakes. Like Frosties, I suggested: the sugar

wasn't separate from the cornflakes, it was in them and of them. Rolfe said I had hit it exactly, but didn't give me any extra points for the insight. 'Face it,' he said, smiling without dropping the cigarette, 'you aren't modest enough to be corruptible. Getting rich isn't what you're really after. You'd always be writing something for yourself on our time.' He had the great gift of making you feel that you had been turned down because you were too good, so I didn't start feeling miserable until I was outside in the square, where I had a hallucination, startling in its clarity, of Brenda retreating into the distance while waving to me from the passenger seat of a speeding Maserati. The pavements, though cold to my perforated shoes, were dry for once, so I walked all the way home to Swiss Cottage, feeling more ill, broke and woebegone all the time. The Singapore suit was waiting for me when I got there. It had been forwarded from the OVC and was wrapped in thick brown paper through which several peep-holes had been torn, presumably by customs officers. The conviction nagged me that if I had been wearing it I would have got the job. At least it would ensure that I got the next job.

Unwrapped, the Singapore suit was impressive for its weight of cloth. When I put it on and stood in front of the sliver of glass which the landlady evidently supposed to constitute a full-length mirror, I looked the image of bespoke respectability. You had to hand it to those oriental tailors. They might be flatterers – 'What muscular forearms,' they had whispered as they plied the tape measure, 'what powerful thighs' – but they knew how to cut cloth. Then I lifted my arms to adjust the mirror, and discovered that I couldn't see. The shoulders of the jacket had immediately risen to engulf my head. When I put my arms back down, vision returned. Perhaps I had just moved too suddenly. Tentatively I lifted my right arm. The right shoulder of the jacket went up past my ear. Ditto for the left side. Even more slowly I lifted both arms. Blackout. There was no spare cloth in the armpits: the gussets, or whatever they were called, were missing. Presumably it was the Singapore style of suit, designed for a subtle oriental people not much given to gesture. Anyway, if I kept my hands by my sides it looked quite good.

Into the Hinterland

There was enough left of my overdraft to finance a change of residence. My Swiss Cottage landlady, clearly not charmed by the misshapen ashtray or whatever had happened to her pillowcase, had raised the rent, perhaps also because the end of winter was in the air, with a congruent diminution of revenue from the electricity meter. It was time to rent my first bed-sitting room. In those days a bed-sit all to yourself could be had for three pounds a week, a significant amount less than I was paying at Swiss Cottage. As I compose this sentence, it costs about thirty pounds a week in London to share a two-room flat with three other people and each of them wants to interview you personally before okaying you for the short list, after which the final selection is by written examination. Even allowing for the way money has declined from twenty times its current value in as many years, lonely life was more possible then. Nowadays the young and broke are lucky to sleep on the pavements, while the unlucky ones get chatted up in a pub by a kind-looking chap, taken home to his place, strangled, cut up into small pieces and flushed down a drain. Comparatively little of that was going on in my time. John Christie had merely killed the sort of older people that nobody would miss. The sort of younger people that nobody would miss were not yet on the scene.

Pretty well the worst that could happen to you was to answer the wrong advertisement, which I duly did, ending up in a first-floor horror of a room at the high end of Tufnell Park Road. The other side of the Heath was not necessarily the other side of the world. Kentish Town was only just up the hill and already showing signs of gentrification. But gentrification hadn't touched my room. Putrefaction, yes. Trying to guess what colour the wallpaper had been before the attack by the brown virus from beyond the planets, I vowed that my stay in the Tufnell Park area would be a short one. Somehow, if necessary by a temporary submission to capitalist values, my fortunes would be transformed, after which it would be a small flat in Knightsbridge with easy access to Harrods food hall.

Or perhaps a large flat in Chelsea. At about this time I presumed on my slight acquaintance with Joyce Grenfell to get myself invited around to Elm Park Gardens for a much needed proper lunch, involving such luxuries, long missing from my diet, as beans, lettuce and other foodstuffs coloured green. It was our second meeting. I had first met her when I was a member of the Sydney University Journalists' Club and she had come to Australia on a theatrical tour. We had sent her a luncheon invitation which she threw us into a panic by accepting. Since then I had written her a barrage of tiresomely clever letters which she had been kind enough to answer – probably, I am now able to see, as a means of doing penance, because her nature was so saintly that she looked on duty as a blessing. Semi-bearded and weirdly clad, I sat there in the otherwise immaculate kitchen of her flat, explaining revolutionary socialism while consuming her food. She asked me if there was anything I needed. What I needed was an independent income in five figures, but to my credit – there was so little to my credit that I feel justified in the boast – I didn't put the bite on her. Instead I informed her that everything was going according to plan. I had shaken myself free of materialist values and the results were already showing in my poetry. Some recent examples of this I read to her unasked. She countered by trying out one of her new sketches on me. It was the one about the old lady who posts the dead rabbit through the car window. I laughed helplessly, but while walking home suffered from bitter afterthoughts. Her work was so obviously the finished product, whereas everything of my own, though it struck me as masterly in the hour of its composition, seemed fragmentary only a few days later. The contrast was made doubly galling by my secret agreement with Ken Tynan's published opinion that the Grenfell school of revue was irredeemably genteel and therefore belonged in the dustbin of history, along with the plays of Terence Rattigan and of almost everybody else except Brecht. You could tell that she was a historical back-number by the way she lived, with all those carpets and cushions and a portrait of her mother by Sargent up on the Regency-striped wall. There was even a woman to wait on table. Comfort and good manners stood revealed as an expression of privilege, and the fact that the privilege had all been worked for just went to show.

None of that back in Tufnell Park, at the cutting edge of the bohemian experience. Though spring was on its way, there were still enough cold nights left to demonstrate what was involved in the change from electricity to gas. Over the basin – an early Sung dynasty ceramic artefact which had been pieced back together by a blind archaeologist – there was an early-model Ascot gas water-heater with several levers which had to be swivelled in the right order when the thing was ignited. If the correct procedure was observed, the machine merely

exploded. But if you got it wrong you could be in serious trouble. Even the radiator, or fire, ran on gas. It consisted of a single lattice-work pipe-clay heating element standing vertically in the cusp of a metal reflector, which would have thrown the heat forward had it still been shiny, but which was now, and obviously had been for a long time, black enough to absorb any bold calorie that might threaten to escape from the barely pink glow of the clapped-out element operating at full throttle. For cooking, there was not only the mandatory free-standing gas ring but a proper stove, this latter item having been billed as a luxury extra which could well have warranted the bed-sit being advertised as a flat with kitchenette.

The first hour of the first night revealed that all the bedclothes provided were insufficient to keep my feet warm. Lying there fully dressed with the blankets bound tightly around my feet and knotted, I reluctantly calculated that the gas fire would have to be left running as well. With my feet still bound I hopped over to the gas meter, inserted half a crown, lit the fire, hopped back to bed and lay down. After twenty minutes the element had done little more than assume the colour of a raspberry ice lolly, so I hopped over to the stove, lit that too, left the door open so that the heat would pervade the room, hopped back to bed again, and was just manoeuvring myself into the horizontal position when the fire and the stove both gave a mutter, sputter and guttural pop. It was a total flame-out. The Swiss Cottage electricity meter had been merely a gourmet. The Tufnell Park gas meter was a gourmand. It was Moloch. Obviously it melted the cash payments down for their constituent bullion and gave no more gas than was in the coins themselves.

Winter was almost over but abject poverty was clearly only just beginning. My book-buying habits were no help. From Australia I had brought only one book with me: *Studies in Empirical Philosophy* by John Anderson. The scrupulous realism of Anderson had been either a direct influence on, or a cause of reaction in, almost every Sydney University student of recent years except me. Typically I had failed to avail myself of his instruction while he was still giving it out free every day in the form of lectures. But on board ship, with the man himself safely dead, buried and falling ever further behind, I had submitted myself at last to his magnetic force. Though I was to be a long time making myself proof against the urge to escape from reality into righteous anger, and am perhaps not entirely immune from its blandishments yet, the example of Anderson's critical scepticism struck deep. 'It will be a sign of renewed progress, then,' wrote Anderson in his devastating critique of Marxism's philosophical pretensions, 'when we see revolutionists divesting themselves of the idealistic elements in their philosophy and embracing a consistent realism.'

Meanwhile, it is the philosopher's business to be realistic, to attack idealism wherever he finds it, to consider constantly what is the case.' Anderson's was the voice of reason. But the voice of poetry had not lost its power to intoxicate, especially as embodied in the works of Shakespeare, whom I now rediscovered with a fervour explicable only in terms of my new geographical proximity to his old stamping grounds. True, Tufnell Park had not been the location of any of his several theatres. Indeed if you were to construct a map showing all those purlieus of London even tenuously relevant to Shakespeare's life, there would be a large blank area of which Tufnell Park would be the centre. Not even in the rarely performed *Henry III Part 4* does anyone say 'Brave friends await full-armed at Tufnell Park.' Nevertheless I heard the whispered echo of his light tread everywhere, and when, in a Charing Cross Road second-hand bookshop, I found a set of the four-volume Nonesuch Shakespeare in the small format, the consideration that it cost exactly as much money as I had in the world was outweighed by the sensuous allure of the gold-stamped buckram half-bindings, marbled boards and opaque paper. Although it rated nowhere as a scholarly text, the set when stood upright on my rickety linoleum-topped bedside table helped to make my cell look intentional in its austerity, as if it belonged to St Jerome rather than Caryl Chessman. The effect was further enhanced by the purchase of Louis MacNeice's personal copy of *Practical Criticism*, by I. A. Richards, which I found spine-upright on a trestle table outside the bay window of a small bookshop in Bloomsbury. On the end-paper was the price in pencil, half a crown, and MacNeice's signature in faded ink. Perhaps the bookshop owner could not read. I bought the book for its resonance as an association copy and added it to my table-top library.

Even when bought as bargains, this library's constituent volumes were costing me money I didn't have. To compound the felony, the very books which were eventually to teach me a measure of humility had at first the effect of encouraging me in the opposite, so that I pursued the life of the mind as if the world owed me a living. If the mind develops at all in such circumstances, it is likely to do so leaving certain gaps, one of which will be the failure to realise that to borrow money without the intention of paying it back is a form of theft. I, on the other hand, believed that property was theft – a more glamorous idea altogether, and one which encouraged the notion that if you could induce an acquaintance to give you some of his property in the form of money you were practically a policeman. Luckily I was circumscribed in my begging from friends, first of all by a shortage of friends and then by their own shortage of cash. Sources of small-scale loans with which to pay back large-scale loans were drying up. But I was determined to live the artistic life, and there were quite a

few extremely artistic activities which could be pursued at no expense, if you were prepared to walk there instead of ride. Every time the National Gallery held the British people to ransom by announcing that a Leonardo cartoon would go to America unless they stumped up, I would walk to the gallery, study the great drawing on display, and generously insert into the collection box some small-denomination aluminium coin from Singapore or Port Said. If the White-chapel Gallery held a Barbara Hepworth retrospective I would trek down the Holloway Road to the East End and spend hours caressing her brass volumes and bronze volutes with a famished eye. The famished stomach I placated with fish and chips bought from a glorified roadside whelk-stall just near the gallery. The stall featured a lot of other weird stuff along with the whelks, including what looked like cross-sectional research samples of a prehistoric worm colony trapped in a glaciated bog. These, I was told, were jellied eels. While I was being told this, a small bow-legged man in a flat cap came shambling up, purchased some of the jellied eels, and began, with quivering, palsied hands, to cram them into his asymmetrical maw. He assured me, between noisy mouthfuls, that a life-long diet of jellied eels had made him what he was.

Kenwood House was another free treat, not just for the pictures but for the Adam interiors. I began to have an eye for the clean sweep and jocund formality of the plaster ceiling in a grand English house, perhaps impelled by the contrast it presented to my ceiling in Tufnell Park, which looked as if a loosely stretched and seriously crumpled old tarpaulin had been stuccoed with night-soil. Whether Kenwood House had an eye for me was another question. Certainly my appearance would have startled the original owner if he had still been around to greet his guests. Winter by now was transforming itself into spring by way of a transitional period consisting mainly of mud. The air, if not exactly balmy, was too warm for a duffle-coat, so I was wearing my new combat jacket, bought from one of the many army-surplus stores along Holloway Road which were still occupied with distributing the excess production stimulated by the Korean war. This combat jacket was not the American quilted kind which actually kept you warm. It was more the British kind whose chief function was to get dirty. But clad in it I could imagine myself looking interesting and dangerous; not a man to be messed with. Anyone taking due note of my now more-than-half-formed beard might have decided that I was a man who could be depended upon to mess with himself, but to distract the world's attention from my head there was what was going on around my feet. These were enveloped in a pair of shoes given to me by Joyce Grenfell. She said that they had been given to her husband but that they had not fitted. She was a woman who never lied in her life. In this one case there might have been an element of diplomatic inexactitude. I suspect that they

had fitted, but that he had rejected them for another reason. With thick uppers and an invulnerable three-ply sole, they were well made – far and away the highest quality footwear that I would enjoy for many years to come – but they were tanned a colour so reddish it was almost strawberry. It was another episode in my long history of unsuitable shoes, a story which is not yet closed and would need a book of its own. Let's just say that even now, when I have learned to dress as plainly as possible, I still get so impatient with the whole time-consuming business of covering up exposed skin that I will buy the first thing that catches my eye, and that when it comes to shoes the first thing that catches your eye is the last thing you should ever put on your feet. It is almost better to be an impulse shirt-buyer than an impulse shoe-buyer. I have worn shirts that made people think I was a retired Mafia hit-man or a Yugoslavian sports convenor from Split, but I have worn shoes that made people think I was insane.

Anyway, when I turned up for my next attempt to land a job, that was how I looked – like Judas Iscariot deserting across the 38th Parallel in shoes stolen from a clown. A wine merchant called T. H. Lawrence (I remember it wasn't D. E. Lawrence but was something equally unlikely, so it must have been T. H. Lawrence) placed a classified advertisement for a young man to learn the wine trade. Required qualifications would be a degree in the humanities, physical strength, and an interest in fine wines. The first qualification I certainly had. The second I still had in part, despite the effects of eating fat-fried food every night in a dark room. The third was more of a problem. At the time I left Australia it was already on the verge of becoming one of the great wine countries of the world, but I won't pretend that I was in any way *au courant* with the incipient viticultural breakthrough. My idea of a fine wine was one that merely stained your teeth without stripping off the enamel. In Britain I had discovered Woodpecker cider and resorted to wine only when it was on offer free at Melbury Road parties, where it usually issued from a large green bottle marked with the name of the Hungarian composer Janos Riesling. Nevertheless I had picked up a certain amount of technical chat and reckoned I could get away with a short interview if I kept it laconic. Since the address was that of a country pub in Kent, I eschewed the Singapore suit. Also the red shoes were the only ones I currently possessed. To wear them in combination with the Singapore suit would be to set up a contrast in colour which even I could see was a blow to the optic nerve. If I kept my arms to my sides, the dark cloth of the Singapore suit lulled the viewer's eyes as they travelled down my person, which only made the dissonance more stunning when it was revealed that I was standing in two bidets full of strawberry soda. The combat jacket made for a more meant-looking ensemble, in my opinion. This opinion could have been mistaken but I doubt that

it would have made any difference if I had arrived suitably attired for an investiture. When I finally fetched up at T. H. Lawrence's rustic hostelry after long, lost detours up and down winding hedge-lined single carriageways, the proprietor came to the door, took one look at me and quite obviously loathed what he saw happening on the lower part of my face.

'Oh dear,' he snapped. 'Beard.' Generously I stood nonplussed, instead of retaliating, which I could have done by pointing out how hard his blue blazer and handlebar moustache were trying to make me think of the Battle of Britain, an effect undone by his extreme brevity of stature. He might very well have flown against the Germans, but only on the back of a pigeon. I either managed to bite all this back or else never thought of it, probably the latter. Scott Fitzgerald's Nick Carraway says at some point that any demonstration of complete self-confidence draws a stunned tribute from him. Even today, when some oaf who has confused rudeness with blunt speech tells me exactly what he thinks, I tend to stand there wondering what I have done to deserve it, instead of telling him exactly what I think right back. In those days I was even more easily wrong-footed, not having begun to realise that the boor has a built-in advantage which can be countered on the spot only at the cost of becoming a boor oneself. I used to worry about having no quick answer, and was thus bereft of self-esteem as well as of speech. So when T. H. Lawrence asked me what I thought of the recent French and German vintages I was not best placed to give a convincing summary. My mumbled generalisations got me as far as the bar, but there he poured a glass of yellowish white wine and asked me to taste it.

'This is a 1960 Trockenbocken hock from Schlockenglocken,' he rapped, or words to that effect. 'Selling it through my club for a quid a bottle. What do you think?' I sniffed it, said it had a nice nose, sipped it, said it had a nice bottom, and sank the rest of it in one. 'You know bugger all about wines,' announced T. H. Lawrence matter-of-factly, in the clipped tones of a veteran Spitfire pilot telling the duty officer that the new boy on the squadron had made an unauthorised solo pass over Rhine-Hopstein airfield at nought feet, copped a packet of light flak, and flown straight into a petrol tanker. 'Wasted your time coming down here. Wasted mine too. Gut my hedges for lunch and we'll call it square.'

Starting either side of the pub's gravelled forecourt, hedgerow stretched in each direction along the roadside for as far as the eye could see. With the clippers provided, I went at it and in less than an hour had trimmed a surprising amount of hedge – something like one and a half square yards. T. H. Lawrence the wee Wing Commander didn't help by periodically emerging from his ops room to laugh good-naturedly at my efforts and confess his wonder that an Ossie

(sic) should be so inept at the kind of activity which must be fairly standard in the Backout or Backthere or whatever it was called, har har. Like many Englishmen of his class and IQ, the Sanforised Squadron Leader was either incapable of pronouncing the word Aussie correctly – i.e., with a ‘z’ sound instead of an ‘s’ – or else did not want to, for fear of spoiling the priceless joke whose other elements included the Outback, kangaroos, and the hilarious fantasy of people walking around upside-down. ‘I expect you Ossies see plenty of kangaroos in the Backout when you’re walking along upside-down’ was a standard line, invariably preluded, postluded and punctuated by self-applauding shouts of laughter from a large mouth held six inches from my face. T. H. Lawrence’s version of the same theme differed only in that his mouth was held six inches from my chest. Stripped to the waist and seething with misdirected fury, I clipped like a maniac and got the whole hedge trimmed in time for a late lunch.

My lunch was served on a trestle table in the open air. A piece of stiff white cheese smeared with yellow pickle had been clamped in a vise of partly refreshed bread. There was also half a pint of brown water. These victuals were brought to me with a practised display of weary magnanimity by the abbreviated Air Commodore himself. I had been hungry and thirsty until I saw these things. But the sun was almost warm and there was the additional pleasure of watching the farmers arrive for their midday break. It was a highly traditional sight. You got the sense that it had been going on for a millennium. From Lagondas, Graber-bodied Alvis Grey Ladies and V-8 Aston Martins they emerged barking in tweeds. ‘Nigola!’ they yelled. ‘Over heah, Nigola! I say Nigola! Over *heah!*’ Yet their wives and mistresses made me want to keep my eyes open, even if my fingers were in my ears. Merely quacking while their menfolk bayed like hounds, they looked all the more desirable for their daunting self-assurance. In London I had seen nothing like them. Perhaps it was the district. More probably it was spring. Sitting out there with those wonderful, hand-woven, gentleman’s-relish women under the same sun, I was made invisible by my appearance, like a satyr in an old engraving who blends with a gnarled tree-trunk and its attendant shrubbery. Thus I could catch the perfume of their corduroy and cashmere as they yelped to each other about banging along to Harvey Nichols for a spree. Lust and envy made their usual explosive mixture in my soul. If one of those long-striding creatures had smiled at me I would have thrown back my head and given the warrior-call of the bull ape. But nobody infringed my frustrated privacy except the miniature Marshal of Air Vice, Group Captain T. H. ‘Taffy’ Lawrence, Distinguished Self-Service Restaurant and Bar. ‘Finished? Good. There’s a path around the back. Show you.’ I thought he

was showing me a quick way to the railway station, but it turned out that he was showing me the back boundary of his property, another hedge almost as long as the one in front. I could have done a bunk the minute he left me alone. Defiant, defeated anger required that I stay and make a job of it. By the time I had finished, the afternoon was almost spent, but the countryside was still a pretty sight as I walked back along the winding single-lane road to the station, occasionally leaning back sourly into the hedge while fast cars full of contented, well-dressed, well-fed people treated the road as if they owned it. Which, of course, they did.

Cracking the Secret Code

Just when you think things are as bad as they can get, suddenly they get worse. Not that there was a shortage of jobs. Though the reader of today might find it difficult to believe, twenty years ago in London there was casual white-collar work to burn. I, however, seemed incapable of getting in amongst it. By now I had my name down with the Professional and Executive register and it was amazing how many interviews they sent me off to that I mucked up by talking too much, talking too little or talking just the right amount but to the wrong person. I merely throw in this observation for the benefit of any younger reader, or for that matter any older reader, who has never got a job after an interview. Neither have I. An interview is where you sell yourself, and some of us are just bad salesmen, with no gift for correctly assessing the demand before we start matching it with a supply. If a clerk's job was on offer, I came on strong, filling the air with abstruse literary references, when the only references the interviewer wanted were from some previous employer saying that I had performed clerical duties to his satisfaction and not stolen the clock. If the vacancy was for an editorial assistant, on the other hand, I underplayed it, saying little and looking tough, like a one-time boundary rider who, despite the circumstances of cultivated leisure implied by his now possessing a suit made in Singapore, could still mend a fence or trap a frilled lizard. It was a disaster either way, but the second method at least had the virtue of rendering the interviewer visible at all times. Employing the first method, I had always to hold the cuffs of the Singapore suit's sleeves in a surreptitiously clenched fist while making an expansive, genius-betokening gesture, otherwise the man I was talking to would disappear as if by magic. Not long afterwards I would disappear myself, but there was nothing magic about that.

Back on the street, spring was well established and the girls of London were prettier than they had ever been or would ever be again. They were saying goodbye to the old austerity without having quite yet said the full, mad hello to

Sixties fashions at their most demented. Skirts were on their way up the thigh but had not yet reached the waist. Hair was back-combed but had not yet attained the shape and consistency of a lacquered crash-helmet. Stiletto heels were long and sharp but not yet like needles, so that if a girl trod on your foot you were able to hop about in pain instead of being pinned screaming to the dance-floor. There was a new exuberance abroad, atomised libido was misty in the air, and I was out of it. No money, no prospects. Just debts, purple gums and a pair of shoes that lit up in the dark like dachshunds with scarlet fever.

But there were too many casual jobs on offer for me to go on missing out, even with my talent for being the man off the spot. Just when the only funds remaining were half a dozen Woodpecker cider bottles worth threepence each for the returned deposit, a classified advertisement led me to a London University annexe in Bloomsbury where questionnaires were being coded. A dozen casual coders were required, degree essential and qualifications in psychology desirable. Having majored in psychology at Sydney University, I was taken on as the dozenth coder. Fifteen minutes later and I would have dipped out. This I could be sure of, because, fourteen minutes after I signed on, a candidate turned up who looked as mathematically gifted as Max Planck, an impression not dissipated by the slide-rule sticking out of his pocket. It was a nice change to stand there and see him turned away, instead of being turned away myself. The man in charge, a handsome young tweed-jacketed Rhodesian called Robin Jackson if it wasn't Jack Robinson, showed signs of regretting how things had transpired, but quixotically decided to stick by the arrangement already made. Banzai. I was in, at the lavish emolument, for the six weeks the job would last, of ten pounds a week before stoppages. What stoppages were I had no idea, and for the moment was too busy to ask.

The completed questionnaires contained the answers of thousands of people to hundreds of questions. These questions ranged from concrete enquiries about age and gender to a whole last page of abstract stuff about attitudes and values, whether liberal or otherwise. As I now remember it, which is vaguely, a statistically random sample of students was being assessed for demography, motivation, goals, height above sea level, etc. No doubt I was pretty hazy about it all even at the time. The typical respondent started off by saying he was a 19-year-old male and ended up rating the possibility of God's existence on a scale from one to five. In other words it was a snare for Snarks, a sieve to measure water, a machine to count sand. But to convert the written answers into a given range of symbols was a mechanical matter for anyone who had ever spent a couple of years fooling around with Personality Profiles, Thematic Apperception Tests and that old standby of university psychology departments world wide, the

Minnesota Multiphasic.

We all sat around a large, polished mahogany table with Robin handing out new sheaves of uncoded questionnaires and stacking the ones we had finished into a heap. After the first hour I was on automatic pilot and using up some of the spare energy by inspecting my fellow workers as they toiled. Half of them, I was pleased to note, were females. One of these, sitting at the end of the table to my left, was a very elegant young Indian woman in a gold-trimmed sari the colour of bleached pomegranate. Her name, too sonorous to be forgotten however long I live, was Saraj. Perhaps my heart would have gone out to her if Millicent had not been sitting directly opposite me. But Millicent would probably have had the same effect if she had been sitting upstairs. She radiated so much sensuality that I could still see her after I had closed my eyes.

This is neither the time nor the place to give my conclusions about the physics and metaphysics of sexual attraction. For one thing, it would take a separate volume. For another, I doubt if anything I had to say would be of sufficient originality to warrant the effort, not to mention the trouble. Most inhibiting of all, I seriously wonder if I have yet reached any conclusions, or ever will before I die. When I do die, and come to that check-point inside the gates of Hell where the horrible Minos circles himself with his tail as an indication of the infernal level to which the new entrant is assigned, it will be no secret between me and him that during my time on Earth I suffered from – or enjoyed, if that is the preferred formula – inordinate susceptibility to female beauty. It will be the second thing that he asks me about. His first question will not demand an answer. ‘Hello there, cobber! Must be a relief to be walking the right way up with no kangaroos around out there in the back! Brought your tube of Foster’s? Har har.’ But the next question will be harder to dodge.

I suppose it was a case of arrested development. From childhood onwards I had seen beauty in women as a revelation of universal truth, and now, in what should have been adulthood, I still did, which meant that adulthood felt like childhood, with childish behaviour as an inevitable consequence. There is a lot to be said for idealising those we adore, but not if it means neglecting to listen to what they have to say. A good-looking woman, as well as being the incarnation of a Platonic concept, is quite often a human being as well. One of the cockney photographers who were at that time just beginning their rise to fame recently told me that his success with some of the world’s most gorgeous women was almost entirely due to patting them on the bottom – or, as he put it, patinum honour bum. Having looked like goddesses all their lives, they had never met a man who patted them on the bottom, although they had met hundreds of men who wrote poems in their honour. Sitting at home beside my suitcase in Tufnell

Park I wrote many a poem about Millicent. I never made the mistake of showing them to her, but all day at work I did my best to impress, and my worshipping eyes must have had the unswerving fervour of Hitler's. My consolation, when I got things in perspective a bit later – about fifteen years later – was that she would probably not have been interested even if I had looked and sounded less like an aspiring disciple of Christ who had been rejected on grounds of mental instability. She had, after all, recently married a young doctor who called for her at work one day seemingly specifically to convince me of his close physical resemblance to Alain Delon. Perhaps it *was* Alain Delon, whose career was at that time only just starting to boom. Perhaps the reason I thought that he merely looked like Alain Delon was the tears in my eyes. Not that Millicent required anything beyond herself as a stimulus to induce weeping. Merely to glance at her was to feel the tear ducts fill and spill like cisterns after spring rain.

Her eyes would have been too big if they had not been pale blue. The planes of her face were too classically defined for lips so romantically lush, but the clarity of her cheeks showed that there was more life in her than could possibly remain calm – the blood flooded under them like a peach ripening before your eyes. Her straight dark hair was so strong that wisps of it would fight loose from the ribbon tying it back, so that occasionally, without looking up, she would have to lift one long-fingered hand to clear her vision. This movement would bring certain sections of her upper figure into play. There were several opportunities a day to see the whole of her statuesque form in motion. I preferred to avoid these by either closing my eyes or else averting them, lest I emit, as I did on that first afternoon, an involuntary groan of such intensity that Saraj offered me a Beechams Powder. Millicent had the kind of hips known as child-bearing by those people who try vainly to remind us that all these splendours are laid on exclusively for the purpose of reproducing the human race. But it was Millicent's breasts which struck me at the time as constituting unarguable proof that the Man Upstairs was trying to find out how much he could get away with without causing a mass rebellion. Indeed at one point during a mix-up at the coat-rack in the corridor, Millicent's breasts struck me physically. It felt like being run through twice with an angel's tongue. But to arrange another such accident would have caused comment, and anyway idealism shies from reality, even when, especially when, the reality matches the dream. All day and every day I confined myself to dreaming. When Millicent's hand was raised to restore a stray strand of hair, there was a slight shift of the breast on that side. It was enough to make me cram the corner of a questionnaire into my mouth and bite it to stop squealing.

Occasionally, about once every thirty-four minutes on average, Millicent

would get tired of coding, put down her pencil, lift both her clenched fists high behind her head, and yawn. As an alternative to swallowing a questionnaire whole I coded furiously, branding female orphans who lived with foster parents in Wandsworth and studied bookkeeping at the polytechnic as male upper-middle-class Oxbridge history graduates with an interest in blood sports. There is also a possibility that I was trying to impress her with my coding. I was probably trying to make her think: 'My God, can that boy *code*.' In other words, I was acting like a virgin. Hating myself for it too, because I wasn't one, was I? But I was starting to forget what not being one was like, and was not yet experienced enough to know that for any man short of senility or satyriasis, virginity is a recurring condition, and not the worst from which he can suffer, although only self-possession can make it graceful.

Since I had self-obsession instead, I was not best equipped to maintain my equilibrium. Writing badly by night and coding badly by day, I was getting less enjoyment than I should have done out of my first long taste of being alone and paying my own way, or some of it. But not even the most determined cultivation of chaos can prevent the occasional outbreak of order. Having been advised by Robin that the Courtauld Gallery was just around the corner, I began spending some of my lunch-time there. The Italian primitives would probably not have said much to me even if they had been first-rate: my appreciation of painting was fated to work backwards from a starting point in recent times, so as yet I found the Renaissance, when I visited the National Gallery, an elaborate preparation for Rembrandt, whose main achievement in turn was to have done all that could be done with darkness, so that one day the Impressionists would show the same exhaustive virtuosity with light. But the Courtauld's Impressionists and Post-Impressionists *were* first-rate. The great names were represented by only a few paintings each, yet these were capital works without exception. For the first time I got beyond admiring the individual painter and became immersed in the individual painting. There was a comfortable leather bench on which I sat and stared at Manet's girl at the 'Bar of the Folies-Bergère' for half an hour on end, not always in the hope that Millicent would walk in and catch me there looking intense. After the first few weeks the accumulated evidence that she was never going to visit the Courtauld Gallery had become overwhelming.

As with many scatter-brained women her handbag was a bin, out of which she would produce, when the tea-break conversation flagged, one of those cube-shaped paperback novels by which American authors in elevator shoes take revenge on their country for its having rendered them illiterate. In Millicent's case it was always the same novel, called something like *The Insatiabes*. She would take squares of fudge out of the bin and melt them in her lovely mouth

while it formed silent words as she slowly read. She is probably still reading that book and I would be surprised if the fudge hadn't taken its toll, although not disappointed. Usually we do not want people to flourish after they have proved that they can live without us, but Millicent was a special case. And to think I never got near her – except when, instead of the fudge, she produced from her bin one of the ten cigarettes to which she rationed herself each day. I would always lean across the table and light it for her. The table was eight feet wide, but before the filter tip of each lucky Dunhill had settled into position between those sumptuous lips I would have lit a match and be sliding across that polished mahogany like a speed skater falling headlong and face downward on the fleeing ice.

My own cigarette ration was more like twenty during working hours, with twenty more each evening. By the time I eventually quit, about twelve years ago, I was smoking eighty cigarettes a day. People who scoff at this figure have never noticed how quickly a true addict smokes a cigarette, so that the burning tip, instead of being a shallow glowing cone, is like a red hot wire. Also you get to the point of having two cigarettes going at the same time, until you reach the terminal stage when you have three of them in your mouth at once, recoiling in sequence like guns in a turret. I finally quit when I found myself at two o'clock one morning assaulting a cigarette machine which had taken my last four coins and given nothing in exchange. The machine will probably never forget my deadly flurry of right uppercuts and left jabs, but that's another story. Even when confining myself to a comparatively moderate forty a day, however, I must have been a spectacle, with butts piling up around me and my beard turning yellow around the mouth. On my right hand, only the little finger was the colour of skin. The thumb and three remaining fingers were a startling mixture of orange-peel and gold leaf. It didn't take a genius to figure out that the nicotine must have been turning me the same colour inside as outside. All it took was someone capable of mature reflection.

More important in the short term, which for a long time remained the only term I could think in, was that the cigarettes ate up a large proportion of the money I had left over after paying the rent and buying the ingredients for my evening meal of bacon and sausages cooked in the fat of a similar meal cooked the evening before. The last duty-free Rothmans was far behind on the horizon, like a ship disappearing towards a more affluent world. For a while I still smoked the same brand, but with tax added to the price they would have been far too expensive even if my first pay packet had not revealed the full meaning of the word 'stoppage'. It meant heart-stoppage. Some form of emergency tax had been imposed until such time as I qualified for a rebate. Presumably one

qualified for a rebate by being able, for several weeks consecutively, to read the amount which had been withheld without succumbing to cardiac infarction. This was all a bit much, especially coming on top of the weekly National Insurance slug. I had thought that National Insurance was meant to insure me, but judging from the size of the compulsory contributions the idea was to insure the nation. So I switched to Players No. 6. A lot shorter than Rothmans, they were the tiny kind of cigarette that children smoked at matinees. In recompense my daily consumption shot up to sixty, with consumption sounding like the operative word. If coughing was a sign of literary ability, I would soon be up there, or down there, with Keats and Kafka.

Summer arrived, the job ran out, and the team dispersed, some of them to take an early holiday before starting serious work. Millicent walked out of my life, swaying gently at the hips: a new recruit for the growing army of the untouched, another chapter in the history of what never happened. I took the loss stoically, screaming only when alone. One of those naturally grave young men to whose air of tranquillity I aspired in vain, Robin had impressed me with the seriousness of his enforced exile, something with which voluntary exile has little in common. I was merely on a long holiday. He was banished. But all the more devotedly he studied to be a lecturer in English literature, showing remarkable tolerance for my views on the subject, which he was well aware owed their fluency to a culpable superficiality in the actual business of reading the books. It is never heartwarming, when you are three-quarters of the way through *The Wings of the Dove*, to be told by someone who has read only three pages of it that it is not worth reading. Robin not only mastered his justifiable impatience, he actually helped me line up another casual job, just around the corner in Gordon Square – something about counting up all the foreign students in Britain. But the job didn't start for another two weeks, during which I would be once again flat broke.

Telling people I was on a fortnight's holiday and would soon be drawing pay again, I raised almost enough scratch to smoke and drink continuously, provided I got plenty of sleep during the day. Much of this sleep I got in the parks. I slept in Hyde Park near the Serpentine, St James's Park near the pond, Green Park, Regent's Park and Holland Park. Daringly ranging further afield, I slept for several hours in the grass at Richmond while deer cropped up to a few feet all around me, so that I woke up looking like a chrysoprase cameo. Most adventurously of all, I slept in the meadow at the Mill in Cambridge.

One of my old Sydney fellow students and drinking mates had already been up at Trinity Hall for a year, reading the second part of the Modern Languages tripos as an affiliated student. During his last summer in Sydney we had been on

stage together in the Union Revue, I playing Abdullah 'Tracy, the Arabian millionaire detective, and he making a show-stopping appearance as the rhythm and blues belly-dancer, Fatima Domino. After the show we would join the Downtown Push at whatever party they had crashed and get drunk enough together to forget the waves of indifference which had emanated from the audience. The last time I had seen him, on the drunken night before he sailed for England, he had been wearing full Push battle order, right down to the suede desert boots worn shiny on the toes. Our faces six inches apart, we had shouted farewell on the understanding that the Poms would never suck him in. Now, in Cambridge, he was suddenly in a three-piece suit and sounded like the Queen broadcasting to the Commonwealth. His new accent cut me off at the knees.

Even with his old accent I would not have found it easy to understand what he was talking about. Apparently there were sound academic reasons why he was still up, when everybody else had gone down. Otherwise he would already have gone down and not come up again until Michaelmas, or Candlemas or possibly Quatermass. But being obliged to stay up was nothing like as bad as being sent down. There was a big difference between being sent down and going down. That was one of the first things one learned when one came up. When I heard him use the word 'one' I began to suspect that he had been drugged, tied to a chair and brainwashed. But after a few pints of brown water in the Eagle, plus a few more in the Little Rose – Pepys's pub, he explained with enthusiasm and difficulty – it was more like old times. He hired a canoe at the Mill and we paddled to Granchester, where a lot of young people were sitting around. These, it was explained to me, were not up. A succession of pints at Granchester was cut short by afternoon closing time, whereupon we paddled back to the Mill. Up at Granchester the church clock had stood at ten to three but down at the Mill it was ten to five. Up, down, up, down. The itinerary was out of Rupert Brooke, the echolalia out of *Four Quartets*, the situation out of hand. On the meadows there were some girls sitting down who were also not up. For a while we lay down and then later on we got up. It was in this condition that I fell into Corpus Christi and looked up at where Christopher Marlowe, no mean piss-artist himself, had had his rooms. I was led into Trinity Great Court as Byron had once led his bear. In the main court of King's I was held steady until the Chapel stopped moving. The sun was gone out of the sky but the twilight was like day, so that the dark, honey-soaked biscuit of the stone – long overdue for the thorough cleaning it has since received – looked like an edible cut-out against the brushed azure. A trembling cut-out. Up, down, up, down. A small old man who looked like E. M. Forster shuffled by. It was E. M. Forster.

That evening we ate in an almost empty hall, called Hall. But the Hall of

Trinity Hall was not the same as the Hall of Trinity. Trinity Hall was not a Hall at all. Trinity Hall was a college. This was merely its Hall. It was Trinity Hall's Hall, that's all. I was wearing a borrowed gown which kept tripping me up while I was sitting down. I had to keep getting up to fix it, whereupon I would fall down. Brown water was served by a man in a white jacket who helped me when the potato salad got into the sleeve of my gown. Up at the high table, called High Table, there were men looking down on us. These men, I was told, were Don's. Don's what? It was agreed that I was too tired to contemplate going up to London until next morning, so I slept that night in my friend's rooms. We went up a set of stairs, called a Stair, and fell down in a set of rooms, called a Set. My companion slept in or near his bed but I was not envious. I was perfectly comfortable with my left arm hooked over the towel-rail and my head in the wash-basin, although every half-hour or so there was a terrible noise, like a man singing the first few bars of '*Celeste Aida*' into a bucket.

Statistical Catastrophe

Having seen an old friend fall so conspicuously on his feet should have tipped me off that I was falling on my head. Incredibly this was a fact that I had still not faced. It was finally brought home to me by an episode which strikes me even now as so shameful that I have to struggle, as I begin to tell it, against the urge to hide behind chalk-white make-up and a putty nose. But whereas it is simply good manners to make a story about one's ordinary human failings as entertaining as possible, one's extraordinary human failings require less self-indulgent treatment. What I did next couldn't be glossed over with ten coats of hand-rubbed Duco. I took a job on, mucked it up, panicked and ran. That's the long and the short of it. There was a girl involved, but that makes it worse, because she in no way approved of my behaving badly, and the only reason she couldn't help me behave better was that I didn't listen. Remorse, remorse. But let's not jump the gun.

Once again the job was in Bloomsbury, just around the corner from Woburn Walk, in one of whose bow-windowed little houses W. B. Yeats had once written poetry, and in another of whose bow-windowed little houses Ezra Pound had once played the bassoon. Whether the second activity helped or hindered the first has always remained an open question, but to the inward ear of my imagination this was a mighty conjunction of creativity, as if Goethe and Beethoven, instead of slipping through each other's grasp, had settled down in the same street to write *Faust* as an opera. I couldn't walk past those bow windows without shivering, and indeed still can't. Twenty years ago the shiver was at least partly caused by apprehension. The job had something wrong with it. It was too easy.

My employer was some official outfit called the Association for Commonwealth Institutes, if it wasn't the Institute for Commonwealth Associations. Its headquarters were in the usual Georgian terrace house. From the architectural viewpoint, Bloomsbury had been raped twice, once each by the

Luftwaffe and London University. The attack by the University had been the more merciless, but there were still a lot of Georgian terraces left. Few of them, however, were quite so elegant as the one housing the Institute for Associations. With the credit obtainable from friends on the basis of my prospective first week's wages minus stoppages but plus rebate, I bought a pair of black chisel-toed Chelsea boots to go with the Singapore suit. Entering the building, I felt that I needed only a bowler hat and a tightly rolled umbrella to make me look the complete Establishment figure. If I had had the hat, hanging it on the hat-rack in the hall without being rendered temporarily headless by my suit would have entailed a pretty energetic combined jump up and lunge sideways, yet the idea was sound. Even the beard, after suitable attention from a pair of nail scissors, looked like something that might have been approved of by the Navy, instead of fired at on sight.

Once having entered the building, I bent to my task. This I did literally, because the task was spread out on one of those familiar large mahogany tables, except that this time I was on my own. The task was a large chart in which I was to enter, against the names of all the institutions of higher learning in Britain, the number and provenance of all the Commonwealth students attending them. At the end of the scheduled two months, the task would be completed by my tallying the total number of entries, thus to give a set of figures which could be read out by the responsible Minister in answer to a parliamentary question already tabled. A cinch. Nothing to it. All it needed was a level head.

For years after the disaster I tried to convince myself that a level head was something I possessed naturally and that I lost it only because of Pandora. In cold retrospect it becomes apparent that a man with the Medusa touch will wreak havoc whether he has help or not, but at the time of the explosion, and for as long as the debris was falling, I couldn't help believing that the whole débâcle had at least something to do with Pandora's legs. Pandora's legs had the rest of Pandora on top of them, which didn't make things any easier. The man in charge, a nice old thing in a three-piece suit with a watch-chain, had explained the chart, shown me how to analyse the data sheets, made a few sympathetic remarks about how my new shoes must have been hurting, and left me alone. It was all plain sailing for about an hour, and then Pandora opened the door to ask me if there was anything I wanted. Instantly I wanted Pandora. Her severe expression only added to her appeal. Those career-girl glasses were something cruel: when she looked at you it was like having your photograph taken by the police. Their frames were so big that she was getting both your profiles to go with the full face. But her mouth was all the more intriguing for being set in a firm line. From there on down she was Jaeger twinset, pearls and plaid skirt with

a safety pin, but it was all put on over a figure twanging with whip-lash energy. Millicent's sensuality, the memory of which now began a rapid retreat into the past, had been languid, passive, receptive. Pandora's was the other thing entirely: avid sinuosity on a hair-trigger. And whereas Millicent's legs had been merely poetic, Pandora's were rhapsodic. They came tapering down out of the hem of that glorified Black Watch kilt like a pair of angels nose-diving with their wings folded, did a few fancy reverse curves of small radius so as to recreate the concept of the human ankle in terms of heavenly celebration, and then swooped at an only slightly less vertiginous angle into a pair of black lacquer stiletto-heeled court shoes with little bows near the toes. Stiletto shoes had come on even further in the previous few months, to the point where prospective airline passengers were asked not to wear them. Airliners kept crashing in the Andes and when the search party finally managed to cut its way through the jungle it would find the usual fuselage full of skeletons, except that at least one of the skeletons would be wearing stiletto shoes which had to be extracted from the metal skin of the pressure cabin with a pair of pliers. Pandora's heels were like that. Looking at her for the first time with roughly the emotions of the Flying Dutchman meeting her namesake, I suddenly and strangely remembered a more than usually weird case study in Havelock Ellis about a man who got his rocks off by lying down and having women stand on his vital areas without removing their buttoned boots. If Pandora were to co-operate in such a venture, there could be no doubt that the experience would prove terminal, but what a way to go. Pinned like a butterfly. This ambiguously disturbing prospect was made even more unsettling by her air of severity. Though she didn't look as if she would be much interested in your pleasure, an interest in your pain was clearly not to be ruled out.

I was maligning her, of course: it was just the glasses. Having foisted one of my fantasies on Millicent, I had immediately set about foisting a different fantasy on Pandora. But there could be no doubt that the detachment of her manner was more effective than a provocation. To indicate that there was nothing I wanted, I raised both hands as if to fend off help, while saying: 'No worries.' What I said came out muffled, but her reply was witheringly clear. 'Is there something wrong with your clothes? What happened to your head just then? You looked like Charles I.' I told her the story of the Singapore suit, a would-be self-deprecating routine which by then, after so much practice, was in a high state of polish. Any normally equipped English-speaking female could be depended upon to laugh aloud at least twice during this comic *tour de force*, but Pandora didn't crack a smile. This was particularly galling in view of the fact that her line about Charles I had been pretty good. Not perhaps a miracle of

invention, yet tellingly delivered from the dead pan. Pans didn't come deader than Pandora's pan. I was gibbering. What could I do to break the pack ice on that minatory face?

The answer was nothing, but I didn't find that out before trying everything. There was a Howard Hawks season at the National Film Theatre. I took her to see *His Girl Friday*, one of the funniest films ever made. She sat there like a world champion poker player. Her studied indifference might have had something to do with the way I rolled in the aisle. (Anyone who rolls from side to side in the aisle might be doing so naturally, but to roll up and down the aisle is an affectation.) If that was so, however, why did she agree to go out with me again? And she always said yes to going out, just as she always said no to any form of physical contact. When I asked her if it was the beard she said it wasn't. Then what was it? One night we went to the Royal Court to hear Lotte Lenya sing Brecht and Weill. Lenya's voice was in rags from laryngitis and the tube trains arriving and departing under the theatre sounded like a fault in the earth's crust, but the acrid lilt of 'Surabaya Johnny' proclaimed the inexorability of desire. Pandora invited me back to her flat for coffee. I told myself to stay calm and it would all drop into my lap. It did, too: a steaming hot mug of Nescafé. Nothing else. Perhaps it was a tactical error to give her my standard lecture on the evils of capitalism. I gave her the short version – less than three-quarters of an hour – but before it was half over she was saying 'Really?' in the middle of each sentence as well as at the end. When I tried to kiss her on the way out I rammed her spectacle frames. It was like being thrown against a windscreen.

History was leaving me behind. John Glenn went into orbit but I stayed earthbound. Britten wrote his *War Requiem*. Basil Spence built Coventry Cathedral, which briefly held the title of Most Hideous Building in Britain before the new London Hilton pipped it for top spot. The Mariner unmanned space mission left for Venus. The Moulton small-wheeled bicycle appeared on the streets of London, giving the miniskirts of its female riders a further boost towards the belt. When a girl's tights came towards you on a Moulton, they were making scissor movements at eye level, especially if you were on your knees sobbing with lust. The air was pulsating with libido, but somehow Pandora hadn't heard the news. I knocked myself out trying to impress her. There is no point trying to impress women – if they are listening to you at all, then they are already as impressed as they are ever going to get – but this fact takes some of us a long time to learn and even then it is easily forgotten in the stress of frustration. Pandora wasn't impressed with what I knew. An Oxbridge education had equipped her to say 'Really?' on those occasions when she was told something she didn't know already. When Pandora said 'Really?' it was like

being flicked in the face with a wet, sandy towel. Equally clearly she was not impressed with my looks, clothes or earning potential. No doubt it was out of fairness that she always paid her share, yet her manner implied that she was subsidising a gypsy. So there was nothing left to impress her with except a revolutionary new method of calculating the number of foreign students.

Why this did not impress her mystified me at the time. My formula was a breakthrough in sociologico-statistical methodology comparable to those diagrams by Pareto showing causes and effects all linked up with arrows. With four different coloured pencils I approximated the increment against the asymptotic co-ordinate. The chart looked like Stravinsky's holograph manuscript of *Le Sacre du printemps* overlaid by a computer print-out of the Walt Disney Organisation's payroll. My employer, Mr Niceold Thing - soon, if all went well, to be Sir Niceold Thing - dropped in to see how my work was going and pronounced himself dazzled. 'But doesn't this slow everything down terribly?' he asked. 'Only,' I explained patiently, 'in the initial stages. It takes a few weeks to do the transpositions, but then all you have to do is read off everything in the right-hand column and you get the whole answer in a few minutes.'

He wasn't as convinced as I was, but he needed to be only half as convinced as I was to be convinced enough. Instead of ordering me to forget the new method and just get ahead with the old one, he retreated looking trustful but worried - never a good sign in a commander. He probably blames himself for what happened and I must say that there are moments when I agree with him. They are weak moments. Pandora, after all, told me outright that I was breaking a butterfly on a wheel, or words to that effect. 'Making a meal of it, aren't you?' Without lifting my head I converted the five Sierra Leone students at the Bradfield Polytechnic into a green Greek gamma with a pink circle around it. 'Just put down the tea, smart-arse,' I retorted. It was part of my new plan to relax her with obscene banter. It wasn't working any better than the old plan, but it wasn't working any worse either, which made it a potential step forward.

'Would you like a cake?' she asked with what sounded like less than total indifference to my destiny.

'Sticky cake or crumbly cake?' I riposted, edging the pink circle with yellow.

'No, not cake. *Cake*. *Cake-Akela*. Thought you might be hot.'

I looked up to see that she had brought two bottles of the familiar American beverage in its sensually draped and fluted bottle. This was tantamount to a love-tryst. I followed it up immediately and once more crunched the bridge of my nose into her spectacle frames. If she had not been turning away as I lunged forward with my eyes closed, the hinge where the ear-piece joined the main frame would not have cracked open and spilled the tiny brass pivot. A long way

above me as I crawled around looking for it, she kept saying ‘Really’ without the question mark, which made it sound even worse.

Getting her back to the mood of relative abandon in which she had voluntarily brought me a fizzy drink took weeks. My first English summer was now at its blazing height. For an hour on end the sun would shine. In the parks at lunchtime the English males would bare their potato-white bodies to what they had heard described as ultra-violet rays. Pandora appeared in a new range of dresses which apparently she usually wore only when in Cannes or Nice with Daddy. When we walked in Lincoln’s Inn Fields the allegedly pitiless sunlight did nothing to unfreeze her cryogenic face, but at least it silhouetted her legs through the thin gingham so that I could see the shapely shadows heading upwards. When I tore off my shirt, the remnants of my Australian tan made a remarkable impression on her. No impression. None. In desperation I switched back to the indoor approach and took her to see the Lycergus Cup in the British Museum, hoping that the sunlight slanting through its delicate green and pink calyx would touch some deep, repressed, Dionysian impulse in her Apollonian soul. It didn’t.

Not making it with Pandora, I was fatally distracted from the more portentous truth that I was not making it with my job either. By the time the awful facts sank in, it was too late. There was no hope of assembling my multicoloured symbol-scramble into an intelligible order: not in the time available, and probably not within the foreseeable duration of the known universe. Neither was there time to go back and start again with the ordinary method. Somebody normal might just have managed it, but my morale had collapsed. With the parliamentary question only ten days away, I turned up at work, looked obliquely at the chart, sat down and wrote poems. Every time my employer stuck his head through the door, I brusquely assured him that any moment now, with a stroke of a pencil, the scheme would yield its results. Pandora no longer made her daily appearance. Putting my hand on her bottom in the British Museum had been a terminal mistake. She was looking at the Elgin Marbles and for a blessed second I thought that I was feeling them: cool, firm, curved even in their planes. Then her favourite word, only this time with an exclamation mark, echoed through the museum like a polite gun-shot, or a door that had never really been open clicking finally shut.

There was only one honourable course: to go to the boss and make a clean breast of my failure. So I took the dishonourable course. On the third last day before the deadline I did not go to Bloomsbury. I went to Birmingham instead. On the credit side of the ledger – the sole positive entry – may be put the fact that I didn’t do a midnight flit from my digs. Fronting up to the landlady fair and square, I paid her a month’s notice and no arguments. A committed sherry-

drinker who was invariably blotto by eleven in the morning, she failed to recognise me, which made it easier. Toting the cardboard suitcase, wearing the Singapore suit, sweating into the Chelsea boots which already had holes in them, I headed for Euston and the train that would take me north to sanctuary. The ticket cost me the last cash I had, but I was cleaned out in the metaphorical sense only. My soul was heavy with the fluid of a molten spine. After such knowledge, what forgiveness?

The Birmingham Decision

Head of the Department of Psychiatric Medicine at the University of Birmingham, Professor William Trethowan had a wife, two teenage daughters, a son in short pants and an unexpected bearded visitor holding a cardboard suitcase. ‘What’s wrong?’ was the first thing he asked. I shrugged. ‘What happened to your head just then?’ was the second thing he asked, but in a detached manner, not pressing for an answer. He had an apparent lack of concern which people in trouble who found concern inhibiting would seek out, so I was far from being the first unannounced runaway to darken his door. At Sydney University, where I had first met him, his house had been a hostel-cum-clinic for highly strung would-be poets. An eminent English doctor of medicine who talked like George Sanders, played jazz trumpet, was generally interested in the arts and had a wife both keen and competent to produce the first Beckett and Pinter plays Sydney had yet seen – it was a challenging proposition for Australian students who were accustomed to a solid show of philistinism even from the Arts faculty. My neurotic but divinely gifted friend Spencer had arrived for dinner at the Trethowans one April night and not left until August.

I can give Professor Trethowan his real name and occupation because there was nothing professional about our relationship even at this, the lowest moment of my life, when I must have so closely resembled one of the case studies that could never be discussed outside his office. When I asked for refuge and time to think, he gave me both freely, plus unlimited access to his precious collection of old Vocalion 78 rpm records featuring Benny Carter. If I had asked to have my confession heard he would no doubt have granted that wish also, but whether from a Protestant upbringing or an innate suspicion of my own theatricality I have never been able to believe in that particular method of purging a sin. In my experience the sin is still there afterwards. Whenever the late and unlamented Albert Speer said ‘I should have known’, I always recognised my weaker self

staging a carefully underplayed tantrum in which maudlin exhibitionism palmed itself off as atonement. Of *course* he should have known. That was his crime: deciding not to. Yet although I could honestly plead innocent to any charges of mass murder, the relative puniness of my transgression did not alter its absolute reprehensibility. For a while I contemplated emigrating back to Australia. At that time an Australian visiting Britain had all the advantages of British citizenship, including the opportunity to emigrate home again at a cost of only ten pounds sterling. Many of my compatriots who ran out of funds and hope used this escape route. Even as I thought of it, a change in the law closed the loophole for good, as if to ensure that I should not outwit my destiny. So there was nothing left except suicide.

As the last of summer strove tenaciously to keep the potted plants alive in the pedestrian areas of Birmingham's new Bull Ring shopping complex, I would trail my way from one zebra crossing to the next, tour the art gallery, gaze at the Pre-Raphaelites (not as many as in Manchester, but more than enough) and consider the various possible means of my forthcoming voluntary exit. There is something about the Pre-Raphaelites which makes me contemplate self-inflicted death even when my conscience is clear – something to do with the way they managed to predict every shade of lipstick on a modern cosmetics counter. But this time I was definitely, or at any rate pretty seriously, planning to rid the world of my presence. Adopting a mysterious smile which enjoined complicity, I presented my four-volume Nonesuch Shakespeare to the younger daughter and my cherished association copy of *Practical Criticism* to the elder. I was saying goodbye to the treasures I had laid up on earth. Now nothing remained except the final act. When I sat down to write the letter which would explain this decisive step to my mother, however, I had a lot of trouble with the opening paragraph. It wasn't easy to hit the right tone.

There was another difficulty. Either I loved life, or I couldn't take my misery seriously enough. Perhaps there was, and is, a connection. To be incorrigibly ebullient might entail a congenital inability to assess the shambles around us in its correct importance. Since on this occasion the shambles had been wholly caused by me, I could hardly escape being at least shaken. It never came to choosing between the sleeping pills and the slashed wrists, but there was food for deep and severely troubled thought. My first thought, now that I had resolved not to end it all, was of how to get my books back, but on second thoughts I decided to regard their loss as a down payment on the appropriate propitiatory offering to the gods. This matter decided, it began occurring to me that my grand schemes for working by day and writing by night all had a fundamental flaw – my lack of qualifications for working by day. Unless the task was of the simplest

and most undemanding, my mind wandered. Even at that stage, after so many years of evidence, I had not yet realised that there could be no task simple and undemanding enough, but at least I now resolved not to take on anything which could not be successfully tackled by a ten-year-old child. I had overestimated the age bracket, but the idea was right.

Another right idea was to negotiate my way back to some sort of institute of higher learning. For the lost soul, the university is the modern monastery. On top of that, it had started to dawn on me that my years as a student at Sydney University had been fruitful in everything except actual study. I needed time to read seriously, and working all day was no more favourable to heavy reading than it was to writing. Also I hadn't been able to get out of my mind a story my Cambridge friend had told me about the poet Gray. It was to do with his epoch-making switch from one Cambridge college to another. At Peterhouse they had made an apple-pie bed for him once too often, so he had crossed the road to Pembroke. That journey of about twenty yards was, apart from one brief visit to a country churchyard, the biggest thing that ever happened to him. I needed to be somewhere where a twenty-yard walk was an adventure and you could spend your life polishing a single elegy. Dreaming of Cambridge should normally have been an activity on a par with my previous plans to take a flat in Belgravia. But strangely enough I had a possible way in, or up. My capacity for wasting time at Sydney University had attracted the amused attention of the Reader in English, George Russell. Humanely learned in Old English, Middle English and the European Middle Ages generally, he had a lot of information to impart; all of which I managed to ignore. I still recollect with shame how, in a seminar, he opened Ernst Robert Curtius's *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, raised his hands above it as if he were breaking communion bread, and called it a great book. The shame springs from the fact that twenty years were to go by before I bothered to find out that he was right. But he must have thought I had promise. Every week Françoise and I were invited to his house and there I was gently but firmly introduced to classical music. In return for being allowed to assail George and his wife Isabel with my Thelonious Monk LPs, I was obliged to at least consider the more accessible quartets of Vivaldi. Always I got dead drunk on George's well-chosen wines. My comportment must have been less brutish than I remember, because he told me – or rather told Françoise, so that she could tell me when I sobered up - to get in touch with him if the day ever came when I wanted to settle down and read seriously, an activity for which he thought I had a considerable, if entirely unexplored, talent. At Pembroke College, Cambridge, they might possibly take me, he ventured, on his recommendation. His own career at the college had been so distinguished, he

neglected to add, that even if I turned out to be an utter goof they would still be in profit.

At the time, and for a long time afterwards, I thought nothing of this offer, believing that the cloisters were no framework for a serious artist. But in Birmingham, living on charity, with autumn crowding glumly in and nothing in view except further proof of unfitness for everyday life, the serious artist was ready to think again. So I composed a densely packed air letter to George Russell begging him to get me in out of the cold. It was a carefully phrased effort, a concentrated masterpiece of the epistolary art, and I sincerely trust that he never kept it. He must have acted on it immediately, because within two weeks Pembroke wrote to offer me a place. They had been just as unquestioningly welcoming to Gray, of course, but with better reason, because although he probably cut no great figure as he came sulking across the road with an armful of his bedding, he at least had a few elegies under his belt.

Thus was I offered on a plate what many native-born Britons have to strive for and often in vain – a fact of which not one of them has ever sought to remind me. God knows what George Russell said. He must have told them I had discovered the lost books of Tacitus, squared the circle and was on the verge of developing a unified field theory. But my assumption that to be given a place would ensure an automatic grant proved incorrect. The responsible authorities wrote to say that I could indeed receive a grant, although only after being resident in London for three years. This meant at least two more years of proving myself unemployable. There was nothing for it except to go back south and begin my sentence, Professor Trethowan and his wife, gracious as always, refrained from cheering aloud when I announced my departure. They merely looked very, very happy, as if a weight had been subtracted from their shoulders and added to their refrigerator, which I had been helping their children empty for too long. If it occurred to me that I had been a shameless free-loader, I merely added the realisation to my burden of guilt, as you might toss an apple-core into a skip full of rubbish. ‘When you finally get to Cambridge,’ said my host in farewell, ‘head straight for the Footlights. It’s your sort of thing, believe me.’ I don’t think, at this distance, that he meant my future was on the stage. I think he meant that it wasn’t in the cloisters; but I prefer to regard this remark as one more instance of his acute psychological insight. The Viennese essayist Friedrich Torberg once poured out his troubles to Alfred Adler, who told him that with so much going wrong he had a right to feel lousy. Torberg immediately felt marginally, but crucially, better. Bill Trethowan had the same knack. He knew I had a bad conscience and he didn’t pretend that it could easily be made good. The gnawing conscience, the agenbite of inwit, helps us know ourselves.

Showing an unprecedented measure of dignity, I refrained from putting the agenbite on him for my bus-fare. Instead I took his daughters aside and fixed a price for the books I had already given them. Kisses all round and I was gone, hoping I looked like a devil-may-care vagabond. If only we could really tell what impression we make. Probably there would be no living.

The bus from Birmingham's Digbeth deposited me in Hammersmith's Talgarth. Digbeth, Talgarth: it sounded like one of those Anglo-Saxon chronicles which mercifully exist only in fragments. I was a stranger in a strange land, a wanderer reduced to his essentials, with only a suitcase for shelter and the light of my red shoes to steer by. Yet fortune, ever ready to rub in the message that what she holds back from the deserving might be given to the undeserving if she is in the mood, chose this moment to smile. There was a party on at Melbury Road. In quick succession I was offered a place to sleep and a job which might have been tailor-made.

My benefactors were dancing together. One of them was Babs, an Australian girl actually living in the top flat of Melbury Road at the time, and the other was one of her several English admirers, a dandruffy man in a crumpled three-piece suit who had trouble getting people to remember that he was called Trevor. His main problem was that nobody understood what he did. Computers were his field and he talked a lot about how they were going to revolutionise the world, to the point that ordinary people would have a computer in the house, and so on. All this would have sounded like nonsense even if he and Babs had not been dancing the Shake while he was saying it. But he had a room for rent in his flat, available as of now. When I asked him where the flat was, it was as if I already knew the answer, and was only seeking confirmation. 'Tufnell Park,' he said. 'Up and coming area.' Babs, who was now twisting while Trevor was shaking, was even harder to hear because she was going up and down instead of just vibrating, but I gathered that a job in one of the Lambeth public libraries would be open from the next Monday and with her recommendation I would be a dead certainty. She had worked there herself the previous year and the librarian would do anything she told him to. Trevor, to whom the same clearly applied, nodded vigorously, but that could have been the music. 'All you have to do is put books on shelves,' shouted Babs, 'For you, it's tailor-made.' My recent experience of tailors might have warned me, but there was too much noise and too much beer. There was a plastic barrel of it in the kitchen with a little spigot that you could lie under.

Trevor had one of the new Minis, With my suitcase across the back seat and my soused body hanging in the front passenger's seat belt like the corpse of an executed revolutionary, I went back to Tufnell Park. Nor was it even a different

part of Tufnell Park. Trevor's flat was just around the corner from where I had been before. I felt like a rat going back to Tobruk, to a place I returned to only in order to be bombed out of. Page 45 of the *London A-Z* had become my map of the world. But my allotted room couldn't have been cosier. Beside the bed there was space for the suitcase if it stood upright. There was also space for me if I stood upright, as long as I stood upright on the bed. Time for that tomorrow. The problem now was to lie down without getting hurt. I started by kneeling and then did the difficult next bit by twisting myself sideways so that my mouth hit the pillow at an angle which allowed breathing. You can tell when it works because you wake up again next morning.

On the weekend before my new job started I paid two important calls. The first of them was to say goodbye to Pandora, who told me that she was under the impression I had said goodbye already. It transpired that she and Niceold, to save the Minister from parliamentary embarrassment, had worked together for two days and a sleepless night in order to accomplish what I had failed to do in two months. When I laughed nervously at this information she used her favourite word with no emphasis at all, like a death knell tolled by a cracked bell underwater. I backed out on all fours with a last, long, longing, hopeless look at her intractable ankles. The second call was on Joyce Grenfell and wasn't much more successful. My account of recent events drew the bare minimum of appreciative laughter. Never one to preach, she none the less made it known that in her view those who regarded themselves as gifted had fewer, not more, excuses for behaving badly. Characteristically she had seen through at a glance to the centre of my self-indulgence. Satan's opening remarks are almost always about how talented we are. As I left her, I was already chewing over the implications. They were too many to swallow that day or, as I can now see, that year or that decade, and perhaps the lesson has not fully sunk in even yet.

There were several Lambeth libraries, of which the one with the putative sure-fire job for me was in Brixton. A bus from Holloway Road went straight there, taking only nine years for the journey. By the time I got there I would have needed another shave, so the beard was a plus. Clad in the Singapore suit, I evidently impressed the librarian, whom I will call Mr Volumes because at this distance I can't remember anything about him except the way he spoke. He spoke very loudly. Even for a road-worker wielding an unjacketed pneumatic drill he would have spoken loudly, but in a librarian his voice was truly startling. In all other respects he was a shambling buffer but then this stentorian voice came out. 'YOUNG BARBARA SAID YOU WERE JUST THE MAN. WAS SHE RIGHT? EH? EH? WHAT?' I did a lot of nodding, got the job, was shown out of the office into the reading room, and stepped on the delicately tapering

right hand of Lilith Talbot, who was kneeling down to shelve some books with a lithe grace never employed on shelving books up to that time.

In Sydney, Lilith, the glamour girl of the Downtown Push, had memorably divested me of my virginity, something which had been of no use to anyone. As the personal property of the notorious gambler Emu Coogan she had not been able to go on with our affair - or that was what she had said, perhaps letting me down lightly. But now, in despair at Emu's continued indebtedness to the standover men (apparently he had spent a night chained upside-down to one of the Mosman wharf pilings, listening to the rising tide) she had run away to England. Her intention was to recuperate from years of stress. Instantly I saw my own role in her recuperation.

She didn't see it the same way, so I had to reconcile myself to our renewed friendship remaining chaste for the immediate future. Meanwhile I did everything I could to ensure that my presence bulked large in her life. During the morning shelving session we would shelve as a team. 'CANOODLING AGAIN, YOU TWO?' Mr Volumes insinuated gleefully, whereat the sleeping tramps at the reading table would come up out of their chairs mumbling automatic apologies. This was embarrassing but it helped get the idea into Lilith's head. Also I took her out a lot, principally to the National Film Theatre. She sat through a whole Vincente Minnelli season, each film prefaced by a long free lecture from me, delivered on the bus. Walking back across Waterloo Bridge in the first fogs of winter, I would deliver a further monologue concerning the finer points of what we had just seen. She seemed appropriately grateful for all this instruction, which she was getting for almost nothing. Out of my weekly wage, after stoppages, I paid for all my own cigarettes and cider, on top of most of my rent. All Lilith had to do was buy the NFT tickets and provide the occasional small loan when we dined out together.

Dining out meant shepherd's pie and bitter at the Anchor, Bankside. The Anchor was a little sooty brick Georgian pub on the Embankment. You could sit on the wall outside and look across the river to St Paul's. The tiny house from which Christopher Wren had once done the same thing was a few yards along on the left, on the same site as a previous house where Catherine of Aragon had spent the night on her way upriver to marry Henry VIII. Lilith and I sat there in our duffle-coats looking out over the Whistlerian nocturne, with no sound in the cold air except the muffled drunks in the pub, the dimpled gurgle of the tide turning, the chugalug of the barges, and the slurred drone of my voice telling her about the genius of Arthur Freed and the exact difference between Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly. Framed in the hood of her duffle-coat, her angelic face looked as if it were receiving a revelation. It always did, of course. Long practice at

listening to the gratuitous political lectures of the Downtown Push had taught her to yawn with her mouth closed, with no tell-tale flaring of her poetically sculpted nostrils.

My campaign to get Lilith back into bed would have run into trouble even had she been compliant, because there was nowhere to go. Her bed-sit in Maida Vale was on the fourth floor of a red-brick terrace house inhabited on the first three floors exclusively by landladies. It must have been some sort of landladies' training college: they were all in there, learning how to pick up the sound of illicitly creaking bedsprings and stockinged male feet on the stairs. They had echo-sounders and infra-red detectors. The layout *chez* Trevor was theoretically permissive but in practice hopeless. Trevor's large room contained Trevor's electronic gear, Trevor's weirdo junior-scientist friends, and Trevor. He slept there on a convertible divan: one of those things that doesn't look much like a sofa, but after you fiddle with it for a while it doesn't look much like a bed. To uproot Lilith from polite drinks in the living-room and lead her off into my adjacent roomette could be for one purpose only, especially when you considered that unless we climbed straight away into my bed we would have to squat on it like Indians. After a gallon or so of Woodpecker the obviousness of such a move might be lost on me, but Lilith was not only sober, she was, like all genuinely sexy women, decorous. Anyway, even this slim possibility disappeared when Trevor evicted me. Accurately pronouncing me a defaulter on my payments, he rented the room to a girl folk-singer. I could kip on the floor of his living-room until I had found somewhere else. He was very nice about it, but also very firm. I think he had hopes of getting somewhere with the folk-singer, who sang the standard Weavers repertoire with a Roedean accent. Her name was Ninette and that was the name of her LP: *My Name is Ninette*. She made semi-regular appearances on the Bernard Braden show on the BBC and was thus well enough off to afford a new inner-spring mattress to go on top of the one provided by Trevor for what had previously been my bed. The mattress came wrapped in a 16-ply paper bag. Autumn had by now become winter in all but name, Trevor's fan-heater did more for his bed than for my area of the floor, and the insulating properties of the paper bag were obvious. So I moved into it.

The Man in the Brown Paper Bag

In Trevor's living-room, my suitcase against the wall served as a headboard. Folded clothes made a pillow. Beyond, into the centre of the room, stretched the brown paper bag, forming my bed. Wriggling into it took some time, but once inserted I could settle down in comparative warmth for a long night of turning from one side to the other. It was the hardness of the floor which compelled frequent movement. A lot of this I could do in my sleep, because my body, albeit much abused, was still young and supple, and I have always had Napoleon's gift of falling asleep at will, although unfortunately it has not always been accompanied by his gift of waking up again. The problem resided not in how the hardness of the floor affected my sleep, but in how the noise the paper bag made affected Trevor.

As he lay there in the darkness on his enviably luxurious convertible divan, it was as if, somewhere nearby, a giant packet of crisps was being eaten by one of those cinema patrons who think that they are being unobtrusive if they take only a few crisps at a time and chew them very slowly. When Trevor could bear no more he would switch on his modernistic tubular bedside light, wake me up and tell me to be quiet. Invariably I would discover, upon waking, that my bladder, which was already showing signs of being weakened by the steady inundation of cider, demanded emptying. So I had to get out of the paper bag, go away, pee, come back and get back in, thus creating a double uproar. When Trevor switched his light off again I would lie there trying not to move. Only a dead man or a yoga adept can keep that up for more than twenty minutes. Judging that Trevor was asleep again, I would essay a surreptitious turn to one side, making no more noise than a shy prospective bride unwrapping a lace-trimmed silk nightgown from its tissues. This movement completed, for a long time I would lie there, inhaling and exhaling as shallowly as possible and waiting until the sound of Trevor's steady breathing deepened into the second level of sleep. Only then would I make the necessary full turn on to the other side. A man tearing up a thin

telephone directory while wading through dead leaves would have been hard put to be so silent. But if, after these manoeuvres, I dropped off to sleep, it was inevitable that an involuntary shift of weight would sooner or later produce the full effect of a large, empty cardboard box being attacked by a flock of woodpeckers. I can be sure of this because sometimes the noise woke me as well.

Even after the student-codifying catastrophe and the subsequent agonising reappraisal, my powers of self-deception were still in healthy shape, but it was not easy to convince myself that mere lack of sleep lowered my performance at the library. I preferred to think that it was the frustration caused by not sleeping with Lilith. Having convinced myself of this, I did my best to make her see reason. In no sense of the phrase was she having any. Probably she had already guessed that I was an irredeemable incompetent. Certainly Mr Volumes had rumbled me early on. The evidence was hard to miss. I always arrived late. Oliver Goldsmith, accused of the same thing, pointed out that he always left early. Lacking his self-confidence, I merely looked sheepish. 'YOU MUST KEEP TIME, YOU KNOW,' Mr Volumes told me and the rest of the borough. Lilith had been transferred to another branch so there was nothing exciting to look at except the tramps who came in to get out of the cold. They would sit at the big leather-topped table pretending to read *Country Life* but it was obvious that the blood-bag eyes couldn't focus on anything except a bottle of methylated spirits or a tin of boot polish. You could make bets with yourself about which disease they would succumb to first, cirrhosis or gangrene. Once a month they were rounded up and hospitalised so that their socks could be removed surgically. Skin ingrained with dirt has the anomalous effect, in the right light, of looking expensively tanned, as if by the Riviera sun: an observation which, once I had made it, depressed me deeply. But the real killer was boredom. Stamping the cards of borrowers, I ran out of answers for the little old ladies who wanted to know if they had already read the book they were thinking about taking out. The smart ones used a personalised coding system. One of them would put a small inked cross on page 81 of every book before bringing it back, so that later on in the library she could turn to that page and, if she saw her mark, be reminded not to take the book out again. Another would draw a circle in red pencil around the last word on page 64. There were hundreds of them at it all the time. If you picked up a book by Dorothy L. Sayers or Margery Allingham and flicked through it, you would see a kaleidoscope of dots, crosses, blobs, circles, swastikas, etc. It was interesting but not interesting enough. When I met Lilith in the evening, I complained about having trouble concentrating. She advanced the theory that for someone whose destiny was to read and write books there could

be no profit in being obliged all day to do nothing except pick them up and put them down. I took some comfort from this advice, although the historic evidence should have suggested that it was fallacious. Jorge Luis Borges and Archibald MacLeish had each pursued a successful literary career while working as a librarian. Philip Larkin was currently doing the same, although I didn't know that. Admittedly Proust had been a disaster as a librarian but that was mainly because, instead of turning up late, he never turned up at all. When Mr Volumes began hinting, in his subtle way, that I might think of pursuing a similar course, I did my long perfected number of resigning one step ahead of the boot.

Jobless in winter in a paper bag. My discomfiture had a Miltonic ring to it. But now that I was merely working through a sentence towards the day of release, defeat was easier to shrug off, or even to cherish as a token of my rebellious nature. There is also the possibility that I was clinically certifiable at the time. Sex starvation was in its downhill phase and something had gone seriously wrong with my teeth. The half-dozen of them that I had already lost didn't hurt, but those remaining in my head rarely did less than give a sharp twinge when I sucked anything – air, for example. Under Lilith's influence I was now attempting to vary my egg, bacon and sausage diet with the occasional helping of steamed greens, but the treatment was a holding operation at best. The connection between the teeth and the brain is intimate and potentially devastating: that much I knew. But you wouldn't catch me going to a dentist. I was too smart for that.

Breathing carefully through the nose – never an easy trick for a chronic sinus sufferer – I auditioned for a new job at a light metal-work factory off the Holloway Road. The supervisor wore a grey lab coat, had a short back and sides haircut polished with a buffing wheel, and favoured blunt speech. 'I'll speak bluntly,' he rapped. 'Don't like your general appearance. Don't like the beard. Don't like the fingernails. Should have worn a suit, not that jacket. Shouldn't wear a jacket like that unless you're in the army. If you have to wear a jacket like that, should wear it tomorrow, not to your interview. Interview, you should be standing up straight, not slouching like that. Shouldn't be smoking. I'm not smoking. Why are you? Hope we won't be seeing those shoes again . . .' The roar, clank, thump and *chong chong* of the stamping machines out on the factory floor drowned some of this out but not enough. I listened stunned, which was obviously the desired reaction, because I was taken on, as a general workman, at nine pounds a week before stoppages. Young British-born readers with qualifications but no job will doubtless wince to read of an immigrant with a job but no qualifications. All I can say is that things were different then. The economy was already collapsing but everybody thought the noise was bustle.

With proof of my employed status I found new digs around the corner from Trevor's, in Tufnell Park Road proper. Since it was by now clear that Tufnell Park was my Berlin and my Paris, it was only fitting that I should become resident in its Kurfürstendamm or Champs-Élysées. From the awe-inspiring single-storey edifice of Tufnell Park tube station, Tufnell Park Road swept down majestically for half a mile until it met Holloway Road in a *carrefour* blazing with the glamorous white light of the launderette. At No. 114 I was exactly half-way down the road, and thus equidistant from the only two points of interest. My room was in the basement, with a window opening not so much on the back garden as under it, so that I looked out into a cross section of the earth. But the rent was a more than reasonable thirty shillings a week. In fact it was a snip. Mrs Bennett had not kept up with the times. She was eighty plus and walked with a stoop, which meant, since she was not very tall in the first place, that I often didn't see her before falling over her.

Not seeing her was made easier by the darkness. Her connections with the outside world had been broken on the day when her fiancé sailed away to the Middle East on the same ship as Rupert Brooke. Out there he had suffered the same fate, but without writing any poems. Understandably the modern world had ceased to interest her from that moment, and she had declined to keep up with its inventions, including any light-bulb more powerful than forty watts. The chintz furniture was well dusted but so faded that it was virtually monochrome. No doubt it was all still a riot of colour to her eyes. In the corridors and on the staircase it would have been easier to find one's way by the weak light of the frosted bulbs if only the wallpaper had been a brighter colour. But it was all brown: brown on brown with dark brown wooden trimmings. Sometimes through the layers of varnish you could see the ghost of a William Morris print, like jungle under a flooded river full of mud. Once, while she was waiting, it must have been a bright little house he would have been glad to come home to. Then she went on waiting without an object and it all turned dark. I could sympathise, but things got very tricky on the stairs, which I had to spend a certain amount of time groping up and down because the toilet was on the floor above. If you ran into her in the dark, no matter how slowly you were going, it usually meant a tumble. For her a fall would probably have entailed multiple fractures, but she was so low down that she acted as a fulcrum. It was always the rest of us – everyone in the house at some time or other – who took the dive. This wasn't so bad if you were going upstairs at the time, but if you were heading in the opposite direction it could involve a sudden plunge into the brown void, with a good chance of cracking your head against a skirting-board the colour and consistency of petrified gravy.

With its narrow bed, single-bar radiator and burnt umber decor, my little room was an unlikely setting for happiness, yet Lilith took one look at me in my new context and immediately granted the favours so long withheld. Perhaps she had been touched by the spirit of Christmas. The snow began early that year and a good deal of it had already occupied the top half of the vista through my window, above the half filled with dark earth. She had come a long way by bus to cook me my weekly lifesaving meal of liver and greens. I was knackered from a hard day in the factory. Also, chary of the effect that the cold air had on my bared teeth, I wasn't doing much talking. This was probably the key factor. Eloquence might get you started with a woman but it is often taciturnity which seals the bargain. Shakespeare has a line about it – in *Henry IV, Part 1*, I think. Those who can rhyme their way into a lady's favour do always reason themselves out again. Not being able to say anything, I couldn't say the wrong thing, which left Lilith, undistracted by importunities, free to decide that in such a depth of winter there was no further point in leaving her beautiful body lonely. There is also a slim chance that I was an irresistible object of pathos, but experience suggests that even the warmest and most generous woman can be moved to tears of compassion without feeling impelled to take off her clothes.

The only real explanation, however, is that I got lucky, not only then but for the rest of my life. Right through that epic of a winter she came to me several times a week. The first love affair I had had which lasted long enough for me to get used to it, it did wonders for my confidence. It probably did wonders for my arrogance, too: her queenly bearing could not, as I recall, prevent my taking her for granted unless she issued the occasional verbal reproof. Innate tolerance – plus, no doubt, vivid memories of Emu Coogan's impecuniosity – made her slow to remonstrate, so I got away with what seemed a lot even at the time, and strikes me in retrospect as something close to white slavery. When I packed her off home on the last bus it was only common sense to give her the poems I was sending out, each batch of them accompanied by a folded self-addressed envelope and placed inside another envelope addressed to an editor. To expect her not only to post the letters but to buy the stamps for each envelope was possibly a bit much. She did it without complaining. Hearing no protest, I took everything and gave nothing.

Some stupidities only time can cure. What could be gained by experience I gained then; or the essentials of it anyway, and the deep self-doubt that inhibits and cripples was obviated at an early stage. Which is not to say that I was permanently immunised against all anxiety. In future liaisons, that particularly humiliating version of impotence known as first night failure was always to be a hazard. But when it struck, it did so in perspective, as an embarrassment rather

than an affliction. All it means, if you wilt that way with a lady, is that you haven't yet really met her. You're not trying to make love to a woman, you're trying not to miss an opportunity. I have heard men say that such a thing has never happened to them. The claim, I think, speaks as much against their imaginations as for their virility, but no doubt they are telling the truth. The truth might even redound to their credit: never to be unmanned could be a sign of manhood. Those of us who can't plausibly make the same boast have at least some comfort. We find out the hard way, if that's the appropriate phrase, whether the lady has a forgiving soul. Since no other kind of woman is worth getting mixed up with, the man who crumples at the first sign of impatience should be glad to consider himself forewarned, if not forearmed.

In this case the question became academic after the first evening, and for a long winter that should have been a disaster I put on satisfaction like a weightlifter putting on muscle. Without Lilith I might have been not just unhappy, but dead. The winter deepened into the worst since 1947, then the worst since the year after the Great Fire, then the worst since the last Ice Age. The cleared snow formed long ridges at the sides of the roads. These ice ridges turned dark with dirt: burial mounds for long ships, they were pitted like breeze blocks. With thousands of tons of water lying around in frozen form, the anomalous consequence was a water shortage. So many pipes burst that the system just packed up. You had to draw your household water from a stand-pipe in the street. The residents of 114 Tufnell Park Road took turns to do this on behalf of Mrs Bennett, whose only recorded journey outside the front gate was instantly defeated by the frozen snow-ridge at the road's edge. It was taller than she was. After gazing for a while into that threatening escarpment of refrigerated lucent suet, she turned back bewildered.

Bewildered and coughing. Many old people died younger than they should have, that winter. If they were poor they died of hypothermia. If they were well enough off to keep their radiators going full-time, it was the acid fogs that got them. The fogs, the last great fogs that London was ever to see, were Dickensian epics through which I groped home from work each evening, lucky to be young and mobile. The bus that brought Lilith to me would arrive an hour late, its headlights diffused by the fog into opalescent radiance. Mrs Bennett was always glad to see Lilith and usually arranged to be on the stairs so that we could both fall over her. But soon her cough confined her to her room. For a while I was mildly afraid that she had withdrawn because of the shock induced by my poems, which she had asked to see – or had at any rate agreed to be shown – yet had obviously found to be not quite the sort of thing she had grown used to at the time when dear Rupert was into cleanness leaping. Eventually her cough became

audible even through the ceiling and thus disabused me of my typically solipsistic notion. You had to be above a certain age to cough like that but anyone who qualified could be sure that there would be nothing temporary about the affliction. Once it started there was only one way of stopping it. Each droplet of fog had a molecule of sulphuric acid attached. The fog looked romantic if your beautiful girl-friend had stepped off a bus and was materialising out of it towards you with the dark outline of her duffle-coat taking shape against the nacreous cloud. To the old people it was breath-taking in a different way. Mrs Bennett was only one of the many who tried to hide from it in the bedroom. But the mist with the sharp taste got in through the old warped door jambs and the place where the window sash would no longer sit square.

Even had she been in sight she would probably still have been out of mind. Her star lodger was too busy being the horny-handed proletarian and tireless young lover. Actually the demands of the first component of this dual role often threatened to inhibit my achievements in the second. After a night spent shivering – if Lilith had been there, my room seemed colder than ever after she was gone – I arrived already tired at the machine shop, where the warm air that would otherwise have been welcome was offset by the continual uproar. The machines were devoted to taking 6' × 4' sheets of metal and punching or drilling various patterns of holes in them. Punches went CHUNK CHUNK and drills went YERK YERK. An acre of machines doing both these things produced a clamour which one's ringing ears might have analysed as CHUNK YERK CHUNK YERK if one's body had not been vibrating. Physically walking on air from the interminably reiterated percussion, I heard the sound as CHU-CHU-CHUNK (CHERK YUNK!) YER-YER-YERK (UNK UNK!) ERK ERK, or sounds to that effect. The machine operators, who had been doing the same sort of work since the Second World War or even earlier, watched the flow of cutting oil and the glittering spillage of metal waste with understandable indifference. Once upon a time the perforated plates had been going into Lancaster bombers and there was point to the work. A team from *Picture Post* had come to take photographs of them cheerfully doing their bit. Now the perforated plates were going into the backs of slot machines that sold Kit-Kats and packets of Smiths Crisps. Alienation, as defined by the young Marx but better described by the older William Morris, was a palpable presence. Where Marx and Morris had both been wrong, however, was in the assumption that men alienated from their labour must necessarily be denatured. The machine-operators all drove second-hand but immaculately kept Rovers or Riley Pathfinders and had enough spare cigarettes to 'lend' me about a packet a day between them. I was the alienated one and opium was my religion.

Machine operators had a name called Fred had a most unperforated metal plate of

My job was to help a man called Fred load as-yet-unperforated metal plates of specified gauge on to a trolley, wheel them to the machines, unload them in sequence, load the finished plates and wheel them back to the racks in which they were stored vertically until shipment. At the beginning and end of this chain of events there was a mildly thrilling moment when Fred picked up and put down the heavier plates by means of a Ferris hoist which ran on a rail in the roof. It was controlled electrically from a hand-set. Fred pressed the buttons on the hand-set and I steadied the plates so that they didn't swing around and swipe anybody. You couldn't call Fred's job skilled labour, so as his assistant I scarcely rated as a dogsbody. This situation was made no easier by Fred's personality. A dedicated racist, he lurked outside the machine-shop door at lunchtime so that he could shout 'ANY COCONUTS?' to the West Indian girls in transit between the steam laundry and the greasy spoon. Even worse, from my angle, he liked to shout racist jokes to me while we were working. He had a theory that all Australians were descended from Aborigines, and that any Australian immigrant into Britain was therefore part of the universal black conspiracy to deprive the British working class of employment. Compounded by the Wagnerian banging and jangling, his sentiments had the same effect on me as the iron band tightening around Cavaradossi's head. Fred's first word was always 'EAR!', by which he meant 'Here!' He kept yelling that until I paid attention. 'EAR! (CHU-CHU-CHUNK) THIS JEW (CHERK YUNK!) ANNA NIG-NOG (YUNK CHERK!) SO EASE ALL BLACK FROM A BOO POLISH (YER-YER-YERK) . . .' Fred didn't put me off the cockney accent, which had already influenced my own, no doubt with ludicrous results. But he would have gone a fair way towards putting me off the proletariat if I had really believed that it existed. In fact my belief in such things was only theoretical, and even the theory was a fag-end. It had always been transparently obvious to me that there could be no such thing as the masses. There were only people. Even Fred was unique. That was the awful thing about him.

Thus the little factory chuntered on, with Fred and me pushing and pulling our trolley endlessly around its inner perimeter. Meanwhile the rest of the country was gradually coming to a standstill. For some reason which nobody has ever been able to figure out, the British consider themselves to be living in a tropical climate into which any intrusion of snow, no matter how brief, is always regarded as Freak Weather Conditions. The railways, for example, are invariably brought to a halt by any snowfall heavy enough to make the rails show white instead of silver. The drivers in their Hawaiian shirts and dark glasses climb down from their cabins and quit. The trains are not allowed to move again until the commuters have had a day's rest and the tabloid newspapers – even more grotesque than the Australian equivalents – have had a chance to run headlines

cremious than the Australian equivalents – have had a chance to run headlines about the Freak Weather Conditions. (BRR! SAYS BR: IT’S SNOW-GO!) It will be understood, then, that in the winter under discussion the trains vanished for weeks on end. So did most of the livestock. The sheep were so far down that the army was using echo-sounders to find them. Then somebody had to look for the army. It would have been a good story if it had ended at the proper time. But it all went on and on. History, however, has to be truly disastrous before it impinges on your personal odyssey. For me, with my new assurance, the snow was just a backdrop. Secure within, I was looking outwards for the first time.

The owner of the business arrived in a Bentley to tour the shop-floor, his blazered school-age son in attendance. They paraded like royalty, with their hands behind their backs. Only the blunt-spoken supervisor got his hand shaken. It was because his hand was clean. In Australia the air would have been thick with first names. I really was in another country, an observer as flabbergasted by exotic ritual as those first Portuguese in China whose astonished narrative stands out even in Hakluyt’s vast codex of the strange. Fascinated, I neglected to steady a batch of steel plates which Fred had just picked up with the hoist. The swinging load knocked him backwards off his feet and on to the trolley, where he lay pondering the implications while the plates shook themselves out of the grip of the hoist, crashed to the concrete on their edges a few inches from his head, and, considerately tilting away from him – instead of, as they might equally well have done, towards – accumulated thunderously on the floor like playing cards in Valhalla. At this point, but for an entirely unconnected reason, the supervisor cut the power in the machines. The owner wished to address his work-force. The clangour stopped with a reverse shock, an inburst of sound, a downroar. Fred, never quick at adjusting to circumstances, was still yelling. ‘. . . UCKING NIG-NOG GIT, YOU’RE AFTER MY JOB!’ The owner and his son left hurriedly, even as the blunt-spoken supervisor headed towards me, his eyes narrowed with purpose.

Solvitur acris James

Out in the countryside, the corpses of sheep and the hulks of abandoned trains emerged from the melting snow. Spring came to Tufnell Park. It was too late for Mrs Bennett, whose cough had already stopped by itself. Not going to her funeral was a sin of omission easily committed – all I had to do was not ask the precise time it would take place. Also I was busy looking for work. But my conscience was uneasy at the time, and although it never became exactly inflamed on the subject I can still say that my dereliction lived with me as a matter for regret. Perhaps I had been put off death at an early age. Certainly I had a revolutionary socialist's contempt for ceremony, which I construed as empty posturing, and never more so than when the chief participant was, as in this case, dormant. Nowadays I set much less store by my independence of mind, and indeed doubt whether it really exists. Yeats's question about custom and ceremony has at last sunk home. In those days I was either a different man or – something even harder to understand and absolve – a glib version of the same one. The old lady had not only been kind and gracious, she had taken positive delight in the idea that the feckless young writer under her roof had been so thoroughly compromising such a well brought-up girl. One of those rare people who, having missed out on a blessing, are glad instead of bitter to see it conferred on others, Mrs Bennett in death deserved something better from me than the cold shoulder. But she was dealing with someone impatient of mere formalities.

So was Lilith, who wanted to be married. If she had wanted to marry me I would probably have panicked, because a sound instinct told me that I was far from ready. But she wanted to marry Emu, which gave me an opportunity to be peeved. She made the announcement after we had seen *Les Enfants du paradis*. 'If all the people who live together were in love,' said Baptiste, 'the Earth would shine like the Sun.' Lilith had been my Garance. 'When I want to say yes, I can't

say no.' How lucky I had been to meet my woman of the world and find it all so easy. Lilith, no less lovely than Arletty, sat beside me, looking as happy in the reflected light as a woman could who had just paid two bus-fares, bought two cinema tickets, and was about to pay for two bus-fares more. All the way home on the slow bus past the now shrinking roadside ranges of dribbling black mousse I explained the significance of what we had just seen, how it was all an idyll. In my little room she took me to her with special tenderness, which should have told me that this had been an idyll too, and must now end. Typically, though, I had to be told what I might have guessed.

Hypocritical jealousy is more enjoyable than the genuine article but I still managed to work myself up into a state. Lilith, however, remained calm. Her mind was already on its way home, and soon her body followed it. The time had come for her to be married, so she went where it would happen. It was as if her mission in my life had been completed. She had got me through the winter without my succumbing to vitamin deficiency: my gums were purple only when I smiled, and I couldn't do much of that even in spring, lest the air get at my teeth. She had also got me through that dangerous second stage of virginity, the stage in which we are only technically no longer chaste, and callow anxiety is compounded by a little learning. I still had a lot more to find out about women, but I was on the right track. It was only much later that I could be sure of this, however, because there is a wrong track which runs beside the right track for a long way.

Released from stability, which youth finds hard to bear even when beneficial, I was suddenly mobile, like the unfrozen landscape. The whole country woke up to an ecstasy of self-consciousness. There were political scandals, quasi-satirical television programmes, hit singles to make the dead dance, and the rise of the miniskirt to ever less prudent lengths of shortness. Cabinet Ministers were disgraced for love, thugs robbed a mail-train and were hailed as heroes, unmasked traitors were admired for their complex personalities, the harlot's cry from mews to mews had the exultant confidence of Callas singing '*Casta diva*', and the Beatles mouthed and mimed to fame in screaming theatres whose seats had to be heat-dried afterwards because they were soaked with the love-juices of pubescent girls. Urgent messages of change came from everywhere, the most insistent of all from my teeth. With my bad conscience blacked out by stabbing pains from molars and incisors, I went on National Assistance to tide me over. When the assessor came to look at me in my room I sat opposite him in the brown darkness with my mouth closed, making signs of need with eloquent hands. Touched, or afraid of infection, he signed the papers and skedaddled.

At a Melbury Road party I met an Australian dentist who impressed me by

being able to tell I had toothache by the way I was dancing. He was dancing himself at the time, opposite a wonderfully proportioned girl from Curl Curl. She had a freckled face and a jersey miniskirt whipping softly around her hand-span waist to the sensual pulse of John Lennon's rhythm guitar. She was a red rag to a bull. 'Flash me the fangs for a sec,' said the dentist, matching her step for step as she trod successively on imaginary cigarette butts. 'Shit a brick, you'd better get down to see me pronto.' Next morning – still drunk from the night before or I never would have made it – I arrived at his surgery in Shoreditch to be greeted by the girl from Curl Curl, who turned out to be not only the receptionist but the nurse. She performed this double function in a white uniform of mini length, with white patterned tights below. Her employer, whose name was Barry, conformed in every respect to the paradigm Australian dentist I had been warned against, down to and including the 3.8 Jaguar parked outside. For the English chattering classes, stories about Australians had begun to serve as a mild form of licensed anti-Semitism, a function they retain. One of the stories then current was about the typical Australian dentist who spent a year in London pulling every tooth in sight, thereby defrauding the National Health and making possible the purchase of a 3.8 Jaguar, in which he and his beautiful nurse then decamped to the south of France and retired. Barry had the car and the beautiful nurse but in other ways he didn't fit the stereotype at all. For one thing, he showed no urge to extract any teeth that were not already an obvious lost cause. Instead he fought to save them, despite my generous offer to surrender them without a struggle. 'Nar,' said Barry, 'you don't want to lose that eye tooth. I'll just kill the nerve and go down the hole into the root. Give her a good cleaning out. Nothing a cavity likes more than a good probe, right, Noelene?' If you wonder how I can recall the way Barry talked, it's because trauma etches the memory. Freud's theory of repression is doubtless right – how could we tell if it was wrong? – but in my case it ceases to apply when the subject turns to teeth. Back almost to the beginning of my life, I can remember everything that happened at the dentist's. Mostly what happened was my imagination running out of control, but that made the experience no less frightening. While writing the first volume of this work I was not yet ready to face the full degrading facts of my dental history. I think that by now I can handle it, but if you get the impression in the next few paragraphs that their author is looking into the pit of his own nature, you will probably be right.

It started in Kogarah when I was about seven years old. That dentist, whose own teeth weren't much of an advertisement, should never have told me that the extraction of my abscessed molar wouldn't hurt. It did, distinctly. I felt betrayed, and received no comfort from the dentist, who had received a squirt of pus in the

eye. Outrage at his pertidy motivated me to a brilliant career of truancy which ensured that I did not visit any dentist again until all my remaining first teeth were extracted in one go, under gas. When I woke up I was given limitless lemonade and ice-cream as a reward for bravery. In fact my bravery, after a week's delaying tactics including a furniture-fracturing tantrum, had consisted of agreeing to accompany my mother to the surgery on a bus instead of in the police car which she had indicated would otherwise have to be called in. But the Shelley's lemonade was balm to the plundered gums and the Street's ice-cream was a portent of all the sweet things I would now be able to eat when my mother wasn't watching. The Jaffas, Fantails, and Minties which had extracted so many of my first teeth with such precision now riddled my second teeth with cavities. Since I would rather have suffered tooth-ache than go for a check-up, the sweet things got an uninterrupted opportunity to make a cave-system out of the choppers of whose straightness my mother was so proud. She couldn't understand how it was happening. (She probably couldn't understand how so much small change dematerialised from her purse, either.) When a tooth was giving me hell I would try to plug it temporarily by taking a good deep bite into a chocolate bar. Finally there was too much pain to live with and I was introduced, after only token escape attempts, into the surgery of a special dentist for young people, Mr Jolly. He had his chair rigged up as a cowboy saddle with stirrups and you were encouraged to wear toy guns. These latter were supplied by the receptionist if you didn't own any.

With a Ned Kelly cap-pistol bolstered low on each hip I felt a bit self-conscious sitting there, not just because I was sixteen years old but because of a dim awareness that my mouth might present an offensive sight to a man whose whole ambience was so radiantly clean. Upon looking into my open maw Mr Jolly reacted only by catching his breath and turning pale. In the first session that was all he did – look around, poke about a bit, and get his nurse to mark up the cavities on a mouth-map – but after it was over I rewarded myself, at the nearest newsagent's, with a Hoadley's Violet Crumble Bar. At the next session a week later he did a bit of drilling, but not much. Such was his method: to proceed slowly and build confidence. He was also very generous with the local anaesthetic. This accorded well with one half of my ambivalent feelings about the hypodermic syringe: on the one hand I demanded to be as desensitised as possible, on the other I hated needles. He overcame my negative tropism by giving a small preliminary injection to dull the impact of the second, larger one. Further injections followed if there was any suspicion of a reawakening tingle from my fat lip. The cumulative effect rendered me numb to the waist. He could have sawn my head off and I wouldn't have felt a thing.

Since my parents' indignation was still alive, and even more terrified of the

Since my accursed imagination was still alive, and even more terrified of the drill now that I had only its sound from which to deduce what it was doing, he could never step on the accelerator. Any time the noise of the rotating bit rose above a low buzz, I would be arching up out of the chair like a strychnine victim while making, from the back of my throat, the strangled gargles of a turkey choking. These noises had a galvanising effect in the reception area outside, where the waiting children and their anxious mothers erroneously inferred that the current patient had got the drill tangled in his vocal cords.

At that rate there was no hope of filling even one cavity per session. On average it took four trips to plug each hole, with the gap stopped by a temporary filling until the big day came when the cavity could receive its permanent filling of amalgam. Before the amalgam went in, the cavity had first to be lined. The lining included some alcohol-based component which, if it fell on your tongue, burned like Mexican food, but with the mouth jacked open there was nothing to be done except hope the inserted rubber pipe would suck it away along with the spit. Then the amalgam was smeared in, a few flakes at a time, on metal spatulas, like paint from the palette of a slap-happy but somnambulistic Post-Impressionist gradually going mad with the *impasto*. At the subsequent session the hardened filling was polished and the next cavity made its first, tentative encounter with the shy tip of the lethargically turning drill. Since I had something like thirty-four cavities to fill – I can remember for certain that there were more holes than I had teeth – it will be appreciated that the course of treatment stretched over what is called, in Australia, a considerable period of time. Finally all my teeth had been shot full of lead. I had a mouth like two sets of knuckle-dusters. The *pièce de résistance* was fashioned from a nobler metal. It was a heart-shaped gold filling in one of my front teeth. Mr Jolly worked on that one like Benvenuto Cellini on the statue of Perseus. By the time it was in position I had finished high school and was ready to begin university. Mr Jolly told me that of all my unsatisfactory aspects as a patient, the most depressing was the way he couldn't start work on my mouth each week without first cleaning out the debris of chocolate, toffee, liquorice and mashed peanuts from around the very fillings he had spent a good part of his career painstakingly inserting. I got the impression that he wouldn't have minded seeing me take a bit of the pain myself, yet he never succumbed to the temptation. He must have been a saint.

Barry wasn't that but perhaps his straightforwardness was a virtue. Where Mr Jolly would do everything to put fear at rest, Barry would tell you the worst and challenge you to run. 'This next bit's going to hurt like buggery.' He was right every time. Within minutes of each session starting I was making inner vows not to come back next week, but he had a way around that. 'I'm going to leave that

to come back next week, but he had a way around that. 'I'm going to leave that molar wide open so the muck inside can dry out, but if you don't come back soon the bludger'll go septic and you'll die in agony.' He did about a year's work in three weeks. Most of my back teeth were beyond hope but the front ones looked like the full allocation unless I laughed, which I didn't feel like doing for some time. The last and hardest job was to clean up my gums. After every few scrapes I flew around the surgery like an open-mouth balloon. The girl from Curl Curl pinned me with a body-slam and the job was done. 'You'd feel a lot less scared,' said Barry, saying goodbye for ever, 'if you understood your real problem.' Wet-eyed with relief, gratitude and remembered pain, I asked him what that was. 'You're a coward.'

Fairy Mild Green Liquid Godmother

While having my mouth fixed I had changed residence. Farewell to Tufnell Park. Even through the dull ache in my mouth I could taste the thrill of a new era. Youth was at the helm. London had begun to swing. Films were being made in which it was assumed, almost always erroneously, that the story would be more interesting if the people concerned were to run instead of walk. Nothing could be more up to date than to be a young man with a beard and strange shoes, carrying a suitcase, free-wheeling, on the move. I moved all the way up the road and around the corner, into a loft made available by a nice young married lady who charged a reasonable rent. My pyramid-shaped hutch, which could be entered only via a ladder starting in a top-floor room full of her children, was half the size of the room I had left behind and had even fewer built-in facilities, but by moving two blocks I had entered Kentish Town, so for all practical purposes I was in Hampstead. As part of the same upwardly mobile thrust, I had landed another white-collar job, and this time I wasn't coding reports or filling up charts. I was coding reports *and* filling up charts.

Market Assessment Enterprises had third-floor offices just off High Holborn on the Gamage side of Grays Inn Road. Gamage is gone now and I suppose Market Assessment Enterprises, or MAE, has long been wound up, because it was a happy-go-lucky outfit that was far too much fun to work for. Except for the recently ex-Oxbridge Jeremys and Nigels who owned the company, the work-force consisted exclusively of young fringe-dwellers who worked for no other reason than to finance their intense night life. There were some outstandingly pretty girls, fashionably dressed in high white plastic boots yet always cadging each other's cigarettes. There were young men in sharply cut suits with flared trousers – the first hint of the Carnaby Street look – but they couldn't afford to eat lunch.

The low-paying jobs were in the office, coding the reports. The even-lower-paying jobs were out in the street, where you stood with your report sheet and

asked randomly selected people from the passing crowd whether they preferred the cap of the plastic bottle of green liquid detergent fully detachable from the plastic bottle or else attached to the plastic bottle by means of a short plastic attachment. In reality the selection of respondents wasn't random at all, because the only people who would consent to answer such questions were mental defectives or people with such inadequate personalities that any form of conversation came as a blessing. For the first day I tried to be honest but it was hopeless. The only man who gave a coherent set of answers to all twenty-five questions turned out to come from Sweden. Rather than discard the one answer-sheet that made sense, I wrote down that he came from Swindon. It then occurred to me, as it had independently occurred to all my colleagues, that if you could make up the man's address you could also make up the man's answers and even the man himself. The whole thing could be done in the pub.

Employing the same skills which had scored me a perfect mark for my Clinical Case Study in the Sydney University Psychology exams, I produced, at the end of my first week, a set of reports which ensured my promotion to the office staff proper. This meant that I could sit in the office and take the fantasy a step further by coding the incoming reports so that they would be ready for transfer to punched cards. Everyone sat at small desks, as if at school, but talked at the top of his or her voice, as if the school were in the grip of some permanent rag day. The light of spring poured through the windows and illuminated Moira, the girl in the next desk to my right. Moira's physical presence disturbed me in a way that I knew I remembered, but couldn't remember exactly how. Then I suddenly realised that she reminded me of Sonia Humphries, the girl who had sat beside me in the double front-row desk of Class 1B at Kogarah Infants' School in 1946. The resemblance was furthered by Moira's notable deficiency of height. Measured vertically, she lacked inches. Measured around the chest, however, she did not. Moira was the first girl I ever found both attractive and out of proportion. Up to then I had always been drawn towards a classical balance of forces, but Moira made her combination of diminutiveness and excess seem like a romantic challenge. Besides, she was keen – always a potent influence on judgment. Half-way between a garden gnome and one of those country and western singers off whose straining denim shirt-fronts the rhinestones jump like popcorn, she thought I was wonderful and I found it hard not to agree.

Down in the pub – where she regularly paid for her round of drinks after helping me pay for mine – she would sit on the edge of her seat with the toes of her sling-backed shoes just reaching the floor and tell me horror stories about her lover, a company director called Eric. Eric's company, it transpired, dealt principally in goods which had fallen off the back of a van. One of the tell-tale

signs of the now efflorescent Sixties was how the much-touted outbreak of classlessness was matched by an obsession with status, so that any fly-by-night operator would call himself a company director merely on the strength of having had his mohair suits made to measure. Apparently Eric had rescued Moira from her old job as a knife-thrower's assistant in Brighton, but she soon found Eric's idea of looking after her almost as bad as watching the knife-thrower take a stiff drink to steady his hands between the matinee and the main performance. So Moira had run out on Eric and was now covertly occupying an under-eaves bed-sit in Lamb's Conduit Street. While she was telling me this, the evening sunlight flooding through the clear upper panes of the pub windows lit up her beehive of red hair, her freckled face and her chaste white blouse, which didn't seem to drape vertically anywhere except at the back. Just as it was occurring to me that Lamb's Conduit Street wasn't very far away, Moira insisted that I accompany her there immediately. I complied, doing my best to stroll in a casual manner while she trotted beside me. It further occurred to me that all this was too simple. I was right about that, but first there was a short interlude while I enjoyed the uncomplicated delight of a perfectly straightforward woman. In her little room, decorated only by a chianti-flask lamp stand and a suitcase rather like mine, Moira asked for nothing except to give love while having money borrowed from her. She was infinitely exploitable. It should have dawned on me sooner that my predecessors in her favours would be unlikely to let such a bonanza go by default.

What I couldn't hope to guess in advance, however, was the extent and fervour of Moira's gratitude. The mere fact that I did not beat her up was enough to establish me in her mind as a gift from heaven. With desperate urgency she granted me her body as a reward. Amazed to discover that there was someone in whose universe I rated as a kind man, I did my best, through evening after evening, to keep up with her frantic insatiability. My landlady grew ever more waspish as I telephoned once again to say I would be home very late. Sometimes I arrived home so weary, and so fuddled from the cider with which Moira had kept me primed, that I had trouble climbing the ladder from the children's room up to the loft, and would sit there among the teddy bears until I got my breath back or dawn broke, whichever was the sooner.

The only, but real, trouble with Moira was that there was nothing else she wanted to do. I took her to the NFT to see Chris Marker's *Letter from Siberia*, a documentary film whose exuberantly serious tone of voice still influences everything I do twenty years later. At the time I was knocked sideways. The details of the majestic final sequence are fresh in my mind today. 'There isn't any God, or curses,' said the narrator as the rocket took off, 'only forces – to be

overcome.' I didn't agree even then, but I sat transfixed by the rhythm of that voice – the strong view lightly stated. It wasn't words plus pictures. It was words times pictures. At some length I told Moira just how badly the world needed to forget John Grierson and his whole boring tradition. Moira, however, just wanted to get me alone so that she could go on being grateful in the only way she knew. Hazlitt was only half right when he warned his fellow writers that they will dream in vain of the alphabetic woman who will love them for themselves. There is such a woman. What he should have said is that if we find her she will bore us. Moira would have been the ideal concubine if an ideal concubine had been all I wanted. To find out that I wanted something more, or at any rate something else, was disturbing. A fantasy had been made actual and had scared me in the process.

Things got scarier still when I tried taking a night off. The next day at the office Moira was red-eyed from lack of sleep. Just while I was pondering how to disentangle myself from her pneumatic embrace without destroying her newly established faith in mankind, my problem was solved for me. A man walked into the office, stood over her desk, and nodded towards the door. He didn't look quite violent enough to be Company Director Eric but he didn't look like Canon Collins either. She left with him without saying a word. I went after them down the stairs and she must have heard me, because on the last landing before the street I found her facing me. I accused her, with more relief than rancour, of having carried a torch for Eric all along. She told me that the man wasn't Eric. It was the knife-thrower. She was married to him. Then she gave me an uncharacteristically reticent kiss, clattered down the remaining stairs and went out of my life.

I got fired the same day, after a statistical fault in a report about a red plastic tomato-shaped tomato sauce container led to an investigation. The people out in the street had faked their questionnaires as usual, but at least they had built in a few believable discrepancies. For three long and light-headed weeks I had coded the questionnaires while blacking out from the previous night's encounter with Moira. Husbanding my vestigial energies, I had neglected to put in the inconsistencies required by verisimilitude. The result was too perfect, too simple to be believed: rather like Moira herself.

The Warping of the Ninth

Failure felt like liberty, so heady was the air. Not only had I to change jobs, I had to change residence as well. Moira had been and gone like Julie Christie in *Sparrows Can't Knack* or *The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Liar*. Another one just like her would be along soon if you waited, and twice as soon if you moved on. All the new films were the same one with a different title: middle-aged entrepreneurs with second houses in up-and-coming Marbella were making money by convincing the young that money didn't matter and the moonlight flit equalled romance.

My landlady, who had probably wanted nothing from me except a sounding board for her justified complaints about her pig of a husband, had not got even that. Instead of bidding me good riddance she put me in the way of a new job and a roof to go with it. An old Oxford chum of hers was starting up, from an address in Chelsea, a prestige publishing house cum second-hand book service. In the first-floor library of his double-knock-through Georgian house I sat to be interviewed, my arms in the sleeves of the Singapore suit held carefully to my sides. He did all the talking. Visions of the future were conjured up: we would be a combination of Bertram Rota and the Officina Bodoni. He would be the management and I would be the staff. Within a short time I would be a company director. Salary would be a matter of agreement from time to time, but I could take it for granted that I would not want for money, make sense? Each of his successive verbal flights was tagged with the rhetorical question 'make sense?', short for 'Does that make sense?' And at that moment it did make sense, although I should have been more worried about the white foam at the corners of his mouth. A no-longer-young semi-titled Englishman is not necessarily suspect just because his complexion is as purple as beetroot and his eyes pop, but if he spits foam without noticing then it is a safe bet that there are other things he isn't noticing either.

His name was Maurice Dillwick. The name Dillwick was famous, not because

of him but because of his father, one of those hereditary peers who defy probability not only by donating their services gratis to the public weal but by being rather good at it. The old man had organised shadow factories during the war, organised their demobilisation afterwards, helped nationalise the coal industry, helped rationalise the steel industry, and acted as the kind of benevolent Lord Chamberlain whose civilised tolerance served to perpetuate an inherently stifling institution and thus enfeeble the English theatre for longer than necessary. His was a greatly successful life in all respects but one: his son, though clever, was not quite clever enough to distinguish a passion from a fad or a vocation from a phase. While his father lived, Maurice was kept on short commons, rarely being given more than a few hundred thousand pounds at a time with which to pursue his career as a racing driver, a film director, an explorer or a spy. When the old man hit the soup one day in the House of Lords dining-room, Maurice inherited so much money that not even he was able to lose it all at once, so each new enthusiasm could be pursued until he got tired of it. At the time of my recruitment he had already been a publisher for a year.

Not a lot of publishing had been accomplished in that time. That was where I would come in: with my fresh approach, uncluttered by stiffly traditional practices, I would give the project a no-nonsense internal structure. In being stimulated to these fantasies about my prowess, Maurice was perhaps aided by two extraneous factors. One was that George Russell had responded to yet another request for a reference, sending, by return air-letter, an encomium which would have sat extravagantly on the shoulders of Pico della Mirandola. (That I ever wasted my professor's time by such demands is of enduring shame to me, and that I should have drained his energies in connection with this particular mare's nest is something I will have to answer for at the last trumpet.) The other document in my favour was a letter from *Encounter*, signed by Stephen Spender himself, accepting my suite of five poems about porpoises. Maurice was almost as impressed by this as I was. He immediately had me cast as the Christopher Brennan of my generation. (From his days as proprietor and editor of *Negozio nero*, an international arts magazine which had cast its net even wider than *Botteghe oscure* but with less accuracy, Maurice had retained an acquaintance with the principal names in the not very long honour roll of Australian literary history.) As a man of letters I would give the new firm – called provisionally Editions Dillwick – not just an internal structure but an antipodean boldness. He appointed me a company director forthwith.

Promoted from staff to management within a week, I still had no cash in hand but was compensated by being given a back room of the house in which to set up my suitcase. My room, like every other room except the second-floor suite in

which Maurice slept and dressed, was piled waist-high with stacked books, the stock of a second-hand book dealer whom Maurice had saved from going bust. The second-hand book dealer was an ageing but still sexually active old poet called Willis Cruft who had once, in Alexandria during the war, written apocalyptic verses which Tambimuttu had found bad enough to publish in *Poetry London*. Nowadays Cruft did not ask for much in life except enough cash to drink wine, run a string of Chinese girl-friends and attend the occasional Sibelius concert at the Festival Hall. Maurice having bought his stock from him for an indeterminate sum, Cruft was obliged to wait around in the hope of extracting some petty cash from time to time. Meanwhile, as a company director of Editions Dillwick, he was included in our three-way talks on how the books piled on the floor might be dispatched to the waiting world. His certain knowledge that there could be nothing immediate about this process was tempered by the necessity of not dampening Maurice's enthusiasm. Realism and feigned optimism thus fought an eternal war in his features, which were already deeply cragged by decades of too much wine, too little success and whatever had gone on in Alexandria.

We three directors of Editions Dillwick sat down around a tea-chest full of the standard edition of Bernard Shaw (the red binding, lacking three volumes) to plan the company's future. Maurice called this convocation the Think Tank. Two hours went by while Maurice discarded all our suggestions for the design of the firm's letterhead. More unsettling was that he discarded his own suggestions with equal vehemence. It quickly became apparent that Maurice could not hear an idea without becoming enthusiastic about it, and that he could not become enthusiastic about it without turning against it. What was not yet apparent was that he was like this in large matters as well as in small. But when the builders arrived it all started to become clear, to others if not to me.

Maurice had contracted a building firm called Piranesi Brothers to refurbish the house throughout while the books were still in it. In Maurice, the newly emergent Habitat design ethos had found its ideal lay exponent. He wanted all the old wallpapers out, all the wood stripped and stained, and every plaster surface painted white. The inevitable result was spots of paint-stripper, varnish and white emulsion all over the green New York edition of Henry James (spines of some volumes cracked). Maurice accused the Piranesi Brothers of plotting to work slowly and ruin his stock. The Piranesi Brothers would retire to the first-floor bathroom, barricade themselves in and privately agree that Mr Dillwick was a nutter. Little did they know that Maurice was taping everything they said and compiling a dossier for the future court case. When they drove off in their Dormobile to another job, Maurice would trail them in his green Jensen to find

out where they went, then conceal himself and take photographs of them as they hatched plots to spatter Pamastic all over our priceless second editions (endpapers slightly foxed) of the *Complete Poems* of Alice Meynell. It was about this time, acting from an instinct far quicker than lagging thought, that I wrote off to the LCC telling them they would be wise to come through with my Cambridge grant straight away, because I had no other plans and might well become a burden on the social services.

According to Maurice, the Piranesi Brothers were conspiring to cheat him. According to common sense, they were merely, like all small building firms, running several contracts at once in order to turn an honest profit. But common sense had no chance against Maurice's superior intellect. The dossier grew ever fatter. It bulged with photographs, legal documents and transcriptions of taped telephone calls. Finally even Maurice must have begun to notice that he was overwrought, because he gave himself a holiday. 'I'm *bored* with these builders,' he averred, foam much in evidence. 'I have to get away and think about the overall *shape* of the company. I've been pushing myself too *hard* on a day-to-day basis, make sense?' It didn't, because he hadn't, but if that was the way he felt, who was I to argue? Having bought a new Jensen just like the old one except for a sparkling set of Borrani wire wheels, he disappeared towards the south of France, leaving me in charge.

In charge, that is, of a house full of loose books and frustrated builders. Willis Cruft sensibly declined to consider any advice I might have about how the situation could be retrieved. Correctly diagnosing Editions Dillwick to be an irredeemable folly, he gave himself to Sibelius and the relay of Chinese girls still flying in from Hong Kong. I should have listened to him when he said that things would only get worse on Maurice's return. I preferred, not very passionately, to believe that they would get better. Meanwhile I was in the position of Grand Admiral Dönitz in the few days between Hitler's suicide and the surrender of Germany – I was exercising supreme power over a shambles. To my credit I did not keep up the telephone surveillance on the Piranesi Brothers. My dereliction was in clear breach of Maurice's departing orders, but I would have felt contemptible doing it and anyway I couldn't work the Grundig. To my shame, on the other hand, I went on spending my expense money – there had still been no vulgar talk of salary – instead of handing Maurice my resignation. Handing him my resignation while I was in Chelsea and he in Antibes would not have been easy, but to stay on was taking candy from a baby.

My typical day was spent making tea for the decorators and standing close behind them so I could catch a dollop of varnish before it fell on the cover of *The Apes of God* (reprint, two signatures out of order, otherwise fair) and halved

its already negligible value. In the evenings I wooed an Australian girl called Robin who had a marvellous clear skin and was teetering on the verge of deciding not to be a strict Catholic. To encourage her in that direction I took her to see every Buñuel movie in town. When *Los Olvidados* was on at the Chelsea Arts cinema I took her there two nights running but still couldn't slide my hand between her breasts without getting my wrist tangled in the chain of her crucifix. My large talk about being a director and chief executive of Editions Dillwick didn't work the trick either. The letter from the LCC which I had hoped would excuse me two years of waiting for Cambridge only excused me one year. My determination was plain, they said, but it would have to wait until the October after next to attain its object. This was a disappointment. Another letter capped disappointment with disaster: Stephen Spender wrote to say that the number of poems accepted for *Encounter* was now so great that he could see no prospect of printing mine in the foreseeable future. He could, however, arrange to have them published immediately in another magazine, whose name, if I remember correctly, was *Periphery*, or perhaps *Margin*. I wrote back to say that I preferred the original arrangement, which I regarded as a promise, and that the unforeseeable future would do me fine. Perhaps my language was too forceful, because I received no reply. The word 'galah' is an acceptable term of mild remonstrance among Australians. The English, not knowing what a galah is, tend to take offence.

Downcast, I forgot to be the anti-Catholic polemicist and company director. My real self, such as it was, showed through. Robin must have decided either that she liked it or that she might like it after a few things had been done to it, because she hung her scalloped-edged white slip over the back of a chair and took me to bed. Or rather, I took her to bed, the bed being mine: there were books stacked all around it and I spent a lot of time reassembling the collected works of Hugh Walpole after Robin fell over them on her way back from the bathroom in the dark. She looked marvellous dressed in a towel and a crucifix. It made me feel like the hero in one of those *Nouvelle vague* films that were coming out just about then. I lay back like Jean-Paul Pierre or Pierre-Jean Paul or whatever the twerp's name was, the sheet tucked around my waist and a cigarette dangling dangerously from my lower lip.

Very dangerously, as it turned out. The damage to the sheet was extensive and I could easily have burned Robin to death. There was worse. Availing myself of Maurice's stereo, I had been listening half a dozen times a day to his two-disc set of Beethoven's Ninth conducted by Toscanini. The adagio, in particular, sent me into a trance. What delicacy, and yet what drive! How little rubato and yet how supple! It was in just such a mesmerised condition that I left the two records on

top of the switched-on amplifier while I took Robin to the pub, there to help her overcome her inhibitions about drinking by showing her what an entertaining fellow I became when inebriated. Having helped me home, Robin was the first to notice that the Toscanini records had acquired crinkled edges. As well as making me feel iller – iller, that is, than how ill I felt from the whiff of molten vinyl, as well as how ill I was already feeling anyway – their patent unplayability made me feel inadequate. Doubtless Maurice had too many toys: but I was in a position of trust. ‘Position of truss,’ I explained tearfully to Robin. Late that night, without her knowledge, I zig-zagged down the corridor through the cairns of books and transferred the warped discs from the top of a stack of albums to the bottom, partly from the slim conviction that the weight would flatten them out, mainly in the pious hope that Maurice would never twig. After all, he had so much stuff.

Robin understood when I told her that I had to go to Italy. Françoise, the girl I had left behind in Australia, was now studying in Florence and could no doubt arrange accommodation while I spent a week recuperating from vinyl poisoning. I could tell that Robin understood because she didn’t physically oppose my going, and in those days I construed absence of explicit opposition as a whole-hearted endorsement. I was careful to borrow some spending money as additional evidence of her goodwill. The petty cash left behind by Maurice would cover the plane ticket, and I planned to hitchhike after I got to Milan. But there would be cigarettes to buy. Robin was the first to appreciate that a New Wave hero must have his cigarettes, which in Italy, I had heard, were hard to obtain. In my jeans, T-shirt, combat jacket, beard and dangling cigarette I reckoned I looked the sort of tough customer the Italians would take seriously. To complete the ensemble I had a bang-up-to-date pair of new shoes. Black winklepickers so long in the toe that the distance from the front of my foot to the front of the shoe was greater than to the heel, they looked dazzling down there. Even while staring straight ahead I could see the toes of my shoes in my peripheral vision. Equipped to kick the brains out of a fly, I had to walk with my feet slightly sideways, like a ballet dancer. Somehow I reached Gatwick, boarded a Dan-Air DC7-C charter flight, and headed for that far-off country the British call Europe.

Fiorenza, Fiorenza

Everything went fine until Milan, because the pilot was making all the hard decisions. After that I was on my own. Immediately people started behaving very strangely. I had already attracted a few sideways glances from some of the Italians on the plane, but here in the actual Italy the Italians stared openly. They formed groups so as to co-ordinate their unblinking scrutiny. At first I thought it was the shoes, but the immigration official couldn't see them from inside his glass booth, and he stared too. Did I bear a startling resemblance to the lost king Vittorio Emanuele IV? Not too fanciful a notion, because it rapidly became apparent that the focus of interest was the beard. I had the only beard in Italy. (No kidding: the first modern native Italian beards were grown after the Florence floods, still some time in the future.) As I herringboned along in my winklepickers with my beard collecting dust, I must have struck the locals as a failed cross-country skier making fun of Garibaldi.

Another drawback was that nobody spoke English. As I was later to learn, you need only ten words of their language and the Italians will gladly help you with the rest, but at that stage I had only three words and a punctuation mark: '*Autostrada del Sole?*' I was looking for the Highway of the Sun. When I said this phrase with an interrogative inflection while doing my gestural imitation of a six-lane highway, people crossed themselves. Some of them crossed the street. But a few brave souls pointed the way, so that after about two hours of doing my frog-man walk through the killing midday heat I had reached the highway at a spot where it looked like I might get a lift, if one of the hurtling cars would only stop. After another two hours one did. It had an English driver: a Unilever accountant who said he could take me as far as Piacenza. While I drank two bottles of orangeade out of a six-pack and the entire contents of a flask of mineral water, he explained that it wasn't just the beard which kept me rooted to the hard shoulder, it was also that hitchhiking was forbidden. Dimly I

remembered Françoise having told me that in her last letter. Receiving advice, ignoring it, and then later finding out the hard way how good it was, has been the story of my life. One of these days the Good Samaritan might fail to materialise, or might not have any orangeade with him when he does.

Just outside the Piacenza exit my saviour set me off at a point where I might conceivably pick up another lift south, but he warned me not to bank on it. After an hour and a half of watching Fiats, Lancias and Alfas go by both ways like an exchange of bullets, I got the point and started walking towards town. It was a long way and I was grateful when a three-ton truck heading in that direction slowed down and stopped just ahead. The old hooked thumb had worked at last. When the driver leaned out, he doubled my relief by speaking English.

‘You want a lift?’

‘Yes, actually.’

‘Yes, actually. You from England?’

‘Australia.’

‘Australia. I hear your accent now. I was in Australia, at the Snowy River Project. I do not like Australians. Here in Italy we do not like the beard. I drive into town, get some of my friends, we come back and fix you good.’

On the other side of the roadside ditch there were cabbages growing among which I hid, but after about another hour it started looking probable that he would not come back, so I began walking again, this time without the extended thumb. The land smelled like piss but that could have been the way I felt. Having to turn my feet sideways even to limp successfully, I had a terrific pain in the ankle, so by the time I got to Piacenza railway station I had barely enough strength left to get my wallet out. Spending all my remaining money on a ticket to Florence was rendered needlessly complicated by the fact that none of the ticket-sellers had ever heard of the place. At last their supervisor showed up and set them straight by informing them that the city they had always referred to as ‘Firenze’ was in reality called Florence. It took a long time to sort out and I missed a train while it was happening, but the next train had a name –*accelerato* – that sounded fast enough to make up the difference.

It transpired that *accelerato* was the Italian word for ‘Stopping at every station and going very slowly in between so as not to overshoot’. I arrived at Florence long after dark and reached Françoise’s *pensione* near the Medici Palace long after that, having frequently lost my way through being obliged to turn around and disperse the crowd following my beard. The landlady took one look at me and immediately appointed herself Françoise’s guardian. I was allowed into Françoise’s cool, terracotta-tile-floored room long enough to wash the dust from my face, but the landlady stood in the doorway with her powerful arms folded

and large chin raised high, thereby abetting an already remarkable physical resemblance to Mussolini. I ended up sleeping on the floor of a partitioned-off section of a decrepit palace down behind the Piazza della Signoria. The owner of the flat, a spotty but sweet girl called Barbara, was an old school friend of Françoise's from Australia. I don't owe Barbara any money – Françoise paid the rent – but I owe her a lot for her time and concern, and it worries me now that I didn't realise that then. When I met her again in London the following year, I was short with her, instead of taking the trouble to hark fondly back as she expected. Eventually too many such incidents rankled enough to make me change my ways – to the extent, anyway, of never taking any favours that I would not have time to be grateful for. It sounds like a cold man's rule and I'm afraid it is, but I was even worse before I thought of it.

My ill-judged arrival had put Françoise in a false position. Nowadays you have to go pretty far south in Italy before you encounter the widespread belief that any foreign girl is a whore unless her father and two brothers drive her around in an armoured car. In those days the whole of Italy was like that. Françoise, clearly a well brought-up girl, had been highly thought of in the *pensione* and therefore subject only to the usual relentless innuendo from the male guests, actual attempts at molestation and rape being confined to the street, down which, since she did not look notably foreign, she walked at the same hazard as any other presentable woman – i.e., young male pests, known locally as *pappagalli*, followed her in cat-calling groups, while older male pests appeared suddenly out of doorways or lunged from cars in order to run a lightly touching hand over her bottom and whisper obscenities in her ear. Though all this was standard stuff to which she was well accustomed, I would shout with anger when I saw it happen. I should have been angry with myself, because it was my advent which had ensured that the *pensione* was no longer her refuge. Françoise was now known to keep open company with a young man not her husband. Moreover, he had a beard, unacceptable shoes and shouted a great deal. The landlady, by dint of a long speech delivered in front of the assembled guests during which she profiled in true *il Duce* style with her chin as high as her forehead while they burst into spontaneous applause, made it clear to Françoise that I was to be met outside if at all.

To shave off the beard would have reduced the city-wide brouhaha to more manageable proportions, but my dander was up. We radical socialists could always be relied upon to take a stand when there was no hope of budging the status quo and every chance of embarrassing our friends. Françoise would have been well justified in washing her hands of me but she was a born educator. Angry, unbalanced and flailing as I was, I still found the great city opening up

before me. She knew just where to take me. In the Uffizi I was stood in front of the Giotto madonna, the Portinari altarpiece by van der Goes, the Leonardo Annunciation and the two wide-screen Botticellis. In the Bargello I met Michelangelo's Brutus face to face. (He was on the first floor in those days: they put him downstairs after the flood.) To the Accademia for Michelangelo's slaves and to the Medici chapel for his times of day. Across the river to the Brancacci chapel, where I pretended to see, and perhaps already saw, the difference when Masaccio took over the job of painting the walls. It was Orientation Week all over again: the edited highlights, at which I still might have gagged unless wisely led. But Françoise was a real teacher and for once I was a serious student. It was a serious city. The surf of forgotten faces in the Gozzoli and Ghirlandaio frescoes I might conceivably have laughed off. Michelangelo's *terribilità*, when it transfixed me through the stone eyes of Brutus, shook the soul. It was so like being looked at by Françoise's landlady.

My self-esteem took a battering. Part of being overwhelmed by a big new subject is the shame of realising that you knew nothing about it before. Helping me to feel worse were the twin facts that I ended up alone on Barbara's floor every night, and that whenever Françoise took me to meet her friends it rapidly turned out that everybody wanted to speak Italian except me. Or, rather, including me, except that I didn't know how. Up until that time I had been pleased, not to say proud, to remain monolingual. Now came the climb-down. I can even remember the moment. It was at an early-evening drinks party on a grassy little hill behind a big house on the other side of the Arno. The men had their sleeves rolled up in the heat and the women were bare-shouldered in cool silk dresses and high-heeled sandals. Françoise and her friend Gabriella were arguing with Franco, an economics lecturer at Florence University and notable contributor to the kind of film magazine, just then becoming prominent, edited by Bellocchio's cousin or Bertolucci's brother. Franco had reacted against Wölflinn's line on the *cinquecento* to the extent of proclaiming Andrea del Sarto no good at all, whereas the women thought that the cartoons in the Chioistro della Scala were rather marvellous. I had my own, perhaps half-baked, opinions on this matter, but by the time I had persuaded Françoise to translate them, the conversation had moved on to the merits of Fellini, with specific reference to *Otto e mezzo*. Franco thought the film a fraud. Gabriella disagreed. Françoise strongly disagreed, as well she might, because we had seen the film together the previous evening, she for the second time and I for the third, although it had been my first time without the aid of subtitles. I disagreed so strongly that I took Françoise aside, not really hurting her arm that much, and urgently briefed her on my position. When we turned back to the conversation, Franco and Gabriella

were yelling at each other simultaneously, but I forced Françoise to interrupt them and advance my argument. They greeted it with raised eyebrows and embarrassed shiftings from foot to foot. It was because of the irrelevance of Fellini's transcendental imagination to the question of who might succeed Palmiro Togliatti as leader of the Communist Party.

Experiencing inarticulacy for the first time since the cradle, I was so frustrated that I dug the toes of my winklepickers into the hill and stood there bouncing with unexploded energy, like a woodchopper on his plank waiting for a signal that never came. That same night, Françoise sat down beside me with a volume of Dante and construed a few lines of the *Inferno* to begin showing me how the language worked. *Per me si va tra la perduta gente*. Through me you go among the lost people. A line that crushed the heart, but in the middle of it you could say *tra la*. It was music.

Thus it was, when I reached Milan on the return journey and was unable to pay the airport tax because of having bought too many cigarettes at the railway station, that I was able, out of my ten-word vocabulary, to come up with the one word required: *Disastro!* I said it repeatedly with much wringing of hands, until an Indian passenger booked on my flight gave me 1,000 lire and waved aside all talk of repayment. I have liked Indians ever since. The alternative would have been to cast myself on the mercy of the Italian airport police, who all looked as if they were closely related to a certain truck-driver in Piacenza.

Back in London, my problems had not gone away. Indeed while I had been away they had joined forces. Robin was cheesed off with me for some reason; Willis Cruft was accusing me of having cut him off from the petty cash; the builders had not only given up but taken to using the back garden as a storehouse for spare equipment; and Maurice's mother was on the premises to inform me that I must leave for Glyndebourne immediately. Rapidly adapting Maurice's dinner jacket to my differently arranged proportions, the grey-haired but energetic Lady Dillwick had her mouth full of pins half the time, but she spent the other half telling me that since Maurice had arranged to take a party to see *Capriccio* and then decided that he would rather go off to the Côte d'Azur instead, it was up to his substitute to fill in. Lady Dillwick's decisiveness was aided by her technique of not letting anyone else finish a sentence. This habit was later to be made familiar by Britain's first woman Prime Minister, but at the time it was a new one on me. As I stood there in my underpants while Lady Dillwick took up her son's satin-piped black trousers by about six inches, I did my best to disqualify myself for the task. 'I'm not even sure where Gly. . . ' 'Maurice ought to realise that I've better things to do with my *time* than get him out of these messes.' 'How will I know wh . . . ' 'Those pointed shoes won't be

suitable at all.'

Maurice's patent leather pumps were three sizes too big for me so Lady Dillwick padded them with Kleenex. Trepidatiously setting off, I reached the taxi before the heels of the shoes left the house. Lady Dillwick waved me away with an air of 'There, that's *that* taken care of.' I had begun to get an inkling of why Maurice was the way he was. At Victoria I met my companions for the venture. They were a bald, decrepit avant-garde publisher, his beautiful but plastered interior decorator wife, and his large, ageing, Central American senior editor, a woman who eked out an Elizabeth Bergner voice by wearing wooden jewellery and an ankle-length fur coat – rarely a wise idea in summer, even if the summer is English. On top of daring to import such marginal American writers as Alexander Lobrau (*The Beatified Deserters*) and Brad Krocus (*Absorbent Gauze Swabs and Violators Turned Away*), the publisher was currently notorious for staging the first of those Happenings by which London was now establishing its pioneering position of being only just behind New York. I had read about how he had invited fashionable society to a dark room off Shaftesbury Avenue full of actors pretending to be tramps and drunks, through which noisomely struggling mass the perfumed invitees had to find their way while the air filled with finely sprayed water and taped traffic noise. The assembled notables all agreed that this experience was somehow radically and liberatingly different from everyday life in the street outside. Unfortunately the publisher, who like so many promoters of the youth craze was in a state of advanced middle age compounded by bibulous excess, had got the idea that in an ideal world all the Happenings would join together with no intervening periods of the quotidian. He now had the brainwave, for example, of getting down to Glyndebourne without any of us purchasing a train ticket. If you did, you were a spoilsport. I'm sorry to say that I was craven enough to go along with this, instead of doing what I should have done, namely spoiling the sport. When we got off the train it turned out that we had to cheat on the bus too, with each of us pretending that someone else was paying. I was still blushing with shame and fear half-way through the first act of the opera. Then I started paying attention to one of the most hypnotic sounds I had heard in my life. It was the sound of the Central American senior editor, massive in the seat beside me, telling her string of wooden beads like a rosary.

During the picnic dinner at interval my companions all had the chance to have a good laugh about how the emergency stitching in my trousers had started to come adrift. I did my best to divert their attention by explaining that this whole den of privilege and ridiculously attenuated pastiche would be enough reason in itself to start a socialist revolution forthwith. My fervour masked awkwardness.

What with the difficulty I was experiencing in keeping my shoes on and my trousers from unfurling like the inadequately reefed sails of a pirate ship with a drunken crew, I had begun to feel a bit self-conscious. But most of the other men present were reassuringly scruffy. Here was my first lesson on the resolutely maintained untidiness and ill-health of the English upper orders. In baggy evening dress and old before their time, they displayed gapped and tangled teeth in loosely open mouths. Gently shedding dandruff, they lurched across the lawn. When they stood at the bar they looked like Lee Trevino putting. Here also would have been my first lesson in opera, but I found the piece too tenuous to grasp except for the Countess's long soliloquy, during which even the senior editor was charmed into interrupting her death-rattle. Doubtless the way Elisabeth Söderström looked was a help to me in focusing on how she sounded, but I would probably have been captured even had she been less graceful. For a few minutes I got a glimpse into an unsuspected realm of lyrical subtlety. Then the brusque rattling of the wooden beads began again.

Back to Victoria we scaled, one of my trouser legs now forming a black concertina above its canoe-like shoe. That was the night I should have packed it in: random pin money and inappropriate pay-offs did not add up to a salary, and keeping paint-spots off stacked books was the work of a scarecrow. Instead I stuck around. Robin, whose frown of welcome had soon melted into resignation, was there most evenings to cook a meal and help me move the heavier items of builders' equipment. It was a place to live; it was the sort of sinecure, I told myself, that artists had always taken with a clear conscience; and it was certain that Maurice, when he got back, would be better or at least no worse. So I let another three weeks of lightly disguised idleness go by. Luckily for appearances, if not for my conscience, I was actually hard at work transferring an unsaleable almost complete edition of John Galsworthy out of the way of the plasterers when Maurice's Jensen announced its arrival outside by ramming the builders' skip with its left headlight. Tanned the colour of butterscotch and still wearing his Côte d'Azur walking-out dress of rope-soled canvas shoes, lightweight seersucker slacks and a pale-blue T-shirt with a little white anchor, Maurice came bounding up the steps to announce that the positioning of the skip was evidence incontrovertibly establishing the conspiracy between the Piranesi Brothers and the team of Russian spies which MI5 had asked him to keep tabs on in Cannes.

Apparently that was why he had been gone so long. From his unobtrusive vantage point at a table beside the swimming pool in front of the Majestic, he had been surreptitiously photographing the Russian film delegates as they took their constitutional along the Croisette each morning, make sense? Then it had

emerged, in response to discreet enquiries, that a beautiful woman called Valentina Pirenucci was booked into the same hotel as the Russians. As Maurice excitedly began telling me about the love affair that he had almost had with her – he was being set up, he could see that now – he pushed a cigarette through the screen of foam joining his lips and lit it more than half-way down, almost at the filter. He looked accusingly at the flaming ruins of the cigarette. Then he looked accusingly at me. He wanted to know what I had accomplished. Apart from getting to Glyndebourne and back alive while dressed as Groucho Marx, I had accomplished nothing, so there was not a lot I could say. He looked at me as if I was part of the conspiracy. He was right. I was. Anyone who did any kind of business at all with Maurice was only helping him further into confusion. The decent thing to do was to get out straight away, and I had not done it. Now, too late, I tried to make up for my opportunism. But I had still not finished packing my bag that night when I heard, drifting along the corridor from Maurice's locked bedroom, the sound, horribly distorted, of the adagio of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, conducted by Toscanini. Maurice had discovered the final piece of evidence. It all made sense.

Like a Burnished Throne

Charlie came to my rescue, unfortunately. In that great age of the company director, Charlie was the company director epitomised. He had a one-man import-export business. He could get things for you. If you had things you didn't want, he could take them away. Around the Chelsea pubs he was a conspicuous figure, not just because of a major squint but because of his promiscuous taste in fast foreign cars. Peter Sellers had a new car every week but Charlie had a new one every day. On Monday it was a Maserati with a body by Touring of Milan and on Tuesday it was a Mercedes-Benz 300SL with gull-wing doors. None of the cars really worked, but he didn't own them long enough for them to stop working entirely. They stopped working entirely for the people he sold them to. While he was driving them, they went, just. 'Hop in,' Charlie would say from an out-of-date yet eternally beautiful Zagato-bodied 2+2 Ferrari. After you had hopped in, you would wonder why the car was going so slowly. You couldn't wonder it aloud because of the noise kicked up by the chain-driven overhead camshafts. At the next pub, Charlie would explain convincingly how everything would be all right tomorrow, once the drip-feed venturi to the rocker-boxes had been greased. 'Fancy another jar? Your round.'

Charlie said I could live on one of his boats: the one moored at Twickenham. The rent sounded stiff but he reassured me by saying that the boat was an ocean-going job. 'None of your put-put boats what fart about on a river.' As we headed west in an off-white Lancia Aprilia drop-head with my suitcase in the back, I had visions of a modest but comfortable state-room on the sort of yacht that would not be ashamed of itself if anchored in the lee of Niarchos or Onassis. And indeed *The Relief of Mafeking* was the biggest thing in the basin, but only because it was a coal barge. An ocean-goer in the sense that it had long ago made regular trips to and from Newcastle by sea rather than canal, my new home was so broad in the beam that it was practically circular. Charlie soon had me

convinced that this was an advantage. 'Your so-called sleek lines can't give you this, mate,' he said with an expansive gesture in the living space between decks. 'What you've got here is width.' As we stood there with our heads bowed, I had to agree that there was width. What there wasn't was height, but I failed to remark this, being too excited by the prospect of the well-joined planks below and above. I hardly needed Charlie to tell me that there was no workmanship like that nowadays. He showed me how the Calor gas cooking ring worked, warned me that the toilet might be a bit tricky, and left me to unpack. Standing on deck to wave goodbye, I felt like Horatio Hornblower on the bridge of his first command. Lesser boats crowded the basin, in which the tide was so low that some of the water was hard to distinguish from mud. Presumably the smell would be less piercing when the water rose, and meanwhile the Lancia was a reassuring sight as it roared away, stopping only once while Charlie lifted the bonnet to tinker with the engine.

Flushing the toilet was no problem as long as the tide remained out. All you had to do was kick the foot-crank twenty or thirty times until with a loud *kerchunga* the bowl emptied into the bilges. When the tide came in, however, I was saddened to discover that the same process emptied the bilges into the bowl. By that time it was late at night and it had started to rain. The drumming of the rain on the deck was at first a comfort. But after a not very long time there was the less snug sound of the rain that was coming through the deck and dropping on my floor. It happened only where the fine workmanship of the planks was no longer reinforced by caulking. One such place was in the exact centre of the cabin, so that the puddle formed at the apex of the curved floor and distributed itself very evenly in all directions. A carefully positioned bucket could only delay this process, and anyway I didn't have one. So I went on deck in the driving rain, got down on my knees and found the hole. An old piece of canvas stretched across would soon fix that. There were no old pieces of canvas. I laid out one of my tea-coloured nylon drip-dry shirts and weighed it down around the edges with some bits of wood whose nautical name echoed vaguely in the memory. Belittling pins? Bollocks? The whole operation took no more than twenty minutes, so I didn't really get that much wetter than I would have if I had stood in the centre of my cabin all night directly under the leak.

Next morning another drawback revealed itself. My new home was a long way from the centre of London. Unless Charlie turned up on some errand or other I would have to go in by train or Green Line bus. For a few days I waited for Charlie but it was becoming imperative to find a job, so finally I spent a whole morning getting to town and putting my name down to be considered by London Transport for a job on the tube. They were looking for guards, not

drivers. This suited me. I couldn't drive a car but thought that I could probably guard a train, and perhaps work on the odd poem between stations. I could see myself being cheery, useful, a good man in a crisis. Trollope had designed the pillar-box. Keats, Chekhov and Schnitzler had all been doctors. T. S. Eliot had worked in a bank and Wallace Stevens for an insurance company. I would be a tube guard. Obviously I would be overqualified but I was willing to forget about that in return for a steady income and travel privileges – these latter being particularly welcome to someone living a long way away by water on a ship that could not sail. The next day, in the Singapore suit and the winklepickers, the beard trimmed with nail scissors, I sat down, with almost a hundred other candidates, for the intelligence test. Judiciously I soft-pedalled the brainy stuff, neglecting to mention my degree and doing my best to keep Schopenhauer's name out of it. I must have done all right because after half an hour's wait I was sent into another room for the psychological test. This time there were only about fifty candidates. The examiner sat at a desk. You were signalled forward to occupy the seat opposite him when the previous occupant had been dismissed, after a greater or shorter time. Obviously the long interviews were the more successful ones. Some of the interviews were as short as five minutes. Mine was the only one that lasted a minute and a half. I can remember the questions now. 'Why did you leave your last job?' 'Why did you leave the job before that?' 'And the one before that?' I can't recall my answers, except that they were short at first and grew progressively shorter. His closing statement, I thought, revealed a lack of sensitivity which helped to explain why, as a psychologist, he had risen no higher than the underground railway. 'You have failed the psychological test and we are unable to offer you a position.'

Failing to get down that hole was my low point. Or so I thought, assuming that the task was easy. Actually such jobs – being a postman is another one I still covet – demand exactly the sort of elementary yet responsible alertness that the congenital dreamer is least qualified to give. There is a consoling passage in *Dichtung und Wahrheit* about our capabilities being forecast by our dreams, although it might just mean that Goethe would have made a lousy tube guard. But I was still far short of a full self-appraisal. I was also short of cash. Robin, who worked in a Baker Street bookshop, trekked out to Twickenham often enough to keep me from dying of malnutrition, but the fares and the food used up a disheartening proportion – disheartening even for me, let alone for her – of whatever was left over from keeping herself alive. Where was Charlie?

He arrived one morning at the wheel of a Lagonda, handed me a parallel text of *Les Fleurs du mal*, and told me to bring my toothbrush because we were going to Paris. If I helped him load some furniture into his van in London and

unload it in the Flea Market in Paris, there would be something in it for me and I would see the City of Light. The noise of the Lagonda drowned the actual mention of how much the something was. Lagondas were not supposed to be noisy. This one had gear-box trouble. But the van, to which we transferred at Charlie's lock-up garage in Fulham, worked well enough. It was a little blue Bedford tailgate number whose rear tray we carefully filled with solid English furniture – old rosewood military chests and stuff like that. When we reached Dover, I was impressed but not surprised to hear Charlie tell the British customs men that the gear, all French originally, had belonged to his French-born great-aunt, long resident in England, who had recently died tragically of cancer, of the rectum in point of fact, so that the residue of her worldly goods was now returning to her bereaved half-sister in Auteuil. While this was being said I sat there reading Baudelaire as instructed, no doubt to give the impression of being part of the household. At Calais, Charlie told the French customs men that the stuff was all English, of negligible value as you could tell from the chipped inlays, and that it was on its way to furnish the flat of the eccentric new Paris bureau chief of the *Financial Times*. Behold his artistically gifted son, soon to be studying French literature at the Sorbonne. Charlie got most of this across with gestures but there was quite a bit of French mixed in. I was so dumbfounded that I must have looked artistically gifted, because the *douaniers* waved us through. Since the furniture plainly *was* English, and therefore not part of *le patrimoine*, perhaps they didn't care whether Charlie was profiteering or not. Anyhow, we were soon bowling happily down the *route nationale*, with the poplars strobing away on each side.

Under a bright sun we made good time but it was a bit bumpy. Some of the lashings in the back came unstuck so I was standing up there to keep a chest of drawers and a cupboard from knocking into each other when Charlie tooted the horn and I looked ahead and saw Paris. The city lay low among the hills like a dry lake of violet talcum with a little pistachio model of the Eiffel Tower sticking up. It was the Eiffel Tower. Delirium at first glance.

At the Flea Market our consignment of furniture sold out straight away. Charlie handed me my commission: a wad of jokey paper napkins with coloured pictures of people like Richelieu and Mazarin. The wise move would have been to hand the money straight back to him and thus clear up what I would soon owe for rent, but instead I toured the open-air bookstalls along the banks of the Seine, bending over the green-painted bins like a starving parrot over a box of seeds. Books in French scarcely counted as a wise purchase, since I couldn't read more than the odd word of them, but I was working on the assumption that one day I would be able to. Charlie had friends in Paris with whom we had dinner. I didn't

enjoy it much because they spoke little English and looked as if they had been left out of a crime movie starring Jean Gabin because they were too sinister. This especially applied to the women. Charlie's *mauvais garçon* squint fitted right in. The rest of him fitted in too: he spoke the international language of where to get things. I couldn't keep up. But the wine I handled quite well, needing, when I bunked down on somebody's floor, scarcely any help to undress. A less clouded happiness came next morning, when I sat outside a café at the crossroads of the Boulevard Saint-Michel and the Boulevard Saint-Germain, drank cognac and watched the girls on their way to work. I had never seen so much prettiness all in the one place. Charlie explained how they did it, with their small wages all going on clothes and nowhere to live except a cold-water broom cupboard. 'Your actual Frog bird,' he announced, 'has got eyes of her own.' Though my own eyes were as yet untrained, I could see straight away that the silk-and-cotton-clad shop assistant clicking along on her way to the Galeries Lafayette was an entirely different proposition from her London counterpart, teetering towards C & A in a black-lacquered hair helmet, cadaverous white face-mask, laddered tights and a skirt no bigger than her belt. It was the difference between *chic* and shock. Calling myself studious, I ogled unashamed, until Charlie said it was time to go.

Zonked by the cognac I slept all the way to London. At Fulham, Charlie climbed into the Lagonda and went somewhere else, so with his strong hints about the desirability of a prompt rent settlement still echoing in my ears I got back to the barge by Green Line bus in time to discover how the deck looked after the tide had gone far enough out to prove the theory – common among the basin's regular inhabitants, I now learned – that *The Relief of Mafeking* had been incorrectly moored. The tide was back in again but a lot of the caulking on deck had gone missing from between the planks. I found some of it in my cabin. My bed, which had been a mattress with a blanket on it, was now a mattress with a blanket and bits of tar on it. Luckily they were too old to be still sticky.

Paying a return visit as arranged, Françoise arrived at Gatwick and with her usual cool head found her way, against all the odds, to my floating palace. I would have met her at the airport, but for some reason Robin wouldn't lend me the money. The tide was out and the yacht basin wasn't looking its best. There was something particularly depressing about how the brown milk bottles sticking up out of the mud were full of water. Standing at the foot of the gangway, Françoise looked out of place in her blue silk blouse, pale-grey straight skirt and handmade high-heeled suede sandals. She had always had the gift of bringing order and elegance to her surroundings. This new challenge, her expression suggested, might be beyond her. Showing her down to my quarters, I made a

nervous joke about Pandora and the Flying Dutchman, before remembering that Pandora was the wrong name to mention. So I switched the frame of reference to Cleopatra's barge.

It didn't rain, so at least we didn't get wet. But without rain there was no relief from the heat. The tide came in and did something to tame the smell, but it did nothing for the toilet, which turned out to be the final insult. In a few days Françoise did a lot to make the place habitable and my intake of foodstuffs less toxic. I was eating salads and there was a pillowcase on the pillow. But a toilet that worked in reverse was too much. Until it should be time for her charter flight back to Italy, she went to stay with the girls in Melbury Road.

Gallantly I carried her suitcase. There was a party going on when we arrived. Robin was there, looking a bit distant for some reason. Françoise didn't look very tolerant either so I danced with a tall girl called Joanne who had recently got off the boat. I told her that I had recently got off a boat too. Just when I had got her laughing at the story about the blow-back toilet her boyfriend moved in on her, so I found myself talking to an old acquaintance from Sydney called Nick Thesinger. At Sydney University Nick had been the star actor of his final year just as I was starting off as a freshman. He had left for England with the high hopes of his friends filling his sails, although he himself had always been realistic enough to guess that London needed Australian actors the way Newcastle upon Tyne needed coal from Newcastle, NSW. So it had proved, and within a year he had been forced into supply-teaching, to eke out what he called 'a small competence' of money from home. But school teaching had soon become more than just a living. 'At Stratford, I'd be lucky to carry a spear a year,' he explained. 'At the dear old school I'm simply *forced* to play Macbeth, Hotspur and Richard III every morning, with Hamlet for lunch and Lear in the afternoon. One's thespian urges aren't just satisfied, darling. The relevant glands are *squeezed dry*.' His teacher's salary plus the small competence enabled him to keep a set of rooms just off Baker Street. He had a spare bedroom, into which I was invited to move as soon as was practicable. As to rent, the sum mentioned was more than I had, yet so would have been any other sum no matter how small, because next morning everything I had left went on getting back to the barge and leaving a token pay-off for Charlie. You couldn't really have called it a midnight flit. For one thing, it was daylight. For another, the rent I owed him was more than offset, in my opinion, by the psychic and perhaps physical damage inflicted by the leaking ceiling and the retrodynamic dunny. I drew up a sort of account sheet explaining all this, weighed it down with a few coins, packed my bag and headed down the gang-plank towards the Green Line bus stop, watched by a large woman with piled-up ginger hair who was sunbathing

in bursting bra and colossal pink satin bloomers on the deck of a small launch which at first appeared to be listing under her weight, but which on closer examination proved to be stuck in the mud with one side propped up by the rust-eaten remains of a wrought-iron bedstead. The nautical phase of my life was over.

The musical phase now began. Like Françoise a born teacher, Nick was one of those opera fanatics with the gift of putting you on rather than off. In Australia I had discovered jazz because nobody at Sydney University could very well escape it. Classical music had come to me later and piecemeal. On swimming parties to Avalon with the Bellevue Hill mob at weekends, I had acquired their taste for such stirring stuff as Haydn's trumpet concerto and Beethoven's Seventh. In London I had become intimate with Beethoven's Ninth in the manner already related. More happily, Joyce Grenfell had taken me to the Festival Hall to see the Borodin Quartet play Beethoven's late quartets and Klemperer conduct Bach's Brandenburg concertos. I say 'see' rather than 'hear' because I couldn't take my eyes off the Borodin cellist's tapping foot or Klemperer's right index finger, especially the latter. As the old master sat there in his wheelchair, it was the only part of him that could still move.

But these were scattered experiences and no trained voice had been involved save Söderström's in *Capriccio*, heard intermittently through the machine-gun beads of my companion at Glyndebourne. Nick gave me an immersion course, starting with two scenes in *Der Rosenkavalier*: the Presentation of the Silver Rose and the last act trio. From the first day of this exposure, the bathroom rang to my imitation of Sena Jurinac, Elisabeth Schwarzkopf and Teresa Stich Randall. Lacking the vocal equipment to impersonate any of these women singly, I compromised by providing a vigorous pastiche of all three singing together. Pleased instead of panic-stricken at what he had wrought, Nick moved on to Verdi. From an old set of *Trovatore* the gold-rush chest-voice of Zinka Milanov reached to thrill me. Wagner was introduced through Lotte Lehmann and Lauritz Melchior singing the love duet from *Tristan*. Next came Wotan's farewell and the magic fire music from *Die Walküre*, conducted by Knappertsbusch, whose always-advancing quietness I was taught to value above the vertical clamour of Solti's complete *Ring*, released on Decca that very year. My prejudice against Solti – justified, I still believe, in the case of Wagner – was to remain fervent for years afterwards, until the lyrical flow of his *Eugene Onegin* made me think again. But prejudices were part of the enthusiasm, just as jealousy is part of passion. I went opera mad, and all because of Nick. He knew where to drop the needle – an especially important qualification in the matter of Wagner, with whom it is an invariable rule that the most immediately accessible

bits are never at the edge of the disc.

Then there was Mozart. 'Lisa della Casa,' Nick would say, lying back in a winged chintz-covered chair with his eyes closed and his fingertips together, 'is a bear of very little brain, but you have to remember that *so was Wolfgang's wife*.' And at that moment, on the highlights record drawn from the wonderful old Erich Kleiber set of *Le nozze di Figaro*, the lady in question would sing the first notes of 'Dove sono' for the tenth time on the trot. I wallowed like a hippo. It was a mud-bath in concentrated beauty. One doesn't love literature, said Flaubert. Though he said so because he was re-inventing it and the labour hurt, he would have been right anyway. Music we can love.

But the gramophone was merely an adjunct. The main means of instruction was the opera house itself. We were in the amphitheatre or the gods at Covent Garden almost every night. The nights we weren't, we were at Sadler's Wells, getting into training with the English version for something that would show up in the real language at the Garden later on. Nick was in no doubt about the Englishing of a foreign opera: it was strictly a leg-up for getting to grips with the original, in which the language was not just inseparable from the melody but formed its living spine. During the intervals of *Falstaff* we would adjourn to the bar so that Nick could discuss with his friends how Tito Gobbi or Geraint Evans was handling the big challenge. Nick's friends called each other 'love' a lot but they were all omniscient, so I assumed that they had good reasons for booing Galina Vishnevskaya at several points during *Aida*. Later on, however, I started to wonder whether it hadn't been because she was showing too much leg.

Because Nick's friends were queer without exception. Or, rather, with one exception: me. Whether through innocence or an opportunistic disinclination to complicate such a rich source of free enlightenment, I failed for a long time to rumble Nick's true sexual allegiance. The young sailors who arrived at midnight and disappeared into his bedroom would reappear at breakfast. Perhaps he was picking up extra money teaching a workers' extension course. Noises of wrestling came through the wall at night. Perhaps he was practising judo. At long last I realised why Nick wore such a forced smile when Robin came to call. Indeed it was Robin who told me. She also told me how unfair I was being. It wasn't just because I had nothing with which to pay the rent that I was getting away with paying no rent. Nor did all those tickets for Covent Garden grow on trees. Even when you sat so high in the gods that the stage looked like a postage stamp crawling with ants, it still cost a lot of money to be present on the night Birgit Nilsson kept drilling Brünnhilde's climactic notes right through the middle while Valhalla, which was supposed to fall, got caught in the scrim up which the Rhine, in the form of projected green light, was supposed to rise. She

sang like a train coming while the set malfunctioned all around her. It was heroic art and it all had to be paid for. Nick was allowing himself to be taken advantage of, but I was still taking advantage. Once again it was time to move on.

Yet I was moving on with two acquisitions that would serve me well. One was an awakened love for the exultant human voice. The other was a reinforced tolerance for homosexuality. Previously I had never been against it, but had shared the usual delusion that it must be some sort of disease. After living with Nick and receiving the benefit of his knowledgeable, critical, yet wholeheartedly dedicated love of music, I came to believe that it was a necessary and valuable part of life. Two of my great heroes, Proust and Diaghilev, would have convinced me eventually. Proust's article about Flaubert, or that marvellous essay by Diaghilev in which he takes Benois to task for the deficiency of his historical view, would have been enough to persuade me that there is a quality of intellect, a generous precision of humane judgment, which, so far from being damaged by inverted sexual proclivities, is probably enhanced by them. But the job had already been done by a not always happy, always smiling school-teacher who so munificently showed me where to find, at the start of the second side of the Beecham set of *La Bohème*, the duet in which Victoria de los Angeles and Jussi Björling celebrate the beatific prospect of going to bed together. I still find it difficult to believe that Nick and his sailors felt the same way, but to believe otherwise would be an impertinence. Some people are different from the rest of us, and so are the rest of us.

Back to Square One

Homosexuality was not Dave Dalziel's problem. Many people called him mad, but nobody ever called him queer. You would have been able to tell he had arrived in England just by how the girls at Melbury Road went starry-eyed. They stopped giving each other haircuts copied from Mary Quant advertisements and started making group appointments at the hairdresser. Dalziel, for as long as I cared to remember, had drawn women like mosquitoes to a sleeping man. It wasn't because he was good-looking, although he was. It wasn't because he cleaned his nails and dressed in spruce clothes, although he did. It was because he was obsessed. Dave Dalziel was movie mad. He was determined to be a film director, although there had been no Australian film director since Charles Chauvel, mainly because there was no Australian film industry. Very well, an Australian film industry would have to be created.

Meanwhile Dalziel was in Europe to learn more about the craft of his art. He had a short-subject script to shoot and a rich friend, Reg Booth, who would finance the project at the price of being allowed to star. Actually Reg was rich only in comparison to the rest of us, so the money had to be deployed with great care. Dalziel worked all day on preparing this movie. In what spare time he had he saw other movies. He breathed, ate and slept movies. As a consequence, women went silly about him, It was because he had no time to be silly about them. The rest of us chased women and looked foolish doing it. He let them chase him and looked fine. I would have hated him for it if he had been less good company, but if you allowed for his occasional patch of near insanity he was too funny to pass up. Like all truly entertaining talkers he rarely told jokes. He just had a way of putting things. There was a big party on the top floor at Melbury Road to mark the official end of summer. Dalziel suddenly materialised and addressed me as if we had parted only the day before.

'I hear you've been living with a horse's hoof' he drawled. It emerged that he and Reg had just taken a flat in Warwick Road, on the other side of Kensington

High Street, and were looking for a third man to share the rent. 'Here's your chance to play Harry Lime. Also we need someone to keep the landlady quiet, who is a MONSTER. How would you like to slip her the pork sword?'

He always talked like that. The metaphors were so mind-boggling that you found yourself doing what he wanted. A dominant personality doesn't have to believe in its own will. All it needs is the inability to recognise the existence of anybody else's. My suitcase and several string-handled paper shopping bags full of books were downstairs in the hall. Dave, Reg and Robin helped me carry them to Warwick Road, although Robin, to my annoyance, clearly would have been glad to carry the whole lot just to be near Dave. Reg won't mind my saying this, because many times in the following year we bent elbows at the pub for the specific purpose of discussing Dalziel's demoralisingly unfair share of charm, which we were agreed gave rise to, or was possibly even caused by, grave simplicities in the brain. Reg also won't mind my saying that his script was no world-shaker. Even as I moved into the Warwick Road flat, principal photography was about to begin. From the way Mrs McHale, the middle-aged and bitterly irascible landlady, stood permanently by the staircase with her arms folded, you could tell that a top-floor flat with three heterosexual young Australian men in it was already well beyond the limits of what she would ordinarily be prepared to put up with. If her lips had been any more pursed they would have fallen off. You could also tell, from the way she tapped her prominently veined and sinewed foot, that she thought the young men had too many visitors even in normal circumstances – especially female visitors, whose presence necessitated her taking up an invigilating position on the landing outside our flat so that she could make frequent unannounced entrances through the door compulsorily left open. In the week before the camera turned on page one of the script there were a lot more visitors of both sexes. Mrs McHale's foot became a blur. Young actresses auditioning as extras arrived in miniskirts which Mrs McHale clearly regarded, not without reason, as tantamount to nudity. Men with silver boxes full of hired equipment and tea-chests full of scavenged props endangered the threadbare carpets and crappy wallpaper which Mrs McHale cherished as if the Victoria and Albert Museum could be restrained from appropriating them to its collection only by armed force. We called her Hearty McHale, in the way that a wrathful deity is given nicknames to make it less awful. What she was calling us was beyond guessing, but at the annual World Landladies' Rally in the Munich beer hall she would no doubt have plenty to say when her turn came at the banked microphones. They get like that,' said Dave wisely, 'when they don't get enough of the veal dagger.'

Applying listlessly for jobs during that period, I had plenty of spare time to

help with the movie, and for acting as substitute focus-puller while playing a small part I got ten pounds for each week of the fortnight it took to shoot. The film, written by Reg with additional dialogue by Dave, was a mystery about an unnamed man, played by Reg, who works as a hit-man for the Organisation and then finds out that the Organisation is trying to eliminate him, etc. Called *The Man from the Organisation*, it would have been the least mysterious mystery in the world if not for my focus-pulling, which gave some of the shots – the really vital ones, too expensive to be done again – an extra quality of ambiguity. Yet my acting was precise, even pedantic. In the key scene where I impersonated a passer-by in the street who turns to look at the seriously wounded hero, I walked the prescribed eighteen paces, paused for the three seconds required, and turned looking puzzled, exactly as instructed. Next day's rushes showed how exact I had been. You could see me silently counting to eighteen, moving my lips as I counted to three, and then looking as if I had been asked to expound Heisenberg's uncertainty principle. 'You'll have to do it again tomorrow unless we can get George C. Scott,' said Dave, making a note. 'Asking you to play someone you're not is like asking King Kong to play the Moonlight Sonata.' He was right. In later years my acting has improved, if only in the sense that I have got better at being myself.

During that hectic fortnight I learned a little about filming and a lot about Dalziel. I could see now that he wasn't always mad. Sometimes he was just concentrating. When he ignored what you were talking about and started a new conversation in the middle of your sentence, it was because he hadn't heard you. He attacked one crisis after another without any sign of artistic temperament. In sharp distinction to the rest of us, he didn't behave like an artist at all. He behaved like a truck-driver who has to get a load of perishable goods to a certain destination by a certain time. His creative resources were considerable, but invisible because fully committed. There was nothing left over with which to pose. Perhaps the logistic demands of his medium had matured him early. In my own medium, which makes few practical demands beyond the securing of an adequate supply of stationery, coming down to earth takes longer. But here again, and as usual, it was probably a matter of personality. Dave was simply the way he was. Once his single-mindedness had looked like dementia. Now it looked like obduracy. It didn't take a prophet to realise that one day it would look like talent.

Photography completed, *The Man from the Organisation* moved into what Dave called its post-production phase. In other words work stopped completely while they figured out how to pay for the editing. Reg was no longer rich and had to get a job as a driver with a luxury hire-car firm. This came in handy for

allaying the spleen of Hearty McHale, because when Reg temporarily parked a Daimler or a Bentley in front of the house she got the idea that at least one of us was in funds. Reg spoiled it all one evening by forgetting to take off his cap. Dave, with characteristic practicality, had already arranged a short-term job in a Hammersmith builder's yard called Cornwall's Erections. He had underestimated, however, the physical labour involved. At sunset he would come reeling home too tired to wash off the grime. Usually there was some adoring woman who had been hanging around with no other aim in life beyond swabbing the caked dirt off his shoulders and bowed neck. When there wasn't, Reg and I took over. Even with these emollient side-benefits the job was clearly another case of Dalziel's extraordinary dedication to the task in hand. It made me feel queasy about borrowing money from him. Most of what I had earned from filming was already owed, which induced an anxiety that made me smoke more. Nor could it be denied that Warwick Road was situated less in Kensington than in Earls Court. I was back to where I had started, except lower down. Winter was almost upon us and I felt like the pariah of the pack. Even Robin, most generous of attendant angels, was looking at me with a curled lip.

Luck landed me my best job yet. A long, insane letter I had written to Penguin Books suggesting that they publish my collected works – I had left it unclear whether these as yet existed – won me an interview with one of their junior editors, a sleepily bright PhD type in her late twenties. Called Leslie, she immediately sussed that I was a bull artist but kindly suggested I might lower my sights and apply for a newly created menial job which would involve looking after the file of authors' photographs. Two heavily academic Pelicans had recently been published, written by Professor J. M. Thompson and Professor L. N. Thompson respectively. L. N. Thompson's photograph had ended up on J. M. Thompson's book and vice versa. One of them had been nice about it but insistent. The other had been merely insistent. The cost of stripping the covers off both editions and starting again had been very large, hence the decision to put the matter beyond doubt. Coached by Leslie, who advised the Singapore suit and my disintegrating but respectable pair of Chelsea boots with the chisel toes, I put in for the job and actually got it. I didn't tell them that I would be going up to Cambridge the year after *next* or even next year if I could swing it. Perhaps I was calculating that Penguin would go into liquidation in the near future or that my well-attested capacity to screw up would militate against permanence, but more likely I was just being, without particularly meaning to, deceitful. It can get to be a reflex.

The job was a cushy number. Once I had the few hundred photographs sorted into the right envelopes and the envelopes arranged in alphabetical order, all I

had to do was sit there in my cubicle, wait until a request came down for a picture of, say, Malraux, and then make sure I didn't send them a picture of Maurois, Maurras, Mauriac, A. L. Rowse or Mel Tormé. You had to be careful with the Bloomsbury bunch because they all looked the same, as in a horse-breeder's catalogue. Otherwise it was a doddle. The only drawback was that Penguin's combined office, factory and warehouse was located in Harmondsworth, near Heathrow. The journey each way had to be done by Volkswagen Kombibus, from and to, in my case, a pick-up point in Cromwell Road. Among the dozen people on the bus there was always the languorously aloof Leslie. The driver of the bus was called Ted and was in most respects indistinguishable from Fred, the feeble-minded fascist of the Holloway Road light-metal factory, except that Ted had a richer source of material, namely the multi-ethnic pedestrian population of the London pavements. Looking everywhere except straight ahead, he never drew breath. 'Oo, lookit a nig-nog. Nar, ease a greasy wop. Garn, you poxing wog, get out of it ...' The minibus load of liberal young ex-Oxbridge editors cast their eyes resignedly to heaven. Leslie regularly did her best to shut him up but always with adverse results, stupidity being the source of his motive power. If he couldn't curse, he couldn't drive. He had to spout his racist filth or the van would drift to a halt. I liked the way it bothered her. Me it amused. He was perfect, and anyway I believed, erroneously, that it was only the quiet men who were the real killers.

The working week took on a nice rhythm. After breakfast with the boys I would catch the bus, listen to Ted, look at Leslie, barricade myself into my cubicle and doze off, stirring only to work on a poem or take a long, slow look at a photograph of T. S. Eliot in order to eliminate the possibility that it was George Eliot in trousers. Lunch in the canteen offered virtually unobstructed views of Leslie. In the warehouse it was more or less obligatory to steal books: there was a pulp box in which you could find defective copies of almost any title, and usually the defects amounted to no more than a few pages inaccurately trimmed. Back to the cubicle for a read and a sleep. Then home in the bus, with the prospect of watching Leslie getting stroppy with Ted. I liked her principles. I liked her wrists.

If the working day had a somnolent rhythm, the nights and the weekends were hyperactive. Even Dave, once he had been helped out of his inky bath, was always ready for the party. The party was never at our place, because Hearty McHale, rather than see us enjoy ourselves, would have called for an air strike to destroy her own house. But there was always a party on at least one floor of the house in Melbury Road. You could hear the music from the end of the street.

Journalists were writing a lot of stuff about the Sixties by that time. Harold

Wilson was not only Prime Minister, he was still popular. He was not only still popular, he was almost credible: preaching the white heat of technology, he was Prometheus in Hush Puppies. A nation whose technology was white from frost-bite warmed itself at his words. The glossy magazines carried more articles each month about the new aristocracy of the classless cockney photographers in whose hairy arms the creamiest women of café society lay helpless. The articles were illustrated with photographs of the photographers taken by the photographers themselves. The pictures were very contrasty, making the women's faces look like Kabuki masks, while the photographers looked like East End criminals. There were pictures of East End criminals looking like company directors. In the text there was invariably a lot of talk about the disappearance of class divisions, the adduced evidence being that a pacey young designer from Tower Hamlets had married a duke's daughter. There would be a picture of the duke's daughter wearing the young designer's designs. Located without any connecting tissue inside the perimeter of the bleached-out facial area, her enormous black-rimmed eyes and grainy grey mushroom mouth looked surprised at her own daring: three blots on white cardboard. The vacant were being given *carte blanche* to adore themselves. Once the enviable had looked human but hard to get at. Now they looked inhuman and further off than ever.

For those of us with our noses pressed to the glass, the reality of the swinging new era was a dance party to which you brought your own bottle. But as the news about the allegedly effervescent London reached Australia, ship-loads of would-be revellers and social revolutionaries came sailing towards the putative action. Inevitably they all ended up at the bottle party. People I had left Australia to get away from started turning up in bunches – intellectuals who had read three books; writers who had read no books at all and would never write one either; pub singers who would forget the words of their sea-shanties unless you were unlucky. They filed on to the buses at Southampton and debouched into Earls Court by the well-drilled platoon.

Less organised on principle but no more reticent, those members of the Downtown Push who were still young enough to travel arrived in dribs and drabs. The woodwork was the whole world thick but out of it they came crawling, still full of theories about the repressive mechanisms of a society which allowed them to indulge their every whim. Grecian Ern Papadakis arrived, his famous book on Trotsky as yet unpublished, mainly because it remained unwritten. Not far behind him came Ross Peters the Prestige Pie-eater, an expert on Reich's orgone theories who had once received a letter from Reich himself. There men were legends and had the women to prove it: lank-haired, taciturn creatures with approximately depilated bare legs, their shoulders hunched from

constant listening.

One night at Melbury Road, half cut and wholly content in the midst of the writhing throng, I had just finished shaking to a Beatles track when I was horrified to hear the actual living squeal of Johnny Pitts, the Push folk-singer who had for ten years unsuccessfully attempted to emigrate from Australia so as to go to South America and – I quote the wording of his passport application – fight for anarchy. At last they had made the mistake of letting him out, and now he was here. As usual he thrashed his guitar, whined a few bars about bad working conditions in some American correctional facility, and fell sideways. Somebody put the Beatles back on and the crowded room danced again, but it had been a bad moment. Sitting exhausted in a corner with a woman kneeling at each arm and another soothing his forehead from behind, Dalziel suddenly looked haunted. The past was catching up.

But you could always outrun it. One place we ran to was the Iron Bridge Tavern, deep in the East End. Queenie Watts and a friend of hers called Shirley sang jazz there every Saturday. We used to go down there in Dingo Kinsella's apology for a car. Dingo was a spidery journalist serving a one-year stretch in the London bureau of one of the Sydney newspapers. This meant that he was being paid an Australian salary, which in turn meant that he was, by our standards, wealthy. If he had drunk less seriously he would have been driving a Facel Vega at the very least. As things were, he locomoted in what must have been the last roadworthy example of the old upright Ford Popular. A car that had never been popular with anybody I knew of, it held all of us in acute discomfort. Dingo drove the way he drank, as if he wanted to die. But since the Popular's top speed wasn't much higher than that of a walking man, we were all agreed that it was worth the risk. Every Saturday, Dingo would give three toots on the horn and we would all pile out of the house to go looking for the car in the next street. Hearty McHale refused to let him park the machine even momentarily in front of her salubrious establishment, lest property values should be lowered still further.

On the way down the long East India Dock Road to the pub the car would weave from side to side in a sine curve of about ten feet amplitude and a hundred feet pitch. At the Iron Bridge we would listen to the happily shouting trad band until time was called and we were thrown out. On the road home the car ran straight and level, because when Dingo got blotto beyond a certain point he seized up solid. Turning corners remained a problem, which we could sometimes solve by getting him to close his eyes and talking him through it. In a faster car this would have been fatal. To us it was just part of what Bruce Jennings might have called a Rewarding Experience for the Young People.

The Green Gladiolus

Dressed as a deliberate caricature of an English gentleman from the late gasolier period, Bruce Jennings had been in London longer than anyone and was both appalled and delighted that the rest of Australia now seemed bent on joining him. He was appalled because, without being in any way servile, he had submitted himself to Europe and was by now ten years deep into a love affair that the new arrivals looked determined to consummate in five minutes. He was delighted because they provided him with raw material. I suppose Reg and myself were included in his field of observation. But Jennings' interest in Dave was more than just clinical. He recognised a fellow talent. His memories of home sharpened by exile, Jennings was the first Australian writer-performer to exploit the Australian idiom for its full poetic value. He had a fine ear and the learning to back it up. Dave, though an avid general reader, had only the ear. But Jennings valued Dave's ability to fish a phrase up out of childhood and throw it flapping on the table. 'Fair suck of the pineapple,' Dave would say in protest when I tried to hit him for a quid at Wally's, and Jennings' eyes would go shiny. He'd forgotten that one.

Wally's was the greasy spoon in a lane behind Warwick Road. It served plates of fat. You could have sausages in your fat or fried eggs in your fat. You could have the sausages and the fried eggs together, but it meant you got more fat. We ate at Wally's most evenings because the price of cooking at home was a stream of protest notes from Hearty McHale about noise, smells, smoke, fire and the lettuce leaf so vandalously trodden into the hallway carpet. Wally's was a strange place to find the fastidious Jennings – who was known to take luncheon at Rules in the company of his admirer, John Betjeman – but he dropped in a couple of times during the period when he and Dave were discussing the possibility of a movie. I secretly laughed this possibility to scorn, not yet having realised that the ability to plan in the long term, while retaining the capacity to tell a long-term plan from a wild dream, is crucial to success in any of the

collaborative arts. I thought they were both a bit nuts.

Jennings left you in no doubt of his brilliance, though in some fear that his monologues might never end. A career drinker, he would stand balefully in the middle of a party, the only man present in a Turnbull & Asser shirt, antique Chavet tie, pin-stripe double-breasted Savile Row suit, Lobb shoes, black fedora and a monocle. 'Des is the name,' he would loudly confide to an invisible interlocutor, 'Des Esseintes.' And indeed he was the hero of *A Rebours* to the life, a Count Robert de Montesquiou *de nos jours*, creating himself as a work of art. He didn't have the living tortoise inset with turquoises but no doubt it was on order. Meanwhile he had everything else, and I was wide-eyed even as he stood there swaying. When he fell to the floor he would usually take a couple of people with him. Laid to rest on a sofa, he would sleep until the party thinned out. Then, with just the right-sized audience, he would start a closed-eyed, resonant muttering which might consist of nothing but brand-names and radio jingles from the far Australian past. 'Rosella Tomato Sauce ... Twice As Nice If Kept On Ice ... Sydney Flour is our flour, we use it every day ... I like Aeroplane Jelly, Aeroplane Jelly for me ... You'll sleep tight 'cause you'll sleep right, on a Lotusland inner-spring mattress ...'

Years later I was to realise that this was the most original side of his mind talking. He was rediscovering and reordering an Australian language which had never had any pretensions beyond the useful and had thus retained an inviolable purity. It was the language written on bottles of cough medicine and packets of junket powder: a vocabulary without any value beyond common currency, and therefore undiluted by aesthetic pretension. With a sure instinct reinforced by his dandyish collector's erudition, he had realised that not all the ephemeral was evanescent – that there was such a thing as a poetry of trivia, uniquely evocative for a country whose art was hag-ridden by a self-conscious striving towards autonomous respectability. Jennings was already well embarked on a salvage expedition to raise a nation's entire cultural subconscious. The obtuse among his country's intellectuals – a high proportion – thought he was lowering the tone, and belittled him accordingly. He armoured himself by polishing his façade still more brightly, Delacroix, said the doomed Jean Prévost in his wonderful book about Baudelaire, was a dandy not because he wanted to impose his superiority but because he wanted to defend it. Similarly Jennings retreated ever further into his own effulgence, taunting his detractors with the dazzling pages of an open book – the lexicon of their lost youth.

At the time, however, I couldn't get interested in any of that, since it concerned Australia, and Jennings' Australia, through being so vivid, only lit up what I was still trying to leave. It was Jennings' Europe that attracted me.

Jennings could tell you what Satie had said about Ravel. I knew what Hemingway had said about Gertrude Stein, but Jennings knew what Gertrude Stein had said about Picabia, because he owned the letters. He also owned a Picabia. For Jennings, the side-trails of the old international avant-garde were a stamping ground. I thought then, and still think now, that it is more important to be familiar with the major artistic works than knowingly conversant with the minor artists, but Jennings wasn't as easy to fault there as one might have thought. Just because he knew a lot about Honegger didn't mean that he was an ignoramus about Haydn. Jennings was formidable. I didn't envy him his talent, being conceited enough to believe that I had some of my own. I did envy him his well-stocked mind. Actually I should have envied him his talent too: stocking your mind isn't the same as stacking crates in a warehouse. It's a gift.

So is being a landlady. Either you run the show, or the show runs you. Hearty McHale was determined to be mistress in her own house. It followed ineluctably that we were on borrowed time. We were careful to have no parties. We rarely cooked anything more complicated than half a pound of frankfurters. But we were an epicentre of unpredictability. Hearty McHale's mental equilibrium depended on a silent house full of closed doors, with nothing moving except rent. The only acceptable noise in her establishment was the restrained clamour made by money as it transferred itself from the tenant's wallet into the owner's bank account. From there, according to rumour, the loot went to Spain and was sunk into a block of flats affording a view of the sea to any British mountain-climbing holiday-maker equipped with powerful binoculars.

Such was the system which our mere presence disturbed. If we had been trainee Trappists we might have lasted longer. As things were, the crisis came closer every day. In the evenings I would stagger upstairs with heaps of Penguin books for my growing library. When one of these heaps collapsed in my arms, an extruded copy of *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* inflicted minor but detectable damage on the hallway rubber plant. Hearty McHale reacted as if I had thrown a phosphorous grenade. She had already warned me that the beams under my area of the floor were not designed to hold up the British Museum reading room. Books, however, were a negligible irritant compared with women. Reg had a very quiet Australian girl-friend whom he planned to, and subsequently did, marry. Mostly he visited her instead of she him, but she turned up in Warwick Road on two occasions and for Hearty McHale two meant two hundred. Robin came to me at least once a week because it was not practicable for me to take to her the clothes that needed ironing, darning, mending, replacing, etc. Unless these missions of mercy could be accurately timed by the synchronisation of watches and the use of semaphore from the top window, they

necessarily entailed the ringing of the downstairs front doorbell, which Hearty McHale interpreted as the prelude to nuclear attack.

But it was Dave's female admirers who tipped the already precarious balance. When he loved them and left them, some of them failed to get the point, and came looking for him. Reg and I spent a lot of time sitting in the kitchen with a lissome yet decidedly hysterical actress called Bambi who was reluctant to believe that Dave had had to depart suddenly for Easter Island. Leaving one cigarette still smouldering in the ashtray on the kitchen table, she would light several others while compulsively searching the flat. Reg would trail her, catching the ash in his cupped hands before it hit Hearty McHale's moth-eaten though purportedly invaluable carpet. Dave was curled up in the loft above the bathroom. He was so tired after a day's work at Cornwall's Erections that he didn't care where he slept, so it was all right for him. But it was tough on us, and finally we rebelled. Perhaps we were offended by what he could afford to turn down. An evening came when we declined to stall Bambi and she caught him still in the bath. It was the luxury bubble-bath we gave him each Friday. Friday was pay-day and we would count his money as he lay in deep foam after another dedicated week of selfless toil. Taking the sponge from me and the loofah from Reg, Bambi arrogated to herself the task of cleansing and anointing the exhausted hero. Reg and I retreated to the kitchen for half a bottle each of Woodpecker cider, a few hands of gin rummy and some ill-disguised fits of jealousy. When Hearty McHale burst in, her pulsatingly veined feet were about six inches off the linoleum, thus indicating the speed she had attained going up the final flight of stairs. She evinced the special fury reserved for when it was Dave who was receiving the female visitor. Brushing our feeble reassurances aside, she headed for the bathroom, with Reg and me close behind her and making as much noise as possible so that Dave might take warning. The bathroom door was locked from inside but Hearty McHale had a ring of duplicate keys, like a warder. She threw open the door. Bambi was nowhere to be seen. Dave sat there in deep white suds looking suitably shocked. Some of the items in his pile of discarded clothes were suspiciously diaphanous at a second glance but otherwise there was no sign of anything untoward. Had he lowered her out of the window on a rope of knotted towels?

The long, interrogative silence was broken by the splutter of Bambi surfacing. Mesmerised by her cap, epaulettes and half-cup brassière of glistening foam, I had a pang of envy that I can still feel as I write this. Reg positioned himself to catch Hearty McHale's falling body but she was made of sterner stuff than that. The network of veins stood out in relief from the tops of her feet like the roots of gum-trees on the bank of a dry creek, but if standing on your dignity is what

really matters, you can even have apoplexy in the upright position. Skinflint means what it says.

Autumn of the Expatriates

So we got notice one day and a new home the next. It was the house in Melbury Road, whose palatial ground-floor flat had suddenly become vacant after the landlady's husband died of old age. The landlady, who had run an all-female orchestra during an earlier incarnation, instantly moved into the basement, where she kept open sherry for any of the orchestra's alumnae still capable of dropping by. Her name was Geraldine and she was, for a landlady, unusually accommodating, probably because of her close spiritual connection with 'hot' music, a renowned sweetener of the soul. An already heavily peopled house was thus made free to rival the demographic density of Shanghai. There were three floors of Australian girls above us, Geraldine and her heavily lisping visiting female ex-clarinetists below us, and Dibbs Buckley living in the backyard studio with his gorgeous wife Delish – a name whose accent fell on the second syllable because it was short for delicious.

The backyard studio had been added when the house was owned by one of the Pre-Raphaelites – either Holman Burne-Jones or Edward Everett Hunt, I can never remember which, having conceived, as you might have gathered, a hatred for the Brotherhood and all their works which has endured to this day. But the Pre-Raphs knew how to look after themselves. The studio was a split-level pavilion befitting Buckley's status as incomparably the most successful young Australian expatriate. Sidney Nolan had taken decades to break through but Dibbs, while the dust from the rubble was still rising, made his entrance through the same hole with a Qantas bag over his shoulder. The Marlborough Gallery was selling his pictures as fast as he could paint them, which was very fast indeed, because he worked in sequences. Golden-haired, rugby-nosed and as restless as a surfer on a wet day, he chose a theme, painted every possible variation on it, and then sold his sketchbooks and preliminary drawings along with the pictures. Before sending the drawings off for sale he would deck them out with quotations from his current reading. Privately I thought this practice a

slightly premature assumption of immortality but publicly I smoked his expensive cigars and drank his even more expensive imported Australian beer, while dotting, like every other red-blooded male of Dibbs's acquaintance, on the seraphically lovely Delish – an admiration which in my case she didn't pretend to reciprocate. Mortification was eased by the fact that she plainly didn't care much for any of us. Unusually for a woman, she didn't favour even Dave with a soft eye. She would smile at him occasionally, but it was only a refrigerator door opening.

Delish was a van Eyck angel in jeans and T-shirt, but she had a hard business brain and could spot anyone who would waste her husband's time a mile off. Dibbs's propensity to sit around drinking and yarning with his less luminous fellow countrymen she regarded as a tolerable, or at any rate inevitable, subsidiary urge, but she had a clock running somewhere in the background and always made sure he was dead on time for dinner with Sir Kenneth Clark. At the end of the day's work, if the late autumn weather was fine, we would gather around the great oak in front of the studio to drink away our respective memories of Penguin Books, luxury cars that broke down on the M1, the rigours of Cornwall's Erections and an enormously demanding sequence of paintings about Christine Keeler and Mandy Rice-Davies. The arguments were more heated than illuminating. Dibbs would hail the greatness of Matisse, I would explain that Matisse was essentially derivative, Dibbs would correctly insist that the *circa* 1906 Matisses in Leningrad were of an unparalleled grandeur, and I would pour scorn all the more eloquently for not having been to Leningrad and knowing nothing about the subject. Meanwhile Dave had the blacked-out look he got when he was mentally working on a screen-play and Reg wondered openly how these egomaniacs could breathe the same air. It was a pleasant pastime, which for the rest of us went on after Delish had appeared, whispered in Dibbs's ear, and taken him inside. But when, half an hour later, the two of them would emerge transformed – Dibbs in a dinner jacket with his aureate locks carefully tousled, Delish in silver sandals and some dream of a plum-juice silk sheath held up by nothing but her perfect breasts – the pastime was shattered by reality. They were off to the opera and we weren't. The dregs in the tins of beer tasted like aloes.

But the air of prosperity emanating from the backyard studio was contagious. Before winter had taken its grip, Dalziel had signed off from Cornwall's Erections and signed on as a supply teacher. Reg handed in his chauffeur's cap and took the same route to respectability. Though they never knew what school they would be teaching at tomorrow there was usually work, and, more important, always a decent pay-packet. Australian supply teachers were in good

repute, especially if they taught English, because among the natives the ability to spell and parse their own language was already becoming scarce. Each morning the three of us left for work looking the height of bourgeois conformity. My beard was still in place but the effect was tempered by Reg's spare tweed jacket, which he eventually let me have at a low price after I had burned a hole in the sleeve. At the end of the day we would converge again out of the cold, exhaling puffs of steam but with enough spare energy to get on with real life. I worked at my poems, Reg chipped away at the opening sentence of a novel which might well be finished by now, and Dave, with Dingoes willing co-operation, transported the increasingly less rough assembly of *The Man from the Organisation* from one borrowed editing room to another. Dinner was meat – not hunks of meat, as in Australia, but pathetic scraps of meat, as in Britain – which the girls upstairs transformed into edible dishes by heating it in secret ways and adding bits of stuff to it. There was a lot of wine. The evening usually grew into a party. Life had acquired a certain rhythm.

Spencer disrupted it. When left behind in Australia, he had been bisexual, broke, and an expert at wasting his outstanding verbal gift. Now, suddenly, he was married to an heiress, had arrived in London by aircraft, possessed money to burn, and was set on making the West End the jumping-off point for an assault on world theatre. He wanted me to collaborate with him on the writing of a revue. Once written, the show would be financed by his wife's father, whose name in Australia was synonymous with a brand of fly-paper which hung in every home. For almost fifty years (Pam, Spencer's wife, was a child of the tycoon's third, or it could have been fourth, marriage) money had been accumulating in the family vault with the tempo and volume of flies hitting sticky paper across Australia's three million square miles of hot rock. Now the cash would be put to creative use. Spencer explained all this to me while he manoeuvred a second-hand but sumptuous Armstrong-Siddeley Sapphire towards the terrace house he and Pam had taken in Hampstead. A whole floor of the house had been fitted out as a study. High-quality cigarettes and alcohol, purchased on Spencer's Harrods account, stood within reach of a casual hand. The typewriter was the size of a grand piano. Here we settled down one Saturday and discussed what we were going to write. We were still discussing it on Sunday. Pam did the cooking, which consisted principally of examining the tin of jellied pheasant until she found the instructions for getting it open. Spencer and I did the talking. Nobody did any actual writing but it was early days and careful planning was held to be a virtue. The show, provisionally called *The Charge of the Light Fandango*, would galvanise the comic theatre out of the complacency into which it had been plunged by the inexplicable success of

Beyond the Fringe. Spencer and I found it hard to agree about most things but on that point we concurred: the audience must not be truckled to. The current fad for undergraduate irreverence, we knew, merely flattered their philistine self-satisfaction. We would provide something less palatable.

But success lay in the future – rather further in the future than either of us could possibly imagine. Meanwhile here was a quasi-creative way of justifying a succession of drunken winter weekends. One could get smashed and call it a theatrical experiment. Theatre, always absurdly overvalued in London, was at that time spoken of with religious awe. Some of the older actors deserved the worship they attracted. I saw Gielgud in *The Cherry Orchard* and thought him as good as the play. Somehow I got to Chichester and saw Olivier's *Othello*. When he ripped the crucifix from his neck and flung it aside, you knew that it had flown straight down the gangway to his dressing-room and hung itself on a hook: the physical energy was volcanic but precise, like his articulation of the words, which his super-spade accent coated with bitter chocolate but did not blur. *Put out delight and den put out delight*. Exactly what he did put out, the sexy devil.

Alas, it was already the twilight of the great actors. The producer was the new king. This was all right if the gimmick fitted: Peter Hall's *Troilus and Cressida*, previously known as Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*, lost nothing by being put on in a sand-tray and Dorothy Tutin looked good barefooted, kicking granular silicon all over the Americans in the front stalls. For Peter Brook's all-leather *King Lear*, however, Paul Scofield had been encouraged to adopt a gravel voice. From the circle of the Aldwych I couldn't hear what he was talking about. He looked like Tugboat Annie on a wet night and sounded like a cement mixer. Even worse, the director had run the first three acts together without an interval. There was no way of knowing this fact in advance unless you had bought a programme and I had bought a couple of extra pints of bitter instead. In the exact centre of a very long row of people, by the end of the first act I was ready for a pee. By the end of the second act I was ready for emergency surgery. When the third act followed without a break I knew that something would have to be done, possibly *in situ*. I held out as long as I could and then started crawling across people's knees. On stage, Gloucester was having his eyes put out. In the circle, there was a man struggling desperately sideways towards the exit through an entanglement of legs, like one of those American footballers in training who have to run very fast with knees high through piles of tyres.

I made it to safety approximately in time, but as I stood there – or, rather, reeled and swayed there like a man watering his lawn with a hose which had been unexpectedly connected to a powerful artesian well – it began to strike me

that the capacity of my bladder was perhaps incompatible with the quantities of liquid I was attempting to put into it. Over the next decade I attempted to solve this problem by forcing even more liquid in, on the assumption that this would enlarge the receptacle. Common sense, which might have suggested that this was the wrong approach, was vitiated by the method itself. When I finally embraced abstinence it was because of the simple urge to work a longer day. Thus, without joining Alcoholics Anonymous, I was at last able to leave *Piss-Artists Notorious*. But that's a much later story. At the time we are talking about, I was a man out of control, sobbing with relief in a urinal while the lights were going out on the Third Servant as he fetched flax and whites of eggs for Gloucester's bleeding face.

The return to my seat in the audience was effected by the same route employed on leaving it. At least nobody mistook my performance for part of the production. But following hard upon producer's theatre came the theatre of group improvisation, one of whose hallmarks was that the actors were practically never on the actual stage, but were continually roaming up and down the gangways looking for trouble. New York's Living Theater had come to town and its collectively inspired cast spent the whole time in the audience provoking hostile bourgeois response and thus unveiling the insidious nature of US imperialism, although there was rarely any mention of the especially insidious aspect of US imperialism represented by the Living Theater. London's typical literary couple – he a novelist, she a cookery correspondent or vice versa – would sit dutifully attentive in their aisle seats while a naked six-foot white actor with a beard, or a naked six-foot black actor without a beard but with an earring, thrust his bottom in their faces as a challenge to their honky values. Afterwards they would invite him home to insult them further, consume all the liquor in their stripped-pine drinks cabinet and violate their teenage daughter.

Dibbs and Delish Buckley varied from this practice only by inviting the whole cast. Our nostrils invaded by an unfamiliar sweet odour, Dave, Reg and I went out into the yard one chill night and found it inhabited by murmuring people in fancy dress, passing, after one dainty puff each, an oddly defeated-looking roll-your-own cigarette around in a circle. Having included herself for some reason in this silent pow-wow, Delish looked especially exotic, like a Dior mannequin in a hobo camp. Unmasked yet vociferously confident, I joined the circle, making sure, when the butt got to me, that I dealt with it properly. I sucked it to a stub in two jumbo drags. 'Who is *this* asshole?' whispered a huge black man standing by the oak tree. I knew he was black because I couldn't see him against the dark trunk and I knew he was huge because the voice came from high up. Delish gave me one of those downward waves of the hand with which she customarily

apologised for the provincial behaviour of her husband's hangers-on. She had beautiful hands, incidentally: deeply tanned but glowing with that edible, enviable golden health which Modigliani gave his odalisques while he was dying. Cruel one, I pursue thee over the rolling billows. Horace said that. Someone must have put him through it.

The Deep Tan Fades

The foundations of Delish Buckley's profound tan had been laid in Australia. That much went without saying. She and I had both been exposed to the same intensity and duration of ultra-violet. Even though she had done most of her elegantly splayed spine-bashing on the high-toned beaches north of Newport, whereas I had been mainly confined to the humbler inlets stretching south from Bondi to Cronulla, it had been the same free sunlight for both of us. But Delish's tan was now being topped up by regular visits to the Bahamas, St Tropez and – the Buckleys practically discovered the place – Bali. Her tan was intact. Mine was a memory. In Australia, even during winter, one had always had, when one examined oneself before the mirror, a tide-mark around one's waist and upper thighs. When naked, even at one's most wan, one had always looked, at the very least, as if one were wearing a nifty little pair of white panties. But after the second year in London the hallowed demarcation line paled away, never properly to return. Stripped to the waist on a summer's day in Holland Park, the most you could acquire was a mild pink blush. Jamaicans in Fair Isle beanies laughed as they danced past your outstretched form. At night the pink rash itched like an authentic burn but declined to alter the skin's pigmentation. The melanin remained unmoved. You woke in the morning looking more than ever like a peeled raw potato about a week old, with a certain subtle tinge of azure to its chill whiteness. For the girls, the disaster could be staved off with a sun-lamp or, failing that, a timely application of Tan-Fastic. For the men, most of whom could barely afford to keep an ordinary electric bulb burning, there was nothing to do except become resigned. Turning pale was part of one's commitment to the great adventure.

As so often happens in matters of morale, to give up the symbol led to a wholesale erosion of the reality it stood for. When the Chindits in Burma lost hope, they gave up shaving, and when they gave up shaving they would die of a cut finger. When we lost our tan, the emblem of our bronzed Aussie robustness,

we tended to yield along the whole front of general fitness and healthy diet. Dalziel was an exception: he had never smoked and always drank less than other people so that he could give them orders in a credible voice. The rest of us smoked as much as our credit would stand. My borrowing requirement for cigarettes always ran at an unreal proportion of salary. Each time I shifted to smaller cigarettes, I upped the frequency with which I demolished them. By now I had left Players No. 6, the kiddies' cigarette, far behind, and was smoking some brand that looked as if it should have been dangling from the lower lip of a hamster. But I sucked them in like short lengths of spaghetti.

The steady kippering of my insides had so far led to only intermittent convulsions – the average coughing fit was easily quelled by squeezing my head between my knees – but my wind already showed signs of impairment. If I ran a hundred yards for a stationary bus I couldn't get up the stairs after I had caught it. Like most people who smoked umpteen cigarettes a day, I tasted only the first one. The succeeding umpteen minus one were a compulsive ritual which had no greater savour than the fumes of burning money. To have experienced the full thrill, one would have had to have been one's own girl-friend, for whom mouth-to-mouth contact clearly had the same effect as sucking the exhaust pipe of a diesel truck. Smoking so many more cigarettes than you felt like smoking was supposed to indicate an addiction to nicotine, but I suspect that in my case it was merely gluttony. Call it an addictive personality if you like, but since the age of nought I had never been able to get enough of anything. First it was milk and then it was marshmallows.

Just after the war my mother was invited to an RSL social evening in Kogarah. Whereas any man who had served in any capacity could be a full member of the Returned Servicemen's League, she, a war widow whose husband had died on active service, had to wait to be invited into the RSL hall as a guest. Such was the position of women in Australia at that time. One of the most prominent dignitaries of the local RSL lived in our street. He had spent the war as a quartermaster at Singleton, with special responsibility for latrine-boring equipment. My mother's inclination was to wish a plague on the whole business, but she wanted to give me a night out, and the social evening had a special supper for children. A highlight of the supper was marshmallows. Several of the children ate half a dozen of these each and felt sick. I swallowed two dozen and felt fine, except when my breathing stopped. Picked up from where I was writhing on the floor, I was held aloft by giant hands and slapped vigorously on the back. Nothing happened for some time, and then a pink-and-white mass of congealed marshmallows the size and splendour of a shampoo-soaked satin cushion from Zsa-Zsa Gabor's boudoir hit the floor with a sticky plop.

This pattern was to recur. I had better be silent about the ticklish matter of a certain famous pie, except to say that if that brand of meat pie had not been meant to be eaten in excess, its pastry would not have been so enticingly soggy, and that if the pie had not been meant to be regurgitated, the cubes of meat gleaming through its sludge of gravy would not have been so purple. But the RSL marshmallows and the meat pies happened in Australia, as an occasional alternative to good home cooking, and where the effects of *gourmandise* could be offset by exercise. In London there was no home cooking worthy of the name. When you were in funds you ate out. But only the people whose faces appeared in such publications as *Town* and *Queen* could afford to eat in restaurants serving food which would leave them looking and feeling better instead of worse. 'A way of life based on the glossy magazine,' Harold Macmillan had said in a bid to touch the common pulse, and his very words told you how remote the idea was from everyday experience.

When we felt rich, we ate in the local Angus Steak House, where a bland but plump piece of animal was accompanied by reasonably crisp chips and a half tomato cut with a toothed circumference, like a rubicund cogwheel. When we felt less rich, we might eat at a certain British chain of hamburger restaurants devoted to serving nothing else. In recent years, perhaps encouraged by competition from McDonald's, the British hamburger has become a credit to the nation. At the time of which I speak, it looked like a scorched beer-coaster or a tenderised disc brake. Flanked by chips which, if picked up individually on a fork, either shattered or else drooped until their ends touched, the British hamburger lay there sweltering under its limp grey duvet of over-fried onions. When you cut it up, put the pieces in your mouth and swallowed them, the British hamburger shaped itself to the bottom of your stomach like ballast, while interacting with your gastric juices to form an incipient belch of enormous potential, an airship which had been inflated in a garage. This belch, when silently released, would cause people standing twenty yards away to start examining the soles of their shoes. The vocalised version sounded like a bag of tools thrown into a bog.

The British hamburger thus symbolised, with savage neatness, the country's failure to provide its ordinary people with food which did anything more for them than sustain life. In Italy, for the same price as a typical British hamburger meal including sweet, a builder's labourer could eat like a king – rather better in fact, because pasta dishes gain from being kept simple. Françoise, short of lire herself, and with her slim resources cut in half by my presence, always took me where the poor ate well. In Britain this opportunity was not on the cards. It was said that a poor man could eat well in Britain if he ate a British Railways

breakfast three times a day, but British Railways was already in the process of putting its breakfast beyond the reach of the average wage-earner – a process which was to culminate, after the name-change to British Rail, in a successful effort to put the same breakfast beyond the reach of the Duke of Westminster. A more practical alternative to the British hamburger – more practical than climbing on a train just to eat – was the workers' café, or kayf. Alas, not every district had one of these. At their best, the kayfs had a certain style. Men with flat caps, donkey jackets and chipped fingernails could fill up on beef and two veg plus spotted dick with custard. At their worst, the kayfs sliced the beef with the same sectioning equipment used to prepare laboratory specimens for mounting on a microscope slide. Even worse than the worst, there was Wally's, still bubbling away like a tub of hot fat in the lane behind Warwick Road, only a few hundred yards away from Melbury Road across Kensington High Street. All too often we would end up at Wally's because we were collectively too broke for any other solution except one: the last, the zero option, which was to eat at home.

This wasn't so bad when the girls on one of the floors above us did the cooking, but they weren't always available. Most evenings we would send an ambassador upstairs to explore the possibility of having our food cooked for us. Usually the girls would invite us all up and help transform our scrawny chops or dreadful packets of sausages and streaky bacon into something edible. But increasingly often they were lost in the throes of preparing a beef Stroganoff or a casserole, the centrepiece of some candle-lit dinner party for English suitors in charcoal pin-stripe suits. It got to the point where the girls would be wearing full-length gowns and jewellery. The Ruperts and Christophers would arrive in cabs full of roses. The stench of flowers on the stairs drove us back defeated into our all-male domain, where there was nothing to do except fend for ourselves, with predictable results. Supermarket food bred a supermarket mentality. I myself could account for a pound of pork sausages at a sitting. I don't know exactly what was in the sausages, but I did know that a block of ice-cream made by the same firm didn't taste significantly different.

Though Dalziel made sure he got to a health-food restaurant once a month, the rest of us ate junk because it was easy and I ate more junk than anybody because to keep on eating was easier than stopping. For brief spells the supervisory care of an accompanying woman led to a saner diet, but the only reason this happened was because letting her look after the food was easier than looking after it myself. It was the line of least resistance, and usually it led downwards. I had not yet begun to put on weight, but the possibility was there, like the side of a hill getting ready to slip. There was a falling feeling, especially in the scalp.

My comb had hair in it. When the others told me I had a bald patch I told them it was an enlarged crown, but with a shaving mirror held at an angle over my head like a halo I looked into the bathroom mirror and saw a would-be tonsure about the size of a florin. American graduates in hair technology called this the 'O' effect. The 'O' effect at the back of my head was being approached by an 'M' effect at the front, where my temples, when I pulled the hair back from them with the edge of my hand, were retreating as I watched. Add this combination to my wrecked mouth, my all-over pallor and an escalating inability to make any sudden move without coughing for ten minutes, and you had a lot to worry about. And when you had a lot to worry about, the thing to do was to have a lot to drink.

Everybody I knew drank all the time, so I wasn't unusual in that. But I was unusual, I now see, in so easily getting drunk. I couldn't see it then because I was always either drunk or recovering. What I had was a ridiculously light head. I had no more business drinking alcohol than someone allergic to cheese has eating pizza. Unfortunately I liked the feeling of getting tight. When we all went down to the pub in the evenings, I discovered with intense pleasure that the revoltingly cheery horse-brass décor was already out of focus after the second pint of brown water. After the third pint I could barely articulate, and like most people in that condition I found articulation a matter of urgency. Trying to say something of extreme importance, I dimly registered that my tongue was moving slowly. So I started to say the same thing again, as if repetition would get the message across. At closing time it was a hundred-yard walk home for everybody else and about half a mile for me. Every few seconds I would spot the rest of the blokes and try to join them, but couldn't find them again until I had bounced off a brick wall or a parked car. The hangover next morning would be an epic. Overnight dehydration shrivelled my eyes to raisins. Every morning my tongue was like a small sand dune abraded by a hot wind.

Nowadays, more than ten years after swearing off the demon rum, I can take half an inch of wine with a meal without seizing the bottle from the waiter and tilting it to my pursed lips. Strictly speaking, therefore, I was never an alcoholic. I didn't need to be. Just as most people who take cocaine are not drug addicts, but behave so badly that they might as well be, so did I manifest every characteristic of the true booze artist. Except one: my leg wasn't hollow. Or to put it another way: my head wasn't hard enough to let my leg fill up. I got paralytic too quickly to do myself any major damage. The authentic toper bombs his brain-cells with a bottle of Scotch a day and you never notice until they take him away for a liver transplant. Me you noticed in the first few minutes. All the more unlikely, then, that the delicately poised Leslie should even contemplate an

emotional alliance.

Yet it happened, although so briefly that I doubted its occurrence immediately afterwards. Probably I doubted its occurrence even during, and thus hastened its end. Though she was undemonstrative to the point of shyness, it was all too obvious that she was letting me into her life as a distraction from heartbreak. A long love affair with a married man was either reaching the usual conclusion or had entered one of the usual off-again hiatuses preceding the usual conclusion. The older and more experienced man having lost his charm, the way was open for the younger and less experienced man to pose his more easily thwarted threat. The door to her affections opened so suddenly that I can forgive myself for falling through it, but not for flailing straight across the room and toppling out of the window. Leslie would have had a civilising effect on me, given time. We made our first private-life contact not at Harmondsworth or in the Kombibus but at the London Library in St James's Square. I was there doing research into authors' photographs. Each week I gave myself a whole day at the London Library to dig up previously unused, easily distinguishable pictures of, say, Maxwell Anderson, Sherwood Anderson and Robert E. Sherwood. This took about twenty minutes. The rest of the day I would read. I read many volumes of the proceedings of the Nuremberg Tribunal, thereby saddening myself deeply but gaining a valuable inoculation of disillusionment – the precondition for a realistic happiness. Just on cue to help me test this theory out, Leslie showed up in one of the metal-floored book-stacks so that I could clank casually around the corner of a wall of shelves and meet her face to face. She was collecting references for one of the Peregrines she was editing. Peregrines were seriously highbrow Penguins and Leslie was a seriously highbrow person. Being that, being a woman and being in publishing, she was also seriously underpaid, but her little basement flat in Pimlico was a delight. Well used to not noticing my surroundings, I noticed these. Like everything about her the interior decoration was lightly done but not too dimity. There were postcard pictures of Colette and Simone de Beauvoir, of Alma Mahler-Werfel and Lou Andreas-Salome. Not even names to me at that time, they crowded Leslie's mantelpiece with what she presumably took to be friendly faces. Virginia Woolf was up there on the wall, like a sad horse sticking its head in through a window. Sipping tea, I made myself at home. Helping myself to her vodka, I made myself too at home, but that didn't matter at first. The bull had arrived in the china shop but the proprietress welcomed the diversion.

A lot went on in two weeks. With Robin either out of town or safely ironing a large pile of shirts, I took Leslie to see the newly reconstituted complete print of *La Règle du jeu* at the Academy. She knew much more about Renoir than I did

but imparted the knowledge more mercifully than I would have done had the positions been reversed. She had read modern languages at Somerville and had a wall full of Pléiade and Insel Verlag thin-paper editions to prove it. I scanned their immaculate spines with the mixture of desire and fury with which I still look at closed books even today. Eight years had gone by since she had come down from Oxford but she still went there every second weekend. The name Geoffrey was mentioned. I imagined some weedy countertenor in a long black academic gown. Casting myself as the iconoclast – it didn't take much effort – I trampled on her tentatively expressed nostalgia for the cloisters, the libraries and the crocus-bordered lawns. In view of the fact that I was heading for just such a haven myself, this was the yelping of a dog in the manger, but it jolted her from her melancholy. During tea at the Tate one Saturday afternoon I gave her my complete diagnosis of Britain's post-imperial ills. In the setting of Rex Whistler's light-fantastic murals, my oration must have sounded wonderfully incongruous. Certainly it got her attention. Resting her chin on those porcelain wrists she stared at me absorbed, as if Lenin had mounted a soap-box in Kew Gardens.

Since I was too young for her in every way, the law of diminishing returns would have set in eventually, but for the nonce she was not bored. Horrified, but not bored, What put her off, then? Perhaps it was a combination of things, tolerable as separate symptoms yet adding up to a syndrome that no woman of refinement could long countenance. My nicotine-gilded right hand might have been a drawcard on its own: the man with the golden arm. Smoke must have given my lank hair and beard a cosy smell, like the snug of an old pub. My British hamburger breath spoke challengingly of the modern Britain. Hush Puppies having attained a ubiquity which made me less defiant about associating them with the repressive footwear of the sahibs, I had bought a pair, saving money by choosing a brand called something else. Judging by how, after the first hour of having had them on, the sweat of my feet reacted with their unbreathing uppers, my new shoes should have been called Mush Puppies. After a week they were Slush Puppies. Yet Leslie was able to laugh about them as I left them outside in the area under the wrought-iron staircase.

What she couldn't laugh at, however, was the way I started turning up half-cut as soon as I thought she was in the bag, and then getting fully cut while I was with her. She might have pointed out, correctly, that it was an insult. Instead she just drifted out of reach. Before I could wake up to what was going missing, our friendship was back to where it began. I supposed then, and still prefer to suppose now, that I wanted it that way, and so hurried the business to its conclusion. There is, of course, always the possibility, however vanishingly

small, that she simply didn't like me, but that sort of thing happens only to other men, doesn't it? No, she was too serious, too intense, too honest, too much. After my first evening with her I was already writing poems about saying goodbye for ever. It was a bit of a blow to find out that she felt roughly the same way, yet hurt pride was lost in the relief. Writers much more exalted than I am have the same weakness. Think twice before you get mixed up with a writer, and ten times before you marry one. Writers want things to be over, so that they can write the elegy. Gray toured that churchyard on the run.

Prelude to the Aftermath

You could tell how winter became spring by the way the pile of manuscript paper representing *The Charge of the Light Fandango* doubled in size, from two pages to four pages. There had never been four pages to match them. Spencer and I had once written obscurely but here was the evidence that we had grown out of all that. Now we wrote impenetrably. We were producing the first truly post-Cubist material in the history of comedy. Any idea that made us laugh we would hone and refine until it didn't. Then we would try it on Pam to make sure that it met our standards. If she looked sufficiently bewildered, it was in. If she laughed, we took it back for a rewrite.

Despite the unnerving proximity of the lost Leslie, I was also feeling pretty cocky at work. Sir Allen Lane had given over the day-to-day management of Penguin to a whizz-kid called Tony Godwin. Actually Godwin was already in his forties but it was a symptom of Britain's post-war condition that anyone given power before his hair turned white was called a whizz-kid. Godwin's hair was worn long and thick to frame his Caribbean sun-tan, with a candy-striped high-collared shirt, kipper tie and waist-hugging charcoal mohair suit all conspiring to connect the heavy head with the lightweight shoes. A star player in a gentlemen's game, Godwin was clearly very bright. His neglect of the back catalogue was to have deleterious effects in the long term, but there were enough attendant lords who could have looked after that aspect if they had seen its urgency. In the search for new titles, however, he was truly adventurous. He brought in a young editor called Tony Richardson – no relation to the film director – who took the unprecedented step of commissioning a book about the Beatles. I liked Richardson's company. More surprisingly, since he was so fastidiously quiet, he liked mine, and over coffee in the canteen would take time to explain his concern with trivia. Instead of dismissing popularity as a sure sign of the meretricious, he wanted to find out what lay behind it. Laden with first-class academic honours, he was properly suspicious of mere trendiness – the

word was new then – but equally averse to the ivory tower, which he thought was a dead weight. The energy of the ignorant fascinated him. He was a deep young man but it turned out, alas, that a lot of his reticence was economy of effort. He was ill, and soon died. Hardly having known him, I missed him, and some people who knew him better never quite got over the loss.

So the two big ideas I had discussed with Richardson I took to Godwin himself. Penguin had published the occasional science fiction novel in the worthy British tradition but there were vast American sources which remained untapped. There was a boom on the way and Penguin could get in first. The same applied to books about the movies – not boring studies by Paul Rotha about Film or Cinema, but books about the movies. I wrote Godwin a long memo on the subject. To his credit he took me out to lunch on the strength of it. I must have put my case badly. Proving to him that I was a fanatic in both fields was probably a mistake. Dismissing his driver and taking the wheel of the big Jaguar himself, he drove us to a secluded pub. Seizing my opportunity before he got the car into third gear, I spoke continuously, but instead of raving about twenty different science fiction writers with names like Cordwainer Simak and swooning over twenty different film directors with names like Ray Siodmak, I should have been judiciously enthusiastic about a maximum two of each. ‘We might do a bit more science fiction,’ Godwin said, in a tone of voice that told me my cause was lost, ‘but I don’t need a buff who knows all about the neglected minor novels of Kohl and Pornbluth. I need an editor who can see a big project all the way through without wasting my time and the company’s money.’ Dandyish himself, he perhaps took my beard as a sign of unsoundness. He would have been right, of course. ‘Pohl and Kornbluth,’ I said feebly, knowing that he had slipped up on purpose as a contribution towards letting me down lightly. Still, the pub lunch had made a change from the canteen. In the canteen I would have had a tray full of ordinary food and some excellent views of Leslie. In the pub I got a piece of stale French loaf with a dead shallot laid out on it, a dollop of shepherd’s pie like a rhino’s diarrhoea, and a good solid dose of rejection. By and large it is our failures that civilise us, but one doesn’t want to take that principle too far.

Up until that point I had taken a relaxed attitude to my job, but from then on I became positively somnolent. With the arrival of spring it became easier to get a good day’s sleep just by resting my head on the desk. Come autumn I would be back in those groves of academe outside of which, it was becoming increasingly clear, I was unqualified to function. Meanwhile there was one last summer of hard labour to be lived through. The *vie bohème* at Melbury Road reached its peak, and, as usually occurs when happiness is perceived as such, began

instantly to melt away. On weekends we drank at Henekey's in the Portobello Road. Ella Fitzgerald sang at the Hammersmith Odeon. Gallas and Gobbi were in *Tosca* at Covent Garden. Not even Nick Thesinger could get in but we all saw the show on television, which was black and white in those days but made Callas look all the more dramatic. The girls on the top floor had a television set that gave you quite a good picture if you hit it with your clenched fist at the right angle. I spent hours in front of it and would have been hard put to disagree with anyone who accused me of wasting my time. Only a decade later did it turn out that I had been engaged in formative studies.

As a luxury we would dine out at Jimmy's in Soho. Jimmy's was a basement restaurant in Frith Street. Bianchi's, the restaurant favoured by successful people in journalism and television – not yet collectively known as the media – was further along the street and two floors up. It was said that those two floors were the longest climb in London. It cost more than ten times as much to eat at Bianchi's as at Jimmy's and I liked things well enough below ground. The place had started life as an air-raid shelter but had gone down since. Yet the low price of the lamb chops was not reflected in their taste, which was made only more piquant by the number and size of the caterpillars in the salad. On Sunday afternoons, with attendant women reading heavy newspapers on the sidelines, we played soccer with a tennis ball in Holland Park, adding our profane cries to the clattering of the peacocks who otherwise carried the full burden of disrupting the open-air concerts.

Reg went missing from the team when he got a message from Sydney saying that an ex girl-friend had died after an illegal operation. Though it was nothing to do with him, he blamed himself for having been away, a reaction which suggested – correctly, as things turned out – that he would be going home for good. In those last pre-Pill days, the possibility of a back-street abortion was the unstated but inescapable sub-text of the revels, whether you were a shy tyro in Sydney or an experienced roué in London. One of the girls upstairs at Melbury Road was caught out during my last few weeks in residence. Her English company director suitor was long gone. I got the job of taking her to the appointment, waiting for her in the dark parlour which served as a reception area, and taking her home when the deed was done. Her sense of loss afterwards would have been food for the moralist. Yet what struck me, and strikes me still, was her fear beforehand. I wish I could have said better things. Thank God for changed times. The contraceptives weren't hard to live with if a lady didn't mind playing hostess to a small floppy frisbee full of hair-gel and a gentleman didn't mind dressing part of his anatomy as a bleached frogman. But a misfortune could bring misery. The way out of the misery could bring tragedy. Women took

that way out because the alternatives were impossible. Today people need to be reminded that the choice is not between legal abortion and the supposedly edifying effects of bringing up an unwanted child. The choice is between legal abortion and illegal abortion. To know something of what an illegal abortion was like, you didn't need to have seen a girl's corpse after an unsuccessful operation. All you needed to have seen was a girl's face on the way to a successful one. They never put the appointment in their diaries. They always wrote the address on a piece of paper, so that they could throw it away afterwards.

Society was to blame. Actually, on this point, it was, but I held it to blame on most other points as well. My radicalism, now further fuelled by semi-regular reading of the *New Left Review*, found expression at the London School of Economics, where I turned up unasked to the weekly student debates and joined in from the floor. The standard of articulacy was not high. Neither was my standard of logic, but that deficiency made me more prolix instead of less. Harry Pollitt's son Brian, an ex-President of the Cambridge Union, was the star guest one night. He had inherited his father's politics but a privileged education had obviously softened them. When my turn came to speak I pointed out, truly if not wisely, that egalitarianism would remain a dream as long as places like Cambridge existed, Pollitt agreed that Cambridge should be levelled forthwith but put in a plea for the retention of King's College Chapel. He had his tongue in his cheek and knew it. I had my head up my arse and didn't, but to some of the less perspicacious students present I must have sounded like the more committed revolutionary. After the debate, two of them approached me and told me proudly that while earning extra money on the building site of a new housing development they had been deliberately fiddling with the wiring so as to hasten the downfall of capitalism. With sudden visions of some old lady switching on the immersion heater and blasting herself to kingdom come, I instructed these teenage saboteurs to get down there next morning and put things right pronto. Shivering in the summer midnight as I waited for a bus back to Kensington High Street, I resolved to abandon the revolution then and there. This might sound like easy come, easy go. But I doubt if I was ever the sort of harebrained dabbler with ideas who turns up in Dostoevsky and Conrad. My convictions were strong enough. Yet my instincts were even stronger, and they were all against any notion that ends can justify means. I had what it took to be feckless, but *realpolitik* was beyond me. So it needed only a little event to overcome a big idea. Many reluctant liberals would have similar tales to tell about their retreat from radical certainty. There is no mystery involved. The solidarity of the Left is a mirage. The common ground between revolutionaries and parliamentarians is made of air. Its transparency can be rendered apparent by a very small fact. You

can be in a demonstration, someone near you will bend to pick up a stone, and you will realise that you are in the wrong place. Being obliged to remember from that day forward that your fine ideas weighed less than a pebble will never be comforting, but always salutary.

Not having yet informed Penguin that I would soon be doing a bunk, I shamelessly took my annual holiday as a reward for all my hard work. Françoise was waiting on Florence railway station and her joy at seeing my beard again can be imagined. This time there was no question of compromising her reputation at the *pensione*. Instead we took a room at Lastra a Signa, a suburb on the edge of town, where I compromised her reputation with the entire district. The room was an ex-bathroom which had been converted by adding extra tiles to the ceiling. The landlady made it clear that only the recent double hernia sustained by her hod-carrying husband had led her to even consider offering this wonderful abode to an unmarried couple. Unlike her husband, however, she had the forbearance not to join the crowd of menacingly staring locals who followed us in the street. Usually he was in the forefront, no doubt to make up with persecuting zeal for the compromise which had been forced on his wife by his economic weakness. For a man with a serious physical disability he certainly knew how to spit. It was like that terrible scene in *L'Avventura* when Monica Vitti gets followed around by a town's whole population of deprived males. Françoise's good looks, however, though sufficiently startling, were not quite enough to explain the element of potential homicide informing that massed masculine gaze. It was my beard that had tipped them over the edge. They probably didn't like my shoes, either – a new ox-blood pair with gold buckles at the sides. The shoes had cost not much more than five pounds, so I don't suppose the buckles were real gold. But they weren't superfluous. They were holding down the straps. It was the straps that were superfluous.

Incipient hatred of all Italian males was staved off by deeper acquaintance with Leopardi and Enrico. Leopardi had been dead for some time but his poetry, painfully construed by me with Françoise's patient assistance, was a revelation. Enrico's paintings perhaps lacked the same hard-won authority but he was alive. He was the lover of Françoise's friend Faith, a fine-boned English modern languages graduate who had come to Florence in search of Petrarch and stayed on to live with Enrico. They had a farmhouse on a winding road out past Fiesole in the northern hills. Enrico helped buy the food for Faith to cook. He also helped cook it. He had a *boules* court set up in the back yard, near the chicken coop. His Italian was fast and funny yet so clear that I could feel my grasp of the language improving as I listened. He spent a lot of time on helping me to speak it – far more time than any truly committed artist would have had to spare. The


truth was that his temporary job as an art teacher was becoming a full-time job and that both he and Faith had fallen victim to happiness. Instead of achieving their ambitions, they had improved their lives. It was all such a waste, I would tell them as I drank their wine. Françoise agreed with this analysis, or anyway didn't disagree.

Back in England, I found Dalziel on the point of leaving for Africa. A job as head of the Nigerian Government Film Unit had come up and he had decided that a couple of years spent making a documentary every two weeks about politicians giving speeches would still be better experience than living on hope in London. The rough cut of *The Man from the Organisation* got him the job. The Nigerians thought it was a true story but liked the close-ups. I hated to see him go, but in only a few days I would be gone myself. Dibbs had already left for New York, where his sequence of paintings featuring Delish on a massage table had created a sensation. The masseur was variously Freud, Einstein, Kafka and Elvis Presley, with appended texts from each. Dave shared my scepticism but characteristically cut through to the heart of the matter. 'If he spent less time writing down quotable quotes he could learn to draw,' said the new head of the Nigerian Government Film Unit while packing his canvas hold-all. 'But he's got the colour. Especially that sky blue. It looks just like home.' Warning me not to get lost in the books, Dalziel moved out. His parting words were typically lyrical. 'Don't put a dent in the beef bayonet.' Until three replacements moved in I had the flat to myself. At Penguin I had given my notice, which was eagerly accepted. Leslie seemed to mind least of all. They would have been even keener to see my back if they had known how close I had come to supplying Bertram D. Wolfe's photograph for the cover of a book by Bernard Wolfe. At least I hadn't sent them Virginia Woolf. But only a frantic sprint down the corridor and a degrading last-minute tussle with the art-editor had averted the same sort of catastrophe which I had been hired to prevent in the first place.

Down at the Iron Bridge I told Dingo all about it as part of a campaign to amuse him on his last night. Unaccountably he had decided that the place to be an Australian journalist was Australia, so he was not attempting to renew his appointment. He told me all this through the din caused by an ancient male singer who upgraded his performance of 'Mule Train' by hitting himself on the head with a tin tray. Not notably more smashed than usual, Dingo sold me the Ford Popular for a shilling. A non-driver, I didn't want it for transport. I wanted it for a monument. By dead of night, Dingo steered it to the designated spot, and there we left it to rust – in front of Hearty McHale's. The first phase of my career in London was thus summed up as having had nuisance value and nothing more. I went home to an empty flat.

My suitcase looked eager to be away. Stained white with dried rain, even my shoes were itching to be gone. By now they were Gush Puppies, but they would take me to safety. On the flag-stones of ancient courtyards they would find a sure footing.

Clive James



May Week Was In June

More Unreliable Memoirs

'As good as any comic book to appear
in Britain in recent years. Impossible to
read silently' *Observer*

CLIVE JAMES

May Week Was In June

PICADOR

in memoriam

Mark Boxer and Tom Weiskel

and to

Gabriella Rosselli del Turco

where she lies sleeping

I realise very well that the reader has no great need to know all this; but I need to tell him.

Rousseau, *Les Confessions*

I wear a suit of armour made of nothing but my mistakes.

Pierre Reverdy, quoted by Ernst Jünger in *Das zweite Pariser Tagebuch*, 21
February 1943

I've never made any secret of the fact that I'm basically on my way to Australia.

Support Your Local Sheriff

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Preface

Somebody once said that a trilogy ought ideally to consist of two volumes. Unfortunately he never said anything else, so his name is forgotten. When I set out to write *Falling Towards England*, the second volume of my unreliable memoirs, I honestly meant it to be the end of the enterprise. Gradually it became clear, however, that my entry into the University of Cambridge marked the beginning of a further episode, whose events, while less than awe-inspiring on the scale of cosmology, would suffer distortion if compressed into a few chapters. I could have made more room at the back of the book by cutting the front, but it was already cut. The nuances, after all, were everything. It would not have been enough to say that I was a failure in London. One had to convey the way failure felt: how the clothes slept in to keep one warm looked wrong next day, how a letter of rejection could be distinguished from a letter of acceptance before it was opened, how one drank to quell one's nagging conscience about having borrowed the money with which to drink. In the next generation, young people needed a heroin habit to live like that. I managed it through sheer talent. Cambridge was my way out, if not up.

Once again, though, the raw story would not have been enough. God, said Mies van der Rohe, is in the details. In Cambridge, I began to find my way, but simply to say so would have been to muff the point, because I found my way by getting more lost than ever. It was just that this time, by a bigger than usual dose of my usual extraordinary luck, I was given the chance to become confused in a fruitful, or potentially fruitful, manner. In London, entirely through my own bad management, I had been hunted from pillar to post. In Cambridge I could develop my propensities, such as they were, to the fullest extent possible, and all at once. The result was chaos. Fortunately there is a natural law, whose mathematical basis I don't pretend to understand, which says that chaos isn't always just random. It can have patterns in it. The story in this volume – while being, as before, no more faithful to the facts than the ego finds convenient – is as true as I can make it to the pattern which emerged when my half-formed personality was put back into the scrambler. I won't dignify the process with the

personality was put back into the scramble. I won't dignify the process with the name of self-discovery. The self scarcely altered. It might even have become more conscious of itself than ever. But the panic was over. I was still broke, but I had landed in the lap of the only kind of luxury I have ever cared about – a wealth of opportunity. Where once every move had been forced, now there was nothing but choice. For too long the Flash of Lightning had not been free to deploy his cape or put on the mask with the stretched elastic knotted at the back to keep it fitting tightly under the strain of his amazing acceleration. Now once again he was off and running in six different directions.

Cambridge was my personal playground. It would be useless to pretend otherwise. I would be surprised if nostalgia for those easy years did not drip from the following pages like sweat. The place hasn't changed much since. The old Footlights clubroom, together with the whole rat-infested district of which it was the hub, was bulldozed to make room for the Lion Yard development, enraging some but probably saving the city from another outbreak of bubonic plague. The buses have changed colour, there has been a massacre of elms, the old Eagle is ominously surrounded by scaffolding, the Pakistani restaurant on the ground floor of the Friar's House has become a souvenir shop, and fancy goods are now sold in the back room of the Whim where I once sat by the hour writing in my journal. As always, committees of dons do more than the worst developers to inflict horrible buildings on their beautiful city. Yet Cambridge – like Florence, the other main location of this epic – stays what it was. My life didn't. In Cambridge, in the Sixties, my course was altered and fixed, for good or ill. For this reason, though I still spend a good deal of time there, the place is always in the past to me, as epoch-making as my first pair of long pants, and almost as glamorous. The spires, the lawns, the spring alliance of jonquils and daffodils: I hardened my heart against these things, and they all went to my head. Byron kept a low profile in Cambridge, confining himself to booze, broads and leading a live bear around on a string. I was less inclined to hide my light under a bushel. The days of our youth are the days of our glory. He said it, and I believed it.

C.J.

London, 1990

1. GENTLEMEN, SPORT YOUR OAKS!

Arriving in Cambridge on my first day as an undergraduate, I could see nothing except a cold white October mist. At the age of twenty-four I was a complete failure, with nothing to show for my life except a few poems nobody wanted to publish in book form. Three years of hand-to-mouth existence in London had led me nowhere but here. For all I knew, Cambridge was receiving me with open arms. They could have had flags out. There could have been a band playing. It was impossible to tell. The white opacity came all the way to my eyeballs. Outside the railway station I stood holding my cardboard suitcase. I couldn't see the station and I could barely see the suitcase. Having been in Cambridge only once before, for a short drunken visit that started well but ended in a haze not unlike, in its texture, the one through which I now groped, I had only the dimmest memories to go on of how to get to town.

Luckily I remembered, when I reached the war memorial, that the statue on top of it was pointing roughly in the right direction. I had to climb the memorial to find out what the direction was. After that I was on the right track to the city centre, where there was enough light to distinguish people from letter boxes. The letter boxes, in my perhaps embittered view, had warmer personalities than the people, but the people, although not notably less taciturn, at least knew how to give directions if they felt like it. I asked a nice little old lady the way to Pembroke, which was to be my college if I ever found it. At first she snarled at me, perhaps because I had located her partly by touch. It took only about a quarter of an hour to calm her fears, however, after which she pointed the way down Pembroke Street and told me to turn left at Trumpington Street. I turned left too early – probably into Tennis Court Road — and ended up at the Fitzwilliam Museum, which I mistook for Pembroke until put right by the man at the desk inside. Before I could get myself and my suitcase back out through the revolving doors he managed to regale me with his entire repertoire of jokes about kangaroos, koalas, dunnies, and walking upside down in the outback, ha ha. As an Australian expatriate I had grown used to the fabled English sense of humour but preferred to steer clear of it when possible, for fear of laughing too

hazard but preferred to steer clear of it when possible, for fear of laughing too hard.

On the far side of the street I found, by stepping into it, a gutter the size of a small canal. This I slowly followed to the left, occasionally crossing the footpath to check the texture of the buildings with my carefully extended right hand. The ashlar front wall of a college crustily identified itself to my fingertips. When stone became wood, I guessed it must be the front gate of Pembroke and turned towards an egg-yolk halo which materialised in the form of the Porter's Lodge. The porter, called Keeps if not Waits, knew an Aussie (which he mispronounced Ossie) when he heard one and was fully informed about kangaroos, koalas and the necessity of walking around upside down when down under, ha ha. Having exhausted the subject and me along with it, he directed me to my set of rooms, D6 in the old court, known as Old Court, above the dining hall, known as Hall. Having asked for 'the smallest possible set of rooms consonant with my playing the clarinet', I found that I had been given an oak-panelled suite which would have been large enough to accommodate Benny Goodman, and his big band along with him. It scarcely needs saying that I couldn't play the clarinet at all, but on the day I made the written application I must have been toying with the idea of taking up that instrument. As I stood beside my suitcase in the middle of the sitting room, a handsome young man in a silk brocade dressing-gown appeared suddenly beside me with a silence made possible by monogrammed leather slippers. 'Abramovitz,' he said, holding out a pampered hand. I knew that this wasn't my name so I guessed that it must be his. 'I live across the corridor. *Love* that beard. Don't worry, I'm not bent or anything. Just philanthropic. Let me show you the form.'

At least five years younger than I, Abramovitz carried on as if he were fifty years older. He was reading law and naturally assumed that the only reason I was reading English for a second undergraduate degree was in order to give myself time for plenty of extracurricular activities. He advised me to step around to the Societies Fair in the Corn Exchange before I decided finally on trying out for the Footlights. He himself believed the Union to be the only thing that counted if one had one's eye on high government office. I asked him if he was going to be Prime Minister. 'No, Disraeli was the last of our boys they'll ever let in there. Chancellor of the Exchequer: that's the spot.' He explained to me what to do about laundry, of which, as usual, I had more needing to be done than done. He also showed me how to sport my oak. A heavy rolling outer door, the oak was meant to signal that the occupant was at home to nobody, although it was left unclear whether this applied to Abramovitz.

His advice turned out to be good, however. The Societies Fair was indeed a cornucopia of activities, like Orientation Week at Sydney University but on the

scale of the Earls Court motor show. Here was my chance to get interested in heraldry, beagling and riding to hounds. Each activity had a booth attended by undergraduates in the appropriate costume. The dramatic societies stood out through having a more abundant, although scarcely lavish, presence of undergraduates. Careful not to squander my whole grant at once, I did not actually join these dramatic societies there and then, but spent a lot of time standing around being told why I should. Some of the girls from the ADC I thought especially persuasive. But the dramatic society whose booth most impressed me was the Footlights. It consisted of one bare trestle table. Behind it sat a solitary, fine-drawn, bored-looking individual in a tan cashmere jacket. 'How do I join?' I asked. 'You don't,' he said through a barely controlled yawn. 'You audition.' Informing me that his name was Idle, he handed me a roneoed set of instructions saying where, when and how. The auditions were some time off and the chances of selection seemed very slim.

My theatrical urges were further stimulated by the purchase of a gown. Throwing my bearded chin upright and drawing the gown's black drapes around my shoulders, I looked like a Wittelsbach crown prince going mildly ga-ga or a close friend of Count Dracula in search of a meal. When I appeared that evening in Hall there was a hush on the benches and some of the freshmen seemed to feel vulnerable in the area of the neck. Actually I would have done better to dine off them than off the food. This latter proved useful only as a discussion point. The entrée wasn't tender enough to be a paving stone and the gravy couldn't have been primordial soup because morphogenesis was already taking place. 'How about this shit?' said a rotund American whose name turned out to be Delmer Dynamo. 'You can bet they're eating something else up *there*.' He angled his pear-shaped head towards High Table, where, surveyed by a plaster bust of William Pitt the Younger, the dons were Dining in Fellowship. They weren't exactly joined together with cobwebs but you couldn't have called them vibrant. It wasn't their age, so much as their well-being, that impressed. Even at a distance you could tell that the dark wine was helping the venison go down to their profound satisfaction. I wondered which of them was the Senior Tutor of Supervisors, whom I was due to meet next day. Or was he called the Senior Supervisor of Tutors?

When I turned up next day to, meet him, all the other freshmen in the college turned up too. The Senior Tutor, whose full title turned out to be the Senior Tutor of Junior Supervisors, was obviously shy, but equally obviously he had overcome this disability by a meticulous attention to social punctilio. He made small talk and expected everybody else to do the same. Five minutes after

shaking hands with him I found myself left alone with an Iranian biochemist whose name sounded like a fly trapped against a window. This sudden conjunction was blessed with our mentor's assurance that we would have a lot in common. What we had in common was a small glass of sherry and a large measure of awkwardness. I cursed the Tutor for this instead of doing the sensible thing and asking a few questions about biochemistry, a field in which my interlocutor was later to become eminent. If I had asked a few questions about the Senior Tutor I would have found out that he was the world's leading authority on Propertius. Surrounded by distinction, both actual and potential, I was exclusively occupied with not dribbling sherry into my beard. With that, and with the inexplicable presence of Abramovitz. 'What are *you* doing here?' I asked when I had manoeuvred my way to his side through the crowd: 'I thought this was for freshmen.' 'But I *am* a freshman,' said Abramovitz happily. 'I came up the day before you did.' It struck me on the spot that if the English had spent their lives preparing to fit into one of these places, then the only smart thing to do was not to bother about fitting in at all, and I can honestly say that from that moment on I never wasted any time trying. I wasted time doing other things, but not doing that.

Drinks next day with the Master once again featured the full cast, and once again the tipples were warm sherry. The Master was a retired pure mathematician who had no pretensions towards social ease. Wearing a full-length gown, he stood glumly in the centre of the room while we milled around him in our short gowns. Throwing a glass of sherry down my throat and plucking another from a passing silver platter, I assessed him as a nonentity and was duly rewarded for my acumen by finding out, twenty years later, that he had been on the committee which approved the funds for the first Manchester computer just after World War II. Being in possession of that information at the time might have induced enough awe to offset the aggrieved loneliness with which I drank. Apart from the biochemist with the buzzer for a name and the omnipresent Abramovitz, the only face I found familiar was that of Delmer Dynamo. His pear-shaped head, I could now see, was situated on top of a pear-shaped body, which his black gown caused to resemble a piece of fruit going to a funeral. 'How about *this* for a wing-ding?' he shouted conspiratorially. 'You can blow it out your ass. Have you met the Dean yet?' I replied that I was due to meet the Dean the next day. 'You're gonna dig it,' averred Delmer. "Mind you, he hasn't got this bozo's carefree verve.'

Delmer was only almost right. The Dean, whose name was the Reverend Meredith Dewey, was indeed a picture of inactivity as he sat back in a winged leather armchair and expended just enough energy to keep his pipe alight. But

unlike the Master he had overt characteristics. For one thing, his room was full of rocks. The Dean was an amateur geologist who picked up souvenir rocks every time he travelled abroad in order to attend some less-than-crucial ecumenical drone-in. Indeed there were irreverent suggestions that he would accept the occasional invitation – like the one from the Pan-African Convocation of Pastoral Curators in Accra – just so that, between papers and seminars, he could go forth unto the hills and root around for chunks of granite. Doubtless these imputations arose from envy, but only a historian of mining engineering would have been envious: the Dean's rooms were on the first floor and for many years had been arousing concern among the female staff in the linen room below. As they toiled over the ironing of our sheets and pillowcases, they had to live with the mental picture of the creaking ceiling finally bursting open and the Dean's massive collection descending on them like the temple of the Philistines after Samson gave it the push. When you sat facing the Dean you were surrounded by about thirty million years of the Earth's petrified history. While he dutifully enquired after your spiritual welfare you could fill the time by wondering how he got the stuff through customs. There was no problem about how he carried it. Though of only medium height, he had shoulders like Charles Atlas and could obviously lug a tote-bag full of pitchblende for miles. But when those decolonised *douaniers* opened up his luggage and found it crammed with unrefined ore, why didn't they suspect him of stealing their uranium?

The sleepy holiness of his appearance was the only explanation. I told him about my atheism and socialism. His eyelids grew as heavy as sandstone, a large piece of which was poised on a sideboard for purposes of comparison. 'Convinced about that beard, are you?' he enquired tentatively, then lapsed into silence while I explained about radical socialism. I interpreted his apparent torpor as a sherry-fuelled sloth. It was only later on, when I found out how sharp he was, that I realised he was politely but immovably bored rigid at meeting his ten thousandth young saviour of the world. With his direct line to an earlier and better qualified envoy sent on the same task, the Dean was in the position of a senior manager who is required, for form's sake, to go on interviewing candidates after the job has been filled. He released supplicatory puffs of smoke heavenward, tapped his fingertips together, and snuck lazy, longing sideways looks at an inviting lump of lignite.

Overseeing my studies in English was Dr Stewart Frears. Professor Frears, as he later became, was, although the senior English don in the college, only a lecturer at that stage, but he was already an authority on the Metaphysical poets, to which his learned and common-sensical approach had already been more than enough to attract regular vilification from Dr Leavis. In life as in death –

between which two states he was currently hovering – Leavis was the most contentious name in Cambridge. Like an old volcano that goes dead in its central crater but unpredictably blows hot holes through its own sides and obliterates villages which thought themselves safe, Leavis was dormant yet still bubbling. Frears caught more than his fair share of the lava and perhaps this accounted at least partly for a pronounced nervous tic. He would periodically click his teeth and twitch his head sideways almost to one shoulder, like a violinist trying to smash his instrument no hands. He won't mind my recalling this trivial affliction because later on it disappeared. (All the many recipients of routine libels from Leavis got a bit flak-happy in one way or another but in almost every case the trouble cleared up after the old warrior passed on to that great Organic Community, which, despite his vehement assurances that it once existed on Earth, has its foundations only in the cloudy soil of the Empyrean.) While it was still happening, however, Dr Frears's flicking tic inevitably attracted some of the attention I was supposed to be directing towards the post-Elizabethans. Actually, to do myself the discredit I had coming, I was having a hard time getting interested again in the Metaphysicals. I had passed through my first Donne period in Sydney and was not to go crazy about him again for another decade or so. In short, I had done Donne. Currently, I was much more under the sway of the Cavaliers, the Romantics and any other historical group except the one I was supposed to be studying. Reading off the course was my temperamental habit. Nowadays I devour whole literatures in sequential order, making notes and writing essays all the way. It's because I don't have to. When I did have to, I couldn't do it.

So it wasn't just my supervisor's neck-snapping twitch that put me off George Herbert. But even had I been as respectful of Herbert as I am now – anyone who tells you that Herbert is negligible beside Donne doesn't understand Donne either – I would have had trouble articulating a clear analysis of *The Temple* if my interlocutor were continually threatening to catch a fly between his cheek and shoulder. I got increasingly nervous about turning up for my weekly supervision. As usual, I lied my way out of trouble, inventing various ailments. Shoving a piece of cotton wool behind my lower lip and pretending to have an abscess was perhaps the silliest trick. Even my better wheezes were schoolboy stuff and the man in charge wasn't fooled. He could have had me rusticated. It sounded like being castrated with a rusty knife and it hurt even worse, because it meant being thrown back into the harsh world where you had to earn a living. Instead, very generously, he passed me further down the line, to those junior dons who were still, as he put it, 'in the first fury of their supervisions'. It sounded too much like work but at least I was still along for the ride.

And the ride meant Footlights. The club held two smoking concerts (called smokers) each term. The first smoker of the first term was the chief audition smoker for new members. The club room was above MacFisheries fish shop in Falcon Yard, off Petty Cury. Required dress was a dinner jacket, which for purposes of the audition I hired. There was no point in buying one outright at that stage, because if I had not got in, there would have been no occasion for wearing it until I graduated. I played Noel Coward in an old Noel-Gertie routine written long ago in Sydney by my three-piece thoroughly Anglicised Australian friend, who had first invited me to Cambridge two years before and was now on the point of graduating. He was a member of Footlights but for some reason had never used the sketch himself. Perhaps he never found a suitable co-star. I was luckier. Though I made Noel Coward sound like Chips Rafferty, I was spurred on by a Gertrude who, although an Australian like me, could act well enough to be believable as anything. Her name was Romaine Rand.

Slightly older than I and already equipped with a degree from Melbourne, Romaine had descended on Sydney University while I was still a second year student. Tall, striking and already famous for her brilliantly foul tongue, she had pursued graduate studies, libertarian polemics, and, for a brief period, me. At the risk of sounding even more conceited than usual, it is important that I record this fact, for a reason which will shortly emerge. At the time I was having published, in the literary pages of the Sydney University student newspaper *honi soit*, a lot of articles, poems and short stories conveying omniscience, poise and worldly wisdom. Publication was not difficult to arrange, because I edited those pages. Correctly intuiting at a glance that I was grass-green in all matters and emerald-green in the matter of sex, Romaine, at her table in the Royal George Hotel, took bets with the Downtown Push that she could seduce me within twenty-four hours. Next day the news reached me before she did. When she appeared, striding like a Homeric goddess, at the door of the cafeteria in Manning House, I cravenly escaped through the side entrance and hid behind the large adjacent gum tree. The rumour that I hid *up* the tree was false but slow to die.

The following year I was a senior and had developed some real confidence, or at any rate had become convinced by my own swagger. This time it was I who pursued Romaine. When the old Union Hall of beloved memory was pulled down and replaced by a new theatre of unparalleled hideousness, I found Romaine sitting behind me at a *matinée* performance of one of the inaugural plays: some frail, panting comedy by Anouilh which was now receiving the *coup de grâce* from a hunting pack of Australian accents. I held hands with her in the dark: quite a trick when the woman is sitting in the row behind you. It was easy, I told myself, to detect the shy vulnerability which lay beneath this woman's

strident show of independence. Consolingly I stroked her palm with my fingertips. They were a bit sweaty, but she didn't object. Later on I walked her home along Parramatta Road. I did my most accomplished heart-winning athletic feat: the one where I grabbed a lamp-post with both hands and stood straight out sideways into the passing traffic. She looked impressed. Running with sweat from these exertions, at her flat I invited myself to take a shower, and did not lose the opportunity to show off the muscular development of my torso, which in those days was arranged with most of the wide bits at the top. Again she looked impressed. Guess what? I didn't get her into bed.

The reason I am telling you all this is that Romaine herself blew the whole story long ago. After she became, deservedly, world famous, she seized the first chance to get back to Australia and tell the most chaotic journalist in the country – whose prose, when he had worked as my assistant on *honi soit*, I had always felt honour-bound to rewrite – the full story of my crummy seduction technique. She evoked my lamp-post lateral extensions and shower-booth biceps-flexing in such hilarious detail that not even the journalist's slovenly verbosity could dull the comic effect. As a champion of truth, a leading light in the struggle against male chauvinism and sexist hypocrisy, Romaine had a right to say all this. I was more appalled by what she didn't say. *She didn't say that she had chased me up that tree.* All right, behind that tree. She didn't say anything about betting the Downtown Push that she could deflower me in twenty-four hours from a standing start. Nothing. Not a word.

But all this was before and later. For the moment, I was standing back to back with Romaine on the tiny Footlights stage, she with her notable bust strapped down under an old A-line satin frock suitably modified – Romaine was always a dab hand at the household tasks against which she later rebelled on behalf of womankind – and I resplendent in watered-down hair and made-up velvet bow tie holding together the collar of one of my old off-white drip-dries. The rented DJ with its stove-pipe pants descended into a brand new pair of black bootees with zips up the inner ankle. Romaine had a cigarette holder the length of a billiard cue and I held my cigarette from underneath, like a Russian spy. With our nostrils given an extra arch of fastidiousness by the smell of halibut rising through the floorboards from the marble display tables of MacFisheries below, we mouthed brittle dialogue. I was awful, she was great, so we both got in. Romaine thus became one of the very first female members of the Footlights, because that was the smoker at which Eric Idle – the slim, dapper and unnervingly deep young President – finally managed to realise his long-laid plan of extending the franchise to the other half of the human race. Up until then, women could appear in Footlights revues only as guests, and most of the dons

who congregated around the club's small but thriving bar made it piercingly clear that they had preferred the era of good, straightforward transvestism, with properly shaved legs and no nonsense about it. Keeping her gratitude well under control, Romaine eyed some of the assembled senior members with manifest disdain. 'This place is jumping with freckle-punchers,' she told me confidentially, so that only about thirty of them choked on their drinks. 'You can have it on your own.'

So we immediately split up again. Companionship between Romaine and myself had never been easy, because each of us suspected the other of the desire to conduct a perpetual monologue and neither was inclined to act as the feed-man, or feed-person. In my view she argued exclusively from the emotions and in her view I must have epitomised the kind of arrogant male who would hold such an assumption. Apart from and below all that, however, was a deeper reason: in those days ambitious young Australians left their country in order to discover themselves as individuals. Clinging together when abroad was the last thing they wanted to do. The idea that the Australians in England roll logs for each other has always been exactly wrong. Most of them wouldn't roll a twig. I could barely name two of them who would roll me into an open grave.

Romaine took one look at the English Tripos requirements, declared them infantile, and by force of argument got herself registered as a PhD student. The University Library, in keeping with the vaguely pre-Columbian threat of its appearance, swallowed her up like a tomb. Perhaps it had absorbed all the other women in Cambridge too. There seemed to be very few of them, and fewer still who were available. From the two women's colleges, Newnham and Girton, only a handful of girls took enough time off from their studies to appear in the vicinity of the dramatic societies. These brave rebels would attend Footlights smokers but otherwise they were to be observed only near Sidgwick Avenue on their way to and from lectures. On ordinary nights in the club there was scarcely a woman to be seen, except the occasional up-and-coming, or more likely down-and-going, actress from a touring company who would take a late-night snort after the evening performance in the Arts Theatre. The relative absence of a civilising female influence made it all the easier to get disgustingly drunk. One was allowed to run up a bar bill. Mine became a bar booklet. The door of the Footlights closed at night long after the front door of my college, so after navigating my way from Petty Cury to the street behind Pembroke I had to climb over the back wall. Climbing in (called Climbing In) was an experience that varied from college to college. Though frowned on, it was an accepted practice. Undergraduates couldn't walk through town after dark without their gowns or else the Beadles would challenge them and, if necessary, give chase. The

Beadles wore bowler hats and most of them had RAF moustaches. Wind resistance, however, did nothing to slow them down. But once you had reached the walls of your college there were no patrols to stop you climbing in. The occasional drunken undergraduate who impaled himself on a railing spike received no punishment beyond the scar. When King's had a physically handicapped undergraduate it installed a small hand-rail on one of the walls near the river so that he could climb in without drowning. It was all very English: a rule made to be broken, as long as you didn't kick up a fuss. Within the first two weeks I became adept at scaling the back wall whatever my state of inebriation, crossing the roof of the bike shed and dropping to the ground beside a huge cylindrical metal skip in which rubbish was placed for incineration. In the third week, however, I was so drunk one night that I dropped in the wrong spot, with a noise like a huge gong being softly struck. I woke up inside the skip several hours later, a bleak dawn sky overhead.

2. THE DEAR OLD COLLEGE

College life had its attractions. Had I been a few years younger, I might have fallen for them headlong. For undergraduates coming up from public schools, the colleges were no doubt too familiar in their accoutrements to be especially impressive. By public schools, of course, I mean private schools. A boy from Eton might have found even King's or Trinity the same old thing on an only slightly larger scale: the same turrets, crenellations, lodges, fenestrations, cloisters, clerestories, porticos and porters. Those freshmen who came from State schools, however, now met with a concentration of custom and ceremony which had the wherewithal to overwhelm them. It didn't have to hurry. It had all the time in the world. Since I was still a radical socialist, I had no trouble analysing how the system worked. The idea was to tame the intelligent upstart by getting him addicted to privilege. The beautiful architecture had a political function. In Paris, Haussmann's great boulevards were only incidentally grandiloquent: their real purpose was to provide the widest field of fire for the artillery and the quickest access for the cavalry to anywhere the workers might stage a rebellion. In Cambridge, the lovely façades, the sweeping lawns, the intricate crannies opening on distant vistas, were meant not just to lull but to disarm: nobody who had once lived in these emollient surroundings would ever again feel sufficiently alienated from society to be anything more troublesome than a reformist. Gradualism was implicit in every carefully repainted coat of arms and battered refectory table. To remain a revolutionary in such a context you would have had to have treason in the blood, like Kim Philby. Such, at any rate, was the theory, or what I took the theory to be. My college, as I tried my best not to call it, was hardly prodigal with the creature comforts but it knew how to make life convenient. To get my laundry done, all I had to do was put it in a box and leave the box at the head of the staircase. In the course of time, a box of fresh laundry would magically appear in the same place. There are men in British public life to whom this has gone on happening into old age. They are under the impression that their laundry is taken care of by a force of nature. Such coveted hidey-holes for gentlefolk as the Albany in Piccadilly aren't selling the

covered honey-holes for gentlemen as the library in I readily aren't selling the luxury of the Savoy: they are selling the invisible services of the dear old college. The oak-panelled walls are there to remind the inhabitants of school and university. The laundry box is there to reassure them that there is still a linen room somewhere which they will die without ever having to visit.

All this I could anatomise with the piercing insight of Marx and Engels. But I put my laundry into the box just the same. It was too handy to pass up. Similarly the bedder was an institution which could not be defended but was impossible to forego. The bedder was a woman who made your bed. Many of us were ashamed that a woman who might otherwise have been employed doing useful work for society, not to mention fulfilling herself spiritually, was earning a pittance by squaring up our crapulous sheets and blankets. Not many of us ever met her, however. I met mine just once, and just long enough to learn that she valued the work without necessarily valuing me, whose standards of hygiene she found questionable. 'I have to speak frankly, Mr James,' she quacked unprompted. 'Frankly, the best thing to be said for you is that Mr Abramovitz is even worse, frankly.' Her name was Mrs Blades and she looked tough enough to need no defending. So I decided to put off the moment of going to the barricades on her behalf. Very soon I left my bed unmade without giving it a thought, and came back in the afternoon to find it made without giving that a thought either. After all, the same thing had happened at home for the first eighteen years of my life.

Similarly, my initial impressions of the food served in Hall were soon modified. At first I had thought the food was terrible and that I would never be able to eat it. After a few weeks I had come round to the opinion that the food was terrible but that I could eat it. Here again, the arrangements were just too convenient to pass up. Breakfast was there for the taking. I rarely took it. Usually I got up just in time for lunch. It didn't taste of anything, but that could have been the fault of my mouth, fur-lined after a heavy evening. For dinner, you had your choice of first or second sitting, as on board ship. The advantage of the first sitting was that the High Table was empty. At the second sitting, if you looked up from your plate of burnt offerings and denatured vegetable matter, you were faced with the spectacle of the dons Dining in Fellowship off a haunch of venison while they circulated the claret with the speed of happy children playing pass-the-parcel. On the other hand the second sitting enabled you to linger over an extra half pint of acceptable bitter before gravitating to the graduates' parlour for a noggin of port or three. Either way, I could get from my rooms to dinner simply by dragging on a gown and falling downstairs. Falling off a log would have been harder, and I wouldn't have got fed.

This cosy, effortless taking-on of sustenance had an irresistible appeal,

especially considering that I was under no compulsion to fraternise with my fellow undergraduates beyond rubbing gowned elbows with them at the long low table. I entered the Junior Common Room only, if ever, to read the newspapers. My in-college hangout was the graduates' parlour, where one could sign for one's drinks and comport oneself almost as a don. Another Australian affiliate, Brian C. Adams, overdid this to the point of not even hanging up his gown. He stood around pontifically in full drag, his accent, during the course of one term, losing all trace of antipodean colouring, and acquiring, during the course of a second term, an affinity with that of Princess Margaret. 'Eigh-ow,' he would neigh, 'rarely?' He meant 'Oh really?' but the expression emerged like a chicken which had been strangled in a letter box and then pushed out through the slit. Not that Adams was stupid. He was merely quicker than most to go native. He was arrogant, but at least he was honest. Reading English like me, he was after first class honours, and said so. His unprompted disquisitions on critical theory made me wonder if I would be able to get a third even if I worked. He had already read everything, and was now reading it again. He talked learnedly about the Spirit of the College, I suppose with some justification, because he never left its front gate except to attend lectures in Sidgwick Avenue, visit the University Library, or sit at the feet of F. R. Leavis in Downing. In Pembroke, the Gray Society was a literary organisation which met monthly to hear a paper. Brian C. Adams became secretary of the Gray Society before I had even heard that it existed. In Australia, while still an undergraduate, he had published a slim but substantial critical work, *Johnson's Boswell: the Man-made Self*. Two copies of this booklet promptly appeared in Pembroke College Library, with the signature of Brian C. Adams on the donor's bookplate. Brian C. Adams was a College Man.

If, however, you had gagged him, stripped the gown off him, and viewed him from a suitable distance, Brian C. Adams might just conceivably have been mistaken for an ordinary human being. The true embodiment of the College Spirit was Delmer Dynamo. Though his satirical verbal assaults on the college food and facilities never ceased, it was clear that Delmer had found his promised land. His tailoring becoming more gentlemanly by the week, he would manoeuvre his low-slung posterior into position against the open fire of the graduates' parlour, part the rear wings of his Savile Row tweed jacket, and toast himself like a marshmallow while lovingly discussing the Dean's proclivities, real and imagined. 'The question isn't how he gets his rocks *in*,' Delmer would announce loudly. The question is how he gets his rocks *off*.' Delmer called the graduates' parlour the grad pad, a designation which eventually all its habitués, even the English, took up. There could be no doubt that the grad pad's cosiest

amenity was Delmer himself. He was in there like the furniture. Similarly he was as prominent in Hall as Spenser's portrait or Pitt's bust. Every graduate was invited once a year to dine at High Table. Delmer wangled it three times in his first term. Dining on offal down in the pit, we would look up at him while he sat there being waited on. He would be attacking the venison while the stringy beef was attacking us. At assimilating himself to the English establishment, Delmer Dynamo left Disraeli looking like Guy Fawkes. It was because he was so interested. He knew all the college gossip. Few dons could resist the way he talked about their colleagues. The college was a microcosm which he took at its own estimation, as a macrocosm. Not even the Dean could do without Delmer, who had mugged up the whole history of Pembroke's most precious architectural possession, the Wren chapel. 'Sometimes I can't believe that boy's Jewish,' the Dean was heard to say. 'He really does know an *awful* lot about stained glass.' The Dean would invite Delmer to sherry and show him geological treasures kept in thin glass-topped drawers in locked cabinets: slivers of silver, chips of chalcedony, amulets of anthracite, lollipops of lapis lazuli. Delmer feigned interest far into the night, plugging his yawns with a fat Havana cigar. The Dean liked Delmer's cigars, of which Delmer's father, once a term, sent him a dove-tailed box the size of a small suitcase.

The Master and his wife asked Delmer to dinner in the Lodge, where Delmer, maddened by the Madeira, announced his intention of willing his personal library to the college. He was lucky that the Master laughed the offer off. Delmer's book-buying already represented a large, if indiscriminate, investment. In receipt of all the rare book catalogues, he chose from them almost at random, and within a seemingly unlimited budget. If he purchased a set of, say, Maria Edgeworth better than the one he already had, he gave the old one to the college library, where the bookplate marked 'From the collection of Delmer Dynamo' was soon familiar. Delmer's declared aim was to rival the learning, taste and munificence of the legendary Aubrey Attwater, who, at the turn of the century, had been the college humanist *par excellence*, a byword for fine wine, fine bindings and fine manners. Delmer founded the Aubrey Attwater society, electing himself both president and secretary. When it turned out that he was also the entire membership, he prorogued the next meeting *sine die*, but without giving up on his ambition to emulate Attwater's luxurious indolence. For Delmer, college was more than a context. It was a niche, a cradle. It was an egg-cup.

I saw the point but wanted something else. Perhaps my brain just wasn't subtle enough for me to sit around until all hours amidst the softly lit oak panelling while discussing why Selwyn was an obscure college, Sidney Sussex

was more obscure, and Fitzwilliam was even more obscure than either. In my view, the differences between colleges were impossible to detect. I had, and still have today, enough trouble telling the difference between Cambridge and Oxford, too many of whose products flatter themselves that they have been stamped by the one with some indelible hallmark which informs the discerning that they did not go to the other. No doubt Pembroke had enjoyed more than its fair share of poetic talent – as well as the aforesaid Spenser and Gray, Christopher Smart and Ted Hughes had both been there — but the fund of creativity wouldn't be added to by feeling smug about it while warming one's behind at the fireplace of the grad pad. Without feeling disloyal to my college, I felt under no compulsion to make it my sole stamping ground. A wider stage beckoned: fairly begged, in fact, to be occupied.

Like Oxford, Cambridge was, as it still is, an aggregate of colleges. The university as a whole existed only in two ways: one, as a means to examine the undergraduates, and two, as a display case for their extracurricular activities. Into these latter I purposefully entered. Actually, I did not have much of a plan, but since I was four or five years older than most of my fellow undergraduates – a big gap at that age – I was, although unusually immature, a bit less unsure of myself than they were, and in my principal activity, writing, I had the immense advantage of having been at it a while longer. Cambridge was full of aspiring writers. To publish their works, there was a whole range of periodicals: the weekly newspaper *Varsity* and the irregularly appearing but dauntingly historic *Granta* were only the two most prominent. There were poetry magazines with names like *Pawn*, *Solstice*, *Inverse*, and – a token of seriousness, this – *Poetry Magazine*. There was a stapled, cyclostyled weekly called *Broadsheet* which reviewed everything: the penniless prototype of the listings magazines which ten years later were to strike it rich. The *Cambridge Review*, for which William Empson had once written and in whose letter columns the Leavisites would still occasionally immolate a colleague, was put out by graduates, but otherwise the whole immense publishing effort was produced by a few young men, and fewer young women, all *in statu pupillari*. They were in constant search of publishable material. They were about to meet the right man. They had the demand and I had the supply. In prose even more than in verse, I was still trying to bring my style under control, but in comparison to all the other hungry young geniuses I had the odd scrap of solid information to offer along with the strained metaphors and the overloaded syntax. When I reviewed a film, for example, I could quite often refer to other films by the same director. All those tickets to the National Film Theatre, paid for by my dear lost love Lilith Talbot, were now to have their effect. The great age of the undergraduate film buff had not yet arrived.

Nowadays every university in the country boasts a dozen young aspiring film critics who know everything about their subject, even if, because they have seen so many films so fast, they know nothing about anything else. In my day, such a range of reference was less common. I was a harbinger. For *Varsity*, reviewing *Muriel*, I launched into a survey of Resnais's entire *oeuvre*, including the rarely seen *Nuit et Brouillard*. For *Broadsheet*, reviewing *Cuba Si!*, I questioned whether Chris Marker in a state of certainty could ever be as interesting as he was in *Letter from Siberia*, when he was in a state of doubt. Other undergraduate would-be cultural journalists might have been cleverer than I was – as I was later to discover, several of them were – but they hadn't been alive long enough to have that kind of scope. Beyond that, I had the virtue of my chief drawback. My childish imagination was still vivid with the gaudy bric-a-brac which had helped to form it. I wrote about Tarzan and Jane as if they were still real to me. They were, so I sounded convinced, and to sound convinced is the first and longest step towards sounding convincing. My prose pieces gave the effect, strained for though it might be, of a sort of panoptic pop. For the undergraduate editors, always too short of publishable contributions, I was a gift horse who ran off at the mouth.

Soon I was appearing in every publication. The poetry magazines I supplied from the dog-eared back catalogue of finished masterpieces that lined my cardboard suitcase. Here again, there were other undergraduate aspirants more talented. But they were in the first phase of their development and I was in the second of mine. I had got to the point where I would keep working on a poem until it sounded, to my ears at least, like a finished product, not just a promise. It hardly needs saying that my judgment was often faulty: no amount of finishing touches will compensate for a bad design. Much of what I then published seemed to me so immature in retrospect – and retrospect began only a few years later – that at one recent stage I seriously planned to buy up all surviving copies of the relevant magazines and burn them. But at the time it must have seemed, and not just to me, that my work had an authority lacking in the average undergraduate's contribution. It would have been surprising if this had not been so. The poets and editors – all the editors were poets and most of the poets were editors – were admirably poised in their reserved demeanour but they were terribly young. They wore tweeds and corduroys. One of them smoked a pipe and ate seed cake with his sweet tea. Another hid his acne with his hand. The occasional poet-editor was a classless *arriviste*, called something like Steve Bumption, who wore a white leather jacket and talked about Graphics, but at that point trendiness had barely impinged. 'Graphics,' he would say, 'is where it's *all happening*.' But he was saying it into a void. It was all happening in Carnaby

Street, not in Cambridge. Mostly the young people who ran the university literary scene looked and sounded as if they belonged in a wartime BBC radio studio along with C. Day Lewis and Louis MacNeice. They crouched beside the gas fire in their rooms pasting up the layout of the next issue on the threadbare carpet while they drank Nescafé from chipped mugs. Doubtless they had ambitions of their own but this failed to occur to me when I burst in and brow-beat them into running a two-page layout of what I cheerfully assured them was my best stuff.

Since I never took ‘no’ for an answer, their only way to reject my work was to accept it and then try to forget it. I wouldn’t let them forget it. Even in that first year, about two-thirds of everything I submitted got published, which, since I submitted a lot, was a lot. My self-assurance must have been a bit tough on the nerves of some of the young poets who had been around for two years already and might have hoped to shine unrivalled during their third year. None of them sought to make me aware of this, or even, in my hearing at any rate, objected to a colonial taking over. There might, of course, have been the odd snide comment I missed. There probably wasn’t much I didn’t miss, come to think of it. I had never been much of a one for the hidden message. Nor did it occur to me that a lack of editorial resistance might not necessarily be a good thing. What I really needed was discouragement.

Fate decreed that in the theatrical field, if in no other, I would soon get what was coming to me. At the second Footlights smoker in the first term I was on stage in half a dozen different sketches. The Footlights club room, while it had a curtained stage, had no deep wings or any other means of concealment while you waited your turn to go on. Under the windows on the Falcon Yard side of the clubroom there was a wooden bench where you had to wait. It was *de rigueur* to look up at the stage and pretend to enjoy the act preceding yours. As I write, I can feel the curve of that wooden bench under my buttocks: it grew so familiar. Like the oiled stench coming up through the floor from MacFisheries below, and the thump of the dancing feet coming down from the Yacht Club through the ceiling above, the pinch of the bench evoked a cocktail of fear and triumph. You couldn’t have the triumph without feeling the fear first. Thus the basic structure of any theatrical experience was laid out cold. Without having in any way begun to refine my sketches – it still hadn’t crossed my mind that they would have to be constructed at least as carefully as poems – I went out to the little stage often enough to make an impact. Also I had an angle. My stuff was literary. With the aid of an unsuspecting Canadian who played Alice B. Toklas, I performed a sketch I had written about Gertrude Stein. Nobody really understood it – I’m sure of that because I didn’t either – but at least the number had a tone of its

own. At that time, the Footlights was going through one of its recurring periods of looking for a new style. A few years before, *Cambridge Circus*, essentially a Footlights May Week revue with a bigger budget, had conquered London and eventually the world. The Footlights, which had recovered from the success of supplying half the cast of *Beyond the Fringe*, was once again plunged into the necessity of not repeating itself. In London, the satire boom was already commercialised to the point where joining it would have looked slavish. The challenge, as always, was to find your own voice, and the problem, as always, was to find out where that had been mislaid. The club was full of precociously accomplished young performers but as yet they had little to say. I had a lot to say, even if I was not accomplished. This put me in the dangerous position of playing uncle: my worst role. Like most people who organise their lives badly, I just love giving advice.

The Footlights committee were advised by their new recruit to climb on a train and go up to London to see the opening night of *The Charge of the Light Fandango*. The revue I had written with my erstwhile Svengali and long-term collaborator Spencer had found a backer: Spencer's father-in-law. My share of the writing had largely been completed before I came up to Cambridge. Employing the odd weekend *exeat*, I had attended a few rehearsals and helped Spencer to rewrite those of our songs and sketches which threatened to be insufficiently obscure. The cast were all Australian expatriates with high hopes. Some of them had been abroad long enough to be wondering if the big break would ever come. Spencer himself had high hopes, strangely enough. His dedication to obliquity was unimpaired but somehow he expected that his efforts to alienate the audience would meet with rapturous applause. Less forgivably, I expected the same result. I not only should have known better, I *did* know better: but I had been caught up. Any theatrical event has a momentum of its own: any theatrical event except *The Charge of the Light Fandango*. The Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith, had been hired at colossal expense. The Footlights committee were sitting with me in a box. To say that the disaster unfolded would be to exaggerate its pace. The disaster developed at the speed of stale cheese growing blue hair. It was all low points, but perhaps the lowest was a song about a jewel robbery which Spencer and I, greatly pleased with our own ingenuity, had written to the tune of Ravel's *Bolero*. Six of the cast were meant to sing it while tip-toeing in intricate patterns around the stage. If they had merely forgotten the words it would have been a mercy. Pummelled by the waves of indifference from the auditorium, however, they remembered the words, but in the wrong order. Since the choreography was cued by the lyrics, the actors were soon out of sequence. Eventually two of them were out of sight, having taken craven

advantage of their proximity to the wings. It was hard to blame them. The song was a *tour de force* and nothing else.

The whole show was like that. It was all technique. Even at that time I half-realised it: a pretty drastic self-appraisal after more than a year's work. The Lord Chamberlain, who at that time still exercised his baleful influence on the British theatre, had insisted that my best sketch be left out. It was an all-purpose Queen's speech, in which the sovereign assured some foreign country that her best wishes, warm blankets or aircraft carriers were on their way towards it. The idea was that she could cross out what did not apply. When the Lord Chamberlain crossed out the whole thing, I tried to convince myself that censorship had wrecked our chances. The dutiful chuckles of the Footlights committee should have told me the truth, They stayed to the end, in sharp contrast to the majority of the audience, which drained away steadily throughout the first half, leaving the second half to be watched only by friends and relatives. The party afterwards was a wake in all respects except the failure of Spencer's father-in-law to realise that he was the corpse. Either he enjoyed losing money or else he was simply relieved about not having been on stage. It would have been disloyal to renounce my expatriate colleagues, who had all tried hard. Also I honestly felt (self-deception always feels particularly honest) that we had done something new and challenging. Privately, however, far back, in a dark part of my mind which admitted light but was slow to reflect it, I was getting ready to begin again. In Sydney, though I had found Spencer's influence overwhelming, I had always harboured secret desires to establish a contact with the audience. In Cambridge, the undergraduate thespians, however green, shared the same impulse. The polite young men I was with wanted to be entertainers and so did I. On the train back up to Cambridge we talked about something else. They were so kind and tactful that they frightened me. Where had they *got it*, this sensitivity to the pain of others? School must have been Hell, like the trenches in World War One, which could have been the subject of the reviews that *The Charge of the Light Fandango* got next day. I read them in the Junior Common Room and resisted the temptation to rip them out of the newspapers so that nobody else would see them. This forbearance might have been, had it been conscious, a correct guess about the tactical advisability of not reacting to criticism. In reality, however, I was so drained of energy that the effort of tearing a sheet of newspaper would have left me breathless.

Luckily a chance to work off my embarrassment offered itself straight away. Footlights was not the only institution to stage smokers. Some of the colleges had an annual smoker of their own. These college smokers were staffed almost exclusively by Footlights members who were not necessarily members of the

college concerned. In other words, the Footlights were pulling a fast one. The relevant university bye-law, fiercely enforced by the proctors, allowed the Footlights only two smokers per term plus the annual May Week revue. In order to work up the best material from the twice-a-term Footlights smokers into a form which might possibly make it into the May Week revue, the Footlights infiltrated the college smokers. Any Footlights member who wasn't enrolled at the college concerned was invited in as a guest. A sufficiently fanatical Footlights performer could thus tread the boards in the club room, in his own college and as a guest in every other college, so that he was in a constant rhythm of rehearsing and performing for as long as the academic year lasted. In a college smoker, especially, he would get plenty of practice at playing to a wider audience, because a college smoker could be attended by anybody from that college or any other college, since the tickets were on the open market.

Of all the college smokers, the most reliably successful was the Pembroke smoker. When Peter Cook had been up, agents from London would attend the Pembroke smoker and try to purchase the material. On one occasion Cook sold the whole show to the West End. The effect of his professionalism, though not necessarily of his originality, had lingered on. It was a hard act to follow, and when the Footlights committee suggested that I might like to direct the next Pembroke smoker I was not hasty in saying yes. Without question I was the natural choice. The only other Footlights member from my college was some kind of scientist who had been elected to the club by accident after giving what the audience had taken to be a brilliant impersonation of a man who had forgotten a terrible script. When the fact finally percolated that the script had really been terrible and that he had, indeed, forgotten it, he settled down for three years of enjoying the bar facilities and left the field clear for me. But although I had no doubts about the desirability of going back to basics and learning to please an audience, I had several doubts about whether this was the right time to do it. First of all, there was the question of my studies, which so far were non-existent. Also my confidence was not at its highest. The quality of the silence with which the audience had greeted *The Charge of the Light Fandango* was still ringing in my ears like a blow to the side of the head with the flat of the hand. I could still hear every cough, every wild, bitter laugh of disbelief, every bang of the safety exit double-doors as the steel bar across them was hit loudly by the uncaring fist of another customer baling out like a test pilot from a prototype spinning to its doom. Finally, the doors had been held open by the usherettes. They had nodded knowingly. I didn't want to see that knowing nod again.

I was talked out of my gloom and into the job. Actually, the show couldn't lose. Eric Idle was in it and he knew all the ropes. Above all, he knew that what

really mattered was the wine. Into Pembroke's old library, called Old Library, were carried many boxes of a cheap but acceptably smooth Beau-jolais from Peter Dominic, who also supplied the glasses. Many of these were broken on the first night by the Hearties. The show ran for four nights and everybody came. The Hearties were merely the noisiest element. Large, boat-rowing types with low foreheads, thick necks and annoyingly pretty female companions imported from London, they laughed at everything, including the love songs. Everyone else enjoyed the show too, although most of them would have been hard put to give a clear account of it afterwards. All the men were in black tie and all the women in evening gowns. Some of the male dons would have liked to have been in evening gowns also, but they confined themselves to lipstick and rouge. The stage, constructed from beer-crates for the occasion, was only about six feet square and stood uncurtained in one corner of the room, so that you could make an entrance through the door leading to the book-stack. The rest of the room was packed with small low tables tightly surrounded by increasingly happy people. The oxygen was quickly used up. So was the wine, except that our waiters kept replacing it. The heat was terrific. Breathing neat nitrogen, with only an unlimited supply of plonk to stave off dehydration, the entire audience was already drunk before the lights went down on the first act. Even the dons were shouting. But the level of physical behaviour remained decorous if you didn't count the periodic attempts by the Hearties to smash their table by dancing on it.

The show, I am bound to say, merited an enthusiastic response. A cast of all the best Footlights guest artists did their stuff, topped off by Romaine Rand's fabled strip-tease nun routine, making its first appearance since the Sydney University revue several years before. For its reincarnation in the Pembroke smoker, she had hand-sewn a whole new Carmelite nun's habit. She wore a particularly daring bikini underneath. Luckily, the Dean didn't see the show until the last night, when he bit through the stem of his pipe. Though Romaine pulled the walls in, really there was nothing in the show which did not go down a storm, mainly because the audience was clinically intoxicated, but partly because, in my role as producer, I had arranged the running order with some care, making sure that the up-beat songs came at the end of the half and stuff like that. I even got away with my own monologue. A whimsical little number about two railway locomotives in love, it went on for so long that the Hearties, from a sitting start, managed to reduce their table to matchwood before I was half-way through. But the show had built up too much impetus to be easily stopped. Since the whole of the university's theatrical establishment turned up over the course of the four nights, this small success could be counted as my first tangible impact on the broader Cambridge scene. For anyone with the right set of

personal inadequacies, an applauding audience is a wine far more ready than anything that you can buy in a bottle. I was especially pleased to see the women putting their hands together admiringly. The wine having flowed freely for the cast as well as the audience, it was with a fond eye made foolish that I peeped low around the corner of the book-stack door while some other act was on stage and checked out those pretty faces looking up, lit as if they were spectators at a ballet by Degas. I felt love. I felt grief. I felt sick. Where had they been?

Wherever they had been, they were gone again when the fifth day dawned and there was no more Pembroke smoker to draw them out of their hiding-places. A life without women made it hard to be temperate. Theoretically, I was undeviatingly loyal to my near-fiancée, Françoise. Having left Australia the year after I did, she was now studying in Florence. Italy was a long way away. My close Catholic acquaintance, Robin, was still in London, but even London needed an *exeat* and Robin was going through one of her recurring phases of being reconciled with the Church. Questions of fidelity aside, to know a girl in Cambridge would have been the answer, but where were they? The few that I clapped eyes on seemed capable of transferring themselves from the Sidgwick Avenue site to the safety of their Newnham sitting rooms within a matter of seconds, or else cycling back up Castle Hill to Girton as if competing successfully in the Tour de France. Perhaps I should have paid more attention to my personal appearance. Many a young man has worn himself to a frazzle practising verbal approaches when what he should have done was wash his hair. But even supposing I had squeaked with cleanliness, who would have seen the shine? Sitting through lectures at Sidgwick Avenue was too high a price to pay, and if the undergraduettes weren't working there, they were working in the University Library, the faculty libraries or their rooms, Study was all they ever did. Abramovitz had the answer but it took his kind of unembarrassable self-confidence. He toured the schools in Station Road where the foreign girls came to learn English, picked himself a strapping German with paradigmatically chiselled Aryan features, brought her back to his rooms and gave her English lessons. The fee was not in cash but in kind. Through Abramovitz's frequently sported oak, the squeals of his guest penetrated with ease. What was he doing to her in there? When I met him in the gyp room while brewing tea he would explain, trembling with repletion, that he was doing his bit for historic justice. 'I've *enslaved* her, dear boy. It's the guilt. She's putty in my hands.' I think he taunted her during the throes of need. Anyway, there was a big scandal when his ancient bedder – the same Mrs Blades who was my bedder too – tottered into his bedroom one morning and found half a dozen loosely knotted, awesomely heavy condoms festooned all over the decor. The one draped over the lampshade had

started to fry. Presumably Mrs Blades had seen one or two of those things before, back around the time of the Battle of Jutland, because when she eyeballed six of them at once the shock of recognition drove her backwards all the way down the stairs and across the court into the Dean's office, where she had hysterics among the haematite. Convulsions amid the chrysoprase. She passed out into the porphyry. The Dean proclaimed the matter out of his spiritual jurisdiction and got in touch with the Chief Rabbi, who happened to be Abramovitz's uncle. Abramovitz should have had another year of living in college but he was told that next year he would have to take digs in town. He was lucky not to get sent down. He had luck running out of his ears so maybe the reprieve was just normal. Abramovitz was among the blessed. Some of the English he taught Helga apparently got her into a lot of trouble back in Stuttgart, 'Wasn't it remarkable,' he asked me years later, 'how *much* she looked like Heydrich?'

3. SLEEPING TIGER

Preparing for Part Two of the English Tripos was supposed to take me two academic years, and the first was already gone in a drunken haze. As usual, I had done quite a lot of reading. Again as usual, little of it was on the course. I had started teaching myself French by construing Proust a sentence at a time – the complete job was to take only slightly less than fifteen years – but to satisfy the examination requirements I would have done better to teach myself a bit more English from the English Moralists, some of whom I could not recognise even by name, let alone by their opinions. The unspoken policy in Cambridge was to give affiliated students like myself a long rein in their first year, although a certain proportion – mainly Americans, strangely enough – persisted in regarding the long rein as enough rope, and hanging themselves with it. Suicide from loneliness was unnervingly common. One of the many hazardous prospects of a bedder's job was to enter a young gentleman's oak-panelled sitting room in the morning and find him suspended from the central light-fitting. This possibility was rendered less likely in my case by the news that I too, like Abramovitz, might have to spend the following academic year lodged in the town, where oak panelling was less lavishly supplied. I was also officially advised that during the long vacation it might be profitable to attain at least nodding acquaintance with the curriculum, and thus stave off the already likely possibility that I would receive a degree classified so low it would be tantamount to a certificate of mental disability. But all these admonitions were easy to take lightly now that it was May Week in Cambridge.

May Week, one need hardly point out, took place in June. Only if it had been called April Week would it have taken place in May. Your first academic year in Cambridge is so arranged that you must learn to appreciate your surroundings in winter, when the trees are waterlogged traceries and the buildings are doomy silhouettes between sky and fen. Captain Cousteau diving without lights saw more colour under a continental shelf than you will see in Cambridge between November and March. Also he kept relatively dry. So you either hang yourself from despair inside one of the venerable edifices or else learn to love them for

from despair inside one of the venerable canons of life learn to love them for their shape alone. The perfect little lidless cube of Clare College unpacks its form most reluctantly, but eventually most completely, when the grass of its courtyard is covered with a tablecloth of snow. In Garret Hostel Lane, the dark chimneys of Trinity's south wing are already cut out clearly against the sodden clouds. The trick is to see the brilliance of the set design before the spotlights are switched on. After that, not even the blind could miss it. When spring pumps the water out of the panorama, the lawns of King's light up and throw their radiance into walls that suddenly look as edible as wafers. The blue sun-dials in the courts of Caius reveal what they have been mimicking: a clear sky. The Wren library in Trinity fills up with sunlight underneath, a baroque hovercraft on fire. The backs of the colleges are like Dresden reborn in a garden, like an Ideal Chateau Exhibition on a toytown Loire. The whole undergraduate population takes to the punts. Released from their examinations, the girls whose very existence you had begun to doubt reveal their delicious corporeality in thin cotton frocks vaporised by sunlight. Horrible young men in blazers and straw boaters momentarily attain the fluent beauty of a river party by Renoir, before their neighing voices – 'I say Simon! Simon! Don't let those oiks nab that punt!' – shatter the illusion. The illusion forms again. Everyone is outdoors. Everyone except those concerned with the Footlights May Week Revue. They are inside the Arts Theatre, facing the horrendous prospect of not being loved.

That first year I calamitously failed the audition to join the cast, but got the job of assistant stage manager. Being a bit older than anyone else involved, I was in a potentially humiliating position, but felt, with the flop of *The Charge of the Light Fandango* still reverberating in my dreams, that a stretch of being humble couldn't hurt. It could be argued that Cambridge was already eroding my spirit of protest. A more likely explanation, however, was that I had temporarily suspended my self-assertiveness in order to submit myself to a new discipline. I was falling back in order to jump better. The French, I had just learned from Proust, had a phrase for it: *reculer pour mieux sauter*. I couldn't pronounce it very well, but it sounded like the right idea.

As a Footlights May Week revue assistant stage manager, I was diligence personified. The previous year's revue had apparently been only one step up from a fiasco. It had tried to ape its successful predecessor *Cambridge Circus* without the wherewithal in either personnel or material. This year's had improved the position to the point of being merely something of a dud. Romaine had been coaxed out of the library to join Eric Idle at the head of an accomplished cast, but good material was at a premium, and most numbers were little better than workmanlike. But being little better than that, they were never

worse than that either. The music, in particular, seemed astonishingly inventive and accomplished to anyone who, like myself, had spent several years arduously fitting lyrics on to ready-made melodies because he didn't know anyone who could write new ones. In the Footlights there were young men who could read and write music. In the depths of my conceit I didn't really believe that any of these youngsters could write words better than I could, but when it came to putting black dots between staves – or between keys or whatever it was that they did – there was no question that they had me whipped. Nearly everybody could sing. Even those who could only speak could speak in tongues. They could do accents, for example, which I couldn't, and indeed still can't. So there was an air of professionalism about the whole business, to which I contributed with some ruthlessly efficient assistant stage management. When the show was touring the provincial towns, the set had to be secured to the stage with sixty-four separate screws, I had them all colour-coded. With one of those pump-action screwdrivers I could do the whole job in the dark. When Idle sprinted on stage as the Olympic torch-bearer, his flaming torch had been primed by me with exactly the right amount of inflammable fluid. When Idle came sprinting off again, barely had the lights snapped out before I had propelled Romaine, dressed as a Russian peasant woman and sitting in an old armchair on top of a wheeled platform, smoothly into position for her appearance as Tolstoy's widow. The whole lexicon of backstage terminology – tabs, flats, spots, dimmers – was easy on my lips. On the entire tour I made no mistakes at all. It turned out that I was saving them all up for the opening night in London.

Perhaps the venue spooked me. Once again, by the cruellest coincidence, it was the Lyric, Hammersmith. The memory still haunted me of how the audience, during the early stages of *The Charge of the Light Fandango*, had fought among themselves at the crowded exits. That night at the wake, I had poured Spencer's bereaved father-in-law a full glass of whisky because he had been still too stunned to say 'when'. This night I must have been reliving that night, because when the time came to prime Idle's Olympic torch with inflammable fluid I overdid it by a pint. As he ran on, his torch was already sending flames almost to the proscenium arch, and before he was half-way through his monologue there were fireballs falling all around him. Troupier that he was, he kept going to the end, but the audience found it harder to laugh as it became more likely that his incipient demise would entail theirs. Shortly before the end of the number the torch, as if disappointed at having failed to burn down the theatre, sputtered out, just in time to ruin Idle's punch-line, which depended on its still being alight. When he came running off into the wings he cursed me with admirable restraint, but by now I was rattled, and I pushed Romaine's

trolley into the blackout with too much force, so that it rolled several feet past the marked position. When the fixed spotlight which should have illuminated her was switched on, it illuminated a circular area of empty stage instead. She delivered the first part of her monologue in total darkness, during which time, it transpired, she had got out of her chair and begun the job of pushing the trolley back towards the right position. When the lighting operator at last figured out what had gone wrong, he killed the fixed light and picked her up with a follow-spot, thereby revealing her toiling away like Mother Courage at the exact moment when she was describing what it was like to be paralysed on her death bed. The audience was either sophisticated enough to be wondering politely how Brecht had got into the act, or else had correctly judged that something was amiss.

The show would probably have been no great smash hit anyway, but I had helped scotch what chance it had. The notices were death threats. David Frost, acting as a guest critic *in Punch*, was generously kind, but a turkey, once cremated, declines to be a phoenix. Though the revue ran for the scheduled two weeks, it was full only from Thursday to Saturday, with hellish matinées during which the cast ran some of the sketches backwards to see whether the old age pensioners would notice I got some valuable training in how to keep slogging away at a show after it had been pronounced dead. Also, I was getting paid: the first real money I had ever made in show business. Though the stipend wasn't very large, it was larger than the one I earned next. When the show folded, there was still a lot of the Long Vacation stretching ahead, and before I could get to Italy I would need to earn the fare. One of the regular staff at the Lyric told me that the circus at Olympia had an opening for a roustabout. I applied for the job and got it before I found out that the opening was at the back of a tiger.

My job was to clean out the tiger's cage. In later years, when telling this story, I didn't always remember to mention that the tiger was removed from the cage before I got in there with my bucket and short shovel. Actually there wouldn't have been much danger if the tiger had stayed put. He had probably thrown the occasional scare into Clive of India, but to Clive James he posed no threat. So old that only his stripes were holding him together, he had teeth that couldn't dent the tennis ball with which he had been provided. Already safer than if he had been stuffed, he was rendered definitively innocuous by drugs. Some form of tranquilliser was fed to him in his morning hunk of raw meat, zonking him to the point where he couldn't suck his tennis ball without dribbling. The trainer plus three assistants removed the savage beast from its cage by rolling two long poles under the dozing corpse and lifting it out like a litter full of rag and bone. Then in I would go, a man in control of his fear, showing the ice-cool nerve of

those who work close to the big cats. In I would go and scoop up those sadly depleted droppings. The poor shagged-out old moggie could scarcely shit a pretzel. The stuff was a sort of dark green, if you're wondering. Or perhaps, in that mysterious part of the brain which Baudelaire conquered like a new country, one of my memories has taken colour from another.

Flashback

When I was about twelve years old in Sydney I was allowed for the first time to attend the Royal Easter Show on my own, carrying two whole pounds with which to buy sample bags. I bought the Minties sample bag so that I could assemble the Minties cardboard gun, which was meant to fire cardboard discs but could fire lead slugs if you doubled the rubber band. Having assembled the gun, I ate all the Minties. I bought the Jaffas sample bag and ate all the Jaffas. So my stomach already had a lot to deal with before I bought not just one Giant Licorice sample bag, but two. My plan was to take one of the Giant Licorice sample bags home to my friend, Graham Gilbert, who was bedridden with German measles. Before I had finished eating the contents of my own Giant Licorice sample bag, this plan was already starting to fade, and during the long wait for the Doll's Point bus that was to take me home I ate the contents of the second bag as well. There was an incredible amount of licorice in a Giant Licorice sample bag, and all of it was black. There were logs of black licorice, straps of black licorice, coils of black licorice, cables of black licorice. By the time the bus came I had eaten everything and could make my way only with caution up the stairs to the top deck. Just past Brighton-le-Sands the road along the beach met President Avenue. From the junction it was an easy walk to Kogarah, so that was where I usually got off. It was where I got off this time, too, but not as usual. I pressed the upstairs bell to halt the bus at the next stop, but I couldn't move without feeling strange. The conductor appeared on the down-stairs rear platform and looked up the staircase to see who had pressed the bell in an irresponsible manner, a misdemeanour to which a statutory penalty was attached. As I swayed at the top of the stairs I could see him in the stair-well mirror, so he must have seen what I did next. I vomited. I did the big spit. In the resulting avalanche, large fragments of Minties and Jaffas appeared merely as reinforcement, like gravel in liquid concrete. The basic thrust of the whole thing, the burden as it were, was an unspeakable tide of half-digested licorice. Yet what struck me with most force, even as the first wave of the descending onslaught struck the conductor, was how strange it was that what had gone in black had come out green. It was a dark green, admittedly, a green deeper than bottle

come out green. It was a dark green, admittedly: a green deeper than some green, thicker than heavy jade, But still it was green. From where I crouched heaving at the head of the stairs, it all went bouncing down like a baroque cascade of duckweed nougat. When, void and light-headed, I started walking home, the bus was still there: all the passengers had been ordered off because the conductor had refused to continue.

But that was to digress. I like to think that in adulthood I have acquired a certain polish, and that if I were now offered two sample bags full of Giant Licorice I would have the will-power to turn one of them down. There is no use pretending, however, that my sensibilities were either refined or usefully mortified by squeegeeing the effluent of a senile feline whose only contribution to the big cat act was a slow hop on to a stool and another slow hop down again, the two manoeuvres being separated by a growl in response to a crack of the trainer's whip. The growl sounded like a long yawn from the audience, a comparison which could readily be verified. It wasn't much of a circus, yet I rarely failed to watch the performance. The show didn't run to a trapeze act but there was a good-looking and sumptuously shapely girl in a silver-spangled scarlet leotard who climbed up a rope into the roof, hung on by her teeth to a short silver bar, and then spun rapidly round. It's an old act – Degas and Lautrec both did a picture of it – but it never fails if the girl has the right equipment, and Pearl had. She was billed as Pearl the Girl in a Whirl and in addition to her athletic attainments she demonstrated an excellent understanding of my poems for someone whose usual reading matter was the novels of Barbara Cartland. Pearl was all strength. When she flashed her teeth you tended to cross your legs involuntarily. But underneath the finely tuned muscles there was something tender. Unfortunately the ringmaster thought so too. Pearl was his mistress. When the circus broke up they left for Benidorm together. I left for Florence, this time able to pay for my own ticket, with only a small subsidy from Robin so that I could buy two cartons of duty-free Rothmans filters – which in Italy were as good as gold, because the Nazionale cigarettes produced by the state tobacco monopoly tasted like burning polystyrene.

Another wise precaution was to remove my beard. This transformed my reception in Florence almost as much as it transformed my face, which emerged pale, small and pointed at the bottom, like a talking turnip. Some of the things it said were in the local language, which with Françoise's encouragement I had mastered to the point of being able to speak platitudinously on the subject currently under discussion, instead of the subject that had been changed five minutes before. In those last few beautiful summers before the floods, the young

university people of Florence had an open air party every evening as the sun went down behind the cypresses lining the informal garden of some villa on the other side of the Arno, usually on the slope leading up between the Gardens of Boboli and the Piazzale Michelangelo. Sunset left the horizon rimmed with a light like crème de menthe. Young men wore cravats, allegedly of English origin, thus adding extra casualness to their tan lightweight suits, the jackets of which were hooked on one shoulder in the warm air. Young women wore silk and sandals. To indicate nonconformity they smoked like old trains. Feminism had not yet arrived but the girls were already feeling, if not their power, certainly the need for it. They could all talk a streak. One of them, called Adriana, was so witty she literally took away your breath: you were scared to respire in case you missed a wisecrack. Incorrectly judging her eyes to be too small, she drew circles of mascara around them, which made her look like a pangolin. At dinner in Gabriella's apartment across from the façade of the Pitti Palace, Adriana would palpitate on the spot with the fecund splendour of her own verbal invention, her cigarette waving around her head like a magic wand, ashing gaily into the ice-cream pudding. 'The sweet is my ashtray,' she would cry in her own language: 'it sounds like my autobiography.' Gabriella ate the affected area, as a gesture of apology for her money and titles. Larger gestures would be demanded later, but this was before the young Italian intellectuals had taken their rebellion much beyond a daring thesis reinterpreting Gramsci, or an interest in the poetry of Pier Paolo Pasolini. When crooked on chianti they sang the old songs of the partisans. With the hangover came the eternal question of who would be appointed whose research assistant when and where. '*Bella ciao*,' they sang rebelliously, '*bella ciao bella ciao bella ciao ciao ciao*.' But the system was hard to buck. If music could have changed the antiquated Italian university system it would have had to be the kind of music that changed Jericho. Even Gabriella must have been concerned about how and where she would fit in. If she was worried, though, it was hard to tell. In addition to the apartment opposite the Pitti Palace, Gabriella owned a villa in the country. She was an aristocrat. Her hospitality was extended not only to her friends, but to the friends of her friends, such as myself. She had nobility. There is nobility in every class but if an aristocrat has it she finds it easier to exercise it. My beliefs, at the time, being dead set against privilege in all its forms, I found it disturbing to like her style. Though not beautiful, she had the grace that brought beauty towards her. Everyone was at his best near Gabriella. Françoise's fine intelligence burst into flower, and Adriana became a semantic fountain. Keeping, or trying to keep, up with what Adriana said was the best possible training, a linguistic advanced motorist's course. A supplement to the course was La Lucciola Estiva, the

Summer Firefly, an open air cinema in the dry pebbled bed of the Arno which showed the comedies of Ugo Tognazzi and Nino Manfredi on a continuous basis. *L'Immorale*, a comedy directed by Pietro Germi and starring Tognazzi, was the first Italian film whose dialogue I was able to follow. Tognazzi played a soft-hearted *amoroso* who kept two wives and a mistress ecstatically happy by lying to all of them while he ran from one to the other on a split-second timetable. He never missed a trick. Remembering every birthday and anniversary, he always bought the correct flowers, turned up on time for the intimate little dinner by candlelight, knocked himself out being wonderful with the children. Finally, in a post office, while mailing three separate sets of letters and postcards, he expired quietly from a heart attack. The audience laughed helplessly at his demise, so perfectly was the film paced. I saw it three times and enrolled it among the all-time film masterpieces. Perhaps it wasn't, but the thrill was authentic: the state of grace when we break through into understanding a new language is, after all, only the recurrence, this time fully conscious, of the long euphoria in which we first attained comprehension of the tongue to which we were born. For those of us who work with words, a periodic return to that initial urgency is essential. Don't listen to the pedant who says that because you have not mastered the whole speech of another language there is no point learning to read it. Smatterings are well worth having. They help strip the world bare again of its cloaking vocabulary. Dante's few lines about how paper burns took me back to the first principles of evocation in a way all of Shakespeare's plays could not, because with Shakespeare I had forgotten that the word and the thing are different things. Florence was my unofficial university. In my few weeks there I read more than in the whole of the previous year. My whitewashed room in the Antica Cervia, an obscure *locanda* behind the Palazzo Vecchio, was like a warehouse of sand-coloured BUR paperbacks. Two streets further down towards Piazza Santa Croce was the Trattoria Anita, a cheap restaurant favoured by whores, pimps and cigarette-smugglers. There I read and ate, spattering the pages of Cesare Pavese with spots of meat sauce. In the Biblioteca Nazionale I was part of the furniture, taking short lunches so that I could wolf down Sapegno's history of pre-Renaissance literature, the note-books of Leopardi and the major works of Benedetto Croce. Very little of this would come in handy when I sat the Italian paper in Part Two of the Cambridge English Tripos, but my guardian angel was still working overtime to protect me from utilitarian values. His representative on Earth was Françoise, who seemed duty-bound to push the right books in front of me so that I could devour them. What satisfaction she got out of my single-mindedness I didn't bother to ask. The question never occurred to me, any more than it occurred to me to wonder why

she didn't choose between her several other suitors, all of them serious and one with a very large Mercedes. Perhaps that was my secret. Having left ordinary self-absorption behind, I was a self trying to absorb all creation, and must have been as hard to ignore as a vacuum cleaner.

Michaelmas term was already a week old when I caught a crowded train north to Milan. Reading Eugenio Montale's first book of essays, I scarcely noticed that I spent the whole journey on my feet. The plane was delayed by a day. The airline paid for a night in a cheap hotel but such necessary extras as cigarettes ate up my remaining cash and when asked for the airport tax I was once again embarrassingly not able to produce it. The last time that had happened to me, a nice man from Calcutta had taken pity and offered assistance, no strings attached. This time there was no Indian Samaritan on hand to overhear my entreaties and fork out the money. All the Indians were back in India. The airport tax official, noting the book I was carrying, must have independently decided that a foreigner's incipient love of the world's most lovely language should be encouraged by subsidy. Dumb luck. Don't think it doesn't bother me now, how my falling bread always landed with the buttered side up. It even bothered me then. But there was a mass of compensatory trouble waiting for me in the chill air of the fens. In my Junior Common Room pigeon-hole was a series of progressively more curt notes from the Dean requiring my presence at once. Either he was digging a mine-shaft down into the linen room and needed help, or I was in deep shit.

4. UNQUIET FLOW THE DONS

I nearly got thrown out. Squatting gnome-like in his rocky grotto, the Dean examined the bowl of his pipe as if he had not yet given up hope of discovering small but valuable mineral deposits within its charred circumference. Mature students of a certain theatrical *réclame*, he informed me, could get away with a lot, but to come up late for term, without a previous written application, was to invite rustication at the very least. Also it was just plain bad manners. To one *in statu pupillari* such as myself, he explained, the college was *in loco parentis*. Gazing at the Dean as he sat framed among feldspar, I found it hard not to reflect that he was about as loco as any parent could well get, but this unworthy thought was chased away by my uncomfortable realisation that he had a point. Offering my apology on the spot, I pleaded, with some truth, that the educational stimulus of Tuscany had distracted me from my normal loyalties. The Dean accepted these protestations with a Christian heart, though it was clear that Italy for him meant either the presence of the Scarlet Woman or an absence of suitable rocks. Perhaps the customs officers had once opened his bags in the Brenner Pass and found them full of Carrara marble. This year, he told me, I would not be offered a set in college. He understood that there was a room going at the Eagle, in the centre of town. The Eagle being a pub, it scarcely counted as approved lodgings, but it would do until I found something better. He made it sound as if I had better find something better pretty quickly, or else die of privation. He did not, on the other hand, offer the alternative of staying on in college until something classier than a room at the Eagle should become available. 'Trot along' he insisted, 'and rent it straight away.' My packed suitcase, he added, was in the care of the housekeeper. Naturally I could eat in Hall as usual, but perhaps it would be an advantage both to myself and the college if I no longer had to scale the walls after dark. There was such a thing as dignity, and too many nights spent in the incinerator skip could entail its loss. 'One can only advise,' he puffed.

He left me to find out for myself that the incinerator skip knocked spots off the Eagle as a place of abode. The Eagle was the most romantic pub in

the Eagle as a place of abode. The Eagle was the most romantic pub in Cambridge, if not the whole of England. During the war, bomber crews from all over East Anglia had come to the Eagle to spend, in hilarious conviviality, what was statistically likely to be one of their last evenings alive. Riding on each other's shoulders, into the deep red linoleum ceiling of the saloon they burned the numbers and nicknames of their squadrons with naked candle flames: a portent, doubly hideous for its innocence, of their own fate, and a grim token of the fiery nemesis they were bringing every night to the cities of Germany. To this day I can't enter that room without hearing their laughter, which becomes steadily more unmanly as I grow older. All my sons. Twenty years ago I was not all that much older than they had been when they were snuffed out. It was a hall of fame, a temple of the sacred flame, a trophy room for heroes.

Unfortunately my room was somewhere above it, and not quite so grand. The door to my room opened off the first floor gallery which ran around the courtyard where the coaches had once stopped. When I opened the door and stepped into the darkened room, I fell across the bed and smacked my forehead smartly on the opposite wall. Luckily the wall, under many geological layers of plaster and paint, was sufficiently resilient to absorb most of the impact. It was also quite moist. When I found the light switch, a twenty-watt bulb dispelled just enough of the gloom to reveal that the moisture was not my blood. It was rising damp. It was also descending damp, with a good deal of transverse damp mixed in. The smell of mould was tropical. The temperature of the air, on the other hand, was arctic. There was a two-bar electric fire, one of whose bars worked reasonably well for half its length, I had lived like this in London. I had no wish, and no capacity, to live like this again. Squeezing my cardboard suitcase into the space not occupied by the bed, I lay down in the half-light and tried to decide whether I was near tears or had simply begun, like my new surroundings, to deliquesce. There was a pillowcase on the pillow but there was something on the pillowcase. It was wet dust.

I had not really been punished. Nobody ever was. The ancient universities looked after their own. When a currently famous poet lived on my stair at Pembroke, he not only invited women friends to stay the night and the next night as well, he advertised the fact by encouraging them to dry their stockings out of his window, which overlooked the old court, called Old Court. After about a year of indecision, the Senior Tutor for Junior Supervisors finally grasped the nettle. He knocked timidly on the poet's seemingly permanently sported oak. Nothing happened. The Tutor went away. The next day he went back and knocked again. Still nothing. The day after that, he knocked again. At last the oak rumbled open to reveal the poet, stark naked with his arms thrown apart,

shouting 'Crucify me!' Within seconds the Senior Tutor was having tea with the Dean. Together they decided that nothing had occurred, even though blasphemy, as the celebrated case of Mark Boxer had recently demonstrated, was the only reason why anyone ever *was* sent down. The Tutor went on to become the Master, the poet went on to become Poet Laureate –I name no names – and the Dean went on. Continuity was the keynote. Any amount of eccentricity was tolerable as long as not publicised. If my friend Boxer, rather than publishing a mildly secular poem in *Granta*, had practised voodoo in his rooms, he would have gone on to get his Gentleman's Third, instead of being carried symbolically out of Cambridge in an open coffin. But merely to state his case is to show the truth. To be thrown out was to be kept in. Oxbridge had you even when it let you go. Oxford threw Shelley out but kept his name. You can get sprung only on probation. It drives some alumni bananas, so that they write whole cycles of plays and novels about how they don't really care about not having become dons. One of the several candidates for the dubious title of Cleverest Man in England always tells his interviewers that the one real failure of his life was his not being elected a Fellow of All Souls. Can you imagine, say, Leonardo da Vinci, who had a reasonable claim to the title of Cleverest Man in Italy, confessing his disappointment at being refused membership of any institution at all, no matter how exalted? Though I had reason to be grateful to Cambridge, I was already thanking God that it hadn't caught me young, before the world had given me some measure by which to get its insidious cosiness into proportion. As things stood, I had the memory of how Masaccio's frescoes looked on the wall of the Church of the Carmine in Florence to remind me of what intellectual distinction was really like. The dons could impress me with what they knew, but it took more than their port and walnuts to impress me with what they were.

And some of them were as crazy as loons. To give a star student free board and lodging for life might well protect his future productivity from quotidian distraction but it is rarely good for the personality and can lead to behaviour patterns indistinguishable from those that get people in other walks of life locked up. Either Trinity or Trinity Hall, I forget which, elected a History Fellow in the 1930s who seemed set fair to be the next Edward Gibbon. From that day forward he never did anything except walk the streets with a bundle of old newspapers under his arm. If they had always been the same newspapers he might have retained some historical interest. You could have stopped him and found out what the *Daily Express* had said about Ribbentrop. But he changed the newspapers at random, just as he never took the same route twice on his endless walks to nowhere.

A don didn't need to be carrying a bundle of newspapers in order to manifest

an unhinged walk. It was a Fellow's privilege, when crossing a courtyard, to walk diagonally across the grass instead of, like everyone else, keeping to the flagstones around the edge. Dons whose behaviour was near normal in all other respects would exercise this grass-treading privilege even when it would have been more convenient to everybody, including themselves, if they had not. In summer they would amble across the grass and then wonder loudly why they had been followed by a large party of tourists from Osaka. The answer was obvious: the tourists from Osaka had not been able to judge from the Fellow's gowned appearance that he was any more uniquely privileged than a bad imitation of Batman. But the Fellow's training had equipped him to deal only with the abstruse. Though he could deliver a learned paper about Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff's refutation of A. B. Drachmann's theories about *Antigone*, or preferably compose a scathing review of somebody else's learned paper on that subject, he couldn't deal with the proposition that the really smart way to preserve the grass would be to deny access not just to most people, but to everybody. One don, in a college I had better not name, walked diagonally across the grass even in winter. This would have made sense if he had worn Wellingtons. He invariably wore the patent leather dancing pumps which had been bequeathed to him by Ivor Novello. The snow could be three feet deep and you would see his tracks going through it like the wake of a caribou. The short cut would have made some sense if he had been saving mileage at the beginning of a route march to Land's End. He was only going as far as the Porter's Lodge to see if there was any news of the Jamaican steel band he invited over every year to play calypsos to him in his rooms. Blessed with a large inheritance, he had a healthy bank balance which the gift of a suite of rooms, all found, did nothing to diminish, but his emotional propensities were more questionable, although rumour had it that not all the members of the steel band were asked to remove their clothes, only some. The rest just took off their overcoats and galoshes.

In Cambridge there was a good deal of High Table homosexuality, some of it still struggling in the closet but a lot of it out in the open and dancing around on tiptoe. Recently the full story has been told of how the homosexual mathematician, Alan Turing, most gifted of all the many Queens of King's, saved Britain's life in World War II. With a then unusual combination of mathematical and engineering genius – two departments which the English educational system had always worked hard to keep separate – Turing devised the mechanism by which radio signals encoded through the German Enigma machine could be read in time to produce the stream of useful, often vital, secret intelligence known as Ultra. It was the society outside Cambridge which

hounded Turing to an early grave. Cambridge itself, even if it did not precisely cherish him, at least offered him its tolerance and protection. Even more than Keynes's or Wittgenstein's, Turing's case, it seems to me, is decisive. Though it could be said that Cambridge was equally tolerant and protective of a whole succession of Foreign Office and MI5 prodigies who subsequently turned out to have been drawing an extra salary from the Soviet Union, nothing can alter the fact that Hitler, who threatened the whole of civilisation, owed his defeat in a large part to a high-voiced but not very predatory invert who threatened nobody, and that the dons of King's, who knew all about Turing's proclivities, did nothing to sabotage this desirable outcome. Where victimless crimes are concerned, tolerance is an absolute good. Cambridge will probably never get round to formally approving homosexuality, but the type of homosexual involved perhaps prefers a blind eye to public acknowledgment, and meanwhile a tacit understanding seems to provide liberty enough. In my time as an undergraduate, however, I sometimes had to concentrate very hard on how horrible most of the boat-rowing heterosexuals were if I was to offset my distaste for some of the more epicene dons, of which Footlights had a full quota among its senior membership. Dating from the long era when every May Week revue had been a big-budget exercise in make-up and drag, they would turn up at term-time smokers and form a swooping group at the back of the room, muttering archly at the pretty pass to which things had come. One of them was among the nicest men I had ever met, but I didn't go for his pals. They obviously thought I was too butch to be plausible, and I was constantly afraid of being knocked flat by their flailing wrists. I bottled it up, though. Human nature is various, and I have never been pleased enough about my own nature to be fully contemptuous about anybody else's, provided he isn't homicidal. These weren't that: they were just a bit high-pitched. The kind of undergraduates who swarmed around them certainly weren't being misled, unless sugar misleads ants.

In order to be weird, however, a don didn't have to carry bundles of old newspapers, cross snow-filled courtyards diagonally with only his head showing, or make up his eyelids with the very lightest touch of blue shadow. Some of them could maintain an unbroken rectitude of deportment while still going comprehensively haywire, especially if they were involved in the humanities. Cambridge science having done such earth-shattering things, it was sometimes suggested that non-scientists were suffering from an inferiority complex. If so they kept it well hidden. A more likely explanation concerns the relative difficulty of keeping work separate from life. A physicist can't live his physics. A humanist can live his humanism and after too much Madeira might find it impossible not to. One of the young Cambridge philosophy dons specialised in

aesthetics and made sure you knew it. He dressed the part, wearing a black leather jacket, tight trousers and high boots. He had not, at that stage, produced any of the substantial writings in which he has since expounded his viewpoint, but such was the level of personal invective he maintained in conversation that you always knew where he stood. He stood on his opponent's throat. He was a Leavisite, junior model. He had taken his master's principles of literary criticism and applied them to the other arts as well. Thus it came to light that in each field of artistic endeavour there were only three or four master practitioners, all the others being enemies of civilisation. In music the three or four were reduced to one: Wagner. I once heard this terrifying young man say that one of the many great things about Wagner was that when you realised his true greatness it obviated the necessity of listening to pipsqueaks like Puccini. I searched his face for a sign of humour but could see nothing except certainty. It was Leavis that had made him certain. On the rare occasions when the black-leather Wagnerian could be tempted into print, it was usually an encomium in the *Cambridge Review* for some collection of addle-pated late essays by Leavis, or else it was a passionate attack on a book, any book, by someone who, at some point in the past, no matter how distant, had disagreed with Leavis or merely failed to endorse his every opinion. Even Wagner came second to Leavis.

Leavis himself, though nearing the end of his career, was, as I have mentioned, still active around Cambridge and more irascible than ever, particularly against his disciples. To do him credit, he could never be depended upon to go on lapping up the hosannahs of his sycophants indefinitely. At some unpredictable moment he would turn on his arselickers and deliver a series of stunning kicks to their pursed lips. Later on, almost with his dying breath, he publicly repudiated the Wagnerian for having 'misrepresented my views'. Far from having misrepresented Leavis's views, the Wagnerian had endorsed them even at their most fatuous. When Leavis wrote his last-gasp, break-through essay in which Tolstoy was discovered to be a great novelist, the Wagnerian, either having forgotten about the existence of Matthew Arnold or else never having heard of him, announced that nobody had dared to proclaim Tolstoy's eminence so courageously before. With his tongue thus applied to the heel of his master's boot, the acolyte was ill-prepared to receive its toe in his teeth, The Wagnerian never fully recovered. He took to wearing a Harris tweed jacket and ordinary shoes, and not long ago, at a dinner party in a private home, I caught him red-handed listening to other people instead of just laying down the law as of old.

Really he shouldn't have taken it so hard, Leavis's views were almost impossible not to misrepresent, because they were designed so that only he could hold them. This was partly true even in the early, fruitful part of his career, and

became completely true later on, when dogma took over from doctrine. Those who opposed him he merely insulted, but to support him invited vilification, and anyone who arrived at one of his conclusions before he did suffered treatment that differed from character assassination only in being prolonged like torture. When he gave his famous Dickens lectures the hall was jammed. I was there along with the worshippers, the admirers and the merely gullible. Brian C. Adams was sitting in the front row, with two fountain pens ready in case one of them ran out. He was doing his best to appear critically detached but there was no mistaking his look of exaltation when Leavis came trotting briskly in. Leavis was Seriousness personified. He even had a serious way of being bald. Though I had, and for some years to come retained, respect for the intensity of his commitment, I suppose I was the only person present who actively disapproved of him. There were plenty who detested him, but they had stayed at home. I wanted to see at least the vestiges of the mental force he must once have had in order to cause those decades of fuss and bother. I hadn't tried to enroll in his seminars because I had passed the age of being caught up in his rhetoric. This will sound like light-mindedness to all those Cambridge graduates – many of them now prominently placed in the theatre, radio, television and journalism as well as the academic world – who think that Leavis made them serious about literature. But literature would have made them serious about literature. They met him at an impressionable age, and they have matured since only to the extent that his influence has been ameliorated by the thing he preached of but saw with such distorting strictness - life. It depends not just on who your mentor is, but on when you meet him, and I no longer needed Leavis to tell me that Shakespeare was a greater poet than Shelley. If Leavis had had something to say about the kind of poet Shelley would have been had he lived to middle-age, I might have listened. But the good Doctor dealt in absolutes. Nevertheless I was prepared, as that bald-eagle head bent over its pile of notes and cleared the gaunt throat in its open collar, to admit that he had something, if he had.

What he had, alas, was a long series of attacks on all those critics who had made the unpardonable mistake of calling Dickens a genius before he did. Humphry House came in for an avalanche of abuse, clearly because Humphry House had given half his life to Dickens while Leavis had still been proclaiming that only *Hard Times* merited serious attention. The names Graham Hough and John Holloway also kept cropping up, although their connection with Dickens was not clear. 'We know what to think of Dr Hough', sneered Leavis, as though no further explanation were necessary. 'We know what to expect from Dr Holloway.' Perhaps Hough and Holloway had not only been prematurely pro-Dickens, they had also been anti-Leavis, or, even worse, pro-Leavis without

permission, Then a strange thing began to happen. The names Hough and Holloway went on cropping up, but they cropped up mixed up. 'This is the kind of misrepresentation, I need hardly point out, which we have learned to associate with the name of Dr Houghoway.' Not long afterwards there was a reference to Professor Hollohoway. Some of Dr Leavis's pages seemed to be in the wrong order. He shuffled them, apparently at random, and read on. This should have been a touching, if not exactly comic, grace-note to the performance, but the outpouring of venom forbade sympathy. As the hour neared its end, there was a peroration against Edmund Wilson, who had pioneered the movement which, long before Leavis got around to joining it, had brought the critical appraisal of Dickens into line with public appreciation. 'We doubt Edmund Wilson's qualifications to discuss Dickens,' said Leavis, and although I am quoting from memory the memory is so indecently vivid I would swear by its accuracy. 'We doubt Edmund Wilson's qualifications,' he wound up triumphantly, 'to discuss *any* literature.' Beside me, an Indian girl student in a sari noted it down: 'doubt E. Wilson quals. discuss *any* lit.' In a blessed life, that moment was as close as I have so far come to witnessing clerical treason in its pure form, dogma distilled into a pathogen. One day I might write a book about how I think cultural memory is transmitted, and perhaps I had better put off discussing this sad business until then, but for now I should say, in order to stave off charges of frivolity, that I thought any amount of frivolity preferable to the Leavisite parade of seriousness. Better Lord David Cecil at his most fruitily fluting than Leavis's Vyshinskyite tirade, his inquisitorial denunciations. The hall was full of students who would have profited immensely from reading Edmund Wilson's literary criticism, which was, and is, full of discovery and judgment. Wilson's appreciation of Dickens was just what they should have been encouraged to read. Instead they had been given an excuse to do something for which students need no encouragement: not to read.

Not much of a reader on the course myself, I was in no fit state to climb on a high horse. Helping me to contain my rage was the suspicion that this event was more parody than reality. The Leavisite brand of *odium theologicum* had all the characteristics of totalitarian argument, right down to the special hatred reserved for heretics. But the patterns of thought which had filled the concentration camps of Europe proper had arrived in England in the mercifully diluted form of university politics. The ruckus surrounding Leavis, though too nasty to be a farce, was not toxic enough to be a tragedy. You could always have gone somewhere else. Leavis himself could have gone somewhere else, but fought to stay on in Cambridge. It couldn't be said while he was alive, and is still considered bad taste when said now, but the reason he was shut out of university

preferment had little to do with his supposedly challenging originality. It was personal. People will submit to having their opinions contradicted, but not to having their characters attacked at the same time. They can't watch their fronts *and* their backs. They would rather shut the door. So Leavis, as he put it, became part of the real Cambridge: the Cambridge in spite of Cambridge. He was part of the landscape. You became accustomed to seeing him walk briskly along Trinity Street, gown blown out horizontal in his slipstream. He looked as if walking briskly had been something he had practised in a wind tunnel. Not long before he died I was in Deighton Bell's second-hand bookshop looking over the rain-ruined books of the literary booze-artist John Davenport, who must have left the library doors open on the stormy night of his suicide. Suddenly Leavis's wife, Queenie, appeared at my shoulder. 'Nasty piece of work, Davenport,' she muttered, having no reason to know me from Adam. 'While he was up here he was the leader of a *particularly odious set*.' Seeing me buy Davenport's cracked and stained Pléiade edition of Rimbaud, she nodded approval. Almost any teacher, no matter how intransigent his or her views, can be moved to tears by the sight of a student voluntarily purchasing a book, but the light in Queenie's eye was one of reminiscence. 'With Frank it was Laforgue. He nearly broke us, buying up those Frenchmen. On to it quite independently of Eliot. In France you couldn't get him past a bookshop. We were there a lot when we were young.' She sniffed for a while at a row of damaged books which Davenport had failed to return to the London Library. Then she left. In later years I have remembered that chance encounter as part evidence that in matters of the spirit the truly dangerous poisons are refined from flowers. In her husband's youth she must have found him as easy to love as in his last days I found him easy to loathe. I tried not to hate him, though. Of all the moral lessons he had to teach, the one that stuck was the one he taught inadvertently. In his later books he libelled his literary opponents so scandalously that when he tried to condemn Stalin he had no harsh words left over. If he had been asked to give his opinion of Hitler and Himmler, he would not have been able to summon up any terms of disapprobation that he had not already lavished on Houghaway and Hollohough. He had given up his sense of reality, and all in pursuit of the very study which, he went on insisting, was the only thing that could give you a sense of reality. He was a self-saboteur.

5. YANKS ON THE CAM

You can make a good case for even the weirdest don if he stimulates the young to anything, if only anger. At my age I didn't need the goad. Though I was still too idle a student to put much time into the business of seeking out a sound teacher and listening to what he had to say, at least I recognised such a one when I heard him. Theodore Redpath, for example, was an old man by then and his lectures on tragedy didn't sparkle. You had to strain to listen. But when he talked about Sophocles he was responding to the Greek text. His little book on Tolstoy took in all the Russian scholarship. He was unspectacular, but I had come just far enough to know that he was worth listening to, and precisely because he had no big ideas. He talked nothing except sense. Younger undergraduates couldn't be blamed for wanting stronger stuff. In Pembroke, the star students in English were nearly all Americans. Some of them went to hear George Steiner, recently installed at Churchill College, talk eloquently about how the crisis of Western civilisation had reached a point where it would be better if everybody stopped talking. Others went to hear Leavis talk about how the crisis of western civilisation had been made worse by Steiner. Some of them went to hear both, took verbatim notes from each, intercalated the results and served up the synthesis in their weekly essays. Sharing practical criticism seminars or group supervisions with the Americans, I would marvel at the seriousness with which they took it all. But there would be ample time for them to become less gullible later, and for the time being their all-fired keenness was probably more fruitful, and certainly more attractive, than my indolence. They had a hard enough time fathoming the English, so my own transitional persona must have seemed as out of focus as a chameleon crossing a kilt.

They, to me, looked perfect. Whether Ivy League WASPS, New York Jews or third generation Polacks and Bohunks with names full of 'c's and 'z's, they were fully in character and inexhaustibly supplied with authentic all-American dialogue, They were all very bright, of course, which helped. Fulbright scholars and Phi Beta Kappa almost to a man, they were reading the second part of the

English Tripos, like me. Unlike me they had degrees which had been won by hard work against deadly competition at Yale, Princeton, Harvard, Columbia and Amherst, Of the Ivy League types, the outstanding example was Stradlington Westwood Blantyre III, called Strad for short, like an expensive violin. And indeed he was a finely tuned instrument, though built like an upper East Side brownstone. Six feet four in his triple-welted brogues, he had grown a moustache out of shyness and looked apologetic that it had hidden no more than his upper lip. The expression 'modest to a fault' had been invented for him. President of Triangle when at Princeton, he had a fine line of songs and monologues, but could be forced on to the Footlights stage only at gunpoint. The only male graduate who could cycle past Newnham and make its inhabitants appear at the windows spontaneously – the rest of us could not have obtained the same results had we thrown tear gas – he never noticed the sensation he caused. Every day he was invited to tea at Girton, more than once by the dons themselves, He was actually *invited* to that heavily defended castle full of unattainable females. The rest of us would have been picked up by the searchlights and fixed, machine guns before we had even cut our way through the barbed wire and reached the moat full of alligators. But what did he do when he got there? He discussed Thackeray. As the inmates passed him cucumber sandwiches with trembling hands, he quietly made clear that there was a fiancée waiting for him at home. Pending his graduation and marriage – the two events were apparently scheduled to take place simultaneously – energies left-over from study were expended on rowing. He rowed for the college and would probably have done the same for the university if he had not been so intelligent. In the grad pad after Hall, when the affiliated students would stand around drinking port or coffee in a vain attempt to quell memories of what they had eaten for dinner, I would accuse Strad of wanting to do all the right things. 'No,' he said, after thinking it over, 'I just want to do things right.'

He thought himself conventional but made an art of the conventions. I admired his good manners and perhaps he relished my lack of them. At any rate he took me some way into his secret life. One afternoon, in his rooms, he poured me another inch of Bourbon and put an LP on his record-player. 'It is important to be *cool*,' he said, with characteristic terseness. 'These three women are called the Supremes. Notice how *cool* they are.' While the sublime riffs and harmonies of 'You Can't Hurry Love' came lilting into my life for the first time, Strad was rolling a peculiar-looking cigarette. 'Now let's hear that again while we take a drag on this object, which we call a *joint*.' I would like to say that the experience was transformative, but like most first-time pot-smokers I missed the point through not taking a sufficient quota of air. The Supremes were enough to get

me high all by themselves, however. Strad was like that: he played it dead square, but there was always another side to him. His façade had facets.

Of Delmer Dynamo I have already given a preliminary description, but he, too, was many-sided, if someone so bulb-shaped could be that. In his second year he had put out shoots and tendrils. He had not relinquished his sardonic commentary on the college and its facilities. (Famously he had said ‘blow it out your ass’ within earshot of the Dean, but had got away with it because the Dean, misled by the American pronunciation of the word, had thought that Delmer was making some arcane reference to a biblical animal.) Delmer had, however, embraced English cultural values with the determination of a Greek ship-owner angling for election to White’s. He was a college man yet more than a college man. He was practically a college building. His large supply of money from home was poured into first editions of George Eliot and the novels of Dickens in the original monthly parts. In his rooms there was a matched pair of Purdey shot-guns, one of which had not been fired, and the other of which, by Delmer’s own account, had been aimed at a partridge and accounted for a beater. There was fly-fishing equipment. Where once there had been a rack of Savile Row suits and tweed hacking jackets, there were now two racks, while on the appropriate pegs and shelves, specially installed, there were Burberry overcoats with detachable linings, oiled Barbour, opera capes, deerstalker hats and green wellingtons. Late night discussions in front of Delmer’s fireplace were fortified with a hamper from Fortnum and Mason’s. Most impressive of all, kept in a small car-park off Trumpington Street, was Delmer’s car. It was a Bentley with a very rare H. J. Mulliner double-shell body of aluminium. A measure of Delmer’s Englishness was that he did not call aluminium ‘aluminium’. Delmer’s newly anglicised diction, seemingly acquired from manuscripts which P. G. Wodehouse had rejected as too characteristic, shed any last overtones of self-mockery where his car was concerned. ‘Care for a spin, old bean?’

Strad, who adored Delmer, warned me to play along. ‘He’s serious. Don’t call him on it or he’ll crash the goddam thing.’ The big drawback was that Delmer couldn’t drive. He had an international licence but he must have bought it off a crooked cop in Atlantic City. In the car-park, Strad and I had to wait a long time while Delmer tried to turn the key. Not in the ignition: in the door. When we got into the car there was another long wait while he got it to start. “Tally ho!” he cried, when the flooded carburettor at last coughed life into the engine. ‘Wizard prang! Now let’s toodle off into the landscape.’ Then he couldn’t get out of the car-park. With too much pride to let anyone else try instead, he crabbed toward the exit, backed up, twisted the wheel, lurched forward again, but couldn’t line the front wheels up with the way out. Part of the trouble was the driving

position. With his feet on the pedals he had to tilt his head back in order to see over the walnut dashboard. Eventually it was time for Strad to go rowing, so he got out.. That left me. After a while I got out too and tried to guide Delmer between the posts. It didn't work. Though the engine of the Bentley wasn't very loud even when revved in desperation, there was a terrific silence after Delmer switched it off. He climbed out, shut the door, and looked for a long time at his most expensive acquisition. His hands were in his pockets. I got the impression that if they hadn't been he would have punched a dent in the front door. The lustrous toes of his ox-blood shoes, which had been handmade in St James's, were twitching. But the revenge he took on his recalcitrant purchase was not physical. Recrimination had gone beyond that. With his hands still in his pockets he threw back his head and cried out to Heaven. 'BLOW IT OUT YOUR ASS!'

Strad and Delmer both slaved over their books like gladiators in training, but always with a sense of their limitations. Strad would one day go to work in the family publishing firm, Delmer in the faculty of English at Columbia. They would serve literature, not create it. JFK, their best hope and only President, was dead; the Vietnam war, though still rated officially only as a police action, already beckoned with an evil welcome for contemporaries who had been less lucky; they were troubled for their country and grateful for small mercies. But Bob Marenko was Captain America. An Amherst Phi Beta who as a high school tight end had already been scouted by every team in the newly-formed National Football League, he had turned his massive shoulders on sport in order to put his head down and charge at literature, fourth down and goal to go. In his rooms he had two copies of Yeats's collected poems, one to be kept sacred and the other to be marked up. In the marked copy every line was underlined and annotated in the margin. 'Elision of "the" and "indifferent" conveys casualness of swan after consummation, while abruptness of terminal word "drop" mimics action. Develop.' Unsurprisingly for one so young and keen, Marenko's own poems aped those of his idol, yet you couldn't fail to be impressed by the sheer number of them. He never sent them out for publication in the university newspapers and magazines, Instead he passed them around the college, listening attentively to criticism before going back to his rooms and writing far into the night. It was clear that if he did not become a great poet he would become a great critic. The latest books and articles by Harold Bloom, Northrop Frye, Yvor Winters and Stephen Marcus were all collected and cross-referenced by Marenko as if they were jazz records. He felt the same way about jazz records, but they had to be modern. Thelonious Monk was about as far back as Marenko's tastes went, and he really started to feel comfortable only with John Coltrane, whose interminable solos could be listened to and argued about until dawn broke. Marenko wanted

to discuss things. Above all, he wanted to discuss Vietnam. He was serious about it: much more serious than the anti-war agitation which was by now building up throughout the Western lands. If Marenko thought it was a just war, he would put his head down and run at the Viet Cong. If he thought it was unjust, he would put his head down and run at his own government. Hence the necessity to talk things over. The debates lasted half the night every night, except when there was live jazz to be heard. Every Wednesday night there was a guest soloist at the Red Lion in Lion Yard, usually a good, solid British sax player such as Ronnie Ross, Art Themen, Don Rendell or Kathy Stobart. Colin Edwards, a townsman, was the resident drummer, and Mike Payne, a retired Vampire pilot, played the bass. For a few shillings it was a feast of danceable mainstream music. On top of that, once in a great while an American legend came to town. Duke Ellington came to Great St Mary's and gave his Sacred Music concert, which proved to be a bit too sacred for my taste, while Marenko merely found it antediluvian. I tried to explain that Ellington's great period had been in the early 1940s, when every three-minute recording was like a miniature symphony. Marenko's eyes were suffused with pity. But when Thelonious Monk played at the Union, even Marenko got excited. We went with Delmer. Monk-mad myself, I did my best to understand as the mighty man - backed by a susurrating post-bop rhythm section in which the drummer seemed to hit nothing except the cymbals and the bass player did everything he could to avoid the beat - punched clusters of notes apparently at random and climaxed a half-hour rendition of 'Monk's Dream' by jabbing all his fingers into the lid of the key-board. 'Jesus H. Christ on a crutch,' said Delmer at interval, 'this guy is stoned.' Marenko tried to set Delmer straight, 'I can relate to how you might feel that, Delmer,' said the star student compassionately, 'but the aleatory component was always implicit in Monk's music. He's merely taking that element to its logical conclusion.'

'Blow it out your ass,' Delmer replied. '*I'm going home.*' Marenko and I stayed for the second half, during which Monk twice missed the piano altogether. But over cocoa late that night Marenko was persuasive about our having witnessed an important step in modern music. Marenko's passionate erudition was hard to resist. He knew so much, and cared so much more. Long before dawn, he had me convinced that every move of Monk's hands had been a miracle of controlled self-expression. Late next morning we were waiting outside the Blue Boar Hotel in Trinity Street to pay homage when Monk checked out. When he appeared, he wasn't precisely being carried by the drummer and the bass player, merely supported by them, but his feet were only vaguely in contact with the ground and his eyes looked like blood-capsules. 'Where we *at*, man?' I heard him enquire softly. 'Still in England,' muttered the

bass player. 'Stay cool till we're in the car.' Monk's toes, were touching the pavement but they were dragging behind his heels. His puce eyeballs rolled upwards to look at the narrow brim of his black felt hat while his lips, between his toothbrush moustache and his vestigial goatee, imitated a little doughnut. 'Where we *at*?' he moaned.

Marenko took this setback philosophically, the way he took everything. Dutifully he would enlarge his world view to fit the world. In college I spent more time with the Americans than with the British because the Americans were more interested in everything, including Britain, They certainly made better Europeans. They worked hard at their languages and got across to the continent in every vacation. They looked on self-improvement as a sacerdotal obligation. Democratic without being philistine, studious without feeling superior, the Americans were my solace inside the college. Outside the college, I necessarily spent much of my time with the natives. By that stage, I was publishing poems and articles in every issue of *Varsity*, *Granta* and the *Cambridge Review*, with the overspill going into the aforesaid gaggle of evanescent literary magazines unread by anybody except the committed *literati*. These latter life-forms were now becoming easier for me to classify into their various weights and types. There were flashbacks called Algernon who dressed and sounded as if they were auditioning for a tea party thrown by Harold Acton or Maurice Bowra. There were ultra-grey ex-grammar school types who wrote something called Concrete Poetry and were called Ken. Both groups, had I but known it, were on their way up in the world. The Algernons were all from minor public schools. In the new mood of classlessness they could plausibly carry on as if they came from major ones. (As the cachet enjoyed by the editorial staff of *Private Eye* had already demonstrated, the principal effect of the Sixties social revolution was to make young men who had been to Shrewsbury feel less miserable about not having been to Eton.) The Kens were amassing points for their future careers: a BBC general traineeship would fall most easily to the *curriculum vitae* which showed evidence of artistic endeavour, if not actual achievement. Over the secret desires and lurking ambitions of both Algernon and Ken I rode rough-shod. Algernon wrote crepuscular sonnets and Ken assembled, probably with tweezers, microscopic unpunctuated stanzas from which the ghosts of ideas gestured feebly, like lice in raindrops. There was a lot of white space left over, which I filled. My verse was still a long way from the clarity which I was eventually to realise should be my aim - I would rather my work were thought prosaic than poetic, and there are some who would say that I have been granted my wish - but compared with the eye-dropper out-squeezings of my undergraduate rivals it was a torrent of candour. Also, after a year's practice, I had become almost

impossible to turn down. Having grown another beard even more farouche than its predecessor, when I fronted up at an undergraduate editor's door I must have looked less like an aspiring contributor than someone who had been hired to collect a debt. I was only about five years older than the average final-year literatus but in your twenties a *lustrum* is like a canyon. Most of these young scribblers, I guessed, would one day give up, whereas I had already diagnosed myself, correctly, as having the disease in its chronic form. I was a lifer. Being that, perhaps I should have sent my work out to the professional magazines, but if these amateurs resented my crabbing their act they didn't show it. Not that I would have noticed if they had, because I spent as little time socialising with them as possible. If, to them, I was just too insensitive, to me they were just too callow. Except for the Algernons, who were living in Echo Park, all that concerned them was Experimental Writing, and I had come far enough to know that there is no such thing as experimental writing. There is only writing. The arts do not advance through technique, they accumulate through quality. One evening I went to a literary tea in Newnham. The editor of a magazine called something like *Samphire* had invited me as guest of honour. If the editor had been male, I need hardly state, I would have found the invitation much easier to refuse. All the Cambridge poets were there, the Algernons in their velvet jackets and the Kens in their anoraks. During the muffled course of a desultory conversation in which tea-cake crumbs were carefully retained in the cupped hand, Anselm Hollo was proposed as a touchstone contemporary poet. My contention that they would all be better off learning MacNeice's *Autumn Journal* by heart was greeted with tolerant smiles by the Kens. The Algernons were more ready to entertain the notion but they were outnumbered. The balance was shifting. Revolution was in the air. An aerosol can of crazy foam was passed around. We were supposed to close our eyes and shape the foam between our hands while improvising on the theme of primal creation. One of the Kens squirted the crazy foam into his long hair. I left, not because I didn't like them but because what they had on their hands, under the crazy foam, was time, and time was what I was already running out of.

At such moments I wondered whether I had any legitimate business being in a university, which is, after all, a place where young people discover themselves. Those who have already done so should clear out. These misgivings were reinforced by what went on in the Union debating chamber. Abramovitz was elected Secretary of the Union in the first term of his second year: the fastest climb to power on record. I attended his inaugural debate with some vague intention of speaking from the floor. I was ready to lie down on it and go to sleep before the paper speeches were half over. Though Abramovitz himself

conducted the proceedings suavely enough, the frolicsome puns and points of order from the resident wits would have tried the patience of a saint. A moustached madman called Peregrine Sourbutts-Protheroe kept jumping to his feet and proposing that the motion be put, or that the point of order be promulgated, or whatever. Since the motion was some balls-aching foolery along the lines of 'That this House would rather rock than roll', I was all in favour of its being got out of the way as soon as possible, but apparently Sourbutts-Protheroe was out of order. He certainly looked it. Instead of the black tie favoured by the committee he wore full white-tie evening dress, except that he also wore plimsolls. Abramovitz informed me that Sourbutts-Protheroe was tolerated for the amusement he provided. The humourless, keen to be thought otherwise, love to laugh but need to be told when, so they are always glad if a clown dresses the part. With my eyes closed I listened in despair as the evening wore on. It was just possible that something serious could be said in such a context of bad jokes and braying laughter. But something funny never could. I vowed never to speak in a university union debate. In later years I was to rescind that vow several times each in Cambridge and Oxford, but always with subsequent regret for a largely wasted evening. If only they would cut the malarkey and get on with the oratory. Nothing speeds up your heart like speaking on your feet.

There was plenty of opportunity for that in the Footlights, where I continued to meet young British people who were to influence my life deeply. Some of them have become well-known since. I will try not to single them out merely on that basis. Stylistic gymnastics ensue when one tries to drop a name softly, while simultaneously indicating that one was present at the birth of, and perhaps even helped breathe life into, the future star. ('The name Marlon Brando didn't mean much then, but when he watched you act you knew that someone very special was analysing your every move, your every vocal inflection,' etc) Besides, some of those who impressed me most have never become stars, but have lived normal lives instead; a destiny to be preferred, in my opinion, unless the strength of inner compulsion leaves no choice.

Eric Idle had gone down to begin a professional career as a performer on stage and screen. Since the road to Monty Python was longer and harder than most of the journalists who write about the subject are capable of taking in, he won't thank me for saying that he had future stardom written all over him. He was a consummate performer. He was, however, still somewhat short of material at that time, having not yet found his true comic vision, which was within him, but needed a context to bring it out. His successor as President of Footlights was Andy Mayer, whose originality was already fully established, and probably had

been when he was still in the cradle. Mayer must have lacked the neurotic requirement for the limelight, because nowadays he is happy to work behind the camera. At the time his precocity floored me. He went on stage with his own stuff, and it was unique. So was his style of delivering it. A smallish young man with a huge Beatles-style helmet of dead straight dark hair whose fringe was cut square across the eyes so that he had to tilt his head back to look at the audience, he had a weird sort of negative timing which made pauses go on longer than they should, except when, as he often did, he got a big laugh, which he would try to talk straight through, as if he couldn't hear it. Staccato and legato at the same time, his monologues were short and apparently incoherent collages of verbal fragments. A routine in which he pretended to be an American evangelist had me simultaneously roaring with laughter and breathless with admiration, wondering how he packed so much in. 'Jesus Christ! Remember the name. Said. (Long pause) Or is *said* to have said. (Longer pause) God! (Inconceivably long pause) I put it to you that he *noo!* I dunno. (Looks at watch, nods into wings.) So! (Extends forefinger, finds it fascinating, becomes transfixed, shakes head.) Write away! Write away *right* away to the following *address ...*' There were only about a hundred words in the piece but it took him five minutes to get through it, so panic-stricken was the audience. They would hold on to each other and howl.

Pronounced by so young a man, these comic ramblings, when I stopped laughing to reflect, stung like a reproach. My own monologues were still running at about ten minutes minimum and Mayer was taking half the time to say twice as much, with four times the effect. When it was announced that President Johnson's daughter, Lucy Baines Johnson, was engaged to be married, I presaged the nuptials with a monologue which was my first really big hit in the Footlights. But the emphasis was on 'big'. Cast in the form of a running commentary, as if the wedding ceremony were a football match, the piece went on and on like a novel by Thomas Wolfe before Maxwell Perkins had persuaded him to cut it down to merely mammoth proportions. The foreign policy of the United States was starting to worry me almost as much as it was starting to worry my American friends. I had a lot to say on the subject. Partly because my American friends were present in the audience, my 'Lucy Gets Married' monologue went down a storm in the Falcon Yard clubroom, but it was a long storm, with several lulls included. Chastened by Andy Mayer's gift for brevity, I trimmed my masterpiece by several minutes before going public with it in the Pembroke smoker. At the cost of sacrificing some of the more obviously political content, the laugh lines were brought closer together. What I was then engaged in, I realised much later, was the first stage in a laborious process of learning to remove the connecting tissue so that the argument could be unified

by tone rather than logic. In the long run this painfully acquired discipline would enable me to write a thousand-word article which sounded as if I was just saying it (detractors who called my television column in the *Observer* a cabaret turn were exactly right) but at the time it was painful to go on and die, and even when I had a hit, like 'Lucy Gets Married', the hit could be alarmingly hit and miss. A laugh that I got on Thursday night wouldn't be there on Friday night. What had I done wrong? I had produced the show successfully enough - the wine had once again done its work on the audience - but I was less adept at producing myself. This was to remain a pattern. When it came to criticising and arranging the work of others, the shaping spirit operated in good order. When it came to my own work, the enthusiasm of invention made me deaf to my own better judgment. Always I had to go into hiding and lick my wounds before I found the wherewithal to improve...When I did improve, it was often in the wrong direction, towards a more polished performance, when what I needed, to do was to perform less: the deader my pen, the better my words worked. An anti-talent, I needed a non-style.

Romaine Rand: now *there* was a performer. After her striptease nun routine the previous year, I was well aware that her absence from the Pembroke smoker would not be tolerated. The Hearties would dismantle the place if she did not show up. By now I was in digs on the Newnham side of the river, having got out of my room in the Eagle only just in time to avoid being consumed by the killer mould. My new room was rented from a nice young couple of graduate scientists who needed the money. Apart from my habit of smoking in bed while drunk, from their viewpoint I must have been the ideal tenant, because I was busy in Footlights almost all the time. They seldom saw me, and my memory of them is hazy. I changed my sheets about once a term, but never slept in them long enough on any given night to turn them any very deep shade of grey. A pot of jam that I left with its lid off for two or three months was mysteriously removed. Apart from that there was no interference with my freedom. Rather better organised as usual, Romaine lived in a Newnham hostel not far away. Her sitting room had a diamond-leaded casement, through which, from outside the building, I debonairly inserted my upper body before launching on an eloquent appeal for her participation in the Pembroke smoker. Walled in by stacks of books about Elizabethan rhetoric, she tried to stave me off by pleading pressure of work. I had the answer to that. Since, as I have related, she had managed to persuade the university authorities that she should be allowed to forget the Tripos and register for a PhD, it was *my* year for sitting examinations, not hers. Then she tried to stall me by saying that she didn't have a number ready. I countered by telling her that it would be enough for her just to show up and go on. It didn't matter what

she did, but if she wasn't there then I was a gone goose. This appeal to her compassion was unavailing, because although Romaine's emotions were powerful, they came and went, and this was a Tuesday, whereas her day for compassion was Wednesday. Tuesday was her day for patriotism. When I pointed out that if the Pembroke smoker flopped it would be bad news for Australia, she began to melt, and when I wound up by suggesting, in broad terms, that no essay in the art of cabaret and intimate revue could be fully alive without the galvanising influence of her genius for improvisation, it became clear that I had finally touched her heart. Her day for self-obsession was every day. Since the same went for me, it had taken time for me to switch the centre of attention from me to her, but having once got around to it I could congratulate myself on my cunning. 'Don't get your hopes up,' she said dismissively, already engrossed again in the exquisite scholastic filigree of *Love's Labours Lost*. 'I'm fucked if I'll work my tits off for a pack of dick-heads who row boats.' She promised, however, to put in an appearance of some kind. Romaine had her drawbacks but her word was her bond. She had said she would be there, so I was saved. It was with an inexpressible sense of relief, then, that I backed down the gardener's ladder up which I had climbed to her window. Although elated, I was careful not to hurry. Her sitting room was only on the second floor, but the gravel driveway looked as hard as a proctor's heart.

Though Romaine did indeed turn up on the first night of the Pembroke smoker, she terrified me by announcing that she intended to do nothing except sing 'Land of Hope and Glory'. She had brought the sheet music for this, so that our piano player could accompany her. She was also carrying a dark blue straw hat with a stuffed bird on it. She put in a request to go on last, so that she would have time to practise her piece out in the corridor. My own view was that it was her look-out. The standard of numbers was quite high that year. We had a jazz quartet powered by the compulsive mainstream drumming of Colin Edwards, who was moonlighting from his regular gig at the Red Lion. Under the low ceiling of the Old Library, with the audience far gone into the rapture of the deep, that band sounded like a destroyer passing close overhead. All the Footlights who had aspirations towards being included in the May Week revue were parading their audition pieces in highly polished form. I'm bound to say that I held my own with them. In my capacity as producer, I chose to place my 'Lucy Gets Married' monologue as the second last number. By that time the Hearties at the back of the packed room were sitting on each other's shoulders and swinging playfully at each other with empty wine bottles. Down at the front, flanked by two Girton girls in taffeta, the ruffles on the expensive dress shirt of Delmer Dynamo were hanging limply wet, like cabbage bleached by steam. The

audience were all so tight that Sir Alec Douglas-Home could have read out the university bye-laws and gone over like Max Miller. At the end of my monologue, I was swept off the stage by a tidal wave of applause. As Romaine went past me in the dark, I tacitly challenged her to top that. For a long while nothing much happened, I peeked around the door. The preliminary cheering had died down to a provisional rhubarb. Some of the Hearties were laughing at Romaine's hat, but all the rest of the audience were refilling one another's wine glasses while she handed her sheet music to the piano player, gave him whispered instructions, stood back, folded her hands, cleared her throat, and nodded for him to begin the accompaniment.

The result was chaos. She sang 'Land of Hope and Glory' with her lips out of synchronisation with the words. When she sang the word 'hope', her mouth was pronouncing the word 'land', and so on. The effect was uncannily funny, as if the world had come loose from its pivot. I saw the normally staid Strad Blantyre pass out from laughter. He was out of his chair and on the floor as if the room was being sprayed with bullets. People were holding on to one another and crying. Delmer Dynamo was removing his clothes by tearing at them, like a sea-lion strangling in its own skin. When Romaine finished the song they made her sing it again. This time she added illustrative gestures, but they were out of synchronisation too. She marched on the spot when she should have looked maternal, smiled winsomely when she should have looked martial, laughed when she should have wept. The audience rocked back and forth as if lashed by the gale of their own laughter. When I led the rest of the cast on for the closing number it was like setting up a Punch and Judy show after the battle of El Alamein. I did my best to look proprietorial, as if the whole idea had been mine. This strategy must have worked at least partly, because from that day forward I was able to run up debts on my college bills, and an *exeat* was always easy to obtain. When I said I had important business in London, I was believed. I had become a tolerated eccentric. This had been, was, and probably still is, one of the undeclared side-benefits of the Cambridge system. Within broad limits you can make as big a fool of yourself as you like, and still be put up with. In that respect, on the day when the ancient universities become efficient they will cease to be productive. Misfits and failures should have room to flourish. The proposition is made no less valid by the haste with which the misfits and failures spring forward to agree with it.

6. MEET KEITH VISCONTI

My important business in London consisted largely of misbehaviour. Charter flights had made Italy cheaper to get to but no nearer. Meanwhile my old life in London could be reached for the price of a student rail fare. Some of my cronies, including the incipient film director, Dave Dalziel, had gone home or gone away, but others had stayed on to enjoy what had become self-consciously an Era. Among these latter was my erstwhile girlfriend, Robin, whom I had helped to become a lapsed Catholic. Since then her personality had flowered, to the extent that the nuns who had brought her up would have sent her to Hell on the strength of her clothes alone. Also she danced well, in a sort of silent frenzy. She was one of those people whose whole bodies have a feeling for popular music, and that was the time when popular music had a feeling for bodies. If you believed the glossy magazines, Swinging London was a place where you could run along the King's Road and meet Julie Christie running the other way. People you knew, or anyway people known by people you knew, were working as extras in Antonioni's *Blow Up*, and sending out reports of how David Hemmings was being pressed flat between ravenous women. The barriers were down, the hunt was up, the game was afoot. Actually it wasn't quite like that. The youth scene consisted, as it always had, of awkward parties with alcohol still the strongest stimulant, apart from desire. This last, however, was rampant, and was flogged on to a new fervour by the music. The music really was good. Every new Beatles LP moved things on to a new plane of rhythmic sensuality, as if we were all ascending from floor to floor in a transparent building that swayed more as you climbed higher. Though Robin had good cause to distrust me, in these circumstances she lacked the fanaticism which would have been necessary to fight me off. Her tiny flatlet in Pimlico had a yard consisting of precisely four paving stones. The yard, hilariously called an area, was hemmed in by a wall taller than a man. At three o'clock in the morning I would be up and over that wall like a commando and sobbing at her closed door. What could she do but let me in? Other young women were harder to persuade but the occasional one

succumbed, probably because it was too dark to know quite what was going on. In the aftermath I was not always a gentleman. Even more shamefully, I thought I had an innate right to thoughtless behaviour. The *Zeitgeist* had given my Bacchic urge a blanket endorsement. The quantum leap in the efficiency and convenience of contraceptive methods amounted to a mandate. Rubber, however elastic, had been to some extent a restraint. Now the wraps were off. If you looked closely enough at the pill, it glowed with a green light.

On the loose in London, I could fancy myself as a rake. Fancying myself was easier in those days than it became later. Quite a lot of my hair was still on top of my head. My chest, though it showed signs of slipping, had not yet begun to accelerate. As a line-shooter I was indefatigable. I could fall in love in ten minutes and tell her about it for ten hours. I wrote poems on the spot and read them out unasked. Most of what I said, I believed. When I told some pretty dancer that she was a revelation, it was true. True at the time. I had commitments elsewhere but elsewhere was somewhere else. My trick, or condition, of being able to compartmentalise my life allows me to be active in several fields at once. This was already coming in handy as far as writing went: I could write during the day, go on stage at night, and each activity would benefit from the other. But from the moral viewpoint there was another sense in which I needed to be watched. It took me a long time to learn to watch myself, possibly because I didn't much like what I saw when I did.

The return of Dave Dalziel helped to restore my capacity for dedication. Without him, London might merely have been where I went to do a cheap imitation of Christopher Marlowe in his cups. Dalziel had come back out of Africa, and he demanded allegiance. Being a model of seriousness, he got it. He was a man dedicated to his art. That his own art lay mostly in the future merely testified to its purity. In Nigeria, he had put in a punishing year and a half as head of the government film unit. Apart from a couple of local assistants, whom he had to train, he was the whole staff. One of the loveliest of the Australian expatriate girls, a brunette of Irish extraction unbelievably called Cathleen O'Houlihan, had flown out to marry him. Knowing his record, and stung by jealousy, I doubted if the alliance would last, yet I couldn't deny the magnificence of the gesture. It was a leap in the dark. Nigeria was already in a recognisable preparatory stage of the civil war which was later to make the name Biafra notorious. At that time, nobody outside Africa could tell an Ibo from a Hausa. According to Dalziel's letters, however, the lay-out was terrifyingly simple. The Ibos were smart and everybody else hated them for it, so sooner or later there would be a massacre. Meanwhile the Nigerian politicians wanted nothing from the government film unit except to be filmed individually in close-

up at all times, even at night. ‘You can’t turn an empty camera on them, either,’ wrote Dalziel. ‘They show up at the lab. and demand to see the negative. These guys are *very easy to see* in the negative.’

As conscientious as ever, Dalziel had got on with the charade while sedulously maintaining his lines of communication to London, in the hope of snaring a job that would get him out of Lagos before people started cutting one another up. Utterly without side, he had a great gift for true friendship with the black Africans and didn’t want to be there when the inevitable happened. It was already happening when he and the now pregnant Cathleen landed in London. They took a small house in Brixton, where their parlour soon became a gathering point for refugees from Nigeria. You could meet people who had run government departments who would now count themselves lucky if they were allowed to clean trains. I met a tubby, middle-aged, smiling woman there whose whole family had been massacred before her eyes. She was smiling to hold her face together. Cathleen organised the tea and cakes-1 listened to the baby in her stomach. It sounded keen to join the party. I had known Cathleen when she had first arrived in Sydney like an inspiration out of an emerald background, an Iseult Gonne transported in space and time. Now she was a wife and soon to be a mother. Dalziel had a new air of - what was it? – sanity. Something was going on that I felt left out of.

Dalziel still had plenty of the old insanity left, however. In Nigeria, on the few days of the month when he was not required to film politicians as they queued up to appear one at a time in front of the camera, he had managed to shoot the footage for a twenty-minute short subject about the only traffic jam in the history of Lagos. It wasn’t the most thrilling topic in the world, but the film was put together with such craftsmanship that Dalziel was easily short-listed for the newly created job of running the British Film Institute’s Production Board. The successful applicant would be given the task of providing spiritual guidance and practical assistance for aspiring young film-makers. At the interview, Sir Michael Balcon correctly judged Dalziel to be the authentic article, and he was hired. Not even Balcon, a great man with the generosity to relish talent in others, realised just how authentic his new protégé would prove to be. Dalziel was so selfless in his efforts to aid young hopefuls that a mere salary seemed small reward: he should have been canonised, Certainly he had a saint’s patience. Some of the aspiring young film-makers were patently crazy. In a few fateful cases Dalziel found this fact difficult to detect. Thousands of applications had poured in from people who wanted to make a film. Many of them loftily left blank the space in the application form reserved for an outline of the film they wanted to make. It transpired that they didn’t want to be pinned down by the

restrictions of the system. Dalziel was sceptical enough to realise that they wanted the status of film-makers without having to go through the taxing business of actually achieving anything. But if an applicant seemed to have an idea that was even halfway decent, Dalziel would put it up to the board, get a budget, and supply the incipient Fellini with everything he needed, which usually included talent. Like many people with abundant creative energy, Dalziel found it hard to imagine what it was like to be without it. If a young would-be film director stood there without saying anything, Dalziel thought that it was because the hot new prospect was so bursting with ideas as to be inarticulate. If a young would-be film director not only stood there without saying anything but smelled as if he hadn't taken a bath in a long time, Dalziel thought that it was because the hot new prospect was so bursting with ideas he was not only inarticulate, he was beyond being concerned with the petty details of personal hygiene.

I have gone only half way towards describing Dalziel's principal and most troublesome protégé, Keith Visconti. Though Keith's anabasis from the status of comprehensive school expellee to potential *cinéaste* should not be derided even in retrospect, there were several reasons to think that on top of being illiterate and odoriferous he was also clinically insane, with overtones of petty larceny. He had, however, an inborn knack for thinking in sequences. He understood the essential grammar of eyelines and reverse angles without needing to have it set out for him in diagram form. Of no fixed abode, he seemed to live out of the gabardine overcoat which he wore at all times. It shone in a way that any piece of cloth does when it is dirty enough. Clutched tightly against the coat, because too big to fit into either of its bulging pockets, was a ten-minute show reel, made on short ends, which featured a friend of his, dressed unconvincingly as a waiter, serving another friend of his, dressed even more unconvincingly as a businessman, with a cup of coffee. Despite the implausibility of casting, sets and costumes, the action all happened in the right order. This was enough to convince Dalziel that Keith Visconti was a genius, an impression that Keith said nothing to contradict. Keith never said anything. He just stood there in his grotty overcoat, silent and immobile. Dalziel was thus able to read into his new pupil all his own qualities of inventiveness, lucidity and scruple.

The film Keith wanted to make was about a businessman and his wife, or perhaps mistress - the relationship was not specified - sitting in a restaurant and being served coffee. The woman is mysteriously drawn to the waiter, who has perhaps played a role in her earlier life, or perhaps might play a role in her later life, or perhaps both, if not neither. Leaving questions of motivation aside, Keith's screenplay was a small miracle of carefully calculated specificity. Every

close-up was thoroughly notated as to expression, the line of the eyes, the intensity of the light. The fact that the-whole thing was written out, with very few of the words correctly spelled, in pencilled block capitals on scraps of paper from varying sources, some of the pages being stuck together with gravy stains, did nothing to dissuade Dalziel from the view that here was a talent from Heaven, a technically endowed avatar on the scale of Pushkin, Mozart, Schubert or Seurat. Lacking Dalziel's purity of soul, I was more easily able to spot that Keith was a potential head-case. Actually i was wrong, too. There was nothing potential about Keith's mania. During his first visit to Dalziel's house, he had helped himself to half the contents of the refrigerator. Cathleen had smiled on this Bohemian trait but had been startled to notice, after he left, that several of her brassières were missing. She uttered a clear warning. Dalziel was too caught up to heed it and I was too craven. I was on the set as an unpaid grip when filming began on *Expresso Drongo*. This was Dalziel's working title for the project and showed that he had not lost his sense of humour. But there were some signs that he might have lost his judgment. Keith did at least twenty takes on every shot. Something always dissatisfied him. In the hired studio, it would be the angle of a light. In an exterior shot, it would be the intensity of the sun. He would squint at it as if it were the wrong size, He would complain that his leading actress had moved when she clearly hadn't, because she never did unless told to. All of this would have mattered less if Keith had not arrived late each morning for work. His excuse was lack of funds. Since the film's tight budget ruled out subsidised meals, Keith borrowed from Dalziel against the eventual profits. Taking this handout as his right, Keith complained that there was nothing left over to pay the cost of public transport, so he had to walk, which in turn was very hard on his shoes. His shoes certainly bore out this contention. Once they had been a rather good pair of brogues, but at that time they had probably belonged to someone else. Now they had cracks, thus exposing Keith's socks to the air, with penetrating results. He had feet like dead dogs. The film was four days behind schedule after three day's shooting, a ratio which it was to maintain and eventually exceed. Dalziel was slow to admit the possibility that it was in Keith's interests to spin things out. *Expresso Drongo* was Penelope's tapestry. To put it more plainly, it was Keith's meal ticket. Even after Dalziel caught on, he allowed this state of affairs to continue, hoping that he would be able to work his influence. That, as he saw it, was his job. A less generous man would have hit the silk sooner.

Keith's leading lady was called Nelia. Close interrogation had revealed that Keith's knowledge of the cinema was virtually zero, but apparently he had once seen a French film and been impressed that one of the actresses had been billed

under her first name only. Nelia was Keith's discovery. Dalziel objected that the name would only serve to confuse the enormous public which the completed film would undoubtedly attract. Keith dug in his worn-down heels. As out of anything else, there was no talking Keith out of casting Nelia in the twin roles of wife and/or mistress. One of these personages - the one who waited outside the restaurant before coming in, as opposed to the one who waited inside the restaurant and did nothing at all - she played in a blonde wig, which cost a large proportion of the film's budget. The film lacking a wardrobe mistress, Nelia took the wig home with her every night and brushed it herself, presumably for hours, because it shone with a rare lustre. When quizzed closely by Dalziel, Keith avowed, in a few words widely spaced and reluctantly enunciated, that his relationship with Nelia was purely professional. It was hard to see how things could have been otherwise. Keith was so dirty that he had small plants growing on him. Any kind of physical contact with him was clearly out of the question. And Nelia was a zombie. You could simply park her in a chair, go away, come back hours later and she would still be sitting there. She was quite pretty but in a way so lacking in animation that even I had trouble idealising her.

Characteristically I managed it. To those of us who are artists at daydreaming, resistance from the medium is an invitation to invention. Nelia had neat features, a sweet figure, and an uncanny gift of stillness. To my mind it was more than enough. Soon she was my Anna Karina, my Jeanne Moreau, my Monica Vitti. I had ample scope to nourish these fantasies, Each day on the set I tried to make myself indispensable by shifting silver boxes about and helping to place the lights, but when Keith got started on his usual twenty takes there was plenty of time to become acquainted with Nelia if she wasn't in the shot, or even if she was. I could get nothing out of her except a hint that she liked tennis players. 'Tony,' she would murmur, looking at the sports page of some subhuman newspaper it took her all day to read. 'John.' Convincing myself that she had mystery, I perched near her as often as possible, rather hoping that I would be asked to massage her neck, which must have ached from the combined effort of sitting and reading. I thought I was getting somewhere when she asked me to scratch her back: not the whole of her back, just a particular spot in the middle, about three inches below the shoulder blades. I did that several times a day for about a week. Finally I dared to be romantic. 'Is that *the* spot?' I murmured. 'The special place?' In a hitherto unheard-of burst of vivacity she turned her face towards me, instead of just speaking straight ahead as usual. 'No, it's them bras Keith give me,' she said. 'They fit funny.' Years later I learned that she was a notorious tennis groupie who was as much a part of Wimbledon as the strawberries and cream, or the rain. Exhausted players who had fought their way

through to the last sixteen would find her waiting for them in their hotel rooms. She would be wearing nothing but a blonde wig. They called her New Balls Nellie.

Not everyone who wants to make a film is crazy, but almost everyone who is crazy wants to make a film. It is just one of the things that crazy people want to do, like starting a law suit or sending long, unsolicited letters to people in the public eye. A letter from a nutter has a recognisable format and orthography, as if all letter-writing nutters have to go through some kind of Top Gun nutter-letter-writing academy. Usually -I think I've said this before, so maybe I'm going nuts too – the letter is written in green ink and its many pages are tied together with a bootlace in the top left-hand corner. Even if typed, however, the letter will continue after the signature in a PS which will run around the edge of the filled page in a dense spiral until the whole of the margin is packed tight. This will occur no matter how many leaves the letter consists of – rarely fewer than twelve – and even if the verso of each leaf is left blank. Usually it isn't. Every space is filled up. Though the combination of energy and futility can be depressing to contemplate, at least the nutter letter can be written on a low budget. The nutter movie costs thousands of pounds at the very least, and if the nutter hasn't got the money himself then he will have to get it from someone else. As the officer designated to provide tyro film makers with operating capital, Dalziel was in the position of a man giving away free meat in Moscow. He was on his guard, but he was handicapped by his correct perception that the partition between talent and obsession is often thin.

The ambiguous case of Keith Visconti would have sapped Dalziel's confidence if it had not been for the continuous, reassuring presence of our old friend and compatriot Alain le Sands. Born Alan Syms in Brighton le Sands, only a mile away from my own home suburb of Kogarah, this conspicuous figure in the history of modern Australian cinema had gone to school and grown up without either my or Dalziel's ever having met him. At the University of Sydney I still didn't meet him, but Dalziel acquired him like a shadow. As I related in the first volume of these memoirs, Dalziel knew the names of the director, cameraman and editor of all the films he had ever seen. Alan Syms knew all those things too. Dalziel made the initial, fateful mistake of assuming that there must be some kind of affinity between himself and this intense young man who followed him everywhere. It turned out that Alan Syms also knew the names of the assistant director the make-up artist and the second unit focus-puller. By the time it emerged that Alan Syms not only possessed this information but was incapable of restraining himself from conveying it unasked, it was too late. That light of excitement in Alan Syms's eyes was the effulgent

stare of the true film buff. The eyes were large, with contracted black pupils blazing in the dead centre of the very white whites. They never blinked. His mouth was similarly always wide open. It was equipped with large square teeth, like freshly cut tombstones. Alan Syms talked in a high, piercing shriek.. Everything he said was otiose information about movies. He carried a card index,

Alan Syms was one of the main reasons Dalziel left Australia. When Alan Syms showed up in London, changed his name to Alain le Sands and started passing himself off as the leading light of the Australian New Wave, he was one of the main reasons why Dalziel left for Nigeria. At BFI guest lectures given by distinguished visiting American film directors such as John Frankenheimer or Delmer Daves, Alain le Sands would turn up and dominate question time. In a voice like a descending German dive bomber, he asked Frankenheimer for details about his assistant editor on *Seven Days in May*. When Frankenheimer visibly failed to recall exactly who his assistant editor had been, Alain le Sands provided the man's name, address and marital history. It was at this point, I am certain, that Dalziel began to find Lagos attractive. While Dalziel was away, Alain le Sands perfected his act by equipping himself with a screenplay for a short subject, By the time Dalziel got back, Alain le Sands had his film half-made. His own funds - which, judging from his varied supply of leather jackets, must have been not inconsiderable – were all used up. His few friends had been fleeced. He needed completion money. He made Dalziel's life a misery, demanding that the incomplete film be seen and assessed. He would telephone Dalziel in Brixton at three o'clock in the morning, waking up a whole houseful of Nigerian refugees. Finally, for a quiet life, Dalziel agreed to see the incomplete film at a small screening room in Soho. I happened to be in town and was present for the event. Dalziel had stipulated that Alain le Sands himself not be in attendance, so there were no witnesses except Dalziel, myself, and the projectionist, who was the first one to say 'Shit'. The film was entitled *He Alone*. It was subtitled '*un film de Alain le Sands*'. Dalziel was to relate this fact so often afterwards that Alan Parker picked the joke up and made it famous, but I was there at the birth and it was no joke. *He Alone* starred Alain le Sands himself, in a role closely modelled on that played by Charles Aznavour in *Tirez sur le pianiste*. Dalziel, who had wanted to *tirez sur* Alain le Sands for many years, groaned deeply in the dark. Yet Alain le Sands was no slavish plagiarist of Truffaut. Plot, characters and entire scenes had been faithfully copied, but he had an incompetence that was all his own. The deliberate jump-cuts of the *nouvelle vague* were translated by Alain le Sands into simple errors. Playing a young hero of threatening charisma, Alain le Sands would leap instantaneously from one

side of the room to the other, his cigarette growing longer on the way. His sleeves would unroll and roll up again from shot to shot. As he advanced threateningly down a hotel corridor, he appeared to be walking between a set of railway lines. They were the dolly tracks of the camera. The cameraman must have been blind not to see them and adjust the framing accordingly. Perhaps he was too busy compensating for an evidently advanced case of Parkinson's disease. The camera shook as if mounted on a billy cart. Unfortunately this imposed awkwardness of filmic style gave the central character none of the vulnerability of its model. Alain le Sands was playing the Aznavour character as if he were Robert Mitchum. He was being hunted, but he was not afraid. The point was thus neatly removed, leaving a vacuum. Close-ups were held for a long time. He smiled in every one of them, looking like two cement footpaths which had been freshly laid side by side. Dalziel watched in fascinated horror, audibly calculating the thousands of pounds the thing must have cost. Though it lasted only about fifteen minutes you could practically smell the burning money. Dalziel vowed that whoever else's cash was thrown on fire, it wouldn't belong to the BFI Production Board.

When Dalziel and I emerged shaking into the cold light of Soho, Alain le Sands was waiting for us on the pavement. 'What did you think of it?' he screamed. 'Hopeless,' said Dalziel. 'What are your criticisms?' shrieked Alain le Sands. 'There aren't any,' Dalziel replied wearily. 'It's just hopeless. Nothing works. It's a waste of time. A turkey. Forget it.' Alain le Sands made a strange move sideways. 'Yes, but how about some *constructive* criticisms?' The word 'constructive' was still echoing off the Georgian façades when we noticed the camera crew across the street. Alain le Sands had captured the whole scene. Luckily he could not afford to wear a radio microphone. We couldn't see a sound man. But unless his cameraman was even more incompetent than usual, he had got the picture. Dalziel commendably did not throw his coat over his head as we got into his car. It was a Jaguar 2.4 that was rather like his clothes: bought second-hand off a barrow but it looked terrific. It wouldn't start. The screaming face of Alain le Sands filled my window until the engine fired, 'God knows what he'll do with the footage,' said Dalziel as we pulled away. 'Keith's going to be a relief after that.' We spent the afternoon and early evening watching Keith Visconti shoot the big scene where the woman seated at the café table reveals that she takes sugar as well as milk. Six hours and a carton of sugar cubes dissolved like memories.

My key role in London's upsurgent film *milieu* made me even more determined, when back in Cambridge, to see every movie that came to town. I could not physically watch more movies than I had been watching already, but

my newly acquired identity of quasi-film-maker gave new legitimacy to my pretty well constant attendance at the Cambridge cinemas, of which there were at that time half a dozen, most of them showing double bills. Across the river and up the hill, the Rex cinema showed – back to back and without let-up except for a few Pearl & Dean commercials - old and at the time almost entirely forgotten Hollywood programmers and films noirs with titles like *Dateline Homicide* and *Make My Tombstone Thick*. If you counted in the Arts cinema and the film societies, which together took care of the *recherché* present and historic past, Cambridge offered a chance to see just about every film ever made. I saw them all. In the late mornings I would write and deliver poems. From early afternoon on I was rarely out of a cinema except when I was in Footlights, and most of my time there was spent watching television. Armed with my practical knowledge I analysed every cut and change of angle, communicating my conclusions gratuitously to those sitting near by, even if they were strangers. I was forever drawing the attention of innocent civilians to what I took to be fine points of technique. Most of the time, I have since realised, I was simply wrong. Competent technique is what mediocrity has in common with genius, so there is small point in getting enthusiastic about it. Unless he is an outright hack, a journeyman will be just as careful as Fellini to make his shots match – often more careful Buñuel, the most inventive of all film directors, resolutely declined to interest himself in any matter he thought merely aesthetic. But a little knowledge, though not always injurious to a practitioner, is invariably fatal to a critic. In recent years I have worked on documentary films at every stage of production and post-production. For any television documentary with my name in the title I have spent at least as much time in the cutting room as on the actual shoot, and often twice as much. I have turned a sentence around to fit pictures and I have asked for a shot to be run backwards to fit words. That kind of finicky labour is an experience for which there is no substitute. Youth, energy and appreciative passion, no matter how blessed they are with insight, aren't enough. There is no comparison between what I know now and what I used to know. Nowadays, after seeing a film or television programme, I wouldn't dream of praising its director until I had seen what he had done with other writers, and especially with other producers. I have seen a producer direct the whole movie. I have seen a cameraman save a director's career. But in my early innocence I fell for the *cinéaste* line full length. A fan of *Al Capone* and *Invitation to a Gunfighter*, I would point out that the director of both these masterpieces, Richard Wilson, had been the assistant editor on *Citizen Kane*, and that this fact should not be ignored when trying to account for their peculiar excellence. Though this wasn't a bad point, I was only a step away from sounding like Alain

le Sands, Raise my voice three octaves, build my teeth with white plaster, and I could have been him.

7. THE OSTRICH ALTERNATIVE

Obsessions are what we have *instead* of normality. They aren't a version of it, they are surrogate. My obsession with the moving image was what I was having instead of working on the set books. Out of the three terms of my second and last year as an undergraduate, one and a half had gone by before I could bring myself even to sit down and assess the magnitude of what I had not yet done in the way of preparing to satisfy the examiners. When I finally faced the issue, I quickly realised that I would have a better chance of satisfying them if I offered them my body. To present them with the contents of my mind would be an insult. My first move was to write one of my classic letters to my mother telling her that I was studying hard and not to worry about a thing. More than usually specious, this work of fiction helped get me in the mood for works of fiction composed by other people, such as Dickens and Thackeray. But merely not feeling negative wasn't the same as feeling positive. Enthusiasm was lacking. Why did it have to be Dickens *and* Thackeray? And why were Dickens's novels so very long, not just in thickness but from page to page? He piled it on as if I had all the time in the world to take it off. Jane Austen had had a far better idea of how much time a busy poet and performer had to spare. There was also the advantage that in previous incarnations, while being an aesthete at the University of Sydney or a down-and-out post-Beatnik Bohemian in Earl's Court and Tufnell Park, I had actually read some of her books. Acquiring a working knowledge of her *oeuvre* was thus on the cards. I resolved to concentrate on Jane Austen and thereby reap the benefits of the informed insight that cuts deep, the sharp focus. Whether a sharp focus on Jane Austen would come in handy when discussing the novels of, say, Dostoevsky, was a point that remained moot, A moot point I could always deal with by crossing the river, climbing the hill and hiding from the reality of afternoon in the sweet, artificial night of the Rex.

Most of the films I saw there were like me: rootless, unsung, wandering the universe like a spaceship with a dead crew, When *The Manchurian Candidate* was withdrawn from the screen after the assassination of President Kennedy, it

showed up nowhere in the world except at the Rex, where I saw it at least ten times. I could, and at the drop of a hat would, analyse its camerawork exhaustively, but in a more reliable part of my addled brain I must have realised that it was the words which really counted. I learned George Axelrod's perfectly turned screenplay line by line. At that time and for years to come, the muttered question 'Why does your head always look as if it's coming to a point?' was a secret password among those who shared the Manchurian connection. I, however, was the only person I ever met who could correctly recite the key line in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*: 'I've never had champagne before breakfast before. With breakfast, often. But never before before.' The line was Axelrod's, not Capote's. I also knew that the best line in *The Big Sleep* – 'She tried to sit in my lap while I was standing up' – was not Raymond Chandler's. Years before it was rediscovered as a cult classic, the all-time off-beat Hollywood sleeper *The Night of the Hunter* would also show up only at the Rex. The print was full of splices yet the photography retained its lustre and, more importantly, the narrative still flowed. Bowled over by Charles Laughton's talent as a director, I still had enough sense to realise that James Agee's screenplay was the vital contribution.

The second time I saw *Night of the Hunter* at the Rex – once again I was in light from Dickens – I was one of only three people in the audience. The others were two of the most beautiful people I had ever seen in my life. Both of them were Indians, and before I introduced myself I had mentally transferred to them the title of a piece by Duke Ellington: the Beautiful Indians. The beautiful girl was called Karula Shankar and the young man, if possible even more beautiful, was called Buddy Rajgupta. They looked like a tourist advertisement for Nirvana. It turned out, however, that they were students like me. In some respects they were even my kind of student. They, too, were in flight from the size of Dickens's novels. In other ways they were not students like me at all. Apart from their physical allure, they seemed materially comfortable to a degree unparalleled among the undergraduate population. This I deduced before we had even reached what Karula called Buddy's pad, whither I had been invited back for coffee. Buddy's casual Western clothes he might have worn at a Hyannis Port lawn party and Karula's sari was so subtle in its colours that you had to check your eyes for teardrops. Surely it was a film of water which was supplying the prismatic interplay as she rustled silkily along? No, it wasn't. In the middle of her superb forehead a tiny upright ellipse of scarlet spoke of the mysterious East. Her voice, however, spoke of Sarah Lawrence or Vassar, with the occasional word strongly emphasised, as if she had suddenly moved closer. 'You don't play *bridge*, by any chance?' Already lost, but not so far gone as to have forgotten that a competence at bridge might be hard to fake, I said I didn't.

‘Man, have you ever met the *wrong* people. We play it *all* the time. We’ll have to *teach* him, won’t we?’ Buddy said nothing for a long while as we walked. I could tell he was thinking. Finally he said: ‘Yeah. OK.’

Buddy’s pad was behind a heavy door in a neo-Georgian brick façade somewhere near Newnham. I can remember a gravel drive and an overhanging elm which must be gone by now, because the Dutch elm beetle went through Cambridge like silent wildfire later on and missed hardly a single candidate for extermination. I imagine the spacious layout of Buddy’s pad has gone too. There can’t have been many subsequent undergraduates who would have been able to keep up that level of classy carelessness. By student standards the place was enormous, colossal, outlandish: it was Grand Central Station, the Grand Salon of the Louvre, the Great Hall of the People in Peking. Actually I suppose the main room was only about thirty feet by twenty, but even among all the divans and cushions there definitely would have been room to swing the tiger whose skin was on the floor. The general arrangements were for a Rajah who had been brought up in the Ritz, which was apparently pretty well what had happened. Family photographs indicated that Buddy’s forebears had driven at Le Mans, flown in the King’s Cup, hunted from howdahs, played host to the Mountbattens. Pretending not to be impressed by all this was made easier by the books, which were loosely shelved by the thousand, and all interesting. Such American avant-garde publishing houses as New Directions and Evergreen were fully represented. These imprints I at least recognised. Others were new to me. Proud of my one-volume collected Nathaniel West, I was rather put out to see his separate novels all lined up in the original American editions, their paper wrappers intact. Undergraduates like to believe that they read adventurously but few of them do. Mostly they follow two curricula: the official one, and the unofficial one which prescribes books supposed, by general consent among their generation, to be of epoch-making interest. Buddy was a genuine extracurricular reader. He had his own taste and followed it where it led. Nor was he one of those paid-up exquisites who read minor writers because the major ones are insufficiently obscure. He was in search of originality in all its forms. The quest was made only the more impressive by his off-hand manner. Nowadays he would be called laid-back. At that time the word for him was cool. Even in conversation, he never ran to catch the bus. ‘Have you read Agee’s film criticism?’ he asked. ‘Yes,’ I lied. Buddy crossed slowly to his shelves, took down the relevant book, leafed through it, found some paragraph that he had been looking for, silently read it, closed the book and handed it to me. ‘You should,’ he said.

And I did. That year I read almost everything on Buddy’s shelves. Constant

attendance at the cinema never cut into my reading: only into my official reading. Unofficially I would rather read than sleep. The Cambridge second-hand bookshops always beckoned. By the second week in any term I was usually too broke to buy anything. The University Library, needless to say, was out of the question: it was full of students who were actually studying, a sight which would throw me into a panic. So every few days I took an armful of books back to Buddy's pad, there to exchange them for more. Occasionally I was a fourth in bridge games but I never learned: the Beautiful Indians were too good at it to remember what it was like not to be able to play, so they couldn't teach me. Several times I was paired off with an Italian graduate economist called Mario who could memorise the whole pack at a glance no matter how it was shuffled. I came to dread the moment, usually no more than half-way through a hand, when Mario, Buddy or Karula said something like 'That's it, then,' and they all laid out their cards, having foretold how the hand – or round or rubber or whatever it was called - must play itself out. I had no sense for cards and got no better. Even today, playing gin rummy with my small daughter, I am notoriously easy meat, and have been since she was seven years old. If I make a fool of myself at gin, it can be imagined what a figure I cut at bridge. I just couldn't do it.

Reading I knew how to do: except, of course, when it was prescribed. Buddy was the same way. As far as I remember he never sat for the examinations, and might well already have been sent down without his noticing. Already, on that first afternoon, I envied him his insouciance, although I was too obtuse to realise as yet that it was only part of an aristocratic principle whose other main component was a deep sense of social obligation. Downing the proffered martinis as if they were water, I conveyed to Buddy and Karula my radical convictions, explaining to them the economic problems facing their country and how easily these could be solved. 'Man, that's *crap*,' Karula murmured from her sleepily curled position in a heap of paisley cushions, as if Liberty's had been bombed and geraniums were growing among the ruins. Buddy, smoking a black Russian cigarette so delicately that it seemed never to, grow shorter, either listened to my monologue or thought of something else. Perhaps he was thinking of his country, in which, he slyly neglected to tell me, his father was a liberal publisher who had many times laid his life on the line for democracy and would expect his children to do the same. It was a typical Cambridge undergraduate evening: ignorance spoke out confidently while experience waited for it to catch up. Night fell and deepened. Karala rose from her cushions and made for the kitchen. She constructed large, American-style hamburgers. Eating a hamburger without putting down my martini glass made it difficult to talk, but I coped.

It never occurred to me that I should at least have offered to leave the

Beautiful Indians together. Anyway, towards midnight I was given the job of escorting Karula home. She lived right in the centre of town, in a suite of rooms in a gingerbread house in a little lane, no wider than a thin man, leading off Market Square. It took a long time to get there because I found her a bit of a handful to escort. In fact I found her at all only with difficulty. The martinis must have had something in them. Alcohol, perhaps. Probably it was the way they made them in India. I tripped over gutters, detoured into bushes, fell down holes in the road. I peed behind a parked Mini and missed it. Karula, perfectly sober, was in hysterics. When we finally got to her place it turned out that she had forgotten her front door key. Luckily her room was on the ground floor. We jemmied her window without much trouble - Karula's peals of oddly accented laughter covered the noise of splitting timber - and I boosted her through. There was so much sari that I didn't really touch her. It was like pushing an unfolded parachute into a dumb waiter. But I felt her. The sweet heat of life. She was lovely and she wasn't mine. I wanted all the lovely women to be mine. If not all, then a few. If that was too much, then just one. Here, now. This instant. I sat down and had a little cry. 'Shit, man,' came that bewitching voice from inside the window, 'go *home*.' But where was home? Far, far away. Using the cool wall as a guide, I edged toward the streetlight at the end of the alley. So cold in England, even when it was warm.

8. WELL INTERRUPTED, PEMBROKE

Let me not convey an impression of time completely wasted. If I had been enrolled to read a science subject and had dodged work in such a fashion, I would have been cheating. But in retrospect it seems possible that I only *felt* fraudulent. Eschewing the set books with unequalled diligence, I read everything else. From the conversations that lasted until dawn, I remembered what I heard in the rare intervals when I wasn't talking. The awkward truth, when it comes to the humanities, is that knowledge, taste and judgment get into us by uncharted routes. Late one night in Footlights, alone with the sputtering black-and-white TV set, I saw and heard Jacqueline du Pré playing the Elgar cello concerto. I saw her before I heard her, and went mad for her smile as I never did for Elgar, but another barrier between me and classical music softly crumbled. Until then I had been convinced, wrongly, that the main stream of great music was in the symphonies and the operas. After that, I started looking for it in the right place, in the concertos and the chamber music. It was her passion that did it. We live more by example than we think. Strong evidence for this view was provided by the disconcerting fact that I was a bit of a role model myself. Undergraduates who were shy about their intellectual or artistic ambitions looked up to me because I was blatant about mine. They believed that I knew a thing or two and I'm bound to say that I agreed with them. When the JCR of my college was invited to send a three-man team to compete in the television programme *University Challenge*, that I should be included seemed natural not just to me but to everyone. The rank of captain being offered, I made no demur. My second-in-command was an American called Chuck Beaurepaire, who was a walking, shouting encyclopaedia. Delmer Dynamo and the other Americans avoided him because of his knack for making his interlocutor redundant. He talked all the time and nothing he said was refutable, because all of it was facts. A formidable practitioner along those lines myself, I had been known to go toe-to-toe with him for a full half-hour before pausing to draw breath, whereupon he swept inexorably into the gap. Beaurepaire talked the way Alexander gave battle. He

went straight at you. ‘Watch out for Chuck,’ whispered Delmer loudly one night in Hall. ‘He’s got another hole to eat with. The mouth *never* gets tired.’ Beaurepaire was sitting only about three places away and should have heard, but he was talking. ‘Johnson has the legislative record. Viewpoint of social benefits, Great Society biggest thing since New Deal. Just has a dumb name. Should’ve called it something else. Fair shake. Free lunch. Whatever. Know what Johnson said about J. Edgar Hoover? You don’t? Teil you. Listen, this is great. They asked him why he didn’t fire Hoover, right? Johnson said he’d rather have Hoover inside the tent pissing out than outside pissing in. My father was *there* when he said that. Johnson was on the Hill when Jack Kennedy ...’ Beaurepaire delivered all this in a sustained bellow that made all around him look into their stew as if a tunnel might open through it and lead them to salvation. But from the viewpoint of Pembroke’s team for University Challenge, to have Beaurepaire on tap was like being offered the assistance of Otto Skorzeny to pull a bank-raid. The third member of our team was a nice young man whose name I have forgotten. He had been chosen because he knew something about science. Beaurepaire knew all about that too, so the young man never needed to open his mouth, and, being shy, didn’t try. Let us call him Christopher, because if his name wasn’t that then it was Nicholas. His family had a nice house outside Manchester, where we all stayed the night before we recorded the show next day. In those days, Granada Television ruled the ionosphere with *Coronation Street* and an unrivalled array of classic small formats like *University Challenge*, *All Our Yesterdays*, *What the Papers Say* and *Cinema*, which was to be the first programme I ever regularly presented when, some years later, I tentatively essayed what has turned out to be my principal means of earning a living. At that time, however, I had been on television precisely once. It had happened in Sydney. Television itself had been new to Australia. I was one of a team of Sydney University students ranged against a team of journalists in a game of bluff. We had scored precisely no points. I forget the rules, but I never got over sitting there for half an hour without saying a word. This time, I resolved, would be different. In one of Christopher’s guest rooms, I lay awake looking at the hammered beams and white plaster of the low ceiling. Outside in the grounds, the moon shone on the lake. I didn’t want Christopher’s inheritance. I didn’t even want, or not very much, Christopher’s mother, which was quite mature of me, because she was exactly the stamp of unassuming but self-assured gentlewoman most calculated to arouse greed and resentment. Her husband, I had guessed, must have been that object covered with coats and hats that we passed in the hall. Anyway, he hadn’t joined us for dinner, which, excusing herself, she did not change for, merely adding tiny pearl earrings to her ensemble

of cable-stitch roll-neck sweater, corduroy trousers and penny loafers. Quality unencumbered by finery, her *soignée* allure was the unfussiest possible interplay of form and content. Serene. What a word. There was nothing ruffled about her image until it reached my eyes. 'You *will* look after Christopher tomorrow, won't you?' I nodded conspiratorially while Beaurepaire told her about the Tennessee Valley Authority.

Next day we were up against an all-girl team from St Hilda's, Oxford. I'm sorry to say that we creamed them. Christopher just sat there and I almost did the same. Beaurepaire was magnificent, Bamber Gascoigne, moderating the programme, could barely begin a question before Beaurepaire answered it. 'It was unhistorical of Keats ...' Gascoigne began. 'Balboa!' shouted Beaurepaire over the zap of his buzzer. He had instantaneously figured out, not only that the question must concern Keats's mistake in putting Cortez on a peak in Darien, but that the question would be about whom he should have put there instead. Bitterly reflecting that 'Silent, upon a peak in Darien' neatly summarised the condition and location to which everyone who knew Beaurepaire would like to see him translated, I was nevertheless pleased that we were cleaning up, and the last bonus question was a personal triumph for myself. The right answer depended on knowing that Leonardo's 'Last Supper' had been painted on a wet wall. Having seen it helped, A man of the world, I struggled not to look too pleased as we swept to victory. The camera probably saw the straggle. Personality is the thing it catches. Everything else it lets go.

You have to realise that in those days the whole country watched every episode of *University Challenge*. They watched it in working men's clubs. The Queen Mother watched it, knuckles white, running to the telephone to place bets. At the time of writing, television in Britain is still, by the skin of its teeth, a communal event - the best reason for being involved in it - but twenty years ago there was no question about it. If you were on television in prime time, the whole population of the country was looking through the same small window right into your face. That night we, the winning team from Pembroke, were given dinner by Bamber and the programme's producer at the Midland Hotel. The losing team was nowhere to be seen. The producer's beautiful researcher had a nice, fresh, land-girl sort of smile which bore up pluckily under a verbal onslaught from Beaurepaire that left Bamber looking thoughtful, as if wondering whether it was all worth it. Somehow I knew that he really thought it was, even if it cost him this, a bad evening out with the cocky youngsters. It wasn't just the money. It was the thing itself. The millions watching. The show. I vowed to myself that they would never get me. Never, never would I succumb to the lure of television. Its mereness I found offensive. Television didn't transform you.

You just sat there. Look at Bamber Gascoigne, just sitting there while two pretty girls from the next table leaned over his shoulder - leaned *on* his shoulder - to get his autograph. *Four* pretty girls. It was a moment of truth. Even Beaurepaire stopped talking. Silent, upon a peak in Manchester.

The following week we came back for the next round, against another Oxford college, Balliol. Once again we stayed at Christopher's house the night before the big day. Christopher's father was still nowhere in the picture. Christopher's mother either changed for dinner or else had been wearing that black jersey silk bias-cut scooped-neck top all day, along with the straight plum velvet skirt and the ankle-strap sandals. While Beaurepaire blew a gale I drowned in her eyes. I resolved that when we returned victorious the next evening, I would dare. I had been reading a biography of H. G. Wells which said that when a guest at a country house party he already had a map of the sleeping arrangements in his pocket before he got off the train, with the distances all worked out so that he could get the mother and the daughter before dawn: a brace with one barrel. Along the corridor at dead of night, knock softly on her door, and begin with a discussion of her son's personality problems, currently being exacerbated by unshielded exposure to the overweening self-confidence of Beaurepaire. As she leaned elegantly sideways in the tempest emanating from the latter's tireless lungs, I essayed a small sympathetic smile and was rewarded with a soft lowering of eyelashes like two black moths making a deck landing on stretched silk. I went into battle against Balliol as if her handkerchief was tucked into my tunic, or was fluttering, as it were, from the point of my couched lance.

Boy, did we lose. And it was all my fault. The Balliol blokes knew more than the St Hilda's women and were a lot quicker at hitting the buzzer. Their captain was practically a psychic. He guessed the question before Bamber's mouth was fully open and his reflex speed on the buzzer was like one of those small Australian boys who can bring down a dragonfly by spitting at it. But Beaurepaire was magnificent. He kept us in there, matching the Balliol top gun volley for volley as the afternoon blazed to a climax. The two teams were dead even when it came to the last question, which was about music. I heard two bars and knew it was Verdi. I heard four bars and knew it was *Otello*. I hit the button while the Balliol captain's overdeveloped thumb was still in the air. Beaurepaire hit the button too but the answer was already out of my mouth. '*Otello!*' I shouted. '*It's Don Carlo!*' shouted Beaurepaire, louder. Louder but too late, Bamber wrapped it up. '*It was Don Carlo*, as Chuck Beaurepaire said. Clive James should have waited. Congratulations, though, Pembroke, on being such close losers ... ' I think I bore up reasonably well I was told subsequently - I am still told today by anyone I meet over the age of forty - that the tears which I

thought were jetting from my eyes merely made them shine, and that if it had not been for my mouth, which went all square like a baby ready to howl, nobody would have known that my world had collapsed.

As we discovered the previous week, losers, no matter how close, did not get invited to the Midland Hotel. All the way back to Christopher's house I explained that the bit of *Don Carlo* they had played was almost identical to the bit in *Otello* just before the whole cast sings at once. Beaurepaire was sulking. Keats would have mistaken him for stout Cortez. Christopher's mother opened the door to us. She looked wonderful. So did her husband. It transpired during supper that he had just got back from Canberra, where he went regularly in order to talk about investments in minerals. 'You're making a mistake, I think,' he told me, 'in selling us the stuff outright. It would be wiser to impose conditions so that nobody could buy anything without processing it out there. That way you'd get a bigger industrial base. At the moment you're just giving it away. The Japanese can't believe their luck.' This was an opportunity for Beaurepaire. His mouth was off and running. I looked at Christopher's mother. I looked at those lashes. They were spread wide while the eyes they protected looked adoringly at her husband. He certainly was quite impressive, if you don't mind them modest as well as handsome, intelligent and rich. 'It must be a bore for you,' I managed to choke out, 'changing planes in Sydney. Must be a hell of a long flight.' He nodded. 'It would be if we didn't have our own. Gives me a chance to keep my hours up.' It turned out that he had flown Meteors in Malaya. I felt terrible. It should have been *Otello*. That bit just before he kills himself, where the strings well up and weep, would have been just right.

9. WANTING AND FOUND TESTED

Sexual starvation was the undergraduate's prescribed fate. I considered myself hard done by, having to share it. After all, I was a man of experience: perhaps not precisely a boulevardier, but withal no sprig. I had experimented, and intended to experiment further. In my opinion I was still at a formative stage. I did not yet consider myself responsible enough to settle down. How could I be, when I was scarcely responsible enough to settle a bill? Without wishing to emulate Prince Aly Khan or Porfirio Rubirosa, I yet believed that there was a certain amount of adventuring which a man should regard as his duty; that I had at least made a start; and that if allowed a fair chance I might well make my mark. Consider the evidence. There was my chequered past. There was my long-term liaison in Italy. There was, to make me feel interestingly treacherous, my intermittent imbroglio with Robin in London. But in Cambridge there was, resoundingly, nothing. At the time the number of male undergraduates known to be cohabiting with females could be counted, with difficulty, on the fingers of one hand – with difficulty because the hand would be trembling with envy. A detached observer might have felt that I was already getting my share. As far as I am able to assess the truth by looking back, however, my sense of deprivation was genuine, even though it arose from a compulsively, and possibly psychopathically, inadequate capacity to realise that out of sight should not mean out of mind. People loyal to me I was loyal to only when I was with them. This went double for women. I have learned better since, but very slowly, and the fact that I had to learn it, instead of having the instinct conferred on me by nature, has been a grief to me, although never so much as it has been a grief to others, who always had to grieve first before I noticed that grief might be appropriate.

There was also the consideration that I was very energetic, a condition which time has since gone a long way towards curing completely. Whatever my psychological compulsion towards putting it aimlessly about, sheer physical randiness was a powerful potentiating agent. If the result was priapism, Cambridge might have been specifically designed to put a stop to it. Men of that

age, in that epoch, wanted their women attractive or not at all. There being, in the first place, few women *in statu pupillari*, the number of them who might arouse desire by their appearance was few indeed, and these received a volume and concentration of male attention which in some cases ruined them for life. The actresses were the worst. After a season with the ADC and a single appearance with the Marlowe, girls who started off with the self-effacing temperament of voluntary aid workers ended up carrying on like Catherine the Great. Being cast in a play was the merest interlude between bouts of theatrical behaviour extending deep into everyday life. They made entrances. They stormed out. They had the vapours. They did all these things going in and out of the University Library. There were exceptions, but the one I had to go and fall for wasn't among them.

From the wooded slopes of Highgate by way of Golders Green and Tel Aviv, Consuela Schleppekis, though rather younger than I, was at the triumphant end of a university career during which she had taken the starring role, and most of the notices, in every major ADC and college production. A prima donna on stage, she was even more so off it, and after the drama critic of the *Cambridge Evening News* named her as Actress of the Year she went over the top like a regiment. Previously, though she had been unable to cycle up Castle Hill towards Girton without making innocent passersby suspect that she might be Lady Macbeth, she had been subject to brief bouts of normal behaviour. Now she would take notes in a Sidgwick Avenue lecture theatre with such an air of commitment that the lecturer would break off to ask her if anything was wrong. Actually commitment, was what she needed and later on she duly got it, but in the meantime her histrionic intensity was no excuse for my stupidity, whose only mitigating factor was her personal appearance, Consuela would have been a personable girl in any circumstances. In the Cambridge context she was like Marilyn Monroe in Korea. She was slim and dark rather than plump and blonde, but the effect was roughly the same. Blessed with a clear-skinned oval face dreamed by Modigliani in his last fever, she moved well when she was not self-conscious. She rarely wasn't, but moved well enough even so. As the spring of my second year approached, Consuela was rehearsing an open air production of *As You Like It* in the gardens of Clare. Leaning on a hedge, her forehead in her hands, concentrating on her lines, she was so graceful that she made you – or me, at any rate – forget that no one can really lean on a hedge without falling through it. I besieged her with poems. Some of them still seem to me to be pretty good even today. Others were trash. She took them all as her due. They were burning in the fire when she finally invited me to an early tea at her digs near Fenner's. The weather was already warm, but she said we would need a fire if

we were going to take our clothes off. Already unnerved by the knowledge that she had asked everyone in Cambridge theatrical society whether it would be wise to sleep with me, I was reduced by the inspiring spectacle of her silky body to incurable impotence. Unaware then, and for some time to come, that what a gentleman should do in such circumstances is to forget himself and think of a few things the lady might like – which is, come to think of it, pretty well what a gentleman should do in any circumstances - I tried everything except ringing up the Fire Brigade. An immediate, frank confession of inadequacy might have enlisted her sympathy to the extent of getting her to drop the play-acting, which would have been a help.

Finally I tried to bluff it out, if that's the appropriate expression. At first Consuela lay back with a show of drowsy, patient sensuality, as if Madame Récamier were receiving Châteaubriand in her boudoir and his dotage. This was not a bad number but unfortunately she must have read somewhere about the possibility of a smouldering simper. She unleashed several of these in succession, decorating them with a flare of the nostrils which would have made the Dalai Lama's robe strobe, but which reminded me of a wild horse I had seen in Taronga Park zoo when very young – when I was very young, that is, the horse being obviously mature, not to say virile. I think it was one of those zebras that have no stripes, but do have a very long and large penis, which, when ready for use, extends so far from the lower abdomen that it will hit the ground unless its owner is standing over a hole. This recollection made me feel even more inadequate than I was feeling already. Desperately I tried to think of stimulating things. Again, here is a technique to which, reputedly, men in that situation often have recourse, but which has little to recommend it. If one is already in the presence of an actual incitement to desire, trying to think of an alternative incitement to desire can only emphasise the discrepancy between one's psychological quandary and the fierce simplicity of one's real-life position. To the part of the mind that watches the mind at work, the disjointure reveals itself as fundamentally absurd. Nothing is sillier to one's superego than to observe one's ego grinding away at the sweaty task of trying to flog one's recalcitrant id into action. I was already far gone in the interior turmoil of this metaphysical confrontation when Consuela put the lid on it by shifting to a new role. She became solicitous, as if I had some rare disease. I got the impression that I had only days to live. Her large and lovely eyes were full of horror and wonder at how God's behest had worked itself out by striking me down, thus depriving her of a great earthly love, but perhaps - who knew? – compensating her with a lasting memory of spiritual grace. If she had left the room, put on a nurse's uniform and reappeared at the foot of the bed holding a hurricane lamp, she

could not have done a better impersonation of Jennifer Jones. By now I was ready for the hospital anyway, and would have been glad if she could have left it at that. Unfortunately she saw a further possibility in the scene: a direction in which she might, in actor's parlance, *stretch* herself, since it had long ago become clear that there was no chance of stretching me. She became scornful, as if Lupe Velez, on her famous first tempestuous visit to Errol Flynn, had thrown herself naked on the floor only to find her passion rewarded with a lecture on stamp-collecting. Tossing her head, Consuela made a sudden exit to the bathroom. A bathroom was already a very impressive accoutrement for an undergraduate to have, but the spectacle of Consuela exiting into it was awe-inspiring. She then made an entrance out of it, apparently without having done very much in there except pause for breath and learn her lines. 'It doesn't matter' she snapped, tossing her head again and gazing fixedly out of the window. 'Let's just say it doesn't *matter*.' What had she seen out of the window? Lohengrin arriving on a swan? It scarcely seemed possible, since the curtains were still drawn. But a certain amount of light was coming through them. Consuela liked looking at light. She liked standing in it. She looked very beautiful there: longhaired, small-bottomed, heroic in her tragedy. My clothes were all over the room. Getting into various bits of them, I couldn't help noticing that I was always looking at her back. 'Look,' she said at last. It just doesn't bloody *matter*, OK?'

There was still quite a lot of the afternoon left. Too miserable even to go to the movies, I spent it at the Whim, the Trinity Street coffee bar in whose back room the aesthetes gathered. Except for the Footlights, who were only there in the afternoon when the clubroom closed, everybody in the university's artistic world would use the Whim all day as a headquarters, clearing house, comfort station, watering hole and gossip exchange. The Whim worked on the French café system: you could sit for a long time over a single cup of coffee as long as you didn't mind paying too much for it in the first place. I enjoyed writing there because there was a good chance of being interrupted. This time I worked steadily on a poem - it was one of those threnodies which claim that to say goodbye is inevitable because the ecstasy is too intense to last - without encouraging anyone to join me in conversation. Indeed, I made a point of not lifting my head. A couple of hours went by like that. The place was jammed with its late afternoon regulars when Consuela made an entrance. In full drag as a tempestuous gypsy princess, she was pretty enough to stop a speeding train. A whole room full of aesthetes ceased talking about themselves and looked at her. Meanwhile she was looking at me. She shook her head. She threw it slowly back, raised her clenched fists to her forehead, and rocked as if her body was in

the throes of rejecting a brain implant. Then she lowered her arms, looked at me again, shook her head slowly, and made an exit. Everyone looked at me. If she had left it at that, they all might have at least remained in doubt, but over the next few days she told everyone the details individually.

In retrospect I must concede that I was in no position to fault her on that point, because until much later in my life I was terribly indiscreet. Telling myself that to spill beans was a necessary component of a wonderful, warm, openly Antipodean personality, I exchanged gossip with the best of them, which necessarily meant that I also exchanged it with the worst of them. If people asked me intimate questions I would tell them the answers. I told people all about myself. Less forgivably, I told people all about other people too. I can't even say that the concept of privacy eventually crept up on me. It was forced on me, by other people's pain – or, to be less complacent and more accurate, by my pain at earning other people's justified disapproval. In this regard I have become a different person: infinitely more guarded, unforthcoming to the point of paranoia. To embarrass someone by revealing his secret to someone who might damage him with it seems to me, in my later incarnation, a crime worse than breaking wind at an investiture. Having learned something of what malice can do, and of how candour plays into its hands, I am now a clam. In those days I simply blabbed. But I still thought that Consuela was impermissibly revelatory about our unproductive tryst. She did everything but hire a skywriter. Everyone in town knew. The women who sold cream cakes in Fitzbillie's knew all about it. More than twenty years later I was still meeting perfect strangers who sympathised with me over my fiasco with Consuela Schleppekis. Let me take this opportunity to set the record straight. The truth is that my failed affair with Consuela rankled for a while, but nowadays, far from being still sensitive on the subject, I try to show that I enjoy a good joke against myself, before I go quietly away somewhere to be sick.

There was ample excuse for being unmanned. The Tripos examinations were imminent, and I was scarcely prepared to answer the essay paper, let alone the specialised papers on Swift, on tragedy and on God knew what else. On Jane Austen I had done just enough background reading to convince myself that I knew less about the foreground than I had thought. The mandatory foreign language paper was at least possible now that I had learned some Italian, which enabled me to avoid the French option. Emboldened by having started to get somewhere with Italian, I made renewed efforts to teach myself French, but I was at an early stage, possibly having overtaxed myself by choosing *A la recherche du temps perdu* as a primary reader. After six months I was about half-way through *Du côté de chez Swann* and still looking up every second word

in an old Larousse. If I had known then that I would turn bald before I got through the whole thing I would probably have given up. A lack of sense of proportion is one of the big advantages of being young: when we grow out of it, we leave possibilities behind along with the absurdity. Proust remains my idol of idols to this day - and I could not, or at any rate would not, have written that last sentence without his influence. His willingness to generalise about life enthralled me even when I myself knew little about life worth knowing. His specific, concrete observations I admired but thought I understood how he did them. It was the *aperçus*, the aphoristic insights driving deeper than observation, which continually surprised me. His every sententious formulation I underlined in ballpoint, until the tattered, coffee-stained *Livre de poche* was fat with dog-ears and looked blue when it fell open. It was one of the books I carried everywhere in those spring days when I was theoretically gripped by examination fever. Examination lassitude would have been a more accurate expression. It was as though I had been bitten by a tsetse fly. As time grew shorter, I moved slower. Having kept well away from the Footlights May Week revue – I had neither auditioned for it nor volunteered any ancillary services beyond handing over a few scripts – theoretically I was unencumbered with extracurricular commitments. Thus free to plan my time constructively, I did little except make plans. I constructed elaborate flow charts of what I needed to do, when what I really needed to do was do something. Quietly getting crocked in his college room, my supervisor, nicknamed the Baby Don because his name was Ron Maybey, greeted me with only partly feigned admiration on the one occasion I could bring myself to turn up. ‘Remarkable track record,’ he said. ‘Far as I can tell, you haven’t actually *completed* a weekly essay in two years. Fancy a sherry?’ It was gallows humour. I should have been in a blue funk.

But the sun was out, the girls were out with it, the punts were on the river and I was lying casually on its far bank, opposite the back lawn of King’s, on the edge of the meadow. The pampered cows and expense-account sheep of King’s were behind me, grazing plumply among the buttercups. Before me was the prettiest stretch of waterway in the world, bounded on the far side by the austere satisfying façade of Gibbs’s Fellows Building, with whose central arch I would always position myself in line so that I could see through it to the dry fountain in the middle of the front lawn. Wearing nothing but a pair of shorts, I could lie there working on my flow charts. When I broke into a sweat from all that effort I could roll into the river and swim lazily about, just quickly enough to dodge the punts. Of the young men who propelled the punts – of their honking voices, their self-satisfied features and their clothes purchased for a touring production of *Charley’s Aunt* – I felt no more tolerant than I had the previous

year, but all anger subsided at the sight of their precious cargo. Elegant fingertips of first and second year undergraduettes would trail past at eye level as I lay limp, submerged to the nostrils. The third year undergraduettes, needless to say, were all in their rooms studying for the examinations which, it periodically occurred to me, I would, at this rate, plough like a plane crashing. So I hauled myself out of the water, temporarily put aside the latest master plan for concentrated study, and tried to sketch out a few thoughts relating to the set books.

One of the special papers was on Swift, and there I thought I had the glimmering of an idea. Swift's prose appealed to me so strongly that my enthusiasm had survived a crushingly boring lecture from the current American academic expert on the subject. On a brief visit paid for by some memorial lecture fund, this worthy had packed one of the Sidgwick Avenue lecture theatres with an audience of dons, graduate students and final year undergraduates all eager to hear him on the subject of Swift's sense of humour. By the time the visitor – I recall him as being the Hale Professor of Raillery at Yale, but I must have got that wrong - had finished isolating, exemplifying and analysing what he took to be Swift's techniques of comic invention, anyone present with even a vestige of a sense of humour was, or should have been, praying for death. The professor was a bore on a Guggenheim, a long-range drone, an international ballistic fossil I spent the whole hour drawing little pictures of hanged men. I was kept from falling unconscious, however, by constantly renewed surprise at the gales of laughter which greeted the professor's every creaking sally. When he quoted something by Swift that he said was meant to be funny, they laughed. Sometimes it *was* funny, although not after he got through reading it out, because he always added a bit of explanatory acting - including, especially, a shrewd, quizzical twinkle which he evidently assumed to be the facial expression Swift might have adopted when regaling fellow members of the Scriblerus Club with a passage of improvised invective. When the professor said something on his own account that was clearly meant to be funny also - you could tell it was a joke because he did everything except lay his index finger alongside his nose – they laughed even louder. It occurred to me that an academic audience – not necessarily individually, but in the aggregate - is like the audience for serious music when faced with the challenge of reacting to *A Musical Joke*. They kill themselves laughing because the only other possible response would be to ask for their money back. They roll in the aisles because they lack the nerve to take to their heels. This was a very depressing conclusion to reach and for a while I blamed Swift himself. Swift himself would have been quick to blame mankind. His misogyny I found off-putting until I read the

journals to Stella and Vanessa. The professor was convinced that there could not have been anything between Swift and the girls except a rich exchange of good jokes. This was enough to persuade me that the truth might be different, and I soon turned up enough textual evidence to be certain that the sly old boy had been screwing both of them. Apparently there was still much learned discussion about whether Swift's use of the phrase 'a cup of coffee' was, or was not, a veiled reference to sexual intercourse. Whole academic careers were devoted to this supposed conundrum. To me it looked like the most easily penetrated code since Pig Latin. 'Can't get over that last cup of coffee we had on the floor,' Swift would write, or words to that effect, 'Get ready for three cups of coffee in a row tomorrow night.' Vanessa and Stella were equally scrutable in their replies. 'Must have at least six cups of coffee with you as soon as possible. Love and kisses.' To my mind, the Hale Professor of Raillery at Tale and all his academic kind were wilfully missing the obvious.

It could be said that my mind was not in a very objective state, but whatever the accuracy of its judgments, affection for Swift was fully restored, and I actually got around to reading extensively not just in his major works but in the poems, pamphlets and correspondence. I even read some of the relevant scholarship and criticism. This was the first time in my life that I had ever studied an author against his background at the time I was supposed to, and I was disturbed to find that although I achieved growing intimacy with the author I couldn't make any sense at all of the background. Of the many experts on Swift beside the Hale Professor of Raillery – who had long ago departed by PanAm Boeing 707 to spread his message of cheery bathos to a helpless world – the big cheese was Professor Irvin Ehrenpreis, whose lumbering two-volume work on Swift was mind-bending in the completeness of its scholarship. Professor Ehrenpreis knew about every philosophical concept and rhetorical convention current in that part of the eighteenth century. He knew about animism, dualism, Deism, dynamism, Platonism, pleonasm, Whiggery and buggery, Though Professor Ehrenpreis didn't write badly, it was evident to me, in my cocksureness, that he had soaked his brain in the period to the point of its falling apart like dead meat left too long in tap water. According to Ehrenpreis, Book IV of *Gulliver's Travels*, the book about the Houyhnhnms, reflected Swift's attitude to the current Platonic, or was it neo-Platonic, concepts of man, God, society and whatever. According to me, Gulliver felt about the Houyhnhnms the way Swift felt about Sir William Temple and all the other English aristocrats whose high civilisation he admired but on whom it shamed him to dance attendance. The Yahoos were Swift's people, the Irish. He couldn't live with them, but he found little solace, and much more humiliation, in his position of court wit to the

English gentry. I had it all worked out. I even drew a little chart.

Actually, after all these years, I still have an inkling that I might have been on the right track. Certainly the scholars and critics were on the wrong track when they suggested that Swift's great writings had been dictated by some sort of synthesis of current thought. That works of art can be inspired only by individual passion is something I am even more sure of now than I was then. Gulliver's love for the Houyhnhnms is made painful to him by their contempt for the Yahoos. His divided feelings are real feelings – Swift's feelings. If I had the time, the qualifications and the academic ambitions I think I could defend that case now. On the eve of the Tripos examinations I was sure I could. I was a man with an idea, and I was angry. Burning in my brain was the memory of the range of gesture and facial expression employed by the Hale Professor of Raillery when he was being amusing about Swift's imitating a horse's whinny and transcribing the sound as the word Houyhnhnm. No doubt that was how it happened, but I knew in my blood and bones that Swift had dedicated his adult life to never being in the same coffee house with a man like the Hale Professor. I was Swift's champion. In my examination paper his great, tormented spirit would rage, laugh, despair and exult.

Unfortunately it happened exactly like that. Casting my eye down the front page of the examination paper, I noted the request to interpret Book IV of *Gulliver's Travels*. Instantly my pen was flying. In a fine frenzy, pausing only to call for another quire of writing paper, I spent the whole three hours answering that one question. We had, however, been instructed to answer four questions. I had left the examination schools, and was standing outside in a pool of summer light trapped by blonde stone buildings, before I quite realised that I had condemned myself to scoring a maximum of twenty-five per cent on that paper even if, which was unlikely, they liked what I said. Instead of cramming for the next day's paper, I spent half the night composing a letter to the examiners begging them to believe that I had failed to read the instructions. The idea that the ability to read instructions was one of the things we were being examined on didn't occur to me at the time.

Ballsing up the Swift paper set the tone for my whole effort in the examinations. The novel paper went only just better. With some ingenuity I answered the questions on the Russian novel by making references to nobody except Jane Austen, but there is a limit to how much you can say about D. H. Lawrence when you have read only *Pride and Prejudice*. As for the English moralists, I was still ignorant as to who they might be, let alone about what they had said. Today it surprises me when I recall how incapable I was of getting interested in anything that smacked of distilled wisdom. If it wasn't Proust, I

didn't want to hear it. I valued spontaneity above all else, as if concentration could not be spontaneous too. On my shelves now, collections of aphorisms sit like containers of radioactive material. Just to mention the French, there are Montaigne, Pascal, La Rochefoucauld, Vauvenargues, La Bruyère. Of the Germans and Austrians, there are Goethe, Lichtenberg, Schnitzler, Kraus, Altenberg, Polgar. The pregnant sentence affects me like a lovely woman in the same condition. When Sainte-Beuve said that Montaigne sounded like one long epigram, it was high praise. Thomas Mann's great son Golo is my favourite modern historian because he sounds so like Tacitus, packing a loosely troubled world into a tense neatness. Envious in my youth of what seemed easy, in later years I find nothing more thrilling than the formulation so loaded with meaning that it burns the mind. Only last year, catching Raymond Aron's enthusiasm for Montesquieu, I devoured the *Lois* as if it were *The Lady in the Lake*. My memory is not especially good and as a linguist I am doomed to remain a mere dabbler, but by now I am so drenched in that type of writing that I can quote it off the cuff more easily than I can spit. If only I had had such a facility to draw upon when I sat those examinations! My ignorance of the British moralists might not have been so glaring if I could have imported a few names from the continent. Hobbes, Hume, Locke: how to sum them up, when they had needed such large volumes to sum themselves? I sucked my pen. On the other side of the room, Consuela Schleppekis wrote like a woman possessed. She called for more paper as if she wanted to start her own magazine. I doodled. The clock ticked like a bomb.

On the Italian paper, on the other hand, I lavished a fatal fluency. If Montesquieu had been in my mind to aid me, I might have said something sensible about Machiavelli. I could read *The Prince* in the original, but I had nothing original to say about it, because I had found Garrett Mattingly's theory – that the book was a satirical parody – too attractive not to adopt. An acquaintance with the other masterpiece, *The Discourses on Livy*, would have told me that Machiavelli, far from doing a roguish cabaret number, was founding a tradition of political realism for the modern age. Only in my prose translation of Dante did I really know what I was doing. Françoise had taken me line by line through every dramatic passage in *The Divine Comedy*, so when one of those passages came up it was a cinch. To that extent my satisfaction with the paper was justified, but I should have realised that I would be lucky to get half marks for the whole thing. Allowing myself a measure of elation, however, was the only alternative to despair. I pretended, in the Whim and on the river bank, that I had everything under control. On the day before the last paper, the essay, I lounged at apparent ease under a cloudless sky whose chalky light blue matched

the sun dials of Caius. The cows and sheep masticated bucolically behind me. King's College chapel waited for its choir, which duly crossed the stone bridge to my right, the top hats of the smallest boys barely clearing the parapet as they all marched *en croc* for a date with Bach, Was Cambridge getting to me? I had a strange feeling of not wanting to leave – doubly strange because I had approached the examination like someone setting out to be expelled. The prospects of being asked to stay on to do research were dim. I rolled impressively into the water, sank like a hippo under a passing punt full of girls, and damned near killed myself ramming my head against a bicycle stuck in the muddy bottom. It must have been one of the pedals that gashed my scalp. There wasn't much pain but there was quite a lot of blood. It was cowardly not to get it stitched.

Marenko, who knew about first aid, stuck a field dressing on my wound, so it was with my head in a sling that I faced the essay paper next day. I should not have been so surprised to find that I could do it. Who couldn't? The choice of set topics was so wide that even an examinee who had been compelled to silence by all the other papers would have been able to find something to say this time. The only way of stuffing it up completely would have been to get in a dither about which topic to choose. Luckily one of my pet subjects was right there on the paper. I had read Hannah Arendt's book *Eichmann in Jerusalem* when it had been serialised in the *New Yorker*; I had followed both sides of the subsequent controversy; and I had reached my own conclusions on the validity of the catchphrase 'the banality of evil'. One of the set topics was exactly that: *The banality of evil* My pen fizzed for the full three hours. The invigilators brought me some more paper like coal-heavers feeding a ship's furnace. My pen overheated. On the only occasion when I paused to look around, Brian C. Adams was staring at me as if I was his nemesis. My own fond opinion of what I had written was that I could have published it as a piece in a weekly. More importantly, I got the thing finished before the bell rang. Unfortunately this fact only served to remind me that on scarcely any of the other papers had I actually managed to answer the prescribed number of questions within the allotted time. Elation induced depression. If only I had been prepared for the whole examination, instead of for just one paper!

Outright failure had probably been warded off, but a low 2:2. was the most I could expect and a third was on the cards. As I left the hall, my gown felt like a shroud. Suddenly I didn't want to give all this up.

All this included May Week in its full splendour. Examinations out of the way, the lawn parties flowered. The June sun shone on them as if intent to prove that once in a way it could co-operate. As a minor luminary in the areas of

theatre, literature and related arts, I had a fair sheaf of invitation cards - their timings mutually arranged by the hosts so as not to clash – but anyone with half a brain could figure out where the next party was and just walk in uninvited. The basic layout was the trestle table set up on a college lawn. In the men's colleges, mostly the table was bedecked with nothing more grand than a bowl of fruit punch, the bowl borrowed from the college kitchen and the punch concocted according to loudly touted formulae promising instant oblivion to all who drank. Though for some imbibers this proved to be the case, if you kept your head you could move from one party to another and never reach the point at any of them when the ladle scraped the bottom of the bowl and came up with nothing in it except apple skins and orange pips.

If the girls were throwing the party, there was often something to eat and usually something better than punch to drink. I went to a white wine effort in Newnham which not even the presence of Consuela could ruin. She had such a triumph in *As You Like It* that she even forgot to cut me. I watched the production in Clare Gardens and had to admit that as well as looking maddeningly pretty she was actually pretty good. As a rule undergraduates don't act as well as actors and she was no exception: but quite often they speak better, through being less inclined to make the lines their own instead of the author's. Shakespeare, especially, rewards good speakers who are indifferent actors, whereas bravura actors who speak badly can only do him an injury. Consuela spoke surprisingly well for someone so histrionic. She took a long time to come on. There was an ornamental pool in the middle of the Clare Gardens acting area. Consuela held her head so proudly high that I thought she might walk into the water, but the lines fell like pearls.

Ros. But why did he swear he would come this morning, and comes not?

I could feel the eyes of a hundred of her friends on the back of my neck. No doubt I was being self-conscious. Why not? Everybody else was. It was the right place and the right time. Around the pool, among the flower-beds and between the hedges, the young, would-be, not-for-long actors deployed their hired costumes as they had been taught by some preposterously solemn young director who wanted to be Peter Hall or Trevor Nunn. In their element, the theatrical dons at the back of the natural auditorium threw decrepit fond looks at Orlando. They thought him charming. In that weather I thought them charming. They had their place in this enchanted forest. Absurdly I was sorry that I must soon lose mine.

Buddy threw a party in his back garden. Among the guests were what he described as one or two people from London. The champagne was endless.

Under its influence I was able to predict that the young man with the huge mouth would never make it as a popular singer. Susannah York was there. She was so beautiful that I burst into tears. Luckily I was lying down by then, so nobody noticed. Karula dipped a napkin in the iced water of a champagne bucket and spread it over my face. I could see the sun through it. That should have been the most lavish May Week party. It was topped for opulence by Delmer Dynamo, who took over the whole back lawn of Pembroke and slew the fatted calf. Befitting his position as President and sole member of the Aubrey Attwater Society, Delmer had outfitted himself for the occasion in cream ducks, cricket boots, candy-striped blazer, straw boater and a monocle. The ensemble would have been suitable for receiving the Prince of Wales on board the deck of a steam yacht, somewhere around the turn of the century. Delmer could keep his monocle in place only by tilting his head so far back that he was shouting upwards, as if at a passing Zeppelin. Marenko, Strad and some other Americans wore rented white tuxedos with carnation boutonnieres. As a barbershop quartet they stood in the rock garden and sang 'The Whiffenpoof Song'. The Master and all the college dons were there. The Dean, somehow managing to keep his champagne glass empty without removing the pipe from his mouth, gazed upon Delmer with transparent fondness. Obviously the college would be sad to see him go. Equally obviously the college did not feel quite the same in my case. Finding myself trapped with the Dean, I was further unsettled to detect in his eyes a look which suggested that he considered himself trapped with me. He sought refuge in the past. 'Brilliant boy, Oppenheimer. Jew, of course, but a real gentleman. Rutherford didn't want to let him into the Cavendish, you know. Said he was too weak on the experimental side. But Thomson believed in him. Young Oppenheimer was really, *really* interested in my minerals. You should have heard him talk about birefringence. Brilliant, brilliant boy. You don't get many like that now. There's Dynamo, of course, but on the whole they're a poor lot now.' The Dean was making it plain that my very existence was an insult to his dream. His whole speech, the longest I had ever heard him give, was an exhalation: one long sigh.

I sighed myself when Delmer shyly confessed that his college had offered him an extra year just so that he could read in preparation for his graduate course at Columbia. 'Hot shit, man,' he crowed. 'They coughed up.' His monocle gleamed in the sunlight. He had done quite a lot of work and deserved his good fortune. I would have found it easier to be warm with fellow-feeling if it were not for the chill wind which I could feel blowing even in the fragrant, stationary air. Where else in the world would I ever fit in except here, where I had never felt the least urge to fit in? And truly I had no social ambitions in Cambridge beyond the

tattered pink velvet jacket of the Footlights presidency. The Footlights committee had decided that if I could stay on for a year the jacket was mine for the asking, but the only way for me to remain a member of the university would be to enrol as a PhD student. For that I didn't have the finance, and without at least a 2:1 result in the Tripos I wouldn't be accepted for registration even if I had the money. So it was all over. In the grad pad, Brian C. Adams commiserated with me. 'You hit the books at least a year too late,' he said sympathetically. 'Still, all that Footlights nonsense should come in handy if you apply for the BBC. Let me buy you another glass of sherry. The Amontillado's really rather surprisingly fine.' Brian C Adams was taking it for granted that he would get a first. So was everyone else taking it for granted that Brian C. Adams would get a first. There was a rumour that the College was considering taking him straight into Fellowship, so that he could sit up there eating venison where he belonged. Belonging must be a good feeling. Usually it was a feeling I got in or near Footlights, but the May Week revue, when I went to see it on the first nighty only made me feel left out. Romaine was in it. She did the 'Land of Hope and Glory' routine with predictable results. There were people rolling about in the aisles like eels. Andy Mayer did his holy roller commercial. 'Write away *right* away ...' I tried to be elated when my own material went well. It didn't always and it mocked my physical absence even when it did. As far as I was concerned – which on this evidence wasn't far – Footlights was unfinished business. In the Whim I sat anonymously, writing the kind of valedictory ode which treats personal disappointment as if it were the heat death of the universe.

Packed and all set to go, I turned up at Senate House to read the examination results with an air of fatalism which would have done credit to Sydney Carton, the only Dickens character I had managed to mention in the novel paper. (I had read the Classics Illustrated comic of *A Tale of Two Cities* when still a pupil of Kogarah Infants' School.) When I saw that I had got a 2:1 I thought it was a misprint. When Brian C. Adams saw that *he* had got a 2:1 he thought the same. Eventually his fellow members of the Gray Society calmed him down by pointing out the truth: that he was simply too good for the Tripos and should have been doing a PhD all along, like Romaine Rand. For the first few days after he came out of shock, however, nothing except Nembutal would keep Brian C. Adams from throwing himself from his casement window into the courtyard. Exactly balancing his despair was my euphoria. I couldn't see how I had done it, until Ron Maybey the Baby Don, breaking all the rules, told me. 'Never *seen* such a spread of marks,' he said, with evident disapproval. 'Very, good score on the essay paper. Nothing at *all* on the Swift paper. Should be impossible. Ought to get something for writing your name. Think that worked for you in the end.

They decided that you'd gone mad that day. No excuse at all for the novel paper. One of the examiners wanted to have you sent down for it. You be staying on?' He was the only don, whether infant or adult, who had ever been sincerely interested in what I was writing, so I told him that I hoped to snare a research grant and be President of the Footlights simultaneously. 'Don't see why not,' he said. 'But I shouldn't actually *tell* them that when you apply. Stress the academic side. Sherry?'

Suddenly it was all at least possible. I applied for a research grant on the basis of a burning desire to evaluate Shelley's reading of the major Italian poets. The university wouldn't actually decide whether or not it was going to finance this scheme until September. Meanwhile I told the retiring Footlights committee, who were about to leave on tour with the revue, that my research grant was in the bag. They handed over the pink jacket, which I stored with the rest of my stuff in the Pembroke linen room. My conscience was reasonably clear, as far as I could tell without actually examining it. If I didn't get the grant, I could always give the jacket back. In the interim it seemed appropriate to go where Shelley had gone, at least up to the point where he drowned himself. Françoise was in Florence. To get there would be expensive. Luckily Robin was still in London. After hitting her for a small loan, I booked myself on the student charter flight which I have already described in my book *Flying Visits*. The reader will permit me the indulgence of making cross-references to my own work when I confess that the journey was never one I have been keen to repeat even in written form. I was exaggerating only when I said the plane swerved to avoid the Matterhorn. It didn't swerve except when it was taking off. Most of the students really *were* seventy-year-old Calabrian peasant women wearing black clothes and carrying string bags full of onions, and I really *did* have a nun sitting beside me who clutched my sweating palm as we came crabbing in to land. It was the way cheap flying was in those days. Today, the nightmare is in the crowded airport. When you get airborne you're relatively OK. Then, the flight was in the lap of the gods. One of David Hockney's early paintings had such a strong appeal for me that I kept a reproduction of it pinned to my wall wherever I moved. I liked its bright colours and cunningly innocent outlines, but most of all I liked its title: 'The Flight into Italy'. Knowing that there was a chance I might have something to come back to made the letting-go all the sweeter, of course. If you can manage it, safe danger is always the best kind.

10. ATTACK OF THE KILLER BEE

Once again, Florence was my principal destination, but this time I had to go to Venice first, a detour I begrudged. Françoise was there on a fortnight's study leave, to read manuscripts in the Marciana Library in the Piazza San Marco. Proust said that after he got to Venice his dreams acquired an address. For me the impact was, as you might imagine, nothing like so subtle. Never fond of the *Vedutisti* painters – Guardi, I thought, used too much lipstick and Canaletto was patently unreal – I was expecting a picture postcard. I knew all the jokes about Venice, of which the best was Robert Benchley's telegram home: STREETS FULL OF WATER PLEASE ADVICE. The exquisite, I had persuaded myself, held no appeal. Give me the chiselled jaw and marble biceps of Florence every time. Thus prepared to be indifferent, I was in an ideal condition to be floored. Before the *vaporetto* was half-way down the Grand Canal I was already concussed. Heat focused by a nacreous sky like the lining of a silver tureen dissolved the surface of the water into a storm of sparks, which were projected as wobbling bracelets of pure light on the otherwise maculate façades of crumbling plaster and rotting marble. The whole place was being eaten alive by liquid luminosity. It was a vision of eternity as soluble as a rusk, God's love made manifest as a wafer in the world's wet mouth. Françoise had rented a little room just behind the Piazza San Marco. I set up house on her floor. While she read in the library I made a library desk for myself on a café table at the city end of the Rialto, just to the left of where the steps of the approach to the bridge formed a natural rostrum from which the characters of *The Merchant of Venice* might step down into the main acting area. The tourist season being at its height, most of the people who came stepping down were Americans. Isn't it weird?' a woman in a baseball cap asked another woman in a baseball cap. 'When they say *Accademia* I can understand *them* but when I say *ACADEMY* *they* can't understand *me* at *all*.' The baseball caps were appropriate because both women were the shape of a baseball. Nothing could break the spell. There I sat reading, periodically lifting my head to confirm all over again that Canaletto had been so literal he might as well have

used a Hasseiblad. Trying out for the Regatta, the *Bucintoro* swept by with whomping oars, a ceremonial dream boat dripping gold. Every gondolier sang like Gigli. From Françoise I borrowed a volume of Leopardi's *Zibaldone*, the elaborate notebooks in which the great, crippled poet kept track of his vast learning. Religiously looking up every unknown word in a dictionary, I eventually broke through the almost tangible barrier that separates being only just able to read from being able to read with reasonable ease. I started to keep a notebook myself. Dignified with the name of Journal, it would run to a dozen volumes in the next nine years. 'Volumes' is a grand word for tatty exercise books. They must be somewhere amongst my junk. One day I must look into them and see what I thought important. Puerilities, I imagine. But the *soi-disant* journal doubled as a commonplace book, and to that extent it was useful. The habit of copying out was a good one to acquire. Though the main idea was to build up fluency in reading a foreign language, the beneficial side-effect was to fix a lot of good stuff in my head, if only at the level of the half-forgotten. The waiters soon learned to approach me only when I signalled. For a while I thought they were smiling tolerantly because as sons of the Most Serene City they were pleased to see a visitor inspired by intellectual effort. Later I learned that they were being even more tolerant than that. Like all the personnel of the service industries in Venice, they lived in the industrial satellite towns, commuted to work, and would have preferred to bring me a fresh glass of iced coffee every thirty seconds. They needed the tips.

When Françoise got out of the library we would have lunch in a cheap restaurant called the Trattoria al Vagon. You could get there by walking from either St Mark's or the Rialto. The path was a maze in either case, crossing little bridges from island to island, and never turning a perfectly square corner within the island itself. We always had to allow half an hour for getting lost. Years later I tried to find the Al Vagon and couldn't. Perhaps it was never there. It was so good and cheap that it might have been a dream. The pasta was always *al dente*, an expression which could be pressed into service as the name of a ferocious gangster. Lui Medesimo ('he himself) was Al Dente's conceited sidekick. Françoise generously laughed at these heavy jokes while I drank her share of the claret to top up mine. Even for her, who preferred to stay sober, there was always the sense that we were living out a carnival scene by Longhi – another painter whom I had previously despised, and of whom I was now starting to see the point.

Yet again, though, it was the Renaissance that carried the heavy charge. Hungry as always for the main event, I was disinclined to be sidetracked by the quirky, the decorative or the merely pretty. Two minutes' walk from the Al

Vagon, Verrocchio's equestrian statue of Bartolomeo Colleoni rode sternly through the Piazza San Giovanni e Paolo. There were pigeons on his helmet and a barge full of empty coke bottles in the canal at his feet, but his *grandezza* was only increased. To every Australian schoolboy of my generation, Bartolomeo Colleoni was the Italian cruiser sunk by H.M.A.S. *Sydney*. The *Sydney's* bows were subsequently built into the stone harbour wall near Kirribilli pier under the north end of the Harbour Bridge. But in Venice I could see the real Bartolomeo, the *condottiere* four centuries into his immortal ride, his image more immediate than the man himself, or any man alive, even me. The contained energy of that bronze horseman kept me occupied for what seemed like hours. Probably, it was less than that, but certainly I stared longer than Byron did, who in one of his plays – either *Marino Faliero* or *The Two Foscari*, I forget which – let slip the opinion that the grim rider was made of marble. It is very doubtful if Byron ever went out of doors in Venice. Recovering in his room between visits from insatiable noblewomen, he would totter asymmetrically to the window, check that the Grand Canal was still there, and turn back wearily to the rumpled couch. Poor bastard.

Françoise believed in her mission to civilise me. When the white heat of the early afternoon sky had eased to a tolerable azure, we would tour the outlying churches by *vaporetto*, on the hunt for Bellini. Most of his capital works were in the Accademia or else in churches close to the centre, but there were others further out, and anyway even his minor canvases were major. Until then, I had been under the impression that all Bellini had ever painted was Madonnas in blue anoraks nursing babies the size of high school children in front of a green shantung antimacassar, with distant landscape an optional extra. Now I saw the range of his humanity, his old men and infantile angels all shaped from pure colour, the painterly monumentality organically complete. In my journal I solemnly noted every painting, enrolling Bellini on my growing list of indispensable seminal figures. His namesake the composer was already on the list. So was Liszt. The honour roll was meant to be growing shorter, but no matter how ruthlessly I pared it down, there was always another genius around the corner demanding to be let in. My appreciation of Tintoretto was not much enhanced by being in his home city, which because of its wet walls has never been kind to the fresco, tempting the business-minded painter towards too-big canvases it took a football team of assistants to help him fill. Most of Tintoretto's best paintings were done on a smaller scale and eventually exported: I had already learned to admire him elsewhere. Titian's last manner, however, was well represented in the Venetian churches. 'Like Shakespeare's sonnets and Beethoven's late quartets,' I remember telling my journal, 'Titian's valedictory

paintings have a divine carelessness.’ Veronese, I decided, was in Paris and London: to all intents and purposes he had left town. Lacking the means to get out into the surrounding Veneto, we saw little of Tiepolo. I decided to like him anyway: Giambattista, that is, not Giandomenico. I was very strict in my judgments. Françoise, who had heard my unshakeable convictions revised before, patiently upheld the reasonable viewpoint – a propensity which, modest to a fault, she considered her limitation. She also, I need hardly add, paid for the museum tickets, the *vaporetto* rides, most of the meals, and the bus trip to Padua.

Padua was dominated by Donatello’s equestrian statue of Gattamelata, a work which I instantly declared inferior to Verrocchio’s Bartolomeo Colleoni. This judgment I have since found no good cause to revise, although nowadays I would be less likely to share it with a trattoria full of German tourists. Giotto I had, until then, respected only because Dante thought well of him. Though the big Madonna in the Uffizi was obviously the start of something, I had been able to get interested in the trecento only as a prelude to the quattrocento, which, in its turn – I was suffering from a developmental view of the arts – was clearly only the muted overture to the cinquecento. Françoise had argued wearily against this dogma until it became plain to her that mere reason was powerless. Only evidence would convince me. This was the evidence. In the Arena chapel I stood stunned as the drama unfolded all around me. Drama was exactly what it was, of course: what Giotto had rediscovered, after its thousand years without a voice, was the intensity between human beings. Oscar Wilde had once stood in the same chapel. He, too, had been impressed. You could tell how overwhelmed he was. He was the only English-speaking person to have visited the chapel in the last two hundred years who had not signed his name on the wall. All around the circumference of the chapel, the frescoes were thoroughly mutilated up to the height of an upstretched hand. These graffiti depressed me much more than the missing Mantegnas. Falling out of an erratically flown B-25, practically the only bomb to have hit the historic centre of Padua had gone straight through the roof of the Ovetari Chapel and atomised Mantegna’s biggest-ever fresco cycle. But that was just a misfortune of war, a bad spin of the wheel. Vandalism was an endemic human failing. Italy had too many paintings to look after and too little public money with which to hire people to look after them. I didn’t mind so much when pictures got stolen: usually they were ransomed back the following week, with tax advantages to both sides. When paintings got razored I became agitated. The German and Dutch galleries had installed alarm systems whereby no masterpiece could be approached without the offender being instantly gagged, bound and arrested. In the Italian galleries even the guides regularly fingered the paint surface. You would see some idiot bodging his finger into a

Botticelli. A reformed vandal with a bad conscience, I began to get very touchy about seeing paintings touched, or even breathed on.

Arriving in Florence just in time for the kind of weather that encouraged the inhabitants to leave, we took a room at the Antica Cervia. The Santa Croce *quartiere* behind the Palazzo Vecchio was the old stamping ground of the *popolo minuto*, in the sense that this was where the little people had been stamped into the ground by a commune which, however egalitarian, had never quite succeeded in distributing its power down as far as the penniless. Still radical enough at that stage to be rather thrilled by my discovery of Gramsci's prison letters, I fancied myself as fitting right in when we dined at the Trattoria Anita with the prostitutes and pimps. In Italy it was a point of style to be a bit red. *Sinistra* was such a thrilling way of saying left wing. *Lotta continua!* The struggle continues! Though theoretically clean shaven at the time, I grew a two-day stubble and tried to look dangerous as I leaned forward over the *spaghetti al sugo*, my intense eye-contact with Françoise perhaps having been unduly influenced by the steely look Giotto had given St Francis. I made it clear to her that the clientele of the trattoria were essentially *my* people: vagabonds, snappers-up of unconsidered trifles, the wretched of the earth. In point of fact most of them scarcely even rated as petty crooks. The boys with the gold chains around their necks who scratched their crotches all the time thought they had done a hard day's work when they succeeded in selling each other a carton of two hundred contraband Marlboros. Otherwise they spent a good deal of time wistfully annoying foreign girls in the hope of forming a profitable liaison, but their hearts and minds weren't in it. The true *pappagalli* would put energy and invention into being pests. This bunch preferred not to work up a sweat. On principle, in the first few days, they eyed Françoise suggestively, challenging her to restrain what they obviously hoped might be an irresistible impulse to cast reason and her clothes aside. After having absorbed the accumulated evidence that she was unlikely to jump into their laps, they relaxed again into their customary torpor. The energy of those brave young men was all for show and their women didn't even bother to show it. To classify them as hookers paid them a compliment. It was a courtesy title. They were too lazy to lean against a wall successfully. Most of the time, when they weren't eating, they sat in the back of a bar complaining in concert about the ladders in their fishnet stockings. A potential customer needed radar to find them.

The only real proletarians present were Anita and her family, who worked their guts out from daylight to midnight, on a profit margin so slim that if a tomato went rotten it was a disaster. Anita could think of nothing more exciting in life than the possibility – a very slim one, given the inefficiency of Italy's

educational system – that her clever young daughter might go to university and learn to speak well like Françoise. The daughter, universally called *La Tempesta*, was almost old enough to wait on table. Neither Anita nor her equally hardworking husband wanted the apple of their eye to spend her whole life doing what they had done and their two sons were already doing. These were the kind of proletarians whose only dream was to become part of the bourgeoisie. Gramsci started sounding less convincing. I was still reading him, but not in the restaurant.

Now that I no longer had to, I read all day. Françoise was studying manuscripts in the Laurenziana, in a magnificent reading room at the head of a staircase by Michelangelo. Scorning the gloom of the libraries, I made my base at a bar in the Piazza della Signoria, just in front of a house designed by Raphael. Alas, he had designed it without an awning. As the daily heat increased from merely intense to overwhelming, I changed base to a better-shaded bar near the Badia, whose graceful tower was my personal landmark. The heat was still too much so I transferred to the Biblioteca Nazionale, having decided that the gloom of libraries might be all right after all. In fact there was plenty of light inside, along with the tolerably cool air. With the Arno only fifty feet away, I could sit at a desk for hours on end, reading my way through the collected works of Benedetto Croce, who wrote so much that he made Ruskin look as parsimonious as E. M. Forster. This autobiography is not meant to be a precise intellectual history, which I doubt if anyone can write about himself without fudging the facts. Ideas, even if they come from books, are modified by experience in ways too indirect to be assessed at the time or recalled accurately afterwards. I can state confidently, however, that those weeks in the library in Florence were crucial to my mental development, to the extent that such a thing has ever taken place at all. Croce, in particular, played a vital role in making me feel better about being mentally *undeveloped*. Formally laid out in his capital theoretical volumes on aesthetics and poetry, and richly applied in countless ancillary volumes of criticism and cultural history, his central concept of the naïve artistic impulse had a strong appeal, perhaps because I was, as I still am, unusually naive myself. For Croce, the individual creative talent was irreducible. A peasant who could crack a good joke might have it, whereas an educated man who gave his life to poetry might not. The high arts and the low arts were united to the extent that they were inspired. Within the unity conferred by inspiration, all categories were illusory. This was good news for a reader whose devotion to the high arts was continually being sabotaged by the attraction of the low ones. But Croce offered no easy consolation. His position was not an indulgence. It was the outcome of a lifelong, untiringly rigorous process of examining his own

omnivorous enthusiasm with a cool detachment. The vehicle of his thought was the proof of his grandeur: his prose, so transparent as to be beyond style, flowed like a river without ever being carried away by itself – or so it seemed. His effect on me, as I progressed from reading with a dictionary to context-reading to reading with ease, was like learning to swim. As I read his pages by the hundred and then the thousand, I tried to remind myself that any great stylist sounds like an oracle until a big enough historic fact contradicts him. After all, I had been equally impressed by George Bernard Shaw until I realised just how wrong he had been about Hitler and Stalin. But Croce's anti-totalitarian credentials were impeccable. Also he was writing in a foreign language. Undoubtedly there was a self-congratulatory element in my thrilled response. Part of the thrill lay in being able to read at all. Careful not to make Leopardi's mistake – he read so much that when he tried to straighten up one day he found he couldn't – I would get up from the desk once an hour, go outside, sit on the river wall and look downstream towards the Ponte Vecchio. Drained by the heat trapped in its etched upper valley, the river was little more than a collection of shallow pools. In the late afternoon sun they lit up white. Fishermen standing in them were silhouettes expounding theorems by Pythagoras. It occurred to me, not as forcefully as it might have, that Florence was my real university, from which Cambridge was the vacation. I was out of phase with my own life. Never would I be able to relax, except when effort was called for, whereupon I would go to sleep. Did this mean that on the day I died I would wake up? *Speriamo*. Here's hoping.

Françoise was there to temper my fanaticism. In theory, a bom teacher likes nothing better than a keen student, but there are limits. When we toured the country villas of the Medici, a bronze nymph or satyr disporting on the edge of a fountain would inspire me to give a lecture on the virtues of Giambologna until I found out that it was by Pierino da Vinci. Unabashed, I would give another lecture on Pierino's limitations. Françoise was a very good photographer. That year she posed me against all the fountains of the city and environs, securing a set of pictures remarkable for their composition and for the fact that my mouth was closed. My spoken Italian was not yet good enough for me to join in easily when she was with her friends, so she had to suffer the full spate of my eloquence in English when we were alone. We weren't alone all that often. Her student contemporaries were as gregarious and welcoming as ever, with an extra sense of group identity engendered by the worsening conditions in the universities. Everyone you knew was a red that year. Even Gabriella went to the Communist Party open air festival in the gardens at the Cascine. The dazzling Adriana had changed her thesis topic from Cesare Pavese to Rosa Luxemburg.

Older and wiser heads – they had begun to call themselves that more stridently, now that the young were calling them reactionaries – insisted that the growing hubbub was just another case of *fantapolitica*: fantasy politics. To a certain extent that was true, but underneath the posturing there were real grievances. The universities were corrupt. Most of the faculty were behaving like absentee landlords. Even the best students could see no career prospects. *La Sinistra* had become a vocation in itself. It had its own language, its own literature, its own cinema. At its best, the Italian left-wing cinema was capable of an analytical *tour de force* like *The Battle of Algiers*, which I saw three times in a row, resolved to emulate its hard-bitten detachment. But Gillo Pontecorvo was a sophisticate who could read history as a tragedy. The young revolutionaries could read it only as a comic book. Most of them believed that the United States had caused the Second World War. All of them believed that the United States had sabotaged the Italian popular revolution after the war was over. The alleged prosperity of modern Italy was a sham. The elected government was Fascism in thin disguise. It was all the fault of the Americans. The question was simple. Why was the government powerless? The answer was simpler. Because capitalism was powerful. Students gathered around the café tables to examine the implications of this obvious fact. Young men dressed in the Italian bourgeois version of the English aristocratic manner discussed how the wealth of their fathers might be redistributed. Taking drinks in the gardens of her villa under an evening sky strangely rimmed with green radiance behind a picket fence of silhouetted cypresses, Gabriella and her coruscating friends were a cut above all this but they had the same frustrations and the same passions. Adriana being politically passionate was a sight to behold. She was an aria without an orchestra. *Ma donnEEena, figOOrati!* she would wail, the ash from her cigarette powdering the evening air. Watching, I moved my lips silently to match hers, the rhythm of her lilting voice. How could it be translated? But little *lady*. Figure it out. The second, stressed syllable of *figurati* was hooted, as in the word ‘hoof’. What mad music! I called for madder music, and for stronger wine. Both were immediately forthcoming, especially the wine. Thoroughly committed by now to the study of my second language, I was already realising the benefit I would reap even if I got nowhere: my first language would stand revealed for what it was, a mechanism so complex that it lived. The revelation was intoxicating. I had to sit down suddenly, right there on the parched grass. The Italians, products of a culture in which drunkenness was almost unknown, politely pretended that they thought I might be ill.

During a brief pause in the political discussion we would all go to the movies at the Summer Firefly. A short walk along the dry bed of the Arno near the city

end of the Bridge to the Graces, the Summer Firefly charged you almost nothing to get in but broke even by screening old movies at very low standards of projection. At ten o'clock on an August night the heat was killing, but it beat being inside. Indeed the Summer Firefly beat anything. It was the best cinema I was ever in. At first glance an al fresco flea-pit, in its capacity to generate a careless rapture it exceeded even the Rockdale Odeon, the Hampstead Everyman, or that little place in the Rue St Severin where they used to screen old Humphrey Bogart movies in *version originale*, back to back, for ever. One of my all-time favourite Westerns, *3.10 to Yuma*, was the Summer Firefly's staple item. Under the title *Quel treno per Yuma* it cropped up every second week, running about fifteen minutes less than its proper length because the print was full of splices. Glenn Ford and Felicia Farr would suddenly switch positions on screen like electrons changing levels. The fact that I already knew all the dialogue by heart in English, however, made the story easier to follow in Italian. We all sat there happily shouting advice to Van Heflin while the other stars, the astronomical ones, sharpened overhead in the deepening purple. At the climactic point where Glenn Ford leans out of the hotel window so that Richard Jaeckel can see him and ride off to tell the rest of the gang, the image on the screen, which had already been flickering weirdly, settled down to show the bottom half of one frame and the top half of another. Glenn Ford's chin and collar were on top of his hat. Electing myself spokesman, I went back to advise the projectionist, who was facing away from the screen while entertaining three friends. They all had glasses of wine in their hands and seemed quite happy to be told that a disaster was taking place. '*Disastro nella proiezione!*' I assured them. '*Glenn Ford si è convertito in una pittura cubista!*' Grammatically questionable, but it worked the trick.

The Summer Firefly's seats were rusty metal folding contraptions that could easily capsize in the gravel if you laughed too hard. The walls of the roofless auditorium were composed of plaited brushwood, intermittently penetrated by children, whose faces appeared like cherubic visitations, abruptly withdrawn when swept by the beam of the usherette's weak torch. Half drunk but fully happy, in the Summer Firefly I hung suspended within reach of the perfect life. It was an illusion, of course: it always is. It can only happen when you have no responsibilities, which is itself an illusion.

On the coast at Viareggio and Forte dei Marmi we swam until August became a slightly more bearable September. Considering the waves to be beneath the contempt of an Australian surfing hero, I sat on the unsatisfactory sand reading the poetry of Eugenio Montale. It was a good location in which to become acquainted with *Ossi di Seppia* – cuttlefish bones. Montale's poetry was difficult

for the right reasons. It was reticent, unrhetorical, compressed, permanent. Memorising it line by line, I was put in my place by the increasing weight of what I had absorbed. 'To vanish,' I mistranslated, 'Is thus the adventure of the adventures.' During this same educational interlude a Sarah Lawrence graduate student called Lisa joined us, as if to remind our bold young radicals of just how powerful a force American cultural imperialism actually was. She looked like Angie Dickinson, spoke Italian almost as well as Françoise, and was writing a thesis on Castiglione. She drove an Alfa Romeo Giulietta Spider hired with the first example any of us had ever seen of an American Express card. When she appeared on the beach in a black bikini, the boys put off the revolution until the next day. Watching Lisa and Françoise standing waist deep in the flat Tyrrhenian was one of my lasting visions of that impeccable summer. Everything went right. Even the life-transforming message was carried in on cue. Back in Florence at the Antica Cervia, there was a knock on the open door. The proprietress stood there in the compact heat of the gloomy corridor. She was illuminated like a figure of destiny by one of those twelve-watt bulbs of which every Italian landlady has an endless supply, so as to be able to replace them when they burn out once every hundred years. She held a letter forwarded by my college. It informed me that I had been registered for a PhD and that a study grant would consequently be forthcoming.

This news, it was agreed, was too good to deal with on my own. The first instalment of the grant was too far off to borrow on the strength of it. I was hugely in debt to Françoise, whose own finances would have been strained enough without me. Dalziel had offered me three weeks' work on *Expresso Drongo*, which he assured me was making good progress. I would have to go back to London. The Italians would not let me go without a party. More precisely, it would be a dinner: a kind of Last Supper. My perpetual beatific smile must have convinced them all that I was touched by grace. The dinner would be at a special restaurant serving nothing but game. The game was one of the secondary results of the Italian hunting season, whose principal product, as usual, had been an impressive pile of wounded hunters and extinct passers-by. When the bell rang to start the Italian hunting season, devotees of *la caccia* drove at full speed into the woods and shot everything that moved. Since the animals were sensibly lying low, most of the victims were people. Advancing at random through the woods, the hunters – whose minds, like their expensive guns, were on a hair trigger – fired when they thought they saw something. Often they had seen each other. They also killed civilians in nearby villages. The occasional wild animal got hit, but only by a fluke. One man blasted a rabbit that was already hanging from another man's belt. So much frantic vehicular traffic

on the woodland roads, however, ensured that a considerable amount of wildlife was run over. The leading all-game restaurant in Florence, I was assured, would be plentifully supplied with pheasants, wild geese, stags, bucks, oryx, ibex and its *pièce de résistance*, wild boar. I was promised the most tearful send-off since Dante went into exile.

With Françoise safely despatched to the library, I spent my last afternoon in Florence luxuriating in sorrow on a stone bench just in front of Santa Maria Novella. I had been inside to commune with one of my heroes, Paolo Uccello, whose frescoes in the Green Cloister had recently been uncovered after about a decade *in restauro*. For once in my life, I told myself, I could take credit for experiencing an emotion appropriate to the circumstances, I knew that I would come back to the city, but that I would never be so happy here again as I had been in this short time. Open in my lap was the *Inferno*, at the great passage where Farinata talks about his banishment. His dignity, I persuaded myself, was mine. I felt that I, too, was a knight in a suit of armour.

Would that it had been true, because at that moment a bee stung me. The bee must have been lurking between my bare forearm – the sleeves of my shirt were rolled up – and my waist. When I shifted my arm slightly, the bee was trapped, and reacted the way bees do. I felt as if a length of stiff copper wire had been shoved into my arm and momentarily fed with the total electric power of an underground railway system. The stab of pain was so disproportionate that I didn't complain until it was over, so instead of emitting an abstract scream I cried 'Jesus Christ!' at a volume that stopped the traffic. It turned out that almost nobody in the square was Italian. A whole busload of English Carmelite nuns stared at me as if I were a blasphemer. They had a point. It was a long way to come to hear the Lord's name taken in vain at ear-splitting volume on the front steps of His own house. A representative of the British Council crossed the square to wonder if I might consider moderating my tone. Only the Americans noticed nothing untoward. They probably thought my outcry had been part of some religious ceremony. The pain was already gone, leaving nothing more than an American man in a baseball cap saying to another man in a baseball cap: 'You mean we gotta spend another three hours in *this* place?' I forgave them, having surmised – correctly, as it turned out – that America was merely first in achieving a level of average income so high that even the mentally underprivileged were able to travel, and that shortly all the other industrialised countries would start exporting idiots too. My senses had never been so sharp. I was clairvoyant. When I met Françoise for drinks at the café near the Badia, I was giggling. When we all arrived at the game restaurant I was already hilarious. The whole bunch was there. The joint was jammed but we had a long table to

ourselves. Wild boar with wheel-marks across their backs were hanging from the rafters. I thought it was too funny for words. For the first hour I was the life and soul of the party, in my opinion. My conjectures as to which bits of the wild boar were concealed by the thick gravy were widely received as brilliantly original after Françoise had translated them. Then I got sick. Bee venom and wild boar had done something to each other that a gallon of chianti couldn't fix. In the toilet I was sad to discover that there was no throne I could kneel beside so as to be sick into it. Instead, there were those glorified holes in the ground. Those porcelain efforts that look like plaster casts of the footprints of square elephants, Flush with the ground and they flush all over your feet. Very, very hard to be sick into accurately. Very HAH! That wasn't so bad. Not accurate, though. Not ACK! ACK! I was there a long time. Beppe and Sergio, two of my closest friends in my whole life, arrived to find out how I was. I was OK, but where were the others? They were all my closest friends. Get them all in here. Bring the girls in too. just a second. YAARGH!

The two guys held me while I tried to regurgitate the wild boar, from which not all the hair, it now became apparent, had been removed. If this kept up, I was going to be sick. The third time that I was helped back to the table, there were suggestions that I should be taken to hospital, but I refused to go unless it was guaranteed that there would be a toilet there. I had seen Italian ambulance crews in action. Manned by volunteers in white Franciscan cowls, the ambulance would scream to a halt at the scene of an accident and immediately the situation would be transformed. Victims lying there with broken backs would be thrown into the ambulance. People bleeding to death from wounds that needed only a tourniquet would be given artificial respiration instead. The volunteers were businessmen with a commendable urge to perform some community service, but they would have done better to sweep leaves. Without the protection of anonymity, they would have stood a good chance of being indicted for murder, if ever the eight differently uniformed Italian police forces could have got out of each other's road long enough to prevent the next crime instead of just arriving abruptly on powerful motorcycles to be photographed beside the results of the last one. No, I didn't want any of that. Just leave me sitting here like a grinning corpse and I'll be fine. Talk among yourselves while I look as if I'm getting ready to vomit a live pig into your lap.

Having thoroughly spoiled my own party, I succumbed to a case of raving, perambulating semi-malaria from which I did not emerge until late next night, when the bus from Luton airport arrived at Victoria. Only then, when all the other passengers were waking up, did I at last fall into a fitful sleep.

11. FULL VELVET JACKET

It should have been an heroic return. After a mentally improving sojourn beyond the Alps, I was coming back to Cambridge in triumph, at the university's invitation and expense. The reality was less exalted. With my trusty cardboard suitcase full of dirty washing I scaled the outer wall of Robin's ground-floor flatlet in Pimlico. It was after midnight. Safely hidden in the tiny area, I tapped at her door-length window very quietly, so as not to wake the neighbours. I tapped for an hour without waking her either. Finally the window swung open and I was greeted by the glistening point of a carving knife. It was Robin's flat-mate, an English drama student called Alison. Though her terror was not feigned, it was, I thought, excessive. Robin, I was informed, was staying the night at her boyfriend's place in Notting Hill. What boyfriend? Peeved, I set up camp on the floor of the kitchenette. There was plenty of room if I kept my legs folded. When that became impossible, I opened the cupboard under the sink and put my feet in there. Not kicking over the cans of Ajax was harder when I slept. I had to stay awake and concentrate. For three weeks it wouldn't be so bad.

Turning up for work on the set of Keith Visconti's film, I found that there had indeed been developments. Dave Dalziel assured me that the key scene where the girl must decide whether or not she wants milk in her coffee was now in the can. Unfortunately the young actor playing the waiter had temporarily ceased to be available. A childhood friend of Keith's, he was being questioned by the police in relation to an incident at New Cross in which the contents of a van full of the new Japanese portable TV sets had gone missing. He was being questioned, that is, during the previous several months of filming. Now that he had finished being questioned, he had vanished. Apparently some of his friends were looking for him. Not childhood friends like Keith. Other friends. Nelia knew all about it, but she wasn't saying much – not, I think, out of secrecy, but because she couldn't raise the energy. She had started reading a magazine and the effort was wearing her down. It was called *Woman's Realm*. She could just about get an issue finished before the next one came out. Besides, Keith was

making her work all the time.

With Dalziel's constant advice, Keith had been using Nelia to get all the close-up reaction shots he could while the search went on for either the original waiter or someone who looked like him. By now it had become apparent that the waiter's scenes would have to be shot again with a different actor. Keith had offered to produce another of his lifelong friends but Dalziel had vetoed this. A proper actor had been hired: one of the Australian expatriates who had been left swallowing engine oil in the burning water after *The Charge of the Light Fandango* had pointed its propellers at the sky and gone roaring down to the bottom. Keith objected that the actor did not look English. Dalziel overruled him. 'I don't think this guy looks especially Australian, do you?' Dalziel asked me this in tones that compelled agreement. The actor, on top of the body of the Man from Snowy River, had the face of Lew Hoad, but I concurred in the judgment that his national origin was impossible to guess. The actor was unimpressed by what I had done for him. All he could remember was *The Charge of the Light Fandango*. Understandably there was a certain *froideur* when he found that my daily presence was part of this deal too. So I did my best to stay out of the way. After doing my bit to shift lights and carry silver boxes I would go outside and sit waiting at the kayf across the road. The studio was in a back street behind Olympia, so it was not a very salubrious kayf. I was writing poems about Florence. They were full of Medici pomp and Machiavellian circumstance, of tasselled banners and blazing trumpets, the sweet waistlines of Paolo Uccello handmaidens and the crackling flames of Savonarola's pyre. All this I wrote about while sitting under a chalked menu announcing that spam fritters with two veg could be followed by spotted dick with custard. Outside the dirty window, rain that for some reason would only make it dirtier fell thinly but persistently, like a small annoyance. The yawning discrepancy between the place I was writing about and the place I was writing about it in, however, seemed to help. I told myself that it was always best to be physically elsewhere from one's spiritual concern: thus recollection was left free to focus. How, for example, would I have come to value the stylish, precisely calibrated density of a tiny Italian *espresso basso* if it were not for the contrast provided by this giant mug of English tea? Tea leaves floated limply on its vast surface. Under the surface there were more tea leaves. A mug of tea of that size and consistency took a minimum of ten minutes to drink, even when cold. If I sipped carefully, opening my pursed lips to the width of a vein, I swallowed only about half a pound of tea leaves, leaving a mulch three inches deep in the bottom of the mug. Yes, this was the real England that Richard Hoggart had talked about in *The Uses of Literacy*. When Raymond Williams complained in *Culture and Society* of the

healthy working class traditions that were being lost, this was what he meant.

Dalziel didn't really have enough for me to do during the week. On the weekends it was a different story. His sister was in town. Beryl Dalziel was a sculptress. Like her brother's, her career lay in the future. Unlike him, she did not travel well. Dave Dalziel was famously capable of getting organised. He had a filing system for his correspondence. Some of the clothes he bought off market stalls would have looked incongruous on any man less personable, and the Jaguar he had so proudly bought for a song showed increasing signs of having been overhauled at some stage of its career by someone who might have been a childhood friend of Keith Visconti, but on the whole Dave Dalziel was a scrupulous realist. He did not cause trouble to others. He could get himself from country to country with all his belongings, get the telephone connected, hire a plumber. Beryl Dalziel could do none of these things. She needed help.

Above all, she needed help moving. During the three weeks I was involved with her peregrinations, she changed flats four times, twice on the one weekend. These moves would have been complicated enough if her innumerable suitcases and steamer trunks had been full of air. She claimed to have put her sample sculptures in storage on arrival, but I was convinced they were in her luggage. They were the heaviest bags I have ever carried. In fact there was no question of carrying most of them, even with Dalziel on one end and me on the other. They had to be dragged. Moving her out of the upstairs flat in Maida Vale which we had moved her into on the previous weekend, Dalziel and I began by taking each end of one of the smaller suitcases. I remembered that a week before I had thought it contained nothing except machine tools. This time it must have been packed with uranium. Luckily it was I who was holding the bottom end, or it might have been Dalziel who bore the brunt, with incalculable consequences for the future of the Australian film industry. The thing accelerated down the thinly carpeted stairs. Ignoring Dalziel's exhortations to stop it with my body, I stepped smartly aside while the case boomed past and slammed into the window seat on the landing, staving in its plywood-panelled front. We rearranged the cushions so that the damage hardly showed. The next case we took a step at a time, positioning it vertically and edging it out until it dropped on to the next step down with a thump that shook the house. The landlady was out. Landladies were always out when Beryl took off. She timed it that way. How she managed it when there weren't at least two grown men around was another question, or yet another question. It was already another question how the cases we were taking down had grown even heavier since we took them up. It took an hour and a half to move all twelve cases. We saved the biggest of Beryl's bulk carriers until last. A metal steamer trunk bound about with clasps and hasps, it looked as if it was

waiting for a cargo ship. On each side, B. DALZIEL was painted in yellow letters two feet high. I remembered this object vividly from former journeys, but there had been a change. Previously merely backbreaking, it was now immovable. Dalziel and I both got behind it and shoved with all our strength. The trunk reacted like the Albert Memorial. We tried again, this time applying the pressure more gradually, on the theory that a steady build-up would break the air seal holding the bottom of the trunk to the threadbare carpet. We had our eyes closed with the strain, so it wasn't until we had given up that we noticed Beryl had lain down on the bed with her thumb in her mouth.

From long experience, Dalziel recognised this behaviour as a sign of guilt. He demanded that the trunk be unpacked and the contents manhandled separately. His sister sulked. The clock ticked. Not for the first time, I wondered how different my personality – and therefore, presumably, my life – might have been had I grown up with siblings to contend with. Dalziel still had flashes of the old insanity but essentially he was a reasonable man. His sister was essentially unreasonable. Was he like that because of her? Was she like that because of him? It was getting dark. At last she gave in. She unlocked the trunk. It was full of house bricks. 'For my kiln,' she explained. 'Want to do porcelain.' All the other bags proved to have their share of bricks too. Eventually we got everything into the hired Dormobile and set off for Beryl's next address. On the way, at Dalziel's insistence, the bricks were dumped into a builder's skip.

After three weekends of intense body building, my cardboard suitcase was like a feather draped over my crooked index finger when I turned up in Cambridge to claim my inheritance. The place was infested with a new intake of undergraduates, all self-consciously parading in their new gowns, which, had they but known it, were due to be replaced in short order by old gowns whose more experienced owners had seen an opportunity to update their kit. Cambridge was a bit like being in the army: you had to know the lurks. By now I was a lurk man, like Sergeant Bilko. This was nothing to be proud of, so I tried not to be proud of it. As a graduate student I was less of an anomaly than I had been as an undergraduate, but I was still a pretty weatherbeaten customer to have hanging around an institution dedicated to forming the characters of young people and furnishing their minds with knowledge. All I can say now is how I felt at the time: that somehow the fact that I was a few years older than my fellow clerks was cancelled out by my feeling a few years younger than they would have felt had they been a few years older. One day I would catch up with myself and then everything would come out even. Meanwhile, I had been granted the immense privilege of being allowed to live in unapproved lodgings. To put it another way, the college didn't want me making life miserable for any of its registered

landladies. With the first instalment of my study grant safely in the bank, I paid back the college what I owed in loans. This left nothing like enough to pay back Footlights what I owed in bar bills, but since I was now President of the Footlights I calculated that I could sway the committee to excuse me my debts until such time as I could pay them back with inflated currency. Retrieving the pink jacket and the rest of my junk from the Pembroke linen room, I staggered along King's Parade, turned right into Benet Street, and moved into the Friar's House, just across from the Eagle.

The Friar's House looked like the best address in Cambridge. It was a half-timbered edifice which had no doubt been built by the eponymous friars. You could tell it went back a long way by all the angles it leaned at. My room was on the first floor. I hadn't been in it thirty seconds before I found out why the rent was so cheap. In those days the ground floor of the Friar's House was occupied by the most popular Pakistani restaurant in Cambridge. I like the smell of curry – rather better than I like the taste of it, in fact – but the fabric of the Friar's House, being so old, was porous. Without going downstairs, I could recite the menu. Another shock was the hitherto unannounced presence of Romaine Rand, who had already taken another room on the same floor as mine. Indeed it was the room *next* to mine. It was the big front room facing on to the street. In something less than a week, Romaine, who in another time and place might have run the sort of salon that Goethe and the boys would have swarmed around like blowflies, had already transformed her room into a dream from the Arabian nights. Drawing on her incongruous but irrepressible skills as a housewife, she had tatted lengths of batik, draped bolts of brocade, swathed silk, swagged satin, niched, ruffed, hemmed and hawed. There were oriental carpets and occidental screens, ornamental plants and incidental music. The effect was stunning. Aristotle Onassis had married Jackie Kennedy in vain hopes of getting his yacht to look like that. Romaine, however, once she had got her life of luxury up and running, did not luxuriate. She had a typewriter the size of a printing press. Instantly she was at it, ten hours a day. Through the lath-and-plaster wall I could hear her attacking the typewriter as if she had a contract, with penalty clauses, for testing it to destruction. As well as finalising her thesis, apparently, she was working on a book. She definitely would not be available for Footlights, so I could forget it. 'Only a few of them are funny,' she announced, 'and *none* of them can fuck.' I slunk back to my bare room. There was, or were, the flat metal frame of a single bed, a stained mattress, the curried floorboards, a bulb without a shade, and my suitcase. I resolved that I, too, would transmogrify my environment. Picking out a section of the wall where a shelf might go, I tapped it with a testing forefinger. About a square foot of plaster fell off and brained a

cockroach.

Making large plans to decorate my eyrie on a scale that would put Romaine to shame, I set off next morning for the Do It Yourself Hire and Supply shop in Hills Road. Somehow I never found it. At the cinema, the DIY Hire and Supply advertisement had always been the one I had most trouble identifying with. It featured an old man with a Ringo Starr haircut who smiled at you while boring holes with a Black and Decker drill. I was well aware of what would happen if I tried to smile at anybody while boring holes. Searching with decreasing urgency for the DIY centre, I happened on a second-hand bookshop and went in there instead. It wasn't a very good second-hand bookshop – mostly its stock consisted of the sort of unsellable item which people nowadays palm off on Oxfam in order to feel charitable – but I had already cleaned all the other second-hand bookshops out. It was a mystery how I managed, on less than no income, to go on building an impressive personal library. From my habit of writing the date when I purchased a book under my name on the front flyleaf, I can now tell that I bought several volumes of Rilke's letters at about that time. Since I would have been able to read no German more difficult than the extracts from *Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks* which had been included in my elementary German textbook at Sydney Technical High School, I must have bought those volumes in the expectation that I would learn the language later on. By that criterion, no purchase was beyond my reach. I brought my trophies home to the Friar's House and lined them up along the edge of the floor where the bookcase would go once I had bored the holes in the lengths of wood that I would be buying in the near future. Until then, late at night when I came home from the Footlights, I lay reading under the dozen blankets I had obtained on a loan from the ladies in the Pembroke linen room. A cold autumn would have made sleep difficult even if there had been a functioning power point for the electric fire I had bought before finding out why it was so cheap. Making sleep impossible, however, was the noise of Romaine's typewriter. Through the trembling partition dividing our two rooms came the frenzied uproar of a belt-fed Mauser MG42 firing long bursts from a concrete pillbox.

She was getting somewhere and I wasn't. Footlights was only one of the distractions that kept me from attending to my principal business, which was meant to be Shelley and his readings of the Italian poets. The luckless man chosen to supervise my PhD thesis was Professor Graham Hough, of whose distinction I was uneasily aware. I went to see him in Darwin. From the time it took me to get there, he might as well have been in Darwin, Australia. Actually Darwin College was only just across the Cam. A hundred yards along Trumpington Street towards Pembroke, turn right down Silver Street, cross the

bridge, and I should have been there in five minutes. It took ten times that because I was thinking. When I got to the bridge I looked downriver and thought for a long while. The wooden lattice of Queen's Bridge spanned the river like a quietly exultant reproach. Isaac Newton had designed it, the cocky prick. He hadn't only known what he was doing, he had been mad keen that everybody else should be appropriately cowed, the asshole. During the long vacation I should have got enough of a grip on my subject to make it sound worthwhile for my supervisor to find out about it himself so that he would be able to check up on me as the work advanced. Unfortunately, what seemed a good idea had remained merely a good idea. I had a few citations to suggest that the influence of Dante and Petrarch had been not just thematic, as Shelley himself proudly admitted, but technical, at the level of imagery and rhythmic strategy. Hough wanted to know how this last item differed from the metrical patterns which it was already known that Shelley had taken over wholesale from his Italian models. Sure I was right, but being short of information – always a dangerous state for anyone who is trying to sell someone else on an idea – I struggled to adduce chapter and verse. Hough was patient. As a prisoner of the Japanese in Malaya, he had been through more trying times than this. Younger students than myself might be torn between the brimstone of Leavis and the fireworks of Steiner, but Hough's realistic solidity was what I valued most in a teacher of English. As much for the theoretical dabbling it eschewed as for the pure reason it espoused, I thoroughly approved of his little book *Essay on Criticism*. A poet himself, he wrote the civilised verse of a man who had been far enough into the pit to admire the scenery on the way back out. I didn't want to muck him around. With sherry-fuelled eloquence I conjured visions of the deep studies I would pursue. If not convinced, he was at least lulled. I got the impression that he might be on the verge of nodding off. It was my suggestion, not his, that I should come back when I had something on paper. Instantly he was on his feet with his hand out. I went to shake it, but it was going past me to the door handle.

On the way back to college to pick up my mail, I took the long way around past the pond and over the meadow. At the Mill I stood communicating with the ducks. The river was already closed down for the winter. Raindrops prickled on the dark water just above where it filled with cold light as it curved out to leap through the sluice. It was the kind of thing Leonardo da Vinci liked to draw. Leonardo hadn't been here, of course, but nearly everybody else had. Not only Rupert Brooke had been down at the Mill, Rutherford had sat here on the wall and watched the atoms pursue their unbroken curve. John Maynard Keynes had looked into that clear declension and seen the economic consequences of the Versailles Treaty. Wittgenstein had seen the silence of what cannot be

expressed, Alan Turing the soul of a machine. Apparently there was now some crippled young man at King's who was working on a unified field theory that would explain absolutely everything. Surrounded by these exemplars of mental effort, I couldn't even be sure that I would do the work I had cut out for myself. Worse, I was sure I wouldn't. Somehow I would be drawn aside, into something else. All the ducks knew enough to stay well upstream of where the surface of the water moved faster and lost its comforting darkness. I couldn't stay out of the light. If I had been a duck I would have been down the sluice. I wouldn't even make it as a web-footed water-fowl. Those ducks got on my nerves so much that I wrote a poem belittling their pretensions.

My duck poem took two days of undeflected concentration. If something was irrelevant, I could do it. While I was supposed to be studying the poems of Shelley, I was writing mine. By this time *Granta* was practically my private newsletter. I still contributed, with grand condescension, to *Varsity*, but I was growing sick of its inability to set up my carefully finished copy without including all the same misprints which disfigured the news stories sent in dramatically from the telephone booth around the corner by would-be Fleet Street pie-eating hacks who were all cheap excitement and no sentence structure. The snapping point came when I reviewed Joseph Losey's desperately unfunny comic film *Modesty Blaise*. I compared the undraped Monica Vitti to the Rokeby Venus. It came out as the Rokesby Venue. I might have stood for this if anybody concerned had been ashamed, but student journalists don't learn to take pains until they have to, and perhaps that's the way things should be. It's hard enough crawling out of your shell, without being driven back in by sneers and quibbles. Uncomfortably aware that I had been hanging around too long, I left the junior reporters to get on with it and switched my feature-writing efforts to *Granta* on the semi-fulltime basis necessitated by my having accepted a post as its new arts editor. Taking on this task was sheer folly but I was sick of being at the mercy of undergraduate newspaper editors. Those who edited the magazines had a greater sense of responsibility than the *Varsity* tribe. They also had a bad habit of leaving the printer to get on with it while they toasted muffins in each other's rooms, but at least, as one of them, I would be able to accept my own stuff without demur and make sure that it got laid out with appropriate prominence: nothing too strident, mind, just plenty of white space to set off the body copy, the occasional full-page photograph to remind the readers of who they were dealing with, and a caption prominent enough to make sure that they didn't get my photograph mixed up with anybody else's. Like all previous and subsequent literary editors of *Granta*, I began with confident hopes of securing contributions from world-famous literary figures. If my letters were answered at all, it was in

the negative. Jean-Paul Sartre said ‘*Non.*’ The fact that he had said the same to the Nobel Prize committee was small comfort. Dalziel gave me a good piece on the films of John Ford. It needed a lot of subbing, because he had written it in spare time he didn’t have, now that the BFI Production Board was pressing him hard to finish *Expresso Drongo* even if Keith Visconti had to be fired.

The one advantage of being *Granta*’s literary editor turned out to be intangible when it really mattered. At the invitation of the Italian department, the great poet Eugenio Montale came to town and sat in the Senior Common Room of Magdalene to be interviewed by the head of the department, Professor Limentani. The room was jammed with members and students of the Italian department plus a couple of hundred others who had all forced their way in to pay homage. Starved of oxygen, Montale sat there under his distinguished cap of silver hair being asked several questions by Professor Limentani. The Prof spoke in a voice that might have just been audible to anyone with an ear-trumpet who had been sitting in his lap. Tired after a long journey, Montale must have thought that to whisper at great length to a huge room full of strangers was an English national custom, like riding to hounds. He whispered too. About two hundred and fifty people all dying of nitrogen narcosis were in there for an hour struggling silently for position so that they could watch two Italian men of advanced years moving their lips. Not for the first time, the extent to which an academic organisation could bungle a big event made me wonder if undergraduates got sufficient credit for the extracurricular things they accomplished. I wrote an article about the occasion for *Granta*, subbed it myself, laid it out and left it for the editor to see through the press. When the issue came out, my article was there pretty much as I had written it, except that almost every detail was in the wrong place. All the paragraphs were out of order, so that Montale – now known as Montela, although sometimes as Mantabe – left Cambridge in the middle of the article before arriving at the end. My critical remarks concerning his famous poem about the lemon trees were attached to a quotation from his equally famous poem about the sunflower. My name was the only item which appeared correctly, thereby ensuring that the blame for the mess would be entirely mine.

At about this time, Florence was hit by a flood that killed a lot of people, played havoc with the artistic patrimony, and transformed the city’s way of life. I felt guilty about not being there to help, but not as guilty as I felt about setting out to spread enlightenment and ending up adding to the confusion. There wasn’t much I could do about bringing people with lungs full of mud back to life. I felt ashamed of my powerlessness, but the shame was abstract. To have my name on a page of nonsense felt as shameful as having run someone over. Françoise was

in Oxford, to start a Bachelor of Philosophy course. After having taken her doctorate with the maximum possible marks – a feat unheard-of for a foreigner, and rare even for a native – she had providentially left Florence before the catastrophe. I was relieved that she was safe. But that, as Gatsby says of Daisy's love for Tom, was only personal. Those columns of pried type were hard to get over. I sent a copy of the magazine to Françoise at Somerville and by return of post she was kind enough to commiserate, although her suggestion that nobody would notice the difference did not have the soothing effect that she intended. No doubt things would have gone better if I had been at the press. I couldn't be everywhere. Certainly I couldn't be at my desk. Shelley would have to wait for a bit.

As usual the thing that demanded most of my attention was Footlights, only now more than ever. In my capacity as President I was in constant attendance. There were more committee meetings than usual because I was intent on delegating every task of day-to-day administration. To delegate successfully, I had to call a meeting, so that everybody could be told what to do. The secretary looked after the finances, the cabaret director looked after the cabaret bookings, the Falconer looked after the clubroom. This left me free to sit in the bar until late at night looking after general policy. My first big policy decision had to do with Prince Charles, who had arrived at Trinity with the whole of Fleet Street just behind him in a succession of hired coaches. It was evident that Footlights concerts and revues, unless an embargo was imposed on his name, would consist of nothing but sketches about Prince Charles. The press was already a gruesome warning of what to expect. Traditionally nuts on the subject of the heir to the throne, they had now gone berserk. Student journalists who had dreamed of joining the World of Paul Slickey were now given good reason to think again. Their heroes, in the flesh, turned out to possess not even the inverted glamour of sleazy corruption. Nothing more complicated was going on than the usual behaviour of a pack of sharks in a feeding frenzy. Determined not to be a prisoner of his fate, their quarry took part in a smoking concert in Trinity. Fleet Street, for which any Cambridge theatrical event is always a Footlights revue – usually misspelled 'review' – ran headlines about his appearance with Footlights, (FOOTLIGHTS CHARLES – PICTURES). Sensibly he didn't come near Footlights. The roof would have fallen in. Thus he solved half the problem himself. The other half was for us to solve. Informing the committee that they would have to agree in advance to pass the motion *nem. con.* – otherwise the mere fact of there having been a discussion would have become a story too – unilaterally I imposed the embargo. This was the right thing to do, but while doing it I felt the sinister thrill of unchallenged power. Luckily I managed to

remind myself in time that as President of Footlights I was not the Shah of Persia, just *primus inter pares*. At, very most, as the Dean of Pembroke might have put it, I was *in loco parentis* to those *in statu pupillari*.

Helping to remind me on this point were the club smoking concerts. There was a new bunch of multi-talented performers coming up who had me beaten to the wide, especially when it came to music. Reading for the Classics Tripos at St John's, Pete Atkin was a shy young man with rimless glasses who had an unfair amount of natural authority on stage, as if being in the limelight saved him from self-consciousness. He wrote shapely melodies which, while being completely original, partook of every musical tradition from Buddy Holly back to Palestrina. Footlights had always had a strong musical element. There was always someone who knew all about jazz and someone else who knew all about pop. John Cameron could score for a big band *before* he got to Cambridge, so it was no surprise that he led one after he left. Daryl Runswick was a music scholar in Corpus Christi who could put away the bow and pluck his bass like Ray Brown: later on he was to accompany Frank Sinatra at the Festival Hall. Robin Nelson could write a parody of a Bach cantata that sounded like a Bach cantata. But Atkin knew everything. He was particularly erudite on the subject of Tin Pan Alley. He knew Rodgers and Hart note for note and word for word. The same Mercer and Arlen songs that were my touchstones he could play and sing straight through from memory. Though he wrote excellent lyrics for his own tunes, I was ruthless in planting the notion that he might perhaps consider setting one or two of my own efforts. Cuckoos laying eggs give more subtle hints than I did. Believing then, as I still believe, that a song lyric should be at least as disciplined as a published poem, I produced, in that first flush of collaboration, intricately symmetrical stanza forms which Atkin could inject with music only at the cost of making it evident that he had been required to use a syringe. It was easier to loosen up the syntax when we worked the other way around, with me concocting a lyric to fit a tune he had already written. After a while we met somewhere in the middle, roughing out both melody and story at a preliminary session around the piano. The piano was on the Footlights stage. Late nights in the Footlights grew later. If Atkin had known that we would write hundreds of songs over the next eight years, he might have struck for regular hours. I had a way of catching people up in my enthusiasms. But I don't think he would protest, looking back, that I turned him aside from his studies. Talent will out. It has a mind of its own.

Some people have so many talents that their idea of being normal is to have only one. Russell Davies was also from St John's. He had already taken a double first in the Modern Language Tripos without realising that he had sat the

examinations. He thought they were application forms. It didn't occur to him to ask what he was applying for. When people asked him to do things, he said yes. He could do everything except say no. The only reason he was so late getting to Footlights was that he had been asked to play by every jazz band in the area. He played a different instrument in each band. He could play the tuba, the trombone, the trumpet, the saxophone and the piano. When he got to us, it turned out that he could write, draw, sing, dance and act, all better than anyone else. He hadn't quite realised that he could do these things. There hadn't been time.

With Atkin and Davies both around, things were already looking promising for the next May Week revue, of which I intended to be the producer. I had already ruled myself out as a performer. In this company I would be outclassed. As the year developed, St John's proved to be a bottomless cornucopia of gifted new recruits. Atkin and Davies had a friend unromantically named Barry Brown, who wrote and performed surreal monologues. Together they all put on the St John's Smoker. There was an interloper from Emmanuel called Jonathan James-Moore who looked and sounded like a retired colonel invented by Saki. They all seemed to have the kind of stage presence that many professional actors spend a lifetime acquiring, but today they would be unanimous in admitting that they paled into the decor when the spotlight came up on Julie Covington. The decor was in the St John's bike shed, annual home of the St John's Smoker. Atkin and Brown had discovered Covington at Homerton Teacher's College. Spotlit against inaccurately draped black curtains in the smoky, crowded depths of the bike shed, her prettiness was sufficient on its own to induce a reverent hush. The reverent hush deepened to religious awe when she began to sing. Student singers who could hold a note were rare. Student singers who could hold an audience were radium. Talent-shopping from the back of the mesmerised crowd, I foresaw a whole new era of student revue opening up, in which the lyrical element, formerly an occasional by-product of make-up and drag, would be fundamental.

Inspired to a minimum of half a dozen new song lyrics per week, laboriously I commuted to Oxford by train so that I might read them aloud to Françoise. Her room in the Somerville graduate house had the rare luxury of central heating, but I made a practice of reciting all my new lyrics on arrival, before removing my duffel coat. Unaccompanied by music, they were perhaps harder to appreciate than I surmised. The Oxford and Cambridge Ski Club had booked a hotel in Zürs am Alberg for an off-season week in early December. Françoise was going and she suggested that if I wanted to write and recite lyrics without being interrupted by a long train trip via Bletchley, I should come to Austria. Picturing what the officers of the Oxford and Cambridge Ski Club would undoubtedly look like – RAF moustaches and white roll-necked pullovers with Olympic rings on them –

I scornfully declined. What would a radical socialist be doing mixed up in an upper-crust activity like skiing? On my return to Cambridge, Marenko told me that he was going to Zürs. Blantyre was going too. Even Delmer Dynamo was going. I told them I couldn't ski. 'Blow it out your ass' said Delmer. '*Anyone* can ski. You just point the things down the *hill*, for Christ's sake.'

12. HELL BELOW ZERO

Somehow the Oxford and Cambridge Ski Club got to Austria by train. The club had no officers – it was just a letterhead – so the mass movement was more of an instinctive migration than an organised journey. The Americans caught the train at the last minute. They had planned to go in Delmer's car. It turned out that nobody knew how to fill it with petrol. The filler cap had a combination lock which Delmer had not had occasion to open before because he had never driven the car far enough to run out of fuel. Also there was nowhere to put Marenko's skis. Delmer feared that a roof-rack would damage his precious hand-rubbed paintwork. Apparently he had expected Marenko's skis to be much shorter. This was a reasonable assumption. Marenko's skis were made of metal and went on for ever, like two lengths of railway line.

Unseasonably, the snow at Zürs was fresh and deep all the way down into the valley. After hiring boots and skis I headed for the baby slope. I was alone. Françoise had been skiing every year in Australia since the first rope-tow had been put in at Thredbo when she was a child. Instantly she was off and gone. Strad ski'd like a gentleman. He went with her. Delmer spent the whole of the first day buying all his gear instead of hiring it, which promised great things. When he finally emerged from the most expensive ski-shop in Zürs, he was carrying a lot of big boxes and already wearing a sensational pair of boots. In those last days of lace-up boots, experts might wear clip-ons, but scarcely anybody had clip-ons made of plastic. Delmer's were not only brilliant red plastic with silver clips, they had gnurled screws, screwed gnurls, grommets, gauges and three-way adjustable furbelows. 'Get *these*,' crowed Delmer. 'Tomorrow I'll be out of *sight*.'

But by then I had seen Marenko. As I lay there sobbing where I had fallen off the T-bar at the top of the baby slope, I had seen him high above me on one of the lower, slower stretches of a black piste. Unmistakable in his dark glasses and the black one-piece overall of an SS tank commander, he came bouncing down through a mogul field in a dead straight line, slamming from hump to hump,

both his poles held by their middles in one hand while he adjusted his collar with the other. What was worse, he saw me. After disappearing behind a clump of trees like a gannet into the sea, he suddenly reappeared on the last, allegedly elementary stretch of red piste on the other side of the T-bar. At first he was going at a scarcely believable velocity, but what was really unbelievable was how smoothly he translated all that impetus into stasis. Changing direction at the last possible second so that he curved up the hill and around the top of the wheel at the head of the T-bar, he just leaned over and stopped, his poles still in one hand. 'This goddam ski-pass keeps flapping loose,' he said. 'Nearly strangled myself up there on the Death's Head. How *you* doin'?'

Though it hurt me to say so, I had to tell him that I wasn't doing very well. For some reason he didn't seem to realise this. He told me to take a run down the slope while he watched. Take a *run*. I took a crawl. Snow-ploughing rigidly with my nose between my knees, I headed downwards at one mile per hour, coming to a halt altogether if someone else had fallen in front of me. Marenko ski'd backwards beside me. 'Don't try to stop the skis,' he said. 'You're choking them. Let them run.' Momentarily I let them run and headed for the village. Between the baby slope and the village was a road. On a collision course from the right came a skidding bus with chains on its wheels and a driver whose arm was across his eyes. Luckily there was a barrier of snow-caked slush at the high edge of the road. While I lay in it face down, sobbing in a muffled manner, Marenko told me I was wasting my time on the baby slope. 'You're a natural,' he announced. 'Tomorrow we'll get you up there on the Death's Head.'

The next day dawned clear and bright, unfortunately. I had been hoping for a blizzard. Everybody was going up to the Death's Head except Delmer. At breakfast he had announced his intention of starting slowly. 'Gotta break in the new boots, men.' And indeed the new boots looked as if they needed breaking in, almost as much as his ensemble needed toning down. A blue and crimson effort with a colour-coordinated beanie, it aroused expectations of speed which Jean-Claude Killy might have found it difficult to fulfil. No stretch pants had ever been so stretched. On the back of the quilted jacket appeared the words DOWNHILL ACTION HI-FI CHALLENGE. On the breast pocket the words RACING TEAM CLUB encircled the face of a snarling tiger. If Delmer had been the right shape for all this it would have helped, but there would still have been a problem. The famous new boots supported him so well that he couldn't bend down far enough to get his skis on. Strad had to help him into them. Delmer looked impatient. Once the skis were on and the bindings were closed, he fell over. All this happened in front of the hotel. 'Blow it out your ass!' shouted Delmer. Some passing Austrian ski-masters, whose walking boots looked as if they had put

their legs down the throats of live wolves, looked curious. ‘*Was hat er gesagt?*’ ‘*Weiss nicht.*’ We helped Delmer out of his skis and he waved us away, promising to join us later, after the micro-wedge plinth mounting on his boots had been recalibrated to match the barometric pressure.

The idea that Delmer had been wise to cop out early grew on me as we rose in the cable car towards the peak of the mountain known as the Death’s Head. My imagination was working overtime as usual. The cable car stopped well short of the peak. The tree line was still in clear view below and the slope looked quite gentle compared to the north face of the Eiger. I hoped it was from the cold that Françoise was trembling. She had advised me to go to ski class but I had shouted her down, keen as usual to take no advice, however sensible, until bitter experience had rendered it imperative. ‘This is more like it,’ said Marenko. This is more like *what?* I subvocalised. My lips were too cold to move. I just breathed very quietly through my nose and tried to look at only the first few yards of the slope. The angle it was at looked ridiculous enough by itself, without considering the cliff it turned into a bit later on. The only stroke of luck was that even the vertical bits were covered with fresh snow. ‘You can’t hurt yourself,’ said Marenko. ‘If you fall over you’ll stop eventually.’ But I was already gone, sliding on my face, held back by nothing except the minimal resistance of the snow through whose surface my nose was trowelling a thin furrow. ‘Stop!’ shouted Marenko as he sliced past at full speed beside me. The clear contradiction between what he was saying now and what he had said just before had obviously not had time to strike him. ‘Get your skis below you and you’ll stop!’ My skis were above me and I wasn’t stopping. Marenko cut in underneath me and brought us both to a halt with me crumpled upside down against his ankles. ‘That’s a good start,’ he said, fishing with one of his poles for my left ski, which had come off. ‘Shows you’re not afraid of the slope.’ Françoise and Strad appeared beside us, looking worried. ‘You two go on,’ said Marenko. ‘I’ll give him a few pointers.’ They wanted to. stay but I insisted. I didn’t want anyone else to be there while I was being given the pointers.

Each hour that ensued seemed like a bad day. I cried all the time. The tears never fell. They just tinkled in my eyes like Christmas decorations hanging in a window. Before I knew how to traverse across packed snow, Marenko was making me traverse across deep powder. I crashed into snow drifts with both my skis off. The automatic ski brake had not yet been invented. The skis were attached by thongs to your boots, except when the thongs came undone. Mine always did. The bindings, when Marenko rescued the skis from further down the same drift, or from the top of the next drift down, were caked with snow, which at that altitude turned to ice faster than a gloved fingertip could scrape it out. The

bindings weren't today's forgiving, apparently simple affairs that you can just step into after a token gesture of knocking the snow off the bottom of your boots with the tip of a stick. They were spring and cable bindings which would not close unless all the snow had been brushed out of them and any hint of ice on the bottom of your boots had been scrupulously removed. Wallowing in a drift, I found these requirements impossible to fulfil. Marenko patiently waited, doubtless thinking about Yeats, while I waded out of the drift towards a firm footing. 'Good training,' he said. 'Just like my first year at Aspen.' He couldn't seem to grasp that the reason I was just lying there was that I couldn't move. 'Don't worry if you feel tired,' he said, blowing on his dark glasses. 'It's just fatigue.'

Though we were on a red piste, which was theoretically much easier than a black piste, there were narrow stretches that I wouldn't have contemplated trying to snow-plough down even in a snow-plough. I took my skis off and walked. On the wider stretches, however, Marenko insisted that I try to do parallel turns. The main difficulty, I found, was to go slowly enough in the first instance so that the turn could be initiated under some sort of control. I was already falling before I turned, so all that the turn did was to alter the direction of the fall. The instruction to lean out into the valley I found impossible to obey, because I had already fallen towards the mountain. The skis having become crossed while my body continued to move, *then* I leaned out into the valley, but by that time I was fully airborne. It was a parallel turn only in the sense that my flailing form was parallel to the snow. On the beaten piste the resulting impact was audible and painful. It was much nicer falling into the drifts. I began to look around hopefully for the next drift. Eventually fatigue reached the point where Marenko began to notice. The piste was about to narrow into a mogul-ridden swoop to the right, with its right edge curving up into the mountain and its high left lip masking a sudden drop to the foot of a clump of pine trees. You could tell how steep the drop was by the fact that only the top halves of the trees were visible. I looked at all this but it must have been clear that I wasn't taking it in. We sat down for a while and Marenko gave me a piece of chocolate. 'You're going great,' he said. 'Only another hour and you'll be down.' At this point Françoise and Strad appeared. They were on their third or fourth run down the mountain. 'He's going great,' said Marenko. All I had to do was sit there until they got bored and went away. Instead I somehow got the idea that it was now or never. In such cases the rule should always be: never. When in doubt, don't. Françoise and Strad fishtailed neatly down the chute and waited at the bottom, looking up. Marenko *schüssed* in a sweet straight line, his arms held out to the sides like a falling crucifix as he bounced from hump to hump of the frightening moguls. He

spun on his skis about two-thirds of the way down so that he was going backwards, drifted to a stop beside the others, and waved a pole to indicate that I should follow.

I should have taken my skis off and walked, but I was too tired. And they had made it look so easy. I started to traverse across towards the outer edge of the piste. After an inspired snow-plough turn I was traversing the other way. But the second turn, which took me some way up the high wall to the right, was of such large radius that it didn't slow me down at all, so when I headed back to the left I was going at full clip. 'Too fast!' shouted Marenko. 'I *know!*' was my agonised reply. Heading up and out over the high left edge of the piste, I tried to stop myself by sitting back. Thus lightened, the skis moved even faster, so I was actually lying down in mid-air as I sailed out into space, 'Death,' I thought. 'This is it. Here it is.' Pine tree branches snapped off in quick succession. They sounded like a pom-pom firing. Their thickness, as it happened, might have been precisely calculated to break my fall instead of my back. My skis came off in the tree, so when I bombed into a drift I was not only moving just slowly enough to survive the impact, I was spared the usual humiliating search for lost equipment. By the time the others materialised below me, having beaten a path through the trees, I had reassembled my stuff and was able to make a brave show of having meant the whole thing. Marenko, in his way, helped. 'You've done the hard part now,' he said. 'Nice work.'

Marenko's teaching methods were, of course, the worst possible for a beginner. Having ski'd most of his life, he had no idea of what it was like not to be able to, and thought that you were incapable from mere recalcitrance, which could be overcome by exhortation. Natural athletes are rarely the best teachers. The person who can teach you something is the one who remembers how he learned it. There was another inhibiting factor. Skiing is a technical sport which has little to do with strength. At that stage I was still quite strong and all too ready to try turning the skis by brute force. It can work only on gently sloping, packed snow. For the last part of the run, some of that was available, and even after my day of torment I was foolish enough to believe that I was getting somewhere. The other three took it slowly so that I could keep up. I fancied that I looked part of the group as we came sweeping down past the baby slope. I rather hoped that Delmer would be there to marvel, but at first there was no sign of him. Then Strad spotted Delmer's beanie. It was sticking up out of the snowdrift at the bottom of the slope. The weatherbeaten, superannuated ski-masters who tended the baby slope were gathered round the beanie. One of them was poking the snow with a long thin stick. Muffled sounds could be heard from under the snow. I recognised Delmer's catchphrase, modulated into fluffy

softness as if shouted through a pillow. ‘*Was hat er gesagt?*’ one of the ski-masters asked us. ‘*Macht nichts,*’ said Strad. ‘*Er sagt nur dass er OK ist.*’ I was amazed. I never knew Strad spoke German.

Strad didn’t like to show off. He was reluctant to reveal that he was capable of anything until circumstances forced him into it. My own character being incurably different, I envied him his ability to keep his light under a bushel. For me, being able to do something meant that I had to prove it, and being unable to do something was a taunt from Fate. Being unable to ski would have been more bearable in, say, Barbados. In a ski resort it was intolerable. I resolved to dare all. Next day Delmer appeared in full ski kit but without his boots. He had bought himself a pair of yak’s hair *après-ski* bootees, and with these crossed in front of him he settled down in a deck chair to cut the pages of his New York edition of Henry James, which had just arrived in a crate. Until the technology had been sorted out, he announced, we would never catch him putting on skis again. His place in the ski class – he had booked himself in for a week of advanced lessons – he kindly gave to me. The ski-masters advised me to swap it for elementary lessons. It was a blow to the ego to be skiing with the children but when they did it better than I the message sank in. Drawing on my usual reserves of fanaticism, I set to work on mastering the stem turn. I mastered it so well that in later years, when the stem turn went out of fashion, it took me an age to unmaster it, and even today, in moments of stress, I find the back ends of my skis drifting apart by that tell-tale inch which brands my generation of skiers more surely than the waffle pattern left by thermal underwear around the thickening waistline. At the end of the week I could get down the red piste on the Death’s Head without taking my skis off. It wasn’t much of an achievement – there was a six-year-old girl in a crash helmet who would go past me three times while I was coming down once – but it made me absurdly content. What I liked best about skiing was how it made loneliness legitimate. Raised in the hot sun, my idea of romance was to feel cold. North was a thrilling word to me. Balzac said that a novel should send the reader into another country. My dreams were like that. They still are.

On the snow I didn’t know what I was doing. As compensation, there was a concert at the end of the week. From the hundreds of student skiers, those who thought they could do a turn came shyly forward. There was the amateur magician with the duff patter and the American girl with the guitar who could sing all the songs Joan Baez sang except that they sounded different and she couldn’t remember any of them all the way through. ‘Oh Gard, I’m sorry, No, wait ... No. It’s gone.’ In this context I was able to shine. I hit them with my ‘Lucy Gets Married’ number and followed it up with my new one about the lost

H-bomb. The Americans, in particular, were delirious. By then the concern with the Vietnam imbroglio had built up to the point where even the Ivy League Americans – and these were certainly those – had doubts about their country's role as a world policeman. As an Australian at a British university telling American citizens how they ought to behave, I was in an anomalous position if I stopped to think about it. It was a less anomalous position than being upside down in a snowdrift, so I didn't stop to think about it. I just rode towards the laughter like a heat-seeking missile. This was the first time I had played to an audience outside Cambridge. I might have been encouraged by the results if I had envisaged a career as a performer. At that time I thought of my own appearances on stage as nothing more theatrical than a form of writing with a light shining on it, like a goose-neck lamp on a desk. It was just a form of expression. I wasn't even sure what form it was. It wasn't acting. I didn't even memorise the stuff. I just read it out. Timing was for real performers: it usually struck me as artificial even when they did it, and when I did it it was ludicrous. Establishing a tacit understanding with the audience that I *wasn't* going to perform, however, generated an air of complicity which I dimly saw might be a way ahead. A ski resort in Austria was an odd spot to be struck with such a formative notion, but that's often how these things happen. Developing a personal style is largely a matter of recognising one's limitations, and the best place to recognise them is somewhere off the beaten track. At the end of the concert I felt pleased with myself. Next day there was a last morning of skiing before we packed up to go home. Pride the night before was duly followed by a bad fall

I was having one of my customary rests at the side of the red piste on the Death's Head when Marenko appeared from above, heading straight down the mogul field through which I had just spent half an hour painfully picking my way. I was amongst a pack of other heavy-breathing rabbits so he didn't see me. He must have been skiing back the quickest way to the hotel after doing his usual half a dozen black runs in succession. Holding both poles in one hand, he had his dark glasses off and was breathing on the inside of them as his heavy metal skis kissed the crests of the moguls like a fiat stone bouncing rapidly across a rippled pond. Below me, where the moguls eased into a smoother piste, he decided he wasn't going fast enough and started to skate. He hooked his dark glasses back on, redistributed his poles so that he had one in each hand, sank slightly at the knees, planted his right pole, and disappeared in a diving turn over the side of the piste. Half a minute later I saw him far below and far away. He had *schüssed* across the face of an old avalanche covered with fresh powder. The rabbits around me sighed with admiration.

Deciding that I had not been daring enough, I tried to straight-line the rest of the mogul field. Miraculously I got through it, although my knees, which despite my fear I somehow managed to keep loose, must have looked ridiculous bouncing up around my ears. The predictable result didn't happen until I reached the smooth bit. I was going the fastest I had ever gone and perhaps it was a mistake to be yelling with exultation. 'WEE HAH!' I cried. 'WHOOEE!' The ensuing fall was the most embarrassing kind you can have. The skis went outwards to each side, spreading my legs so wide that they were practically in a straight line. Luckily the bindings snapped open almost straight away, otherwise my nose would have been broken. Like an arrowhead ! flew on for some distance, still with a pole in each hand. Making a three-point contact – mouth, chest and seriously shrivelled genitalia – I kissed the piste and slid on at full speed, slowing down only very gradually. The main braking effect was provided by the snow accumulating inside my clothes. About fifty pounds of it was forced into my stretch pants. When I finally contrived to stand up again my pants wobbled like bags full of water. I was so completely winded that I thought all my ribs were broken. Symbolically, my recently eloquent lower lip was badly bitten, the blood seeping through the caked snow around my mouth to give the effect, I was later told, of an Italian raspberry *gelato*. My lucky break was that my skis both missed me. Travelling very fast, they went past me on each side on their way down to the hotel, where I joined them an hour later, feeling chastened. The abyss between wanting to and being able to had once again made itself manifest. A man can fall into that gap and vanish. To him it will be small consolation that those who never aspire never appear in the first place.

13. FANTASY ISLAND

Thus my first year as a PhD student took shape. The academic year was short anyway, but there was no gainsaying the fact that I was working on my thesis for an average of one hour per month or perhaps less. No gainsaying it by anyone except me. As usual I told myself that everything would change tomorrow. Tomorrow never came, because it couldn't. I just had too many commitments. Alarmed by their number, I distracted myself from them by adding others. In Footlights my new styleless style of performing made enough progress to attract the attention of student producers in other branches of the theatre. It struck someone who shall remain nameless that I would make an ideal Jourdain in the Cambridge Opera Society's forthcoming presentation of the original version of *Ariadne auf Naxos*. I wouldn't have to sing: in the original version Jourdain is the leading role of a play which is eventually, although not soon enough, displaced by the opera. It should have been obvious that if I didn't have to sing I would have to act, but somehow I convinced myself that I wouldn't have to act either. At that time I was enslaved to the music of Richard Strauss. I knew *Der Rosenkavalier* note for note, could do a traffic-stopping imitation of Ljuba Welitsch in the final scene from *Salome*, and would contentedly croon both parts of the long two-girl duet from *Arabella* while sitting in the Whim writing a nit-picking review of *Accident*. Considering that I couldn't sing the National Anthem in a way that made it sound significantly different from 'Rock Around the Clock', this incantatory Strauss-worship must have sounded pretty strange from the outside, but inside my head it had the full, drenching beauty of that reprehensible old opportunist at his most sumptuous: the shimmering swirl of strings that drapes the soprano like a Fortuny gown, the passing phrase, the orgasmic crescendo, the sudden silence. Not too much, in my version, of the sudden silence. In particular I loved the last pages of *Ariadne auf Naxos* where Bacchus got the lion's share of the duet with the eponymous goddess. To all intents and purposes he had a grandstand aria, of which I knew every phrase. Yes, if destiny had denied me the wherewithal to sing Bacchus, at least I could

play Jourdain. So what I said to the producer was yes, when what I should have said was no. And if he didn't understand it when I said it in English, I should have sung it in German. *Nein!*

It wasn't his fault. Always in the theatre, as in all the arts, it is dangerous to go against one's instincts, but this doesn't mean that it is always safe to go with them. You can take on a project from the depth of your heart and it will still end up stuck all over your face, like egg. I already knew that, but there aren't many operas with a starring role for a non-singer, and I wanted to be an opera star. So I ignored the law of probability, which declared that no student producer, unless he was Max Reinhardt reborn, would be able to hire the opera singers, organise the orchestra, supervise the designs, stage the main action, and also prevent the play-within-the-opera from sabotaging the opera in a manner less decisive than that which had persuaded Strauss and Hofmannstahl to abandon the original version in the first place. This particular student producer's utter innocence – although a brilliant scholar, he had never produced anything except a weekly essay – helped to persuade me for the first half-hour of rehearsal that he might get everything right by sheer purity, like Parsifal. When he turned out not to be completely certain about the difference between stage left and stage right I started to worry. I should have worried more. For years afterwards, to my shame, I vocally blamed him. The fault was mine for not taking drastic action. Either I should have demanded an experienced producer or else bailed out, if necessary without a parachute. The idea of a non-singing Australian Jourdain was a good one. The idea of a non-singing non-acting Australian Jourdain was a possible one, as long as he learned his lines, hit the marks, and kept his good humour when the set collapsed around him. But with everything else going wrong, I worried about that instead of about getting my bit right. Instead of providing a still centre, I was part of the chaos. The play-within-the-opera was a mess. *Ariadne auf Naxos* was scheduled to go on at the Arts Theatre for four nights running, come what might. Luckily the opera-without-the-play was going reasonably well. Professional opera singers are usually able to produce themselves. Alberto Remedios, appearing in the role of Bacchus, was at that time still on his way up as one of the best Wagnerian tenors in Europe, but he had already had plenty of practice at getting on and off a strange stage at short notice. Despite his exotic name, Alberto was a Scouse plug-ugly with a delightfully foul tongue who knew a potential catastrophe when he saw one. It rapidly became clear that he was unimpressed by the visual aspect of the conditions in which he was being asked to work, 'Shit,' he said when he saw the set. 'Who shat?' And indeed Naxos did look very brown. For an island, it was remarkably short of greenery. The designer had sketched some rocks, which had

been faithfully reproduced by the Arts Theatre paint shop. On a large scale the rocks looked like the petrified turds of a mastodon. Ariadne was to be sung by Margaret Roberts, a trouper. It was the other kind of trooper that she swore like when she saw the costume which had been provided for her. Diaphanous in all the wrong places, it looked like Eva Peron's negligée, an impression abetted by the platform mules with pink pom-poms and the sequined cloche flying helmet. A down-to-earth sort of girl, Margaret was prepared to act the temptress, but not in a comedy. Nor was she any more tolerant than Alberto of bright young people dabbling in the arts. She handed back the dress. 'You can burn that,' she said, 'and don't forget to bury the ashes. It might grow again.' From her travelling wardrobe she produced a complete Ariadne costume of her own. Previous experience of semi-professional productions had told her to be prepared.

Alas, not only was I part of the semi-professional production, I exemplified it. For me, *Ariadne auf Naxos* was a personal disaster. I could have called it wounding, but only if I had lived. I died, ten times a night for four nights on the trot. Though the general lousiness of my performance improved toward the merely inadequate as the short run went on, if the show had stayed in repertory for ever I still wouldn't have been able to haul my contribution out of the fire. Romaine Rand, writing a notice for the *Cambridge Review*, said that watching my performance was a strange exercise in compassion, like seeing a man who deserved punishment being beaten up more thoroughly than his crime warranted. She was uncharacteristically kind to the production as a whole, contenting herself with the suggestion that it be sealed in lead-lined containers and buried down a disused coal mine. Looking back on the catastrophe – and even today I look back on it through a veil of tears – I like to think that if I was placed in the same circumstances now I would be able to look after myself, if only by the cheap method of making a virtue of everything going wrong around me. Because everything *did* go wrong, every night. In the play-within-the-opera, a banquet has to be served on stage. On the first night, the banquet was brought in by a single liveried flunkey. There were supposed to be two liveried flunkeys. One of them had gone missing. The remaining liveried flunkey, before he went off to get the banquet, had already entertained the audience by the way his buckled shoes were so obviously a pair of buckles loosely attached to a pair of down-at-heel Chelsea boots. While he was off, we all had a lot of lines about how lavish a banquet it was going to be. When the liveried flunkey reappeared, he was carrying a single tureen. He pretended to stagger under its weight. This merely encouraged the putatively silver cover of the tureen to bounce slightly, as if to prove what the dullest eye already suspected, that it was made of papier mâché thinly caked with silver paint. The audience was thus well prepared to absorb the

possibility that the silver cover of the tureen might not conceal anything very wonderful. When the cover was lifted to reveal nothing but a heaped plate of pineapple chunks, however, there were people in the audience who could take no more.

Little could they know how much more they would have to take. When I shut an allegedly heavy ornamental door behind me, it drifted open again to reveal a crouching stagehand in blue jeans. The audience saw him long before I did, so why was he still there then I turned around? It was because he was trying to stop the purportedly massive solid marble fireplace from falling over. He didn't and it did. It floated to the floor and lay there like an extra stage cloth while the cast assembled around it to discuss the unexampled luxury of Jourdain's surroundings. I got exactly one intended laugh. When Jourdain proclaimed his delight at having discovered that he had been speaking prose all his life, the line worked, but that was because it had worked for Molière. The *bourgeois gentilhomme*, however must have more than one line. He must have character. To be a fool, he must first have his dignity, or he is just ridiculous. My only consolation was that the revival of the original version of *Ariadne auf Naxos*, though worse than a failure on every other level, was a triumph in the musical department – which was, after all, the only thing that mattered. On the last night, the last act sounded lovely beyond description. Conducted by David Atherton, then at the beginning of a glittering career, the orchestra played those marvellous climactic pages in a long, creamy legato line that held Jourdain – watching from a spotlit box but at last released from his terrible obligation to be amusing – spellbound even in the aftermath of his humiliation. Alone on stage among the mastodon droppings, Margaret sent out a languorous invitation to Bacchus that made Sieglinde's song of longing in *Die Walküre* sound like a jingle. The beauty of the music was a sacred rite, but the gremlins had not departed. Alberto's reputed opinion of the set had finally sensitised the student producer to the point where that helpless' young man was ready to do anything to put things right. If Alberto couldn't stand the way the set looked, the producer had the solution. As Bacchus, draped in cloth of gold and carrying a priapic stave wreathed with laurels, sang his first heroic phrase and strode masterfully on to the stage, the lights went out. Almost invisible, Bacchus and Ariadne could both still see the conductor, so the sublime duet proceeded on schedule. Indeed it had never sounded better, because now it *looked* so much better. Alberto, however, was not pleased. He controlled his feelings until after the curtain fell. When the curtain went back up again for the first call, the applause for Ariadne and Bacchus was like thunder. You could see the god's mouth moving. It was assumed he was congratulating the goddess. The applause for Ariadne's first individual call was

even more cataclysmic, but this time Bacchus, although he was invisible somewhere in the wings, was clearly audible to the whole audience. ‘WHICH PRICK TURNED OUT THE FUCKING LIGHTS?’ He got a laugh that I walked into, and I was hypocritical enough to bow as if it were mine.

After a cock-up on that scale, Cambridge wasn’t big enough to hide in. For Easter I was back in Florence, where the extent and intensity of the destruction caused by the floods put my personal misery into perspective. Though the water had gone down again, the thick tide mark left by the thousands of gallons of spilled oil was still there on the walls, at an impossible height. Everything up to that sinister Plimsoll line had been either washed away or else ruined where it stood. In the *quartiere* between the back of the Palazzo Vecchio and Santa Croce, the fatal black stripe was half-way up the second storey of the buildings. Anita and her family had all survived, but the trattoria was gone, gutted as if by a flamethrower. You would have sworn that fire instead of water had done the work: the walls looked scorched. The whole low-lying little principality of the *popolo minuto* had been soaked with poisons. Sections of the historic centre which lay a few feet higher had suffered less, but more than enough. The cost to the art works and the books was devastating. The human cost was worse than that – it got into my dreams. The underground walkway at the railway station had been full of people when the first big wave had come boiling down the river. People trapped in the walkway had drowned against the roof. None of my friends had been killed, but Florence was my city, so I took the loss of strangers personally. The stricken commune had made it clear that only professionally qualified helpers were welcome. Otherwise, I tried to convince myself, I would have been in there with the first army of saviours. Being useless made the sense of loss more bitter. All over the world, people were horrified by the damage to the patrimony, which they correctly pointed out belonged to all mankind. Would-be realists among them said that the dead people could be replaced but that the works of art should never again be left to chance. They were right. Yet up close it was harder to separate the eternal patrimony from the evanescent human beings who lived and died amongst it. Like everyone else who has ever lived in Florence for however short a time, I had been marked by the city and wanted to feel that I had left my mark on it, even if the mark was only in my memory. In the bar near the Badia, though I hadn’t carved my name on the table where I had read and written by the hour, I had been careful to print the table in my recollection. The bar was open again but all the furniture was new. The Biblioteca Nazionale was also, miraculously, open for business, but the desk where I had sat was different and the books I had read were all rebound and their pages were wrinkled from the drying rooms. Somehow the effacement of

personal memories was even harder to take than the damage to the Cimabue crucifix in Santa Croce. There was a chance that the Cimabue might be saved. In the Trattoria Anita the decor would never be quite so self-confidently scruffy again. Tat needs to be time-honoured. The level of the Arno had sunk again to the status of a puddle, so we could look over the wall at where the Summer Firefly should have been. It was gone. It has never been put back. With prompt and generous help from America, every shop on the Ponte Vecchio was fully restored, but nobody would bet on the likelihood of people sitting there in the dry river bed to watch *Quel treno per Yuma*. Obviously it was assumed that they would always be listening for another noise in the distance: the roar of water rolling down the valley like a moving wall at the end of an episode of an adventure serial, except that this time, at the start of the next episode, there would be no escape.

At that time I was in one of my beardless periods, so I found it especially noticeable that some of the young male Florentines among our acquaintances had acquired intentional-looking outcrops of facial hair. Beppe and Sergio both looked like preliminary studies for Titian's portrait of Ariosto. These were the first beards seen on native Italians since the time of Verdi. The floods were the reason. Student life in Florence had been distracted, and had restarted at a broken rhythm, with a new seriousness. The *pappagalli* disappeared overnight, never to return. There had been one notorious occasion when a bus bearing a touring party of French schoolgirls had turned around in front of Santa Maria Novella and gone back to Paris: the teachers in charge had taken one look at the assembled young Italian male pests and decided not to let the girls get off. Now it was different. Foreign girls were no longer followed in the street. In such women's magazines as *Grazia*, which had previously been exclusively concerned with the mysteries of the trousseau, there was new talk of equality. By the following year, the whole of young Italy had become more serious, to the extent that everyone had forgotten where the mood started. But I was there, and I remember. It was in Florence after the flood. The tragedy had worked like a one-day war. Its sheer arbitrariness had concentrated the minds of those who had taken life as it came. They were still subject to intellectual fashion, just as they were still subject to every other kind of fashion. Suddenly all the young men had beards to trim and all the young ladies had blue jeans to bleach. Women in trousers! It was too daring to be true. Yet the surface froth had a deep and potentially violent undertow. There was a demand for justice which the university system was not best placed to supply. You didn't have to be a seer to sense trouble.

Flattering myself that I might do some good, I wrote an article about the

aftermath of the Florence floods which I published in *Granta* when I got back. In my capacity as arts editor I allocated to myself three pages of the magazine, with another page for some impressive photographs taken by Françoise. The photographs were rather better judged than my prose, if the truth be told, but the impresario could scarcely be expected to give himself less than star billing. This time I saw the whole thing through the press myself. The viewpoint of the article was perhaps needlessly egocentric – even for myself, I would have done better to leave myself out of it – but there was no chance of muffing the evocation. I could still smell the mud and oil. This article is worth mentioning because it was to have long-term effects on what I have since had to get used to calling my career, so in fairness to an earlier self I should record here that I wrote it out of no great calculation beyond the usual urge to burst into print. At the *New Statesman*, Nicholas Tomalin had just taken over as literary editor, in circumstances which dictated that he find some new book reviewers, and find them in a tearing hurry, because most of the old ones were boycotting him. Tomalin was a feature writer of originality and courage, whose pieces from Vietnam had done a lot to convince Britain – and the Americans in Cambridge – that the United States was in a jungle over its head. The modern determination of the British intelligentsia to keep itself specialised being already far advanced, Tomalin's obvious qualifications as a journalist were held to be disqualifications in a literary editor. Those of the ambitious young who were lit on by his roving eye thought otherwise. Abramovitz, President of the Union in his final term, invited Tomalin to debate some such footling topic as 'This House Would Rather Be Amused'. Abramovitz invited me to be on Tomalin's team. It was billed as a Funny Debate. I had still not learned never to go near anything labelled as Funny. People who tell jokes don't make me laugh. My experience as a guest speaker in Funny Debates at both Cambridge and Oxford eventually helped to convince me that the only place to be amusing is in a serious context. But at that stage I had not yet formulated this important principle, so I agreed to appear in the debate. After the usual interminably facetious opening diatribes by the student politicians, Tomalin rose to speak sensibly about the necessity of writing in an entertaining manner if one wished to convey a serious message. The United States, by bombing Haiphong, had started something which the North Vietnamese army would probably finish. Getting this likelihood across to young Americans before they themselves were drawn into the mud and flames would require all those whose job was to tell the truth to tell it in an arresting manner. There was no use pretending that the story would be a million laughs. Finally what counted was to be serious, a different thing from sentimentality. The Strauss waltzes that had been played in the concentration camps were not

only a glaring instance of inappropriate gaiety, they were noxious in themselves. *Der Leichtsinn* was dangerous. Like the official language meant to conceal evil, it really embodied it. Flummery was lethal. Thank you and good night.

Abramovitz understood Tomalin's speech and I could tell from the appreciative laughter that there were some American graduate students in the audience who got it too. For the student politicians it might as well have been a lecture on quantum theory. Why the Oxford and Cambridge Unions should attract recruits of such fatuity is a question that I have never been able to answer. Then as now, they bounced to their feet to make foolish interruptions, gave way, refused to give way, were ruled out of order, and begged the indulgence of the house. Peregrine Sourbutts-Protheroe was there, as usual wearing plimsolls with his evening dress. You could tell he was wearing plimsolls because he was sitting backwards with his legs over the back of a bench. There was a character calling himself Abelard Lakenheath-Bagpuize who shouted at random while eating a raw egg out of his bare hands. It was a madhouse. The libretto was by Tristan Tzara, the choreography by Hieronymus Bosch. When my turn came to speak I let anger rob me of whatever mirth I might have been able to summon. No doubt I deserved to be interrupted by Sourbutts-Protheroe but I refused to give way to him. Nevertheless he unleashed a stream of rip-snorting jokes about the Antipodes, kangaroos, aborigines, and the necessity of walking around upside down in the outback. The audience thought he was hilarious. Even Abramovitz, who was no fool, had been so caught up in the Union's idea of badinage that he felt compelled to laugh. You could tell he felt *compelled* to laugh because he shook his shoulders in a way currently made famous by Edward Heath. Real laughter never looks like that. I was desolate. Tomalin, sensibly, had gone to sleep. Hours afterwards, when the thing was finally over – there were more student speeches to end with that made the opening ones sound like Plato's *Symposium* – Tomalin took me aside before he climbed into his car to go back to London. 'I liked that thing you wrote about the floods,' he said, looking past me. 'You could do some pieces for me if you've got the time.' With an effortful affectation of off-handedness, I told him that I was busy until May Week but after that I would have some time in hand. Later on I learned he always looked past people. He had a stiff neck. Luckily for me it was only real, and not metaphorical.

My piece about the floods had counted in my own mind as serious writing. It was encouraging to hear that a professional literary journalist concurred in the opinion. Suddenly all my other work in student journalism counted, in my own mind, as serious writing too. I was a serious writer. Whoopee! This was something to set against the nagging fact that I was not doing much serious

writing on my thesis. The further fact that I was not doing much serious reading for it either was harder to gainsay. Somehow, along with everything else, I had managed to read a lot, but as usual none of it was immediately relevant to the task in hand. Not having yet accepted that my whole life would be like that, I convicted myself of dereliction. Guilt drove me between the pages of a book – always, since my earliest childhood, my favourite place to hide. In English I read anything at all unless it stemmed from the early part of the nineteenth century, in which case it might have been germane to my subject and thus felt like work. For the only time in my adult life, I became incapable of reading Keats. On the other hand, I could not put Yeats down. The majestic later poems committed themselves to my memory. Where previously I had admired but kept my distance, now I submitted. The long process of growing old enough to appreciate his late achievement was well begun. I tried not to become a Yeats bore. The indomitable Irishry remained an opaque sphere of interest, like the mysticism. But then, as indeed now, I could imagine nothing better than the way Yeats conducted a prose argument through a poetic stanza, compressing syntax as if it were imagery, dislocating rhythm locally so as to intensify it in the aggregate, raising plain statement to the level of the oracular. In my dusty room with the cardboard suitcase open on the curried floor, he was my luxury.

There was now the additional pleasure of being able to read with fair fluency in Italian. I reinforced this nascent ability by raiding the Modern Languages Faculty library, which occupied a floor of the unlovely Sidgwick Avenue site and had a room for each language. I found it hard to keep out of the other rooms as well. The sight of books in languages I couldn't read was a potent stimulus to set about repairing the deficiency. The means of repairing it were near to hand, in an air-conditioned basement under the site. The Language Laboratory looked like the NASA Mission Control Centre in Houston, although – since the space missions had not then yet attained their full glory and coverage – I have always thought of the mission control rooms, whether in Houston or Kaliningrad, as looking like the Sidgwick Avenue language laboratory. The bulky tape decks and disc-sized reels of 1/4-inch tape would have looked, to any child of the cassette age who came back from the future, as if they were props from a silent movie about a training camp for mad scientists, but they worked. Picking my way through Proust was a slow way of improving my ability to read French. Studying French in the language laboratory was a faster way. The intention of the course was to teach the student to speak. Leaving that aside until later – decades later, as it turned out – I cashed in on the unintended effect of a language laboratory course, which was to teach the student to read. It was a painless way of absorbing grammar. Over the next year or two I used the

laboratory to recapture and improve my primitive German. I also made a good start with Russian. If there had been a Latin course available I would have devoured it. As it was, I picked up a useful if scrappy knowledge of the Latin classics by using parallel texts as portable dictionaries, until finally I could get quite a long way by covering up the page in English and construing the page in Latin from context. But I missed hearing the voices. If Cicero had been on tape I would have memorised the speeches against Catiline and got my quantities right. For me, the language laboratory was the brightly-lit basement shopping mall of the Tower of Babel. I couldn't stay out of it. It was a roundabout and belated way of getting an education. Perhaps it wasn't an education at all. People who knew what I was up to thought I was nuts. They might have been right. There was something pathological about my evasiveness. I hid from my thesis in the pages of books, hid from my native language in a sub-world of smatterings, and hid from myself in the theatre – the place where those who know themselves just well enough to want to get away go to be together.

14. FRISBEES FLY AT DUSK

Not that the cast members of the May Week revue were anything like as neurotic as their director – a post to which I had been unanimously elected by the Footlights committee. Since any member of the committee who voted against me would have felt himself obliged to resign on the spot, the unanimous vote was no surprise. I took it as a compliment. I also, I can safely say, took it as an obligation. Night and day, with the exception of the examination period, the whole of Easter term was devoted to rehearsals. Ruling by decree, I had stipulated that the cast would be large. Like many another despot in history, I had talked myself into believing that democracy could be imposed by ukase. I should have known better. I *did* know better, but was carried away by a personal conviction that the club had had its mind on London for too long. Small-cast revues with one eye on the West End had arrived there looking would-be professional and not much fun to be in even when they were funny. A large-cast revue would be a sign that we weren't out for ourselves as individuals. There would be no stars, just a happy ensemble. Though I loathed all of Brecht except the Weill operas, I had been mightily impressed by the Berliner Ensemble when it came to the Old Vic. As Macheath in *The Threepenny Opera*, Wolf Kaiser had writhed against the bars of his gaol in a suitably alienated manner, yet it was the inventiveness of the group movement that had stayed with me. It was like the circus. I liked circuses, too. Though sketches, as always, would be the basis of the show, what attracted me most was the prospect of getting that large cast into concerted action, of creating group effects, of – not yet a word made dreadful by pious use – *improvising*. In the cast there were tall men, small men, thin men, fat men. There were four girls, one of whom was Julie Covington. Normally she would have been the star of the show. In this show without stars I at first looked on her conspicuous ability as a limitation. She was pretty, she could act, she could sing and she could dance. All of that rather got in the road of my general plan to have big production numbers in which nobody would stand out. All day in the clubroom and far into the night, while the smell of fish rose from below

like an oily miasma, I carried on like Kim Il Sung, motivating my huge company to perform as one. Possessing an overbearing personality anyway, and fired by the powerful ideals of social engineering, in my ideological determination I was hard for those youngsters to resist. Luckily for us all, they resisted, or there would have been a débâcle.

The show was called *Supernatural Gas* and sold out the Arts Theatre for the whole two-week season. Every Footlights May Week revue always did. At least this one didn't do less. There was oblique evidence that the show was not, in advance at any rate, judged an outright flop. Positive evidence that it was entertaining came from the audience's laughter, which was quite frequent. It might have been more frequent if I had placed due emphasis on the sketch writing. Some of the monologues had not been worked on sufficiently since they had done the usual round of the club and college smokers. Ideally a monologue should be the unique experience of the person who writes it, who, also ideally, should be the same person as the person who delivers it. In reality, scarcely anybody under the age of ninety is self-critical enough to do his own cutting and rewriting. Throughout the Footlight's Dramatic Society's modern history (we had better forget about its ancient history, which was spent, almost exclusively, screaming around in high heels and beads) the best monologues had been worked on by so many hands that they amounted to group creations, like the pyramids or the atomic bomb. I would have done better to apply my group motivation approach to the sketches as well. Instead, I confined it to the production numbers and the mute movement routines. Actually these took so long to rehearse that there was no real prospect of keeping the cast together for further periods of group script editing, desirable though that might have been. Getting the cast together at all proved far more difficult than I had expected.

Russell Davies was in nearly every sketch and musical number. Though the aim was to distribute the plum parts equally, in cold fact he was the best man available for almost everything. No other performer was disgruntled if I replaced him with Davies. Even more gratifyingly, Davies was not disgruntled, or did not seem so. Rehearsing continuously all day and far into the evening, however, he began finding it harder to get up in the morning. We had to send a taxi for him, and it got to the point that if the taxi driver failed to wake him up he would sleep on. It was typical of Davies that he could not bring himself to point out the connection between overwork and narcolepsy. I had underestimated his modesty, and he my insensitivity. The mêlée of an urgent group activity is not as good a time as it is cracked up to be for people to find out about each other. I needed his abilities, so I treated him as if his energies were infinite. They almost were. As for his powers of invention, they seemed to have no limit at all In a big

production number called 'The Fantastograd Russian Dance Ensemble', he played the victim in the Dance of the KGB Interrogators. I was very proud of the whole number and had a satisfactorily dictatorial time making everyone bounce around shouting 'Da!' with their arms folded, but there could be no doubt that the way Davies looked suitably grateful while being straightened out by the heavies – the way he made an actual *dance* of it – was a work of art which brought a lump to the throat. All that inventiveness being lavished on a single moment which would live, at best, in a few thousand memories! Having him to hand was so gratifying that I forgave him his strange habit of falling asleep in his chair and needing to be shaken awake every time the next number to be rehearsed required his presence – which was, in effect, every time.

Robert Buckman, later to be famous as the Pink Medicine Man on television, was the youngest member of the cast and presented the opposite kind of trouble. He was so energetic that you had to hold a cushion over his face to slow him down. I could cope with him, however, by shouting at him loudly. This did not work with a strange young man calling himself Rusty Gates, who had done some very droll, off-trail sketches in dub smokers but who now, having been cast for May Week, revealed an enhanced capacity for obliquity that made him hard to comprehend. He grew his hair in a page-boy cut. He addressed me as 'man'. When he arrived, always progressively later, he crossed one brothel creeper randomly over the other so that there was no telling which wall he would walk into. Either he would stop just short of the wall and address it as 'man' or he would make actual contact with it, but never at sufficient velocity to cause pain. Finally, when he was arriving so late that his eventual appearance was the same as not having turned up at all, he would walk in so slowly that each foot was in the air long enough to make you wonder if paralysis had struck. Even though he is now a highly respected theatre director, he won't mind my saying all this, because his abstracted manner of that time was part of the political position which he has since pursued undeviatingly and with great success. He was the first homegrown English hippy I had met. He regarded me, correctly, as hopelessly square. Certainly I was too square to realise the significance of the hand-rolled cigarettes he smoked in such quantities. In Strad's company I had had the odd puff myself without realising that there was a new religion on the way which would have devotees and would scorn dabblers. Rusty Gates was a hard man to rehearse. He had a manifest contempt for the material. In retrospect I was to decide that he was three-quarters of the way to being right. At the time I regarded him as a disciplinary problem. I condemned him to the worst role, that of the perambulating HP sauce bottle in a clever number called 'Cinquante Sept', written by two exceptionally tasteful young men called Ian Taylor and

David Turner, who later on were to do show business a serious disservice by staying out of it. The song had everything. In later days, when I knew more about pacing a show, I would have made it the finale and poured on the effects. As it was, the song had almost the entire cast in it. Even Jonathan James-Moore, who couldn't sing at all, delivered a spoken announcement in the middle of the number. He just read out the label of an HP sauce bottle in a sepulchral voice. He would have brought the house down if it hadn't already been down. The house was already down because of Rusty Gates. His arms imprisoned inside the giant HP sauce bottle, from which only his feet and his closely framed face protruded, he was supposed to toddle out to centre stage and stay still. But a man who, under the influence of the dreaded weed, had an ideological objection to walking straight even in daylight, was unlikely to toe any given line while clad in a papier mache HP sauce bottle. He wandered around the stage arbitrarily, leaning over at angles from which recovery should have been impossible. The rest of the cast moved smoothly aside to avoid him. It all looked quite meant if you were not the choreographer. I was, and got foolishly annoyed.

Looking back, I am annoyed in a different way, for having become obsessed with technical effects at the very moment when a new maturity of content, made possible by the waning influence of the Lord Chamberlain, was not only possible but called for. The truth was that the theatre, which I had approached, correctly, as a temple, had turned out to be, in the first instance, a box of tricks. Immediately I had become fascinated with the tricks, to the detriment of my sense of proportion. The things that could be done! Normally inhibited young people could be organised into kick-lines wearing funny hats. They could be slung on wires and flown around. They could be made to disappear through trapdoors. Things could be done with lights. Julie Covington looked so elegant singing in a spotlight that I spent hours arranging a slow fade to silhouette and forgot about the songs she was supposed to be singing. Luckily they held the audience, but she deserved better. The whole cast deserved better. I could do it now, but you can't go back into time except through memory, and even that form of transport is dangerous when the question turns on what might have been. At the time it seemed that I had nothing to reproach myself with. Quite the reverse. The show was greeted, if not hailed, as a success. Well, a half-success. It seemed to me that the Six Day War, which broke out at the same time, was a secondary occurrence. I was very pleased with myself and might have modelled my swagger on that of Moshe Dayan. Every night of the run I saw the show and gave notes, but spent little time in the day cutting or re-rehearsing. (In later years I would have rebuilt the show every afternoon until there was not a flat spot left in it.) The mysterious May Week that lasted a fortnight and took place in June

was a mystery no longer. It was a time for youth to celebrate itself. I was a tiny bit past being a legitimate celebrant. That just made the feeling sweeter. While the exhausted cast slept the sleep of the just through the long morning, I would walk the gravelled paths of the backs, clutching the jewel of Pembroke's library, Aubrey Attwater's copy of the Leopardi edition of Petrarch. At ease on a bench, with Trinity's Wren Library in clear view and the river dotted with drifting clumps of girls, I would part the gilt-edged pages and imagine myself Rotto dagli anni e dal cammino stanco. Broken by the years and by the tired road. God help me, I fancied that what I had faced and conquered had been adversity, instead of just another self-set challenge, easily encompassed.

Marenko and the Americans should have been a healthy antidote. Accompanied by Girton girls who had been carefully chosen and gallantly presented with a bunch of carnations each, they loyally attended the revue but didn't pretend to be impressed by anything except the logistics of mounting such a huge venture when everyone involved was supposed to be studying. They, the Americans, were still studying every day, even though, for some of them, the last examinations were over. A sound mind needed a sound body, however, so in the afternoons they were to be found down in the meadow behind the Mill, benefitting immodestly from the sunlight. Marenko looked so magnificent with his shirt off that a Newnham girl, nowadays world famous as a romantic novelist, rode her bicycle straight into the Cam. For Marenko, exposing his torso to the sunlight was a quasi-sacred act which he called 'baking bod'. At lunch in Hall he would propose this Azteclike ritual to the assembled company. 'Why don't we all saunter down to the Mill and bake bod?' Delmer Dynamo having copped out on the excuse that his new set of the Nonesuch Dickens needed its pages cut, we would trail down to the meadow and lie around. At one of those meetings – which would have been a bit *Kraft durch Freude* if not for the high quality of the laughter – the first Frisbee I had ever seen was produced, A large black plastic dish with its name, WHAM-O FRISBEE, applied in gold, inevitably it had been imported by Strad. It turned out, however, that all the Americans could make the thing perform. Strad could make it go about fifty yards and then hover like..a black and gold halo over Marenko's head, Marenko favoured an underarm flick of the wrist which sent the enchanted disc zipping along about three inches above the ground for an improbable distance until, instead of crashing, it rose remarkably into the air, tipped to one side, and slotted into Strad's upstretched hand as if drawn there by a string. To my shame I went crazy with frustration at being unable to make the bloody thing fly straight. Moving my wrist forward as instructed, I merely delayed the disc's inexorable swing to the right,. The accursed object moved to the right like Sir Oswald Mosley. It headed for the

Cam like Hitler for the Rhine. Observant young ladies laughed from beneath the willows. When Marenko, like a languishing Discobolus, airily unleashed a fizzer, there were long sighs from the dappled shade. 'Blow it out your ass!' cried Delmer in the distance, appearing in slow stages from the direction of the Mill as he grappled intermittently with a prematurely opened deck-chair. Boated, blazered and monocled, he sat in full Wodehousian splendour, sending up puffs of smoke from his cigar while his pipe-clayed white shoes acquired grass stains that looked as if they had been brushed on by Monet. When I fluked a straight throw he applauded like a member of the MCC. 'Oh, well propelled, old fruit! Well *chucked!*' The ten-day idyll seemed to last a year. There was the Footlights tour to prepare for. The details must have taken at least a week. Probably it was less than a week, then, that I basked in that perfect light. My whole soul baked bod. At the lawn parties I basked in glory while adroitly dodging Consuela. For someone of my temperament, going over the top is a necessary step towards coming to terms. Those were the days when I gave way to the dementia of celebrity. Critics who think I am out of control now should have seen me then.

And then it was over. Though the tour was no disaster, it was no triumph either. The small-cast show with one eye on London, the kind of show I hadn't wanted, was the kind of show the provincial audiences *had* wanted. It meant nothing to them that the large-cast revue gave the less talented an equal opportunity to share the stage with the more talented. The audience wanted an unequal opportunity to laugh and admire. Sketches which had held the stage in Cambridge ran to comparative silence in Nottingham. They didn't exactly die the death, but they contributed nothing except running time. Standing in the back of the auditorium and wondering how to patch things up sufficiently well to keep the show on the road and some of the cast from suicide, I became a worried man again. At the end of the long vacation I was due to take an abridged version of the show to the Edinburgh Fringe. At that juncture I would have a chance to recast along less egalitarian lines. It would be an act of mercy. Performers out of their depth drown. Though they do it in air instead of water, you can see them struggle. Beginning at last to take in, at the level of experience, the lesson which I should have been able to learn at the level of theory, I packed my carry-all and headed for Venice. Françoise was studying there again and as usual she would make all the arrangements, but this time I was not entirely a free loader. In Venice there was to be a major exhibition of Canaletto, Guardi and the rest of the view painters — the *Vedutisti*. To Nicholas Tomalin I had proposed that I should cover this event in a piece for the *New Statesman*. He had agreed. It was a commission. The piece would be paid for. All I had to do was write it.

I wrote it with suspicious ease. Françoise and Venice were at their most

beautiful. The wine at Trattoria al Vagon was cheap and plentiful. When I arrived at the exhibition I felt happy and confident. The paintings of Canaletto looked happy and confident. The paintings of his nephew, Bellotto, looked less happy and less confident. Canaletto was light blue but Bellotto was dark green. Guardi was dark blue with too much pink. He was neither happy nor confident, Guardi. You could tell just by looking. I am afraid that my analysis of this entire, quite important movement in Italian painting was all on an elementary, not to say infantile, level. With a set length of only fifteen hundred words in which to express my opinions, a paucity of information was an advantage. As far as I can remember – it wasn't far even at the time – I wrote the piece in a matter of hours. Looked at again today, it has a speciously authoritative bravura which I can only envy. Nowadays a piece the same length, on any subject, would take me at least a week. My brain has grown sclerotic, my wind short, and with experience I have become more fearful instead of less, but the main reason for being slower to get things done now is that I know more about them. Possessing more information than will fit easily into the space, I must sweat at the task of choosing what to leave out, and of making what I put in imply the rest. Though often accused of putting everything I have in the shop window, it is no longer among my vices. In the days when I did, I wrote like lightning. At the bar at the foot of the Rialto, Françoise read the finished piece through, suggested a few corrections, and looked, I thought, slightly ashamed, as if she had taken up with a confidence man – which, at that time, was exactly what I was. Not only was I out of my depth, I was staging an aquacade instead of calling for help. She particularly deplored, I suspect, my knack of suggesting that what I was saying was only the tenth of the iceberg that showed above the water. She was well aware that what showed was all there was: the tip of an iceberg floating on a raft. Dead on cue, seven gondolas lashed side by side emerged from under the bridge. Full of Americans, they rode low in the water while the massed gondoliers provided choral accompaniment to a plump middle-aged tenor who stood in the prow of the central gondola facing backwards. His mouth opening wide enough to swallow a melon, he uncoiled the high wailing melodic line of a love song. He was a professional and so was I. You have to start somewhere, and you can't do so without taking the risk that you might one day end up somewhere else than the place you hoped to reach. A scholar takes a job. A writer takes a chance. Carefully I explained this to Françoise over several carafes of wine paid for by her. Arriving at the post office, where with her help I planned to send the piece off to London by registered mail, I was feeling pretty dauntless. During the long process of acquiring the right stamps, stickers, sealing wax and bits of string I gradually sobered up, until by the time the parcel was ready for acceptance I had

qualms. What if it got rejected? Why, indeed, should it be accepted? Three days ago I had scarcely known the *Vedutisti* from the Watusi, Canaletto from a can-opener, Guardi from a mudguard. All I had ever done was look at the pictures. That, basically, Françoise assured me, was all that anyone had ever done. She was a model of strength as I sat there sobbing. The Italian post offices were temples of bureaucracy in those days, sufficient all by themselves to cause a breakdown in civil order. Constantly mutating meaningless regulations ensured that your parcel, when you finally got to the head of the queue, would never be accepted the first, second or third time. Even when you had the right gauge of brown paper, thickness of string and redness of sealing wax, unless you timed your run for the end of the day they would have introduced some new rule about writing the address four times or tying the thing up with a pink ribbon. Coping, Françoise grew cooler as I grew angrier. Finally, when I was down on the floor on my knees, pounding my fist into the tiles, she was smiling seraphically at some official in a cap. He was the one who said there was no problem; of course we shall accept your parcel; he couldn't understand how the difficulty had arisen; was the *signorina's* friend perhaps the victim of some unfortunate mental disease?

In debt to my college and with a long, long vacation ahead before the next grant cheque came through, I was dependent on Françoise for the necessities of life. This drain on her resources left nothing over for travel, so we were obliged to hitch-hike. In her two-piece raw silk suit and high heeled sandals, Françoise must have been the best dressed hitch-hiker since Lola Montes. On the approach roads to the *autostrada*, Italian male drivers of expensive sports cars were eager to break the law and stop, especially if they thought she was alone. I encouraged this misapprehension by hiding myself behind a bush. If there was no bush available I would conceal myself in the nearest depression, feeling pretty depressed myself. In shallow holes lined with dried mud I would cower cursing. When I heard the shriek of brakes I would dustily emerge and shamble forward. Some of the drivers looked a bit pissed off but very few of them tried to cancel the deal. A guy with an Alfa Romeo Giulia *ti* got us to Bologna in no time. The next bit was the hard part. The recently completed stretch of *autostrada* down from Bologna through the mountains towards Florence had instantly established itself as one of the most frightening experiences in modern Europe. There were three lanes each way. None of them was a slow lane. Articulated trucks with two trailers in tandem swung out from lane to lane without warning just as you were trying to overtake them. The chance of getting cut in half was very high, even if you had a great big car with plenty of hot lights to flash in the mirrors of the trucks. The car that picked us up was a little Fiat Berlinetta whose driver thought

he was Eugenio Castellotti, the late lamented Mille Miglia ace revered in Italy for the flair he had shown in driving at 150 miles per hour on the footpath when the road was full of spectators. When a truck pulled out, our boy would try to duck inside, ignoring the possibility that the truck might try to go back to where it had come from, thereby crushing us against the wall of a tunnel or propelling us a thousand feet down into a rocky gorge. All this was happening at about ninety. The hard shoulders of the road were littered with wrecks. Particularly affecting was a Lancia saloon divided into two widely separated pieces. Françoise had insisted on climbing into the back seat with me. Our driver kept turning around to compliment her on the perfection of her Italian and insert his nose into her cleavage. Meanwhile I attempted to draw his attention to the imminent death looming in front. It was a nice exercise in relative time. We got to Florence in a few hours, having aged ten years.

This time Florence was only a staging post. After a night at the Antica Cervia I humped our two bags out to the *autostrada* and we hitched south to Rome. The driver was a gentleman who had a kind word for my Italian as well as Françoise's. That did me the world of good. I forget what make the car was, but in a quiet way of business it was a road-eater. It wasn't an Alfa or I would have remembered. Though the Alfas were fast, they floated sideways on their suspension and had to be steered all the time. This car ran like a train. Probably it was the big Fiat, the one with four headlights. The driver was stopping in Arezzo for a couple of hours. He offered to take us on if we cared to wait. We visited the Piero della Francesca frescoes. I'm glad I saw them then. Later on they were over-cleaned and almost rained. At that time they were as much as I could take in at one sitting – or, rather, standing. I just stood there, with that unmistakable feeling of being returned to the source, of starting again. A clear outline filled in with colour will always be my ideal. Admiring the cinquecento for its intellectual daring, nevertheless I am a quattrocento man at heart. I like that odour of the workshop; of wood shavings and glue. Behind it, of course, is the odour of the classroom; of paint on the finger. I remembered how I had once decorated the margins of my schoolbooks, and wondered if, had I been born four hundred years earlier, I would have decorated churches. It would have been a perfectly satisfactory occupation, apart from the occasional heresy hunt and visitation of plague.

Rome hove into view and there was a whole new Renaissance to contend with. This was where even the Florentines came to make it big. The Vatican was their Hollywood. All the paintings were in wide-screen processes. There was nothing smaller than Cinemascope. The candle smoke of centuries having not yet been expunged from the Sistine ceiling, it was up there like a brown cloud,

but what you saw stirring in the murk was enough to keep you going, and Christ came hulking out of the Last Judgment like a line-backer unexpectedly carrying the ball. With Françoise's help I was picking my way through Michelangelo's sonnets. I had all the makings of a Michelangelo bore. It was Raphael, however, who did the permanent damage. By being so much more transparent than his paintings in oils, the wide-screen frescoes in the 'Stanze' convinced me that there is a desirable lightness in art which must be planned for so that it is not perfected away: refinement, beyond a certain point, kills itself. That, or something like that, I wrote in my ever-ready journal. Somewhere off the Via del Corso, Françoise had found a room which had once been the bottom half of another room twice as high. Using that as a base, we went out on art orgies. We had a Bernini binge. I fell for him where Daphne flees from Apollo, in the Galleria Borghese. Until then I had been under the impression that I hated the Baroque. By the time we were relaxing over an iced coffee at an open air cafe in the Piazza Navona, I was Baroque-berserk. The horse's head in the central fountain I thought the wittiest thing I had ever seen: light, fluent, poised, graceful, alert with the accepted tragedy of passing things. Anticipating the rejection of my piece about the Venetians, I was planning a second assault on the *New Statesman* by way of an uncommissioned Italian diary. I had already done a short piece about the *autostrada* down from Bologna. Now I added a thing or two about Bernini. This time I made strategic use of a semblance of honesty, admitting that I hadn't thought much of him before. (The admission that I hadn't known much of him before might have unsettled the reader.) This affectation of candour struck me as quite touching. It reminded me of a poignant moment, much earlier in my career, when I had shyly put my hand up to confess that it was I who had broken wind. At that stage in Italy's continuing history of inflation, coins of small denomination were made of an alloy so light that they almost floated. When we threw our coins into the Trevi fountain they took a long time to flutter to the bottom. I wrote a poem about it. Françoise couldn't complain that I wasn't responding to the country she loved. I responded to everything about it, with an intensity that left Shelley himself sounding as if he had gone to Disneyland instead. What she *might* legitimately have complained about was that the huge two-volume American biography of Shelley which I had humped all the way down there with me remained unopened. I had my answer ready. To know how Shelley had been overwhelmed, I had to be overwhelmed. Why don't we ask the waiter to just leave the whole bottle of Cinzano here?

After Rome it was Naples, where we set a new all-comers record for not getting robbed. We had nothing to steal so it was easy. Had we possessed anything more valuable than my two-volume biography of Shelley it would

undoubtedly have been whipped. This was the town in which, after the Italian surrender but before the end of the war, a fully laden Liberty ship had been stolen, and the skills learned then had been inherited as an art. In a sensationally hot late morning we were sitting at an open air table in front of a café. The open air tables were divided from the street by a line of bushes in concrete tubs. Françoise, whose task in Naples was to visit the museum that had been made of Croce's house, was mugging up on the catalogue. I was busy trying to unknot the syntax of a Michelangelo sonnet. Neither of us was especially delighted when we were joined unasked by Brian C. Adams and his newly acquired wife. They had driven down all the way from Cambridge in order-to break into our idyll. What they didn't realise, as they sat there, was that the Neapolitans were breaking into their car. It was parked in plain sight of us all, about ten yards away on the other side of the bushes. All we could see, though, was the top half of the car, which proved not to be enough. Our visitors having turned out to be unexpectedly charming in this alien context, they left us with a cheery wave which was shortly succeeded by a squeal from her and a low, unbelieving moan from him. It could be deduced that the thieves must have crawled along the side of the car, forced the lock, and hooked out the cameras, wallets and passports. Harder to figure out was how they had removed all four of the car's wheels without making any noise. The car was supported on neat piles of bricks, like an art exhibit. Françoise was at her most diplomatic talking to the *Polizia Stradale*. Gallant in their blue jodhpur suits and white Sam Browne belts, they were clearly prepared to give our friends a motorcycle escort in any direction, as long as Françoise came too. Alas, there could be no question of restitution for lost property. Yes, they realised that to the outside observer it might seem remarkable how such a thing could occur in full view of everyone in the street, including the traffic policeman. That sort of thing happened. They forgot to add that in Naples it happened every ten minutes, and had been happening since the famous day in 1943 when the American ship went missing from the harbour. Having returned to our table while these fruitless negotiations went on, I was writing in my notebook. My *New Statesman* Italian diary had acquired another episode.

Relishing the freedom of the unencumbered, after a ritual visit to Pompeii – the heat was so great that I felt I had once shared in its demise – we hitched all the way back up the boot to Florence, where we paused to count our money and lick our wounds. All of the former had belonged to Françoise and was now gone. All of the latter belonged to me. She still looked like a *haute couture* mannequin. I was showing the effects of several weeks of diving into ditches every time we heard a powerful car in the distance. When we checked into the Antica Cervia I

was ready to quit.

The staff of life was waiting for me. Tightly rolled up in plain brown paper, like the baton of a Field Marshal in a people's army, were two copies of the *New Statesman* featuring my article on the Venetian view painters. It was the leading piece in the arts section at the back of the magazine. It covered one and a half pages. My name was in the contributors' list on the front cover. I drew Françoise's attention to these points before settling down to read the piece several hundred times. Even then, in the middle of being carried away, I reminded myself of myself: of how, when my first short book review had come out in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, I had bought ten copies of the paper so that there would be one left over for posterity if I were to suffer nine fatal accidents. Before that, there had been my first poem in *honi soit*; and before that, the first thing I ever published – a contribution to the Sydney Technical High School *Journal* which I had based loosely on a piece in an old war-time issue of *Lilliput*, borrowing only the plot, the names of the characters, the descriptive prose and the dialogue. If, in later years, I had become more capable of making up my own words, I had become no more capable of staying calm when I saw them in print. Debarred by nature from becoming blasé, the best I could manage was an affected air of detachment, and even that fell apart at a moment like this, when an important new step had been taken. I saw, stretching ahead, the dazzling prospect of a professional career as a freelance journalist. After telling Françoise all about it until she fell asleep, I sat up all night completing my Italian diary piece in long-hand. Next morning I mailed it to the *New Statesman*. A whole issue would have to go by without me in it,, but there was just a chance that I might catch the one after that.

The article safely on its way to London by plane, I followed it by road. Françoise was due to live in Cambridge during the next academic year, as a don in New Hall. This was a major development which would entail, on my part, some large-scale personal stock-taking. For now, until term started, she would be staying in Florence, I, on the other hand, had to get back to London to earn a much-needed week's wages on *Espresso Drongo* before I went back up to Cambridge to begin rehearsing the Footlights late-night revue for the Edinburgh Fringe. Richard Harris, known as the other Richard Harris to distinguish him from the then up-and-coming film star, was an architecture student and Footlights actor-singer who was heading home from Florence at that very time so as to submit himself to my dictatorial discipline. He had a large heart to go with his small car – a glorified Mini that had a vertical radiator grille effect stuck on the front so it could be called a Wolseley, With him and his stuff in the car there wasn't really any room for me and mine, but I soon talked him out of any

Qualms, After two solid days of filling in forms at the bank, the *New Statesman* cheque had been turned into Italian money. All of this I gave to Françoise as part payment of my debt, before borrowing it all back again to pay for my share of the petrol I also generously offered to navigate, What I couldn't do was share the driving, because I had never learned to drive. This fact became especially regrettable by the time We were winding up towards Bologna through the same hideous stretch of *autostrada* on which Françoise and I had already faced death coming down the other way. It was getting dark and Richard was tired. When it became evident that would soon be cut in half by a road train if we kept on, he filled Into a lay-by and we sacked out in the open. If this sounds only mildly adventurous, it is because I have not sufficiently evoked the scene. There was only just enough flat ground to sleep on. A cliff led down to a tumbling river far below. The edge of the cliff had been inaccurately used as a latrine by many a desperate driver. Avoiding all that, we were obliged to lay down our heads within a few feet of the hard shoulder. The wheels of the passing trucks were near enough for us to hear them fizz angrily over the roar of the diesels. On the crappy edge of the precipice, with our naked heads presented towards the sizzling wheels of the juggernauts, we stared straight up and pretended to sleep under the stars, or under where the stars had been before the clouds had covered them. When rain started falling out of the clouds, we retired to the car and tried to sleep sitting up. The result next morning was that we couldn't stand.

Things got better during the day. We stopped in Geneva and I took a dip in the lake, defying a sign that said it was forbidden. I drew a small crowd of curious people. Richard was curious about their curiosity and asked them why they found me so fascinating. A small girl with pigtails and steel-rimmed glasses said that the last man who had gone swimming in the lake was already dying when he climbed out. His skin had turned bright pink, she said, with blisters that dripped pus. Apparently the lake was so polluted that there were no bacteria left in it. Nothing was alive in there. Apart from the fact that she said all this in French, she looked and sounded exactly like one of those terrible girls in Hitchcock movies who point out unpleasant truths. Until we lunched next day in Besançon, I spent the whole time taking my pulse and checking the colour of my tongue in the rear-view mirror. The restaurant wouldn't serve us a half carafe of wine, so I had to drink a whole carafe, because my companion was driving. I felt better after that, and slept most of the way to the Channel ferry. On the ferry I once again had two shares of drinking to cope with. The next thing I saw was London. Either we had got there in twenty minutes at an average speed of 600 mph, or else I had slept the hard-earned sleep of the navigator. Young Richard showed scarcely a sign of his ordeal. Already a gap was showing up between me and

those only a few years younger. There were physical things they could do that I couldn't. For instance, some of them, after having had a certain amount to drink, could walk quite a long way before bumping into a wall. I couldn't. Something would have to be done about that sooner or later. Perhaps I could get the walls moved further away.

15. HIT OF THE FRINGE

In the week before rehearsals for the Edinburgh Fringe began, I was scheduled to work, for the usual small but significant financial reward, as Dave Dalziel's assistant in the Sisyphean task of keeping Keith Visconti's film from being cancelled. I needed the cash. The *New Statesman* printed my Italian diary, but the cheque vanished into a party. *Expresso Drongo* was now well into its second year of shooting. On behalf of its director, Dalziel had applied for yet another extension to the original grant so that the film's budget could be expanded to meet its burgeoning projected costs. In Hollywood terms, the overruns had taken off. As head of the production board's operational unit, Dalziel had a persuasive voice in the allocation of funds, but finally it was the board that decided. As chairman of the board, Sir Michael Balcon told Dalziel, in the friendliest possible way, that the film had better enter its post-production phase fairly soon, or else it would have to be shut down – and, by implication, Dave's office along with it. Dalziel, in his capacity as Balcon's protege, felt a crushing sense of obligation on top of his already burdensome professional commitment to finishing what he had started. He was a worried man. At work he maintained his usual cool air. At home he would stare into space. This was made hard to do by the continuing presence of half a dozen Nigerian ex-government officials in exile, but he managed it. In these worrying times for him and Cathleen, I think I helped by eating any scraps of food that might otherwise have been left lying around. My old friend Robin having unaccountably declined to take me in, I was sleeping in the Dalziels' loft. It wasn't a very big loft but my needs were simple, Cathleen was probably more pleased than she looked when I sat up drinking with her husband late at night. It could have made all the difference to his morale. He was a man tinder threat. He needed someone to confide in. The main thing he had to confide was his dawning suspicion that Keith Visconti was insane. 'He's a few bricks short of a load,' said Dalziel abstractedly. It was the first time I had heard this expression which now appears in dictionaries of Australian slang. Either Dalziel made it up, or he got it from Bruce Jennings, and

he made it up. From his suite at Claridge's, Jennings would arrive by Rolls-Royce to help soothe Dalziel's anguish with a jeroboam of Krug. They would spark each other off, I was content to be an auditor. Of course you could always have Keith *killed*? Jennings would suggest. 'The problem would be disposing of the body. Physical contact *not* advisable.'

In consequence of all the dire warnings, a new urgency could be felt on the set of *Expresso Drongo*. A tricky scene was being shot in which Nelia, in the role of the woman seated at the table in the coffee shop, rises from the table and crosses to the window in order to check up on whether another woman, perceived in the distance, is the Other Woman. In the finished film Nelia would be playing the role of the Other Woman as well. For now, she was still the woman at the table. So that Nelia might adopt the right eyeline when she reached the window, I filled in for the Other Woman, Keith Visconti made me stand the right distance away and then rehearsed Nelia in the tricky transition from the table to the window. The camera would be tracking with her, which involved all sorts of problems in focusing and lighting. Just solving these would have been finicky enough. Keith made things more complicated by deciding that Nelia's eyeline was not at the right height, I was a touch too tall. After Keith called 'Action!' I would have to crouch slowly so that Nelia would be looking at the right place. The first time I crouched too late, so that Nelia's eyes slipped downward. The second time I crouched too far, so that it seemed as if she were looking, Keith said, at a dog. The twelfth time Nelia and I both got it right but a lamp blew out. It went on like that for days, with Keith always finding another reason for calling 'cut'. Dalziel spent a lot of time with one hand over his eyes. Nelia wasn't bothered. Her capacity for not being bothered, I had by now decided, had less to do with inner serenity than I had once thought. Nor could it be put down to avarice. Although it was true that as long as filming lasted she had employment, what really enabled Nelia to retain her equanimity in conditions of stress was her almost complete lack of a brain. Either that organ had been surgically removed, or it had been cut off from all information. She was a monster. By the third day — the big day when I, doubling for the Other Woman, had to turn and walk away — I could feel Nelia's eyes on my spine as if they belonged to Catherine Deneuve in Polanski's *Repulsion*, currently packing them in at the Academy. Dalziel still strove to convince himself that *Ex-presso Drongo* if it ever got finished, would have the same effect. He was whistling in the dark. You could tell he knew it. Deep down, where it counted, he was on the rack.

Dalziel would take Keith aside for urgent talks but found it hard to shout into his face. Keith had still not taken a bath. He was even less nice to be near than he had been a year before. 'You can't stand over that guy without a ladder,' said

Dalziel. 'And his breath! It smells like a dead bear's bum.' We were sitting in the Jaguar, which had been taking us back to Brixton until something went wrong again in the transmission. Waiting for the RAC man in the middle of Knightsbridge, we watched the girls go by, or rather I did. Dalziel, the married man, had either lost something of his former keen interest or thought fit to conceal it. Perhaps already feeling the weight of gravity myself, I found a certain melancholy invading my fond regard, like smoke drifting into a beam of light. The female figure was at its slightest since the 1920s. Some of the girls had white lips to match their high lacquered boots. Hairstyles were like tight black helmets. A challenging length of leg still showed between boot-tops and mini hemlines, but otherwise the feminine element had become hard to find. On the most obviously fashionable women, creations carried out in Piet Mondriaan plastic had been imposed, drawing their bodies up into an unyielding grid. The sense of confinement was palpable, or would have been if you were allowed to touch it. These flattenings and polishings, this kit of structures, made beauty less unbearable to look at, but to be thus rescued from the desperation of longing was to be made lingeringly sad.

Girls in uniform. There was a regimentation to this vaunted spontaneity which made 'trend' a more descriptive word than it was meant to be: a viscous, inexorable flow in one direction, The generic word 'pop' made me feel old before my time. It sounded like the unavoidable fate of a bubble. But still there, at the centre of the largely manufactured pop era, was popular music, and that was too abundant to stifle, too witty to ignore. With doom staring him in the face, Dalziel threw a tumultuous Thursday night party at the house in Brixton. The Animals shouted from the loudspeakers. The Nigerians danced. All the Australian expatriates were there, Johnny Pitts, the rebel guitarist of the Downtown Push, for a moment resurrected Leadbelly from the distant past, before forgetting the words and falling sideways. Dibbs Buckley drew a mural in the loft. Bruce Jennings arrived with his next wife. He hadn't married her yet, but he was already calling her by his last wife's first name: a sure sign, with him, of impending nuptials. Dandyishly clad, in show-stopping form, he spoke as if he were still on his first drink. 'I did *indeed* peruse your *obiter dicta* on the subject of the Venetian painters, young Clive/ he pronounced with a vulpine leer, 'and I rather got the impression that you had known them *personally*. One of the two of Canaletto's working drawings are in my possession. There is a drawing of a virile head which at one time led me to suspect that the great man had spent some time in Australia. Now, of course, I *realise*. He caught your eyes exactly. *Not an easy task*.' In fact he was on his last legs, but there was no guessing until he fell, and the only way you could tell that he was falling was if you knew he

didn't dance. He went down with arms flailing, taking his next wife with him. Since everyone else was dancing in roughly the same manner, nobody realised Jennings had fainted. His next wife, pinned under him, cried for help but was not heard. In the clear space around Keith Visconti, I danced with Nelia. I had gone off her, yet there was no denying her gentle beauty, so spiritual-looking if you did not know her. She smiled at me fixedly, no doubt thinking of John Newcombe.

Next afternoon at the NFT there was a BFI production board screening for the board members and journalists. This was an important day in the career of Dave Dalziel. All the short films on which he had given technical advice, and for which the BFI had provided the facilities, were to be screened one after the other in a programme which he had carefully planned so that a finished fifteen minutes of the Keith Visconti film would be next to last, as a quiet interlude before the final, powerfully rhythmic *San Francisco*, a ten-minute documentary montage to the music of an unknown pop group strangely calling itself Pink Floyd. In the crucial spot just before *Expresso Drongo* Dalziel had carefully placed a short puzzle picture which would ensure that a simple story of a waiter bringing a woman a cup of coffee would come as a welcome relief. The puzzle picture had been directed by the well-known experimental writer J. D. Sullivan, who committed suicide a few years later, some said because of too much competition from other experimental writers. At the time we are talking about, J. D. Sullivan still had the only game in town. His Arts Council grant for experimental writing had been renewed year after year while he turned out a succession of defiantly unreadable experimental books. Years before John Fowles ever thought of it, J. D. Sullivan had written a novel with alternative endings. He had also written a novel whose chapters came loosely arranged in a box, so that you could rearrange them in any order you pleased, or, some cynics had suggested, so that you could throw away the ones you didn't like. He had published a novel with a hole through the middle so that you could read the last page while you were reading the first. There was nothing experimental that J. D. Sullivan had not done as a writer. Now he wanted to be an experimental film-maker. I had been in on the meeting at which he had first expounded the idea of his film to Dalziel. It had taken place in a Japanese restaurant in Soho. Sullivan, a big man with a bull neck, had explained why Shakespeare was really no good as a playwright. 'People don't talk like that, do they?' he had asked, stabbing a piece of raw fish with his chopstick. 'Do they?' he had asked again, looking at me. I had had to admit that they didn't. J. D. Sullivan was well organised. Everything Dave taught him, he learned immediately. The film got made. A heavily compact assemblage of cross-cut imagery, so intricately elliptical that it made your brain

ache like a sore foot, it had authority: it looked *meant* in its meaninglessness. You could tell, when the screen filled with rotting flesh, that bourgeois society was being somehow criticised. When a building collapsed, it was a fair inference that a rotten social system had been rumbled. J. D. Sullivan's film was a testament. It was dissatisfied. It made *you* dissatisfied. Above all, it made you dissatisfied that it went on so long. Though short, it lasted for ever. Even *Expresso Drongo* would seem sprightly by comparison. A nice sweet dose of Nelia's impassive face would be just what the doctor ordered.

At the screening, J. D. Sullivan's film was barely half over before it became obvious that the packed audience was inwardly begging for relief. They were squirming under the impact of J. D. Sullivan's pitiless symbolism. 'We'll be starting with the shot where Nelia's sitting there with her legs crossed and her mouth slightly open in anticipation,' whispered Dalziel loudly. 'She looks like she's thinking about the pork sword. Ought to go down well.' A female journalist seated in front of us turned round in what I guessed was outrage. Dalziel didn't notice. He was a tense man. A lot depended on the extract from *Expresso Drongo* being well enough received to warrant further financing. Otherwise the single most expensive project the BFI had ever backed would be remembered only as a dead albatross slung around Dalziel's neck. There was cause for hope, however, as the end titles of J. D. Sullivan's film came up, superimposed over a close-up of a calf being born. Polite applause from the audience was punctuated by the occasional muffled cry of 'Thank God'.

For the lovely face of Nelia, that mystery so haunting until solved, a place had thus been prepared, in the audience's collective mind, as yearningly welcoming as the wall of a monk's cell primed with fresh plaster so that Fra Angelico might draw an angel. What we saw next, however, were the words *A man alone*, *un film de* Alain le Sands. Dalziel's seat snapped back. He would have been off and running to the projection box if I hadn't stopped him. Caution was the right reaction. If Dalziel had reached the projection box he would have strangled Alain le Sands and thus attained the wrong kind of fame, as a murderer, although it would have been the right thing to do. Alain le Sands was in there, of course. Craning back awkwardly over our shoulders, we could see his wildly grinning face looking out through one of the observation ports. What we suspected at the time later proved to be untrue: le Sands had not held a gun to the projectionist's head. Le Sands had merely turned up during the screening with his can of film under his arm and convinced the projectionist that there had been a last minute addition to the schedule. The projectionist, like many in his trade, had been too blind to notice that le Sands had the eyes and teeth of a fanatic. *A Man Alone* unspooled its familiar, incompetently captured obsessions. It turned out, though,

that le Sands had acquired a hitherto unprecedented sense of proportion. His film was no longer a fragment of a feature. It was now a complete short film, with an ending to go after its beginning. There was a last scene. It was set in Soho. There was a doorway. From it emerged Dave Dalziel and myself. A rear view of Alain le Sands lurched towards us. His dialogue was roughly as it had been on the day, but new words had been dubbed over Dalziel's moving mouth. 'Your film is too challenging, Mr le Sands,' Dalziel seemed to say, 'too dangerous to our establishment values. It must be suppressed.' We got into the car and sat there while Alain le Sands lectured us through the windshield. A shot from another angle, obviously secured at another time and with a different car, enabled the lecture to last longer. 'The true creator thrives on frustration,' orated le Sands. 'You and your cohorts can no more stop this new upsurge of ... than ... thus —'

Surprisingly few among the audience laughed aloud while *A Man Alone* was on the screen, but everyone was well prepared to pick nits by the time the extract from *Expresso Drongo* came on. The effect was not as planned. Though Nelia looked suitably serene, gratitude for tranquillity was not the prevailing emotion. There was widespread, vocal disbelief at how long it took to be served a cup of coffee. The exquisite touch of the shooting and editing provoked no applause. *San Francisco* saved the day for the screening as a whole, but *Expresso Drongo*, one felt, had run out of its borrowed time. As the crowd dispersed, Dalziel received many congratulations from board members and critics. There was no word of praise for Keith Visconti. Even Alain le Sands was held to have more talent. 'You're on to something with le Sands,' said one film critic from behind the dark glasses he was famous for never taking off. 'I like the way his camera work always *declares* itself. Like to do a piece on him. Give you a bell.' Dalziel nodded glumly. 'That coffee commercial,' said Sir Michael Balcon, 'is the only really big mistake you've made, David.' Dalziel was downcast. As always there was his lovely car to distract him. This time the Jaguar started at the first turn of the key. We had almost reached home before the engine fell out on to the road. Not even the sudden, total loss of power and the shriek of scraping metal from under the car made it easy to believe, so we got out to check up. This was lucky, because the fire started with a thump. A puff-ball of flame filled the front seats where we would have been sitting. 'The guy who sold it to me had great timing,' said Dalziel thoughtfully. 'I only just finished paying for it.' A woman in a nearby house had already rung the police. She came running out with a bucket of water. Dalziel waved her back, telling her it would only help the burning oil to spread. Watching his strength in adversity, I wondered if I had what it took to succeed in the theatre. For a writer to stay true to his gift, provided he has one, is not as hard as writers are fond of making out. To keep going in any of the

collaborating arts requires steadfastness. Misfortunes sooner or later must occur. I caught the train back to Cambridge in a pensive mood. Luckily, when I got there, the task of putting the Edinburgh Fringe Footlights revue together was so pressing that there was not time to brood. Compressing the two-hour May Week spectacular into a one-hour intimate late-night revue, I had every excuse to trim the cast. I might have done this more gracefully, but to lighten the ship was certainly the right approach. As I remember it, the number of on-stage participants went down from about sixty to about six. New opening and closing numbers were written. The Fantastograd Russian Dance Ensemble number was cut in half, making it twice as funny. Julie Covington was unavailable for Edinburgh that year, but Homerton had produced yet another lovely singer called Maggie Henderson, and she was enrolled to sing the two best of the spotlight songs which Pete Atkin and I were continuing to turn out with a great show of dedication on my part, and real dedication on his. Actually, when I look back on it, I realise that I was then understating, rather than overstating, the amount of work we were all putting into every number. I got very little sleep. There was no need, although I behaved as if there were, to purse my lips and make tired noises. My tired eyes must have conveyed the message. My wisdom teeth were the only part of my body that physically collapsed. They started to ache and there was no time to fix them. Finally, in the Footlights clubroom, with the whole cast singing and dancing its way through the intricacies of the closing number, the moment came when I had to go to hospital or pass out with pain. The orthodontist at Addenbrooke's hospital looked into my mouth and said, 'How long is it since you've seen a dentist?' I told him. He nodded. 'Well get the wisdom teeth out straight away. They're all impacted. But you've got plenty of other things wrong that you'd better have seen to fairly soon. Fact is, it's a while since I've seen anything like this. I'd like to get some photographs of your mouth for a paper I'm doing. With your permission of course.' I signalled my compliance, unable to speak because by that time he had my mouth propped open with a metal jack. The wisdom teeth were cut out under general anaesthetic and I was back at work next day with enough stitches in my rear gums to make it feel as if I were half-way through swallowing a rattan mat. On a diet of antibiotics, Dexedrine and creamed potatoes, I finished rehearsals and we headed north in a fleet of cars. Once again I was Richard Harris's passenger. While he drove all the way to Edinburgh I sat hanging in my seat belt, delirious. In a day made dark by rain, huge illuminated signs said the north. I dreamed my primal dream of inadequacy, the one in which I am trapped with no pants on up a tree in a playground of the girls' high school. They pretend not to notice me. Many hundreds of times I have woken up sweating from this dream, without ever being

able to decide which kind of fear it is meant to embody, the fear of being humiliated or the fear of being ignored.

In Edinburgh the latter fear receded, temporarily if not permanently. The Footlights late night revue was the hit show of the Fringe. This was not as remarkable an occurrence as I was later able to make it sound. There were hundreds of events on the Fringe. Most of them were starting from zero and not likely to get even as far as square one. The universities were able to mount a concerted effort, and of the universities Cambridge was the one with the glowing theatrical tradition, so the audience came anyway. And of the various plays and shows put on by Cambridge, the Footlights was the one with the internationally resonant name. The theatrical correspondent of *Die Zeit* had us on his must-see list. In Lauriston Hall, the best venue on the Fringe, we were the last show of the night for an audience that had spent the early evening being less than thrilled by the official production of *The Rake's Progress* in the Assembly Hall. Sold out for every night of the run before we even opened, we couldn't lose. It is nice to be able to report in all objectivity, however, that the show was pretty good. If it was running tonight and had my name in the programme, I would still be proud of its precision, energy and sheer glamour, although some of the material would look more out of date than the flared trousers, zipped boots and velvet jackets that adorned the male members of the cast. Most of these items of clothing have since come back into fashion, if only as parody. Much of the apolitical, would-be surrealist verbal humour, however, would now seem irredeemably passe. Striving to separate itself from previously successful styles, it sounded like all of them without attaining any lasting originality. In the technical sense, it was reactionary. The writing was attempting *not* to do things – always a choking brief. It was trying not to sound like the Goons, like *Beyond the Fringe*, like *Cambridge Circus*, like ten other things. Almost the only area left open was television parody.

My own best monologue, delivered by Jonathan James-Moore far more funnily than I could have done, was a lampoon of one of those BBC winter sports commentators who wore white sweaters and beanies and told you nothing useful. (Nowadays they wear parti-coloured Goretex anoraks and tell you nothing useful: they have gone down-market without uprating the info.) This was my first fully effective monologue from end to end. I had kept cutting it and sharpening it up until there wasn't a line in it that didn't work. Having a thousand people a night laughing as one at every gag was a great pleasure, and the editorial rigour I developed in this way was to stand me in good stead in future years. If I hadn't written those monologues, and especially that one, I would never have known how to write a thousand-word column with a

cumulative effect. But when you took the thing apart, it was standard stuff. I was merely doing a more refined version of what I had been doing since I was in high school – raising a laugh by guying some recognisable, self-revealing speech mannerisms on the part of the prominent. My winter sports commentator, Alexander Palace, patronised foreign competitors while confidently predicting success for the British ones. Everyone knew that this was what BBC sports commentators did, so there was a yelp of recognition when a fictitious BBC sports commentator stood there doing nothing else. To this day, the laugh of recognition remains the one I seek. It comes from values communally shared. At its best, that kind of humour can push back a barrier, by articulating what is already suspected but nobody has yet dared to say. At its worst, it is complacent. At the time we are talking about, I was more comfortable than courageous.

In retrospect the discrepancy between what was going on in the world, and what I was prepared to say about it, seems glaring – at least to me, the only person really interested. Then, however, I struck myself as adventurous enough in what I wrote, and for stagecraft I was ready to take any kudos going. After the evening performance of *Love's Labours Lost* there was only thirty minutes to erect the Footlights set, so it had to be simple. I made a virtue of this, personally designing a three-piece hardboard screen like a triptych, with a doorway in each of the side panels. The screen was painted white and covered in learned graffiti done by me and Atkin with black and red felt-tip pens. Slogans like IT DON'T MEAN A THING IF IT AIN'T GOT THAT SWING (Duke Ellington) and MEREDITH IS A SORT OF PROSE BROWNING, AND SO IS BROWNING (Oscar Wilde) proclaimed our ideals of catholicity without eclecticism, a universal intensity of effect, etc. Lit brilliantly by the Fresnel spotlights on the gantries, the screen looked like the wall of a loft that had been inhabited by all the students in history. In its disfavour it could be said that it was exactly the appropriate setting for a clever-dick undergraduate revue, but it had a conspicuous virtue. The next act could be prepared behind it and come on in the dark through one door before the previous act had finished going off through the other door, so there was no gap between numbers. This gave an exhilarating effect of speed. The jazz band led by Robert Orledge could be positioned conspicuously in front of the screen and still leave plenty of acting area down-stage. To isolate a monologist or singer, all we had to do was switch off the spots and floods of the general lighting and switch on one of the two limes positioned high in the gallery at the back of the hall. Picked out in the soft circle of a lime, Maggie Henderson sang a song by Atkin and myself called 'If I Had My Time Again' to such effect that Harold Hobson, the *Sunday Times* critic, made public love to her in his column. I was proud, no doubt too proud, of the precision of all these effects. Nothing was allowed to go

wrong. It turned out that Jonathan James-Moore, after he had finished his winter sports monologue, had trouble getting off the stage in the dark. His spectacles didn't work without a modicum of light. On the first night, he groped his way into the drum-kit, turned around, and groped his way off the front edge of the stage, which was about four feet from the floor. He fell into the front row and sat there between two members of the audience for the whole of the next number. They were stunned, but not as stunned as he was. The risk was eliminated from the second night onwards. Someone was detailed to go out and get him and lead him off. Every move, including this, was plotted on the stage manager's chart. I monitored the show every night, ran drills each day to eliminate faults, and one way and another indulged myself in the role of overseer.

Actually all these refinements, once the aim of slick, high-speed, value-for-money, stop-for-nothing efficiency had been decided on, were matters of simple mechanical deduction. I had more right to be proud of the production numbers, in which cutting and long rehearsal had improved already successful pieces into gosh, how-did-they-do-that? *coups de theatre*. Squeezed to half its original length and re-rehearsed so that every move was a gag, the Fantastograd Russian Dance Ensemble made the ideal pre-closer. Russell Davies did one of those Cossack dances performed in the sitting position, with the cocked feet kicking sideways as if at two soccer balls placed a couple of yards apart. He had never had any dance training but once he had seen or heard anything, he could copy it. When he folded his arms, squatted and kicked, the audience rose to its feet in a panic. After about a week of bringing the house down, Davies mildly complained that his feet were hurting a bit. I slapped his back with comradely understanding and discovered only several nights later, when he held up one of his boots in the dressing room and blood ran out of it, that he had been kicking his way towards hospital. His dedication to the show went beyond the heroic. Suicidal was a better word. The whole cast was motivated like, fanatics.

It was my misfortune, however, not to be in the show. Having my name on it wasn't enough. Even after running drills and re-rehearsing for a couple of hours a day, I still had too much time on my hands. The Scottish National Gallery had some useful Poussins but I couldn't look at them for ever. At the Traverse I joined in discussions, usually unasked, but the Americans from the La Mama company liked their own voices too, and they had a social revolution to proclaim. I saw matinee performances by other revue groups. Some of them were rather better than I was prepared to allow: the Scaffold, for example, were on at the Traverse and performing material which must have made our stuff look class-ridden to anyone with an objective eye. But most of the revue groups, especially the ones from other universities, were just less disciplined and more

thinly cast versions of ours. There was no point going on with the search. Anyone who saw everything on the Fringe would end up in a basket. So with Daryl Runswick and his band I organised a poetry-and-jazz programme for the afternoons, featuring my poetry and his jazz. It is a matter of regret among poets, however, that poetry lovers, or at any rate poetry lovers who turn up to poetry readings, are not a glamorous bunch. Everything E. M. Forster says about his fellow music lovers applies with bells on to poetry lovers. They wear personally-knitted beanies. They bring their own sandwiches. Intoning my translation of Mon-tale's *The Sunflower* while the Daryl Runswick trio backed me up with dulcet riffs, I gazed out over the thinly populated hall — they all sat a long way apart, so as to facilitate concentration – and resolved to try something more ambitious next year. That I would be back next year I didn't doubt. It felt like home. Like all those who have left home, I know exactly how home feels when I find it again, wherever that might happen to be. Haunting the second-hand bookshops, swaggering along the Royal Mile, taking an ill-advised short-cut through the Grass Market late at night in the sad hour before the alcoholics so far gone that they were eating boot polish had crawled away to sleep, I treated Edinburgh as if it were at my feet. Actually I was at its. The strict romance of the city had found a suitably compliant devotee.

16. BLACK TIE, WHITE KNUCKLES

Back in Cambridge, I should have settled to my studies. It hardly needs saying that I was unable to. Instead of disappearing into the University Library I disappeared into the language laboratory. If I could have my way, I would still be down there, learning Persian by now, or perhaps Basque. The language laboratory was my bunker. In it, like Hitler in his last days, I could plot the manoeuvres of phantom armies and hide from the implications of the flashes in the distance, the trembling of the earth, the drone from overhead. Another bunker was the Copper Kettle, which at that time began rivalling the Whim as a hangout for the aesthetes. Internally, the difference between the two places was no more striking than that between, say, the Deux Magots and the Flore. Through the big front windows of the Copper Kettle, though, a diarist could look across at King's while he sucked his pen. Establishing rights to a small table by the simple expedient of piling my books on it, I sat for hours bringing my journal up to date and pursuing my brilliantly successful strategy of adding depth to my view of Shelley by reading anyone except him. Wittgenstein induced the same passion as Croce but at a different temperature. Wittgenstein was liquid helium. Saturated arguments crystallised out as aphorisms. I read him as literature: an approach which, I much later realised, is probably the correct one for anyone except the professional logician. Nowadays I can see his sentences, each resonating like a leaf of a xylophone made of ice, as part of an Austro-Hungarian imperial tradition which he fits as surely as Schnitzler or Klimt, as well as part of the larger German aphoristic treasure-house that includes Lichtenberg, Schopenhauer and Goethe himself. But if that whole expressive effort is now one of my touchstones – one of the things I would like my work to be *like* – then Wittgenstein was the way in, and still rules that long corridor by a tall, uncompromising head. It is so hard to register the thrill of discovery. You have to think yourself back to a time when part of what built you was not there. You have to unbecome yourself. This much I can say for sure, however: Wittgenstein's demonstration that the multiplicity of the self could not only be

lived with, but could actually be an instrument of perception, was a revelation to me, and partly because I already knew it. The things that influence our lives don't necessarily just give us the courage of our convictions – they usually help to alter those, or at least refine them – but they do usually make us feel better about our propensities. Croce had made me feel better about being unable, or unwilling, to distinguish between high art and popular art. Wittgenstein made me feel better about being unable, or unwilling, to construct a coherent self. Intelligence had pulled him apart. In Sydney, when I was first a student, Camus had helped console me for the feeling that my life was in pieces. Everybody's life, he said in *The Rebel*, feels like that from the inside. I had acknowledged his assistance by cultivating an existentialist air of amused resignation: a set of the eyebrows which incorporated, no doubt too successfully, the concept of the Absurd. But a wish that the pieces might one day be reintegrated was hard to quell. Now here was Wittgenstein, whose personality was in a million fragments. They shone. I got his aphorisms by heart. They were a star catalogue. Croce had carried me away. Wittgenstein carried me back to myself. There must have been a self there of some kind, or I wouldn't have been able to register these comings and goings. I luxuriated, however, in the awareness of an undiscovered country in the mind. Every man his own *terra incognita*. With the slim volumes of Wittgenstein's output piled up like poetry, I sipped coffee, scattered ash, and soaked up the *Philosophische Bemerkungen* like a parallel text of the *Duino Elegies*. It was a cool love and that could be why it has lasted. Even today, in moments of depression, I still visit Trinity College chapel and commune with his brass plaque. Now he was depressed, and look what *he* got done. How? Because he knew that his unhappiness was only personal.

Other bunkers were the various cinemas, at which my attendance increased, as if that were possible. The *Cambridge Review* appointed me film critic. In London, recent *cineaste* publications such as *Movie* magazine had already imported the *Cahiers du cinema* approach into English. In Cambridge, it was still unheard-of for anyone to take Hollywood movies as seriously as continental art films. Treating movies and films as if they were part of the same continuity was a kind of heresy. As always, heresy made for more sparkling copy than orthodoxy. There was no particular posturing involved on my part. The propensity to take popular art seriously was in me by nature. Week by week in the *Cambridge Review* I would talk about Fellini or W. C. Fields, Kurosawa or Don Siegel, as if they were in the same business, which I believed they were. I explained, perhaps too confidently, why Fritz Lang's best film was not *Metropolis* but *The Big Heat*. I was tireless. I was tiresome. I was omniscient. I was a pain in the arse. But my *Cambridge Review* film critic's job, though

unpaid, was invaluable practice at writing a thousand-word column each week. Employing my Footlights monologue training, I shaped each column as a performance, with a set up, an early pay-off, a development section, a late pay-off and a closing number. I learned that it wasn't necessary to cram one's whole *Weltanschauung* into this week's piece: save some of it for *next* week. Above all, I learned how to make the writing not sound like writing. If a parenthesis grew to such a length that it would have sounded unnatural read out, I recast it as another sentence. I tried to make every sentence linear, so that the reader never had to look back. This trick, the essence of writing for the theatre or television, is not so necessary when writing for the page, but readability depends on it. Well before my year as a film critic was up, I had evidence that I was getting somewhere. Since everyone, even the dons, went to the cinema, everyone had his own opinion. Since everyone, even the dons, saw the *Cambridge Review*, he wanted to discuss his opinion with me, especially if his differed. The *Cambridge Review* had an illustrious heritage. It had prestige. But that wasn't why I enjoyed writing for it. What I enjoyed was the communal aspect. It was like preaching a weekly sermon and then having to justify it to a rebellious congregation filing out of church. There was an aspect of showmanship that suited my temperament, and an aspect of obligation to the complexity of events which suited the only sense of responsibility I had. Already the evidence was accumulating that whatever I eventually wrote, I wouldn't be writing it in an ivory tower. A circus tent would be more my pitch. So even when I was lounging in the dark I was thinking about the hot lights. The only reason I was hiding, I told myself, was that I was in a false position. My ditherings were nothing to those of my nominal thesis subject Shelley, whose two-volume biography I finally got around to finishing, with some alarm at the erratic nature of the hero I had chosen. Here was another lesson. Since then I have selected my role models with more care.

In the underground maze which I mentally, and to a great extent physically, inhabited, the connecting tunnels that led from the language laboratory to the coffee bars to the circuit of cinemas led on, I need hardly add, to Footlights, where I would finish the day by adding to my already monumental bar bill. With Barry Brown now safely installed as President, I had no duties except to fill my self-elected office as elder statesman and wise counsellor. After a special screening of *The Bank Dick* in the clubroom I gave a detailed lecture on the art of W. C. Fields. 'He never *led*?' I announced, as if I had learned the lesson myself. 'He just let himself be overheard.' Ruthlessly exploiting my friendship with Joyce Grenfell, I arranged for her to be guest of honour at the Footlights annual dinner. The first great lady most of the club members had ever seen in action close up, she wowed them with her perfect manners. I was pretty

proprietary about her afterwards. Far into the night I laid down the law about Ealing comedy. Why had it gone so far and no further? Because the social forces that gave it shape held it reined in. Why were the Americans so much more penetrating? I had my theories. I expounded them. Another round? Put it on my card.

Looking back, I can now see that I must have been a bit of an Ancient Mariner, telling tales of old that held people riveted only because I had them pinned against the wall. Yet some of the time I spent haunting the place was spent well. Atkin and I seemed always to be writing at least four songs at a time. One of the best things about our collaboration was that I received more instruction than I gave. Atkin's justified enthusiasm for the Beach Boys and the Lovin' Spoonful he passed on to me. An instigator, he organised the recording of a limited-edition disc of what we fancied to be our best songs. The edition was limited to whoever could be persuaded to fork out for a heavy shellac pressing in a cardboard cover. A surprising number of people did. Atkin and Julie Covington did the singing. I forget where the recording sessions took place, but remember well that they didn't happen in a proper studio. The venue must have been somebody's college rooms. I recall that a grey blanket was hung up to make a sound booth. The sound quality was frightful. Julie's voice came purely through the static as it would have come purely through a war, but in all other respects the disc caused us misgivings even in our moment of creative euphoria. We distributed it with solemn warnings to ignore its limitations. This was a grave mistake. Nothing except a finished product should ever be put up for judgment. Art is a matter of deeds, not intentions. That art was what we were involved in we had no doubt, and might even have been right. The title of the disc was taken, in all solemnity, from Eliot: *While the Music Lasts*. Later there was a sequel called *The Party's Moving On*. Today, copies of both change hands at too high a price for either me or Atkin to buy them up and melt them down. Our songs always had fans. Just why the fans, over the next six or seven years of hard work, never accumulated into a listening public big enough to keep us alive, had better be the subject of another, and different kind of, book. This is a book about becoming, not being, and it is getting near the end, because by this time my extended apprenticeship was clearly in its terminal phase. If I wasn't quite ready to ply my trade, whatever that was, I certainly couldn't go on preparing for it much longer. There was a credibility problem. In London, among Nick Tomalin's hard-bitten Fleet Street friends, I was known as the world's oldest student. In Cambridge I was known as an aspiring Grub Street scrivener living cheap on college food, or a would-be theatrical assiduously preparing for his advent into the West End. These contradictory views both had

something to them. I was caught in the middle.

As a Footlights sketch writer and performer I might have, and perhaps should have, gently faded away at this stage. To inspire an Indian summer of activity in this area, Tony Buffery returned from post-graduate studies in psychology at Toronto. When an undergraduate in Cambridge he had been the member of the original *Cambridge Circus* cast who had pulled out because he wanted an academic career. In his absence, many Footlights cognoscenti, Eric Idle included, had assured me that Buffery was the most inventive cabaret talent ever: not as aggressive as John Geese, perhaps, or as intellectually wide-ranging as Jonathan Miller, but with an ear like Peter Cook and a mind from outer space. Though some of this sounded like legend-building, it is always interesting when people adverse to that activity make a common exception. When Buffery returned to Corpus Christi as a don, I was ready to find him remarkable, although I didn't expect to see much of him. After a week of the port and walnuts, however, he was up the wall, over it, and into Footlights as if he had never been away. Very tall with thick glasses and curly hair like Harold Lloyd, he was so lacking in arrogance that the young made him nervous. He couldn't have been more approachable, so I approached him. Partaking of the strong Footlights oral tradition by which fragments of sketches are passed down from one intake to the next, Idle had once told me a killing line from a Buffery sketch in which the Queen Mother, played by Buffery in a floral hat, made a speech to open a redbrick university, which was gradually revealed, as the speech proceeded, to have very little going for it. 'Plans have already been drawn up to equip the seventeen-storey science block with a lift. Or a staircase.'

'He used to take the laugh after the bit about the lift,' Idle had explained, 'and then hit them with the staircase. They were helpless.' Remembering this vivid fragment, I now asked Buffery what had come next. 'I can't remember,' he said, with a slight stutter. 'I kept changing it all the time and never wrote it down. I remember she said: "I name this library, Library." They liked that. But I never finished anything. Lacked discipline. Still do, really. Why don't we write something together?'

I had some notes for a sketch about the Olympic games in my pocket. After my tried and tested winter sports number I wasn't too keen on the idea of another monologue. Maybe it would work better as a two-hander. I read out some bits of it to Buffery, suggesting that we could share it out for two voices. 'No, you do the words,' said Buffery, with a light switching on behind his spectacles, 'and I'll be the athletes.' After a grand total of about two hours' rehearsal we tried the number out at the next Footlights smoker. From off-stage I supplied a BBC-type commentary full of the usual wretched optimism about

British athletes who had no chance. Buffery kept crossing the stage in various *personae*. He was the German superman Hans-Heinz Reichstagger. He was the Russian female javelin thrower Olga Stickintinskaya. He was Tomkins, the perennial British loser with the pulled hamstring who might have done so much better. Hidden in the wings, I sometimes lost my place in the script, so entranced was I by the way Buffery became these people. Without leaving the ground, or not by much, he could mime Reich-stagger doing a sixteen-foot pole vault, clicking his heels in mid-air as if he had suddenly met a superior officer. Russell Davies was still the most protean performer I had ever met, but in his case there was one dour and reticent personality holding it all together. Buffery had multiple selves. By day he was a scientist, probing the human brain to find out which sections of it did what. By night, as a performer, he was a dozen other people. He was also a married man with children. Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde weren't in the running. Neither of them ever made anyone laugh. Buffery made people laugh until they ached. If he wanted to work with me, I would be crazy to turn the chance down.

I was also, considering my other obligations, crazy to take it up. My best excuse was that the collaboration provided a modicum of extra income. The Footlights fielded a cabaret team which would perform anywhere in Britain for a suitable fee. When half the fee was given to the club and the rest was divided amongst the participants, it was an unsuitable fee, but it helped me believe that I could earn my own living. It was more fun than supervising undergraduates in Sidney Sussex and easier on the nerves than trying to sweat a thousand words for the *New Statesman* into a gleaming block of lapidary prose – both of which things I was doing as often as I could, although without showing any signs of digging my fingers into the slipping side of the pit of debt in which I helplessly trod slime. I was still in hock to Footlights and now that I was an ex-President the Senior Treasurer tended to clear his throat significantly when we met. A don from Selwyn called Harry Porter, he was a sweet man and a great friend, but neither the university bye-laws nor his own impeccable probity allowed him to encourage the notion that a club could be a bank. My levels of expenditure effortlessly outsoared my levels of income. Even the train journey to Oxford cost money. When Françoise moved to Cambridge in order to become a don at New Hall, domesticity loomed, with all its requirements of financial equilibrium. Also there was the challenge of performing away from the home patch, where the audience would not be so indulgent.

I was right about that. At Goldsmith's College Ball in London, John Cleese, by then an ex-Cambridge professional and already well known, was the first act on. His monologue was brilliant. The huge audience, pissed and impatient to

dance, barely heard him out. I watched one purple-faced student at the back of the crowd shout 'Harold Wilson!' over and over while Cleese was performing. Cleese was pretending to be a wartime air force officer in a hurry to recruit new pilots. 'Can anyone fly a B-17? [Pause] All right, can anyone fly a B-16? [Longer pause] A B-3? [Very long pause] Can anyone *drive*?' I was wide-eyed at the perfection of his delivery, and at his courage, because during all the time he was at work, this florid dick-head at the back was shouting out, 'Harold Wilson! *Harold Wilson!*' Then a newly-formed band weirdly known as Cream came on to play a set. I had never heard such a noise. Until then, my idea of an electric band had been the Dave Clark Five. Cream were more like an earthquake. Loudspeakers the size of coffins emitted sound that compressed the air. It was a beat that hurt. Buffery and Atkin and I, our throats dry from the impact of the tumult, retreated to our dressing room to consult. Our dressing room was, literally, a toilet. 'We can't go on,' I shouted thinly. 'We have to,' croaked Buffery. He was right, as usual. When we were announced, the hissing was not universal: it came only from those who had heard the announcement. Luckily the ginger groups in the audience found it easier to attack each other than us. High up on the stage, we were hard to reach except with bottles more accurately thrown than the vast majority of those that flew towards us. Buffery's song about Richard III made a few nice girls laugh. Riding on the shoulders of their partners, they were within earshot. Our Olympics number, however, went for nothing. Working on a bare stage, Buffery had no wings to disappear into and reappear from, while I found it impossible to raise my voice above the growing *brouhaha*, in which the only words that could be heard clearly were the first and last names of the Prime Minister, piercingly repeated like a horn motif in a Mahler symphony. We managed to make our act look meant, though. An objective observer would have found it impossible to tell if we were failing. Perhaps we were succeeding at some mimed ritual.

The Footlights cabaret team was well rehearsed and usually got away with it. Often we did better than that. Natty in our dinner jackets, we felt pretty pleased with ourselves as we sang a planned encore after slaying them for a solid thirty minutes. Audiences who had once been undergraduates themselves liked us best. There could be an awkward amount of chippy social edge if they thought we needed reminding of our advantages in life. Facing some revelling groups, we wondered why we had been booked. Apart from the Goldsmith's inaudible non-event, which could largely be put down to bad acoustics, we had but one unarguable disaster, explicable only in terms of a mistake on somebody's part. Coming

after a string of successes, it was a failure on a scale that builds character, but

while the fiasco was in progress we would have given a lot for a hole to open in the floor so that we could have disappeared into it, still waving and singing. The audience was composed of the farmers of Needham Market, a town within easy driving distance of Cambridge. We imagined the kind of prosperous farmers who drove Aston Martins and in January took their elegant wives to ski at Davos. When we came dancing into the dining room, the farmers were all sitting there as if a giftless artist had drawn them. They didn't have the word 'Farmer*' written on their hats, but there was something on their shoes that looked like loam. Perhaps loam was what they had been eating. They looked glum and we did nothing to cheer them up. Buffery and I did our Olympics number to less reaction than we would have earned by slowly deflating a large rubber raft. The farmers looked resigned, as if waiting for the death of a sick cow which had never been very valuable when well. It wasn't just that they didn't laugh. They didn't smile. They hardly breathed. A carefully planned half-hour of entertainment was all over in seventeen minutes. When we went dancing off, there was a perceptible difference in the quality of the silence. Throats were being cleared in relief. As we stood white-faced outside in the foyer discussing the details of our escape, a representative of the farmers' committee joined us. 'Do you get *paid* for this sort of thing?' he asked with open scorn. 'We certainly do,' said Buffery. 'The agreed fee. And we might as well take it in cash, if you can arrange it.' I was very impressed with that. It was a good lesson all round. Jokes aren't necessarily pearls just because they fall before swine, but a deal's a deal. A performer always feels guilty when he fails. If his guilt overcomes his business sense he will quickly starve. To flop is already penalty enough. Don't punish yourself. The audience will do it for you.

17. WITH A HUMAN FACE

Winter wore on and the very idea of my PhD thesis slipped further back into the past. Spring was in the air again but my heart was heavy with undeclared anguish. Fooled by an early mild spell, the crocuses came up along the barbered edges of the backs, were duly filled with snow, survived for a few hours like candy baskets of sorbet, and so died. Reality had intruded. A similar crisis was being played out in my soul. My nagging conscience was partly stilled by Stakhanovite devotion to whatever work I was doing instead of the work I was being given a grant for. Everything the *New Statesman* asked me to do, I did, even if it was beyond me. In Prague, Dubcek's life was on the line. Now was the time to come to the aid of Socialism with a Human Face. Socialism with an inhuman face had already impressed me as the salient moral fact of the twentieth century, a disaster outstripping even Nazism, which has at least worn its true colours on its sleeve. Weighed down by the evidence of history, my erstwhile radicalism had modulated into a version of social democracy which, while still hospitable to the idea of universal popular enfranchisement, was concerned about the milk being delivered on time to the doorstep. In short, I was no longer a revolutionary. No doubt the *Zeitgeist* would have been relieved to hear this news. I did my best to let it know. Nicholas Tomalin sent me books to review that were hard to make relevant to the temper of the times. I developed a technique for turning any subject into an occasion for an anti-totalitarian essay. I tried to write as if George Orwell were looking over my shoulder. When Eric Bentley's excellent short biography of George Bernard Shaw was reissued, I identified, surely correctly, Shaw's failure of imagination with regard to Stalin as clear evidence that the creative mentality should guard itself against its own inevitable pretensions to omniscience, Less correctly, and ignoring my own homily, I signed off by lamenting that Bentley, presumably through ignorance, had paid so little attention to Shaw's music criticism – a body of work with which, I made it plain, I was intimately familiar. When the piece appeared in the magazine it struck as having the effortless *auctoritas* of holy writ. This mood

was punctured when the *New Statesman* forwarded me another book by Eric Bentley, sent, not for review but for my information, by Bentley himself. It was a reprint of *Shaw on Music*, edited, with a long introduction, by Eric Bentley. He could have humiliated me much more thoroughly by writing a letter of protest to the magazine. Thankful that he had taken such a generous course, I resolved never to fudge again. The intellectual community is self-policing. Nobody who tries to pull a fast one will get away with it for long. Also the memory plays such cruel tricks that you will make enough embarrassing mistakes just writing about what you are sure of.

Shamed into flight by the unremitting uproar of Romaine Rand's supercharged typewriter, I had left the Friar's House and gone into exile in digs across the river. My new nest was a front room with a bow window on Alpha Road. The light bulb had a shade. There were shelves for some of my books. I was half way to respectability already. New Hall was only a few hundred yards up the hill. Françoise lived there in a set of rooms whose austere white walls and plain wooden appointments did not preclude an air of luxury verging on decadence. There was so much shelving that even after all her books had been installed there was room for the rest of mine. I also installed my ashtray: a hubcap off a Bedford van, it could hold the stubs of eighty cigarettes, so I only had to empty it once a day. Life was beginning to seem settled, apart from the nagging disjunction between my nominal role and my actual practice. Even the saintly Professor Hough was showing disturbing signs of having at last remembered that I was supposed to be writing a thesis. I promised to show him the finished article soon. It was easier than telling him I hadn't started. The only finished articles I was turning out were for the *Cambridge Review* and the *New Statesman*. Then *The Times Literary Supplement* – in the person of its assistant literary editor, Ian Hamilton – asked me to review some poetry books. Contributions to the *TLS* were still anonymous in those days. This policy didn't suit my lust for glory but it had the merit of not tipping off the dons that my whole attention had turned towards London. It would have been a false conclusion anyway. The university remained, in my mind and feelings, the one place where I could be everything I wanted to be all at once. To a certain extent I feel that even today. Certain kinds of people belong *only* in universities. Later on they make more or less, usually less, successful attempts to convert the rest of their lives into yet another university. Although nowadays I have to get up early in the morning, on the whole I have been lucky enough to arrange my working life along university lines. Mentally I am still *in statu pupillari*, still pursuing extracurricular activities, still torn between all the attractions of the stalls at the Societies' Fair.

The difference is that nowadays I am not so worried about living out an anomaly: let the public judge. In the spring of 1968 I was less confident, and, being that, more strident. If Cambridge thought of itself as the centre of the world, I was determined to take it at its own estimation. With the universities in turmoil throughout the free world, the Cambridge undergraduates regarded their own activities as being of planetary importance. Apart from Delmer Dynamo, who was engaged in an extensive tour of Britain at the wheel of the Bentley which he had at last coaxed out of the car-park, most of my Americans were gone. It didn't need the debacle of Tet to tell them that the war in Vietnam was a national catastrophe. They had a real moral decision to make. Some of them went into the Peace Corps to do good in Africa, some into the American universities to avoid the draft, some into battle against Mayor Daley's police, some into a long, cold exile. As fast as they left Cambridge, however, more Americans arrived: a new, more vocal bunch who preached direct action. Rome university closed in March. Danny Cohn-Bendit became famous at Nanterre. The new Cambridge Americans wanted to be noticed too. King's College, with a typically canny diplomatic stroke, provided facilities for a Free University. Essentially the facilities were a large room with unlimited supplies of instant coffee, but they were sufficient to supply what the student revolution really wanted — the opportunity for a perpetual meeting. Elsewhere, the world shook. LBJ called it quits on a new term. Bobby Kennedy ran for President and died in the attempt. Martin Luther King was murdered. In the Free University at King's, the rhetoric reached a pitch of ecstasy. A list of Demands was drawn up. A Demand for the complete restructuring of Western civilisation was high on the list. Imported simulacra of Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin called for an assault on the university's property, whereupon, it was promised, the repressive nature of the institution would reveal itself. Called upon to speak by a chairman who was later universally upbraided for truckling to bourgeois elements, I argued against the notion of making demands that could not be met, and thereby provoking a confrontation. There were legitimate demands that *could* be met. The whole apparatus of *in loco parentis*, for example, could be dismantled, with no loss of jobs among the townspeople employed in the colleges and a clear gain in freedom for the undergraduates. This part of my address was listened to in a silence which I construed to be respectful, but when I got to the point of casting doubts on the efficacy, or even the feasibility, of direct action there were snorts of derision from the radical young academics standing at the back, which were soon accompanied by pitying smiles from the undergraduates sitting at the front. I argued against the proposed defacement of King's College Chapel, on the grounds that it would dramatise nothing except propensities towards vandalism;

that it would alienate the proletariat, who, if they didn't care for great architecture, cared for militant undergraduates still less and that there were students in Prague ready to die for the freedoms which in Cambridge were being condemned as illusory.

I was more proud of this impromptu speech than the occasion warranted, because it changed nothing. Speeches rarely do. What changed things in Cambridge was the demonstration outside the Garden House Hotel, staged for a reason now lost in history. Either the hotel had been too hospitable to some representative of the US government, or it had not been hospitable enough to Rudi Dutschke, or perhaps both. Anyway, the students besieged the place. During the siege, a few of them picked up stones and threw them at the windows. All the rest suddenly realised that they liked the talking and shouting part of the revolution but didn't like the part where things got broken and people got hurt. The student revolution in general, not just in Cambridge but in Britain as a whole, was over as from that moment. Effectively the same thing happened in Paris, where, although many more and much bigger stones were thrown, the rhythm of events was dictated by the clubs of the CRS, which descended with a precisely calculated force so as to induce headaches that felt like death but were not it. May of 1968 was theatre. I was glad to be in the cast, if only in a bit part, but like almost everyone else involved I had no intention of relying for long on the unrestrained instincts of my fellow man. The perpetual meeting of the Free University should have proved conclusively to all those in regular attendance that they didn't even know how to conduct a meeting, let alone run a society. In Cambridge the real May, as always, was in June. Well before exam time, indeed well before the time for final revision, the Free University had dissolved, leaving nothing but a rump of misfits who had declared their intention of existing on a single bowl of rice a day so as to dramatise their solidarity with the great, continuing social experiment of the Chinese People's Republic. China was their dreamland. Critical, with some justification, of institutionalised power in the democracies, they managed to believe, because they wanted to, that the centralised, perpetuated and unlimited power of a totalitarian nation was somehow more open to argument, more compassionate, more democratic. Impatient for the millennium but oddly prepared to remain stationary until it arrived, they sat on crossed legs and regaled each other with the prospect of what Cambridge would be like when Mao's vision finally prevailed. Whether King's supplied them with their daily bowl of rice I can't be sure, because by then I had gone too, back to Footlights with a new faith in the validity of the purely frivolous. The impurely frivolous had been on display for a month, and I hadn't liked its inhuman face. The undergraduates could be forgiven their ideals.

Experience and knowledge are required before one can accept that an ideal can be murderous, and perhaps they should not come too early. The young dons who had urged the students on, however, were in a different case. Preaching cold-eyed against Repressive Tolerance, safe in their own jobs while urging their pupils to opt out, they were hypocrites and pleased about it: with the taste of cynicism in their tight-lipped mouths they reminded themselves of Lenin, a name they often invoked. Still working out where I stood, I knew where I didn't stand – with men like them. Not just as a displacement activity, but in a kind of wordless affirmation, I directed, for the last Footlights smoker of the year, a sketch baldly entitled 'Slow Motion Wrestling'. Russell Davies was the referee. Robert Buckman, who was very agile, and Alan Sizer, who was large and very strong, very slowly wrestled each other. Russell Davies very slowly tried to stop them cheating. The whole thing happened very slowly indeed. At one point Sizer very slowly punched Buckman in the stomach while equally slowly lifting him bodily into the air with his other hand. Buckman was airborne for an age, mouthing his agony with agonising slowness, while Davies moved like a glacier to intervene. The audience rioted. I felt cleansed. This was worthwhile. Sartre hailing the Chinese Cultural Revolution as an act of liberation: *that* was a waste of time.

A far bigger success than *Supernatural Gas*, the May Week revue that year was directed by Kerry Crabbe, who generously included 'Slow Motion Wrestling' unmodified as the second-half pre-closer. The audience rioted again. I had other material in the show, including several songs written with Atkin and sung by Maggie and Julie, but 'Slow Motion Wrestling' was my apotheosis in the Footlights. Though all three participants in the sketch contributed to its inventiveness, I was its editor. I took out what didn't work and packed the rest up tight. For hours we shaped the piece until nothing was superfluous and everything flowed. It was a piece of sculpture extended into time, an elastic Laocoon, a brawl by Balanchine. Nothing could justify so much effort and that was its justification. Some of the upcoming Footlights disapproved of us who were now the *ancien regime*. David Hare, a brilliant talent with a capacity for organisation almost unheard-of among undergraduates, had a look on his handsome face that plainly suggested one or two of us, and especially one of us, had been around too long. He had a case. From the viewpoint of a politically committed young dramatist with big plans for a new British theatre of Brechtian social analysis, there was something irredeemably insignificant about Footlights. But when I stood at the back of the Arts Theatre and watched hundreds of ordinary members of the public rocking with laughter at the antics of my three inspired clowns, I couldn't persuade myself that such a moment of communal

joy was reprehensible, even if it was socially irrelevant. No society worth living in is without the irrelevant.

I wasn't at the back door of the Arts Theatre every night. Only every second night. Twice with Buffery and once as a solo act I went through the gruelling experience of a May Ball cabaret. There was applause to be garnered but you had not to mind that it was mixed with the popping of champagne corks, the braying of imported Hooray Henriettas, and the splintering sound of furniture being reduced to toothpicks by a scrum of Hearties. The Pembroke May Ball was the occasion of my solo appearance. Somewhere at the back, the Hearties were duelling with empty bottles of Bollinger. Broken glass fell like rain. On the river that year, Pembroke won the Bumps, or the Lumps, or whatever it was called. The runners-up consoled themselves by burning their boat and throwing the college cat on the fire. David Hare and his admirers would have plenty to react against. They would never forgive themselves for having been at Cambridge. I, on the other hand, had always known that I was just passing through. I took the place for what it had to give, gave back what I had in me, and kept the soul-searching to a minimum, protected by a natural capacity for putting off the moment of reckoning. Everything was a prelude.

18. THE KID'S LAST FIGHT

May week was not only in June, it was two weeks long. Did I remember to say that? In the second week Françoise and I got married. My sole but sensational contribution to the organising of the event was to schedule the reception so that it took place before the ceremony. In the garden of New Hall's Storey's Way annexe the Footlights gathered, along with all the editors and leading contributors from the university magazines I had burdened with my contributions. Françoise's friends, some of them from Italy, looked on with apprehension as the theatricals and the *litterati* tanked up on white wine. It was a bright day and the heat helped. Just in time, the whole party headed off down Castle Hill towards the register office. Françoise and I were in the lead, she looking stunning in a white silk two-piece ensemble, I looking stunned in a grey Carnaby Street suit which had already started to fall apart. Stomping along at the rear came a jazz band featuring Atkin, Sizer, Buckman and Davies. They had played better in their lives, but not when as drunk as that. When the registrar recited my full name there was spluttering in the congregation. Clive Vivian Leopold James wasn't feeling very solemn either. Or perhaps he was, and was covering up. It would have been characteristic. I always was the kind of Bohemian who had to work hard to keep the bourgeois within himself from breaking out. *For how but in custom and in ceremony/ Are innocence and beauty born?* I wasn't innocent and I wasn't beautiful, but she was both. I swayed while she stood still. Then we all went up the hill again to continue the party. The lawn was so crowded that the jazz hand had to stand in the flower-bed. Strad Blantyre had flown in, on the way through to Germany for one last grand tour before he left for Africa. He had news of Marenko. After long thought, Marenko had burned his draft card. This should have given me pause, but there was no pause to be had. Delmer Dynamo arrived. His tour of Britain had ended in Scotland, when the Bentley got stuck on a narrow stone bridge high over a little river. 'I was actually in a phone booth calling the AA,' shouted Delmer happily, 'when I saw the motherfucker start to roll. She swerved off the end of the bridge, she

nosed through this *ridiculous* little wall, she bounced down into the river and she ended up on her back in about three inches of water. I sold her to the guy who owned the pub for a hundred quid and came down by train. Let 'em have it. You can blow it out your ass.'

As happens with all empires, the moment of fruition marked the beginning of decline. My academic career was to linger for another six months before I packed it in, but effectively it was all over. My time at the university was almost up. Later that year I directed the Footlights for the Edinburgh Fringe and had the biggest success I was ever to experience in the theatre. If the show had come to London it would have run for a year and my life might have taken a different course. Equity wouldn't let the show transfer. At the time I thought it was a personal tragedy on a Sophoclean scale. I fought a long delaying action in a doomed attempt to regain the lost momentum. Probably it would have made no difference in the long run. Theatre didn't really suit me. It didn't occur to me that this was because the audience was too small. I thought it was because the audience was too large. My picture of myself was as a lonely writer. On a trip to London I met Ian Hamilton at a pub called The Pillars of Hercules in Soho. He had asked me, by post, to write for his influential little magazine *The Review*. I was already working on my first article, a long piece about E. E. Cummings. Other poets and critics from whom Hamilton had commissioned or was about to commission articles dropped into the pub on the strict understanding that they were staying for only one drink or perhaps two. Ten rounds later they were all still there. Almost instantly I felt about Soho the way I had once felt about Cambridge. Over the umpteenth combination of a pint of bitter with a straight scotch for a chaser, I explained to Hamilton that I had reached another decisive point in my life. 'You're a very complicated character,' Hamilton observed sardonically. I wasn't, but I resolved to become one as soon as possible. Literary London! I could already see myself in that setting: shy, self-effacing, trembling on the edge, but *there*. The metropolitan critic.

That story, if I tell it at all, belongs in another book, which will have to be a collection of fragments. It might be a more reliable account than the one I have written up to now, but of necessity it will be less complete. My unreliable memoirs, in which I have tried to tell the full story even if only in edited form, must now come to an end. I could give up my own privacy as I chose. Where other people are concerned there is no choice. Nor should there be. Beyond the point when it ceased to be my own, my life gets harder to write about, and not just because I must tread carefully. There is so much more to say. In a multiplicity of nuance, only fiction can catch the essence. To rearrange the facts is no longer enough. A young man on the make is a comparatively simple

mechanism.

Let us take a last look at him, in Cambridge, in that lovely late spring of 1968. The poetry magazine *Carcanet* has brought out a special issue with a lot of his poetry in it and not much of anybody else's, which is not *necessarily* the way he likes things, but if that's the way they feel, well, let them be happy. A finely burnished piece called 'Cambridge Diary' has just appeared in the *New Statesman*. In the Arts Theatre, actors are saying his words. His songs are being sung. He has married a don. He is on top of his little world. Against a willow tree across the river from the Wren Library, he sits writing in his journal. He has just told it that he is reasonably satisfied. The insistent suspicion that he has not yet begun, and has nothing to show, is too frightening to record. For someone who has good reason to believe that he doesn't exist apart from what he does, to doubt that he has done anything worthwhile is to gaze into the abyss. On the surface of the water, a midge vanishes into a hungry ripple. *I'm not ready yet*. He wonders why, at his age and having come so far, he still feels that. The culmination of his luck is that he doesn't yet realise he will never feel any other way.

Epilogue

All I can do is turn a phrase until it catches the light. There was a time when I got hot under the collar if the critics said I had nothing new to say. Now I realise that they had a point. My field is the self-evident. Everything I say is obvious, although I like to think that some of the obvious things I have said were not quite so obvious until I said them. In my younger and more nervous years, I sustained myself by thinking myself remarkable. It took time to accept the fact that I was ordinary, and more time to be thankful. Born without a sense of proportion, I had it imposed on me by the weight of evidence. My solipsism was already crumbling when I played my World Record Club 12-inch LP of Beethoven's 7th Symphony over and over at top volume until it drove my mother mad. It was in the glazed«in back verandah of our house in Kogarah, the year I turned eighteen. My Pye carry-gram, with the lid that split into two stereo speakers, had been hefted into position on a chair, with a book underneath to bring it level Willem van Otterloo conducted the Concertgebouw of Amsterdam. I danced to the scherzo. During the adagio I sat on another of the wooden chairs, closed my eyes, and rocked slowly back and forth so that the front legs of the chair lifted an inch off the linoleum. That must have been how Blinky bought the farm. Blinky was my mother's budgerigar. When the day was cool enough to permit the closing of the Cooper-Louvres, Blinky was allowed out of his cage to roam the floor. On that day he must have roamed under one of the front legs of the chair and been crushed just enough to limp away and die under the crockery cupboard. Though I decline to admit culpability, the thought was never to leave my mind that I might be someone who loved art so much he could kill while in its thrall.

My mother survived the shock of Blinky's death, and of all the other outrages I have since perpetrated. Readers of the first two volumes of this autobiography often ask me whether she lives and thrives. The answer is that she does both, although she is a different person from the one I have portrayed — no less kind and brave but much more sophisticated, a natural psychologist whose prose, in her letters, has a rhythm and an easy-seeming perspicuity of detail which I would be pleased to hear it said that I had inherited. The point is that I didn't realise any

be pleased to hear it said that I had inherited. The point is that I didn't realise any of that until later. Not realising things until later is the story of my life. This applied, still applies, to the awkward philosophical problem generated by the existence of other people. Even the people I knew best I seldom paused to appreciate. There have been those I loved who had to disappear before I saw their outlines. Usually it was only my story that they dropped out of, so as to continue theirs. Perhaps, in order to forestall enquiries, I should close by giving a quick account of those personages in these three volumes who, having played a formative part in my own dazzling course, influenced it still further by their daunting ability to have destinies of their own. The Australians, in particular, showed a disconcerting tendency to forget that I was meant to be the captain of the ship they filed aboard, laughing and waving, on that summer night, almost thirty years ago, when the band played and the cicadas sang and we all went sailing to adventure.

As I recounted in *Falling Towards England*, Lilith Talbot went home to marry Emu Coogan. She thought better of it when she got there, perhaps because as a husband he would have been out of his role, which was to be a radical, a gambler, a battler and a legend. A woman can marry a man like that and still stay sane, but she can't teach school, which was Lilith's vocation. The year after she went home, Lilith was taken ill with meningitis, and for a further year was on the point of death. Her great beauty melted into the pain. But she was saved, and her marvellous looks returned, and now, at a huge school in the Western Suburbs of Sydney, she has taught a whole generation of young Australians from different ethnic backgrounds how to construct an English sentence — the lesson at the foundation of our democracy, and one which the old country needs to learn again. Much loved by the thousands of pupils who are the children she never had, Lilith lives alone in an apartment at the edge of the harbour. From her window in the evening can be heard the tinkle of the moored yachts, like wind-chimes in a water garden. After twenty years I found her again, and although I do nothing for her except invite myself to tea, I am a better suitor to her now than I ever was when we were lovers. My past, of which she was a crucial part, served to civilise my future, and now, in the present, and despite the handicap of my frozen heart, our friendship, restored through good fortune after being broken by neglect, will last until one of us dies, to be mourned by the other.

Robin was three different women, all Catholics: a Holy Trinity. With an overwhelming two-thirds of this group I failed to establish the intimacy here recorded. One by one they went home to Australia, where they now think of London as a part of their upbringing, in which — so one of them secretly assures me — I featured as a marginal, affectionately tolerated part of the geography, like

Soane's Museum or Madame Tussaud's. At the time I preened myself as no end of a rogue. Now I see that my love-life was a cliché outclassed by that of any tom-cat. The tremendous, condemnatory last act of *Don Giovanni* was written for Don Juan, not for a feckless young opportunist whose beard had grown because he was too lazy to shave. From the women I did not marry I took what I could get away with, including—a gluttony which can look like generosity in the right light – pride at having given pleasure. More often I gave pain, and probably more often than I thought. It would be hypocrisy, however, to say that I didn't enjoy being a free agent. It would also be ill-advised to say that I did. Marriage is supposed to put a stop to all that. Françoise is not the woman I married, who certainly has the quality of innocence, but only in the sense of being incorruptible by the knowledge to which her high intelligence gives her access. She knew all about me. She knows all about me now, and knows above all that the real blank in this book is not where she should be, but where I should be. In our prurient time, this true age of revelations, even the most sensitive sometimes find it hard to accept that the lasting involvement of two human beings must remain a mystery. The reader has the right to know, however, that something like the wedding in the last chapter happened something like that, and that something like the same marriage is still in existence twenty years later. The long storm of divorce that has blown away the marriage contracts of our generation continues to leave my hair unruffled — what there is of it, and for what such an exemption is worth. Perhaps my house is being saved up for last. Anything more specific I will have to say in a novel, where one can pile in all the right facts, as long as they lead in the wrong direction.

Some of the Australians went home, some stayed away, and much has since been made of who fulfilled his duty and who betrayed it; but the truth is that it all came down to personality in the end. Brian C. Adams, who had struck me as the prototype of the prematurely middle-aged academic, just as I had struck him as the extreme case of the delayed adolescent, went back to Adelaide to begin a university career which I loudly condemned in advance as a caricature. As things have turned out, he has played an important part in furthering the movement to give the study of Australian literature its due dignity without succumbing to provincialism. Particularly impressive, in every article he writes, is his mature, humane judgment, which I would once have said — did often say — that he could never possess. Some people develop, and sometimes they have to do that by throwing off the limiting estimation of those who know them. The privilege I always claimed for myself, of putting off until later the onus of knowing better, I should have more readily extended to others. It might even have been preferable, in the matter of success and failure, never to have judged people at all. Though

the Australians who stayed abroad have made their mark, some of those who returned home have changed the history of their country. A few years back, Romaine Rand and I were in Sydney to appear on a television programme together. Romaine's first book, whose early drafts kept me awake while she typed, had long since made her one of the most famous women in the world. We went to see *Il Trovatore* at the Opera House. Romaine, not liking the production, talked to me animatedly throughout the first act. (Proust, when gladly accepting an invitation to the opera from the Baroness de Pourtales, said: 'I've never heard you in *Faust*.') During the first interval we looked out through the screen of glass at the harbour and the city lights. 'It's beautiful/ I said. 'It's pretty,' said Romaine. 'Venice is beautiful.' She was right, but there was no denying that the city we had left behind had come a long way. The expatriates who had repatriated themselves had realised their dreams at least as well as we had. Australia had done very well without us. We could count ourselves part of it only to the extent that our books were on the racks in the shop at the airport. After the performance we walked, middle-aged and arm-in-arm, up Macquarie Street past the Mitchell Library. In the branches of the Moreton Bay fig trees arching overhead, the possums, driven mad by the spring, were behaving shamelessly. It was a sweet moment, but we didn't even reminisce. We hardly ever meet except in television studios, and even then, for preference, one of us is there only as a satellite image. The stayaways are all like that, more or less. Lost in space, they have only so much time for one another. Huggins, who left us behind in volume one of these memoirs, wrote a book about the early days of Australia that is now being translated into every language on earth. New York, though, is his home. He needs something that tall at his feet. As for Spencer, he is beyond achievement, far gone in a version of our search from which no messages come back. The last I heard of him, he was in Brazil, teaching linguistics. It is less than certain that he will ever go home, and more certain than it should be that he will never publish a thing. He, however, was the man with the gift. Given a brilliance of phrase the way Mahler was given melody, Spencer, if he leaves behind nothing more than a thin exercise book with his ten best poems in it, will be the writer in whose work our wandering generation of Australians finds its purest voice. Why did the children of paradise go out into the world? Why did they give themselves up for lost? We will hear the answer in a cadence.

The same way they had come, on expensive silver wings, the Americans all went home again, because to an American there is so little to be gained by staying away. Sometimes the route home was circuitous, but it always led there. Strad Blantyre was with the Peace Corps in Africa. In his letters he insisted that

he could have done the same work in Harlem to better effect. Milos Forman was right when he said that there are only two places where we feel at home: home, and in America. My American friends were fighting for their country, but the war to be won was within its borders: in a cruel dilemma, they grew through the seeking of its cure. Chuck Beaurepaire, who knew everything, put his egregious self-confidence to good use as a lawyer in defence of civil liberties. Even Delmer Dynamo, exempted from the draft on about seventeen different counts of physical inadequacy, lent himself to the struggle. At Berkeley, in the bad days when Ed Meese sent in the cops, Delmer, according to other accounts beside his own, saved the life of the most luscious girl student on the campus by throwing himself on top of her. In his version of the story, he did this several hours before the riot even started. He is probably understating the case in order to sidetrack nemesis, a trick I know well. Delmer is a funny man who makes his friends funny too. I should see him more often, but I am seldom in New York long enough, and the passing of time becomes hurtful between friends if they don't see each other regularly. Strad Blantyre I see often, but that is partly because he is one of my American publishers. It comforts me that he has lost almost as much hair as I have. In New York he takes me to lunch at the Princeton Club; in London I take him to dinner at the Garrick; and it pleases us both to impersonate pillars of the Establishment. What we really share is an unspoken dread of how the dice roll. Stability, for both of us, is a nostrum against caprice.


Marenko is dead. Having decided that the war in Vietnam was a criminal enterprise, he opposed it with a determination and bravery that could have cost him his life, and would certainly have cost him his career if he had not been so – the military word somehow seems apt – outstanding. When the tear gas cleared, the campuses that he had helped turn into battlefields vied to appoint him. His first book of literary criticism carried a charge of abstraction that I was glad to see being partly unloaded in the second, by which time he had become the youngest associate professor in the United States. He married a fellow teacher called Rosalind. They gave their baby another Shakespearian name, Miranda. When they were doing well enough to have a vacation cabin in Maine, Marenko typically built the cabin. I still have a photograph of him, naked from the waist up, hefting an axe and looking like Li'l Abner filtered through a pipe-dream by Thoreau. Miranda, about five years old, looks up at him in adoring awe as he stands there, baking bod, in confident possession of the summer. In the winter of the following year, when he was out with Miranda on the frozen lake teaching her to skate, the ice gave way under her. Trusting his strength, he jumped in with his skates still on. It took him too long to find her and bring her up. They were both already gone when Rosalind got back from the store. My guess is that the

little girl died first, and that when he realised this he gave up the struggle, and let the terrible weight of what he had allowed to happen take him down. I knew him, you see. He felt responsible for everything.

Was he wrong about that? I find it hard to be sure. A sense of guilt, it seems to me, is inseparable from having grown up in our share of the twentieth century, when to die young, and for no reason, has been, if not the typical childhood, then certainly the representative one. When I was first old enough to look back on my infancy, I thought it the epitome of dislocation. My mother's fears while my father was a prisoner of war; her grief when he failed to return; her lonely struggle to bring me up — all this struck me as dramatic, and it was a mystery to me why my mother seemed more inclined to count our blessings than to curse fate. I was a long time, by now stretching to a lifetime, in grasping how reality has a texture to which histrionics are an inadequate response. Those millions of young lives apparently rendered meaningless by arbitrary death were taken from us too: a deprivation for which we can compensate only by making ours meaningful. When I was five years old and sobbing in my mother's arms because the bull ants had stung my foot, children my age were being rounded up all over Europe, to be crammed into boxcars and despatched into oblivion. There were mothers who were obliged to kill their children so as to save them from the protracted agony of medical experiments. Compared with that, the story of my mother and her little boy, and of her husband who did not come home, was something old under the sun, and possible to understand if hard to bear. One day, if I am granted life, I will write a book about what happened in the Pacific when two nations, Australia and Japan, strange to each other in every conceivable way, met and fought, and about what has happened since, in the long, blessed peace which by some extraordinary stroke of good fortune has coincided with my own life. If I have an important book in me, that will be the one, but I will have no warrant to take pride in it, because it will be the book into which I finally disappear, having overcome an inordinate need for attention the only way I could, by reducing it to absurdity. For such a book I will need a decade to prepare before I even begin to write, which is asking a lot. Ten years ago, the joke behind the first volume of these memoirs was meant to be that I was too young to be writing it. Now I can hear the clock. As I bring this slight manuscript to an end, in the fiftieth year of my life, and the first year of the Heisei Era, the swags of blossoms on the cherry trees in the many cemeteries of Tokyo are falling softly apart under their own weight, covering the asphalt walkways with faded pink petals. The year before last, at the cemetery in Aoyama, when there was no hint of a breeze, and I saw the petals change their pattern as if driven by the sad cry of the chestnut vendor, I could already feel the

texture of what I will one day write. It will be frail, but as the surface of the sea is frail. The transparency which is all I have ever been capable of will have at last justified itself, by joining up. Inside that opalescent bubble, I will be invisible at last. There is not much time left, though. Already I have lived half as long again as my father did, whose fading daguerreotype, as Rilke once said, I hold in hands that are fading too.

Merely to be clear would have seemed an aim too trivial to be considered by the eternal student commemorated in these memoirs, which have that much truth, if no more: they are faithful to my ignorance. Through hindsight, I could have given myself foresight. It would have been a bigger lie than any I have told here. I thought I was Jason the Argonaut, Odysseus the long voyager, or at least one of the children in the radio serial I listened to every week when I was still too young to read – children who never had to go to school, and who were always free to continue their quest, the Search for the Golden Boomerang. It just never occurred to me that the real distance I would cross would be in my own mind. In that respect, I had flown half a million miles before I moved an inch, and these three volumes are just the rattling the side of my cot made when I climbed over, on the first stage of that long, momentous journey across the carpet, towards the light of the open door.

A photograph of Clive James, an older man with glasses, wearing a dark jacket and trousers, standing on the top of the large red letters 've' in the word 'Clive'.

Clive James

North Face of Soho

More Unreliable Memoirs

'Combines the best of his literary and observational talents with a brilliant eye for comedy . . .

Yet another triumph'

FT Magazine

CLIVE JAMES

North Face of Soho

PICADOR

To Norman North,
with thanks

I wonder if I am not yet talking again about myself. Shall I be incapable, to the end, of lying on any other subject?

Samuel Beckett, *Malone Dies*

An old man remembers everything, but then he forgets that he told you.

Montaigne

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Introduction

A few days ago, in the beautiful city of Valletta, I was helping a two-year-old boy paint a portrait of his equally beautiful mother. As I vainly tried to demonstrate the concept of using only a small amount of pigment on a fingertip at any one time so as not to get blobs and streaks of red paint all over himself, her, me and the floor, I remembered something. I remembered the afternoon when, at the more advanced age of five, I was helping my own mother make extra Christmas decorations. There were some manufactured ones left over from before the war but they needed supplementing. We made paper chains. The interlocked loops of coloured paper were fixed by a blob of paste, applied with the fingertip. She left me unsupervised for about ten minutes and I got paste all over the kitchen table, her chair, my chair and the chest of drawers. When she saw the mess she leaned suddenly against the tall cupboard that held the crockery. I heard some of it rattle. But I remember all that now only because the texture of the red paint on the same finger reminded me of the white paste. The dizzy speed with which the echo of a sense memory kills time continues to astound me. I suppose that one day, not very far away now, I will die of the astonishment. If this fourth volume of my memoirs sometimes plunges back into even earlier times than those evoked in the first, it will be because the beginning of my life draws nearer as the end approaches. Perhaps they are the same thing: a loop of paper that will finally be closed by the paste of silence. Stand by for other perceptions equally cheerful.

Soon it will be forty years since my undergraduate career at Cambridge finished and my professional career began. It feels like forty minutes. Quite commonly, people who make a splash at university aren't much heard of afterwards. For a long while I looked like being one of those. Overnight success took more time than even I can credit, but when the dust of the effort finally cleared it turned out that I had hit two different kinds of jackpot. I managed to become a small part of the British media landscape, and also to be thought of as part of the Australian expatriate movement. Such a movement never really existed – most of us who sailed away did so in order to foster our individuality

EXISTED – most of us who sailed away did so in order to foster our individuality, not to gang up – but the myth was a tenacious media standby, and especially in the Australian press, whose more enthusiastic practitioners, a bit hazy in their sense of history, are capable of putting Dame Nellie Melba and Cate Blanchett in the same kitchen, for a cup of tea and a chat. The post-war Australian expatriates were looked at with suspicion by their countrymen early on. Later, they got too much favour. My own view is that, of those among us who sailed away to England in the early 1960s, those who soon sailed back again did best. This especially applied to the theatre. In earlier times, a long and powerfully talented line of Australian theatre people stretching from Robert Helpmann to Michael Blakemore had done the right thing by staying abroad, because there would have been no chance of creating a context for themselves had they gone home: Australia just wasn't ready for them. But in my generation, people like Ken Horler and John Bell – to name only two among the many I knew personally from my days at the University of Sydney – did better for themselves, and far better for Australia, by leaving English theatre to the English and going home to start an Australian equivalent, which they were able to energize by what they had learned, and especially by what they had learned to avoid. Nevertheless, with all that said, I still think that the stay-away Australian expatriates have made a respectable contribution. Posterity will have its own ideas about who ranks where. Sometimes, when I am reading one of the marvellous little novels of Madeleine St John, part of whose genius was for avoiding all publicity, I think that the only lasting fame for any of the rest of us will reside in the fact that we once knew her. But one way or another we have all made a fist out of our time away. The nice thing is that the Australian literate public largely agrees. So for my share, and more than my fair share, I have lately had their appreciation to add to the welcome I always enjoyed in Britain.

This wealth of acceptance has been a lot better for me than rejection, on which I would have lacked the moral strength to thrive: so it would be churlish to deny that I did all right. On any objective scale, I can't complain of having been ignored. But it's the subjective scale that can haunt your waking hours, and even deprive you of sleep. On that scale, I have only seldom, and never for long, felt that I got my career into focus after I was obliged to make my way in the wider world. I made a living, and I made my name: made it, indeed, in several different fields, first in Grub Street and Fleet Street and then later in television, which only those who just go on and smile would ever call Easy Street. But I still don't feel that I have Made It, in the sense of knowing exactly what I'm doing and being comfortably certain of doing it again tomorrow. This might seem an absurd claim, a counter-claim, a claim to lack of claims. When I look along the shelves of my books and videos, even I can see that I have been quite busy:

whatever the quality or lack of it, there is certainly quantity. And there is my name over and over, usually written vertically, so that I have to turn my head sideways. The crick in my neck is evidence that I am not shy about doing so. An onlooker might say that I have Done Something. But I'm still not entirely sure about the 'something', and not at all sure about the 'I'. If I were, I might be less thrilled about seeing my name in print. Ten letters in two groups of five, it still rings a bell of reassurance for its owner. But why does he need the reassurance?

Who is this character? Perhaps, as I write these introductory paragraphs, I am in a trough of uncertainty, but I have a suspicion that the troughs join up in a long line which has always been there and will continue to the end. Always a keen student of other people's careers, I reached the conclusion quite early on that there is often a discrepancy between the outer show of confidence and the inner assurance. In my own case, I think, the discrepancy is about as large as it can be without a fragmentation of the personality. There might even be a possibility that my personality remains intact only because it never fully formed: an embryo disguised as a golf ball. Whatever the truth of that, I can assure the prospective reader of this volume of my unreliable memoirs that the same principle applies as applied in its predecessors: a principle to rely on. Each of those volumes was an instalment in a serial confession of how I learned to do the right thing only by doing all the wrong things first. This volume will work the same way. The only essential difference between my professional career and its long period of preparation is that I have benefited from the opportunity to blunder on a larger scale. The main benefit has been in immediacy. When I told a story in the school playground and my audience didn't laugh, I could always blame them for not getting it. When I screwed up on television with ten million people watching, even I got the message straight away. To be fair to myself, if I had got nothing right at all, there would be no achievements to show, whether good or bad. But the reader can be sure that this will be no parade of self-satisfaction. It may, of course, have self-aggrandisement as an underlying motive, just as conceit almost always underlies a show of modesty. But the conviction that informed the first three volumes will be even stronger in the fourth. The conviction is that, though the desire to entertain is not to be despised – if only because the capacity to do so is rare – it rates quite low on the scale of social importance, a long way behind dentistry and not necessarily very far above the ability to clean lavatories. Most of those who make a living from it are very lucky, and I am even luckier than most.

The best an entertainer can hope to do, when writing about what he does (and nobody asks him to do that: he decides to do it for his own reasons), is to be instructive. As a consequence, this book will be full of homilies about what to

avoid. These homilies are sincerely meant, but with one proviso, which I hope is a saving grace: if I myself had avoided all these things, I would probably have got nothing done at all, because the errors were essential. There is hope, therefore, that young people contemplating a career in the arts and the media might find guidance here, and those less young people who have run into difficulties might find consolation. For readers leading normal, and therefore more important, lives, there might also be the consolation of any evidence I can offer that those of us who have been granted a disproportionate ability to express ourselves may not always have the best selves to express. I hope to get all the way to my grave without committing any major crimes, but within the limits of the law there are very few human failings that I have not embodied. Some of them I can't specify without embarrassing other people. But if I did not embarrass myself, this book would be too far short of the truth to repay reading, or to be worth writing. The older I get, the more time I spend wishing I had done things differently. I wish that could be different, but there you go. Or rather there I go, still trying to clean up the paste with the good lace doily from the chest of drawers.

– *London, 2006*

1. BLOTTO VOCE

In the closing pages of the last volume, I got married. The ceremony marked a rare outbreak of normality in my life. It was symbolized by my personal appearance. I was clean-shaven and had a hairstyle in reasonably close touch with my head. I was wearing a rather good-looking dark grey suit specially purchased in Carnaby Street. For a suit whose price had not been high, it was elegantly understated. There was no excess cloth, and at that time there was still no excess flesh. The suit's drainpipe trousers had drainpipe legs inside them. Posing in front of a full-length mirror, I had to say that the suit was well chosen. Usually people who choose their clothes badly never realize it when, once in a while, they accidentally choose well, but my powers of self-assessment must have been blessed by the felicity of the event. I vowed to look after the suit for a long time, in keeping with its manifest high quality.

After the next occasion on which I wore the suit, I noticed that the cloth had frayed on both legs in the area of the upper thigh. After only a single further occasion, the crotch fell out. Perhaps some mental projection of deep-seated anxiety about my fitness for marriage had eroded the fabric. Freud probably had a word for it: *Trausertraumerei*. But a more likely explanation, I slowly realized, was that the suit had been cheap because its materials were flimsy. By dead of night I dumped the suit into a garbage bin, and it was never mentioned again. I'm not sure that Oxfam, in the late sixties, was as yet accepting discarded clothes, but even if it had been, I still would have hesitated. The thought of some poor tramp wandering around with his balls hanging out would have put me off.

After that sartorial hang-up, as it were, I rejoined the mainstream, in the sense that even when dressed for best I looked like a comedy of errors. If, during the course of this volume, I refer to my mode of dress as if I looked outstanding, the reader should grasp in advance that standing out, in that period, was unusually hard to do. We all looked like that: or, at any rate, the younger men did. The Duke of Edinburgh never dressed to get attention. If he didn't, why did we? It is a very hard thing to evoke an era. Pick up a notebook and a pen right now, stick your head outside the door, and command yourself to evoke your era. How for

your head outside the door, and command yourself to evoke your era. Now, for example, would you capture your era's atmosphere of squalid menace in public places? Where would you start? As the sixties slithered into the seventies, the streets were still almost incomparably safer than they are now, but the post-punk body-piercing hoodies of today look diffident, almost self-effacing, compared to the young males of that time. With few exceptions, we all looked more amazing than anything seen in Britain since the Restoration brought in horned wigs and stilt heels. You can't really tell from photographs how universal the bizarrerie actually was, to the extent that nobody noticed because everybody was doing it. In a photograph there are usually too few people to give you the full impression, or else, if there are a lot of them, they are too far away. At the time, the unaided human eye, with its depth of field greater than any camera, could see, all the way to the horizon, nothing except young men dressed to make a cat laugh.

After the disintegration of the dark grey suit I joined them in their frenzy of bad judgement. The fashion dictated long and thick sideboards to the hair, as if the head had been joined on each side by a small sofa deprived of its covering and tilted on end. There were velvet jackets, flared trousers, zip-sided boots. With the possible exception of the hair, all these elements entailed a lavish use of industrially generated materials, especially polyester. It meant that the average young male was carrying a greater proportion of artificial fabrics than an airliner's interior. My own range of shirts included an electric-blue number that made the unwary spectator's eyes ache. As its proud owner, I thought it looked particularly good with a cravat. The cravats I favoured were of a chemically derived material printed with a paisley pattern. I had a whole rack of them. Today, my wife still remembers them as 'those cravatty things you used to wear', so obviously they were not without impact. They sometimes delivered electric shocks when touched, but so did almost everything else I was wearing. When charged up by walking for long enough on the right kind of nylon carpet, I could be seen in the dark, but that still didn't mean that I looked unusual. Almost everyone under forty looked something like that. It was the style of the time. Some of you may remember it. But those who don't will have to imagine it. For them, the best way I can think of to sum it up is that it was an era of dandies without taste.

So much for the evocation of the exterior life. The interior life, as always, was more personal. Even I could see that the first consequence of getting married was the necessity to earn a living. Until then I had lived like a student, which is another way of saying that I had lived like a bum. Such a way of life would still be my first choice today. When life gets too much for me I have no trouble identifying with the man dressed in a pile of rags as he sleeps in another pile of rags somewhere against the concrete wall of a London underpass. Just far

...
enough away from a puddle of his own urine. Wedded to paucity, he rarely makes the mistake of trying to improve matters. His Tokyo equivalent is a construction worker from out of town who sets up home in a Shinjuku underpass, sleeping in a spanking new cardboard carton and sharing a small stove with his fellows. Somehow or other they all have access to washing facilities and even a laundry. They sit around in circles passing bottles of Kirin beer while they tell stories. They are as neat and cute as a blossom party of junior accountants in Ueno Park. Too much effort. I prefer my London guy, but if I succeeded in getting him to swap lives I suppose I would soon spoil the borrowed simplicity. The rags around my feet would be an invitation to do a soft-shoe shuffle. I would write a monologue, pull a crowd, get an agent, and it would all begin again.

After I was married, though, it was still in question just how I would pull the crowd. I was reluctant to let go of Footlights and for a while it looked as if I might not have to. Had I been wise, I would have quit while I was behind. It was a body blow when the most successful Footlights revue I ever directed for the Edinburgh Fringe was not allowed into London. Professional companies would have envied some of the notices we got. There were several commercial bids to bring the show in, but the actors' union, Equity, had recently imposed a strict embargo on university students being granted union membership merely because they'd had their names in the Sunday papers. As some of my cast members were keen to remind me in later years, I chose the worst possible tactics when arguing our case with the Equity tribunal. I pleaded eloquently that all of us were really only on our way to serious professions and wouldn't be in this theatrical caper very long: therefore it would not be a case of denying food to more deserving mouths. My own mouth deserved a kicking. What I should have said, of course, was that we were all dead serious about the theatre and ready to wear greasepaint until the grave. For some of us it would have been true. It might even have been true for me. Even today, I feel most at my ease when I go on stage. Even though I don't do much more than read out my own stuff from memory, the discipline of turning up, waiting around and going on gets me away from everything like nothing else. And some of our people really had a gift to explore. They weren't just looking for a bolt-hole. But my advocacy sank them. Advocacy, if it is to work, usually has to be on behalf of a cause that would win anyway. Our cause was probably lost from the start. But it soon became clear to me that I had done the opposite of helping to win it.

The guilt was compounded by the further realization that it hadn't become clear soon enough. While the case was being heard, over the course of several days at Equity's Lubyanka-like headquarters somewhere in the back-blocks of

Bayswater, the revue in question, with its West End offers pending the decision, was running on an edge-of-town semi-amateur basis at Hampstead Theatre Club. In those days, Hampstead Theatre Club was a glorified pre-fab perched in a car park near Swiss Cottage tube station. Boiling with frustration at the uncertainty of our status, I did not adjust easily to the unglamorous conditions. At Lauriston Hall in Edinburgh we had played to a packed house every night, with extra houses twice a week to take the overflow. Edward Heath had attended. Either soon to be, or having recently been, Prime Minister, he came backstage afterwards to declare himself amused. ('Amusing,' he said, shifting his shoulders to indicate amusement. 'Some of the turns were really quite amusing.') At Hampstead the really quite amusing turns went down well enough, but perhaps I should not have included myself in the cast. The second-string critics who came were sufficiently tolerant, but there were none of the hosannas employed by the first-string critics in Edinburgh. Most of the tickets sold but there weren't all that many tickets to sell. From the tiny stage, I couldn't help noticing that the auditorium was not much bigger, and therefore contained few people even when full. The people, in their turn, could not help noticing that the fourth chap from the left, the one with the Australian accent, looked as if he wanted to be somewhere else. The Equity frustration came to a head when I was finally told that not only would the show be denied access to a West End theatre, but that I, if I really wanted that Equity card, would have to change my name, because somewhere in the North of England there was already a Clive James playing tuba for a novelty act called the Wurzel Bashers. Eventually the latter stricture was rescinded, but it was definitely no go on the larger issue. Towards the end of our Hampstead run, I had to tell the cast that the dream was cancelled. Without exception, they took it better than I would have done if one of them had been telling me.

To console myself before we went on stage that night, I had a few beers, and then a few more. The first one would have been fatal, because I can't take even a single drink before I perform or else the words grow fur. Having had half a dozen drinks at least, I went on to stuff up my opening monologue so thoroughly that not even I knew what I was talking about. There is no more dreadful feeling for an actor than a tongue out of control. Some drunken actors can live with it, but only because they feel even more dreadful when they are sober. More dreadful than the feelings of the drunken actor, however, are the feelings of the audience. Not long before that evening, I was in the audience for a late-night symposium at the Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh. The symposium had a panel of featured guests who included Patrick Wymark, at that time a star of stage and screen. A talented actor with a splendidly grating voice, Wymark was well

known in the profession for his ability to go on stage at night after spending all day drinking one pint of milk after the other, each pint with a double brandy mixed into it. Most of the legendary British thespian drunks – Trevor Howard, Hugh Griffith, Richard Harris, Richard Burton – tried to make a point of waiting until the show was over before they hit the sauce. There were always a few, however, who were already loaded before the curtain went up, and who went out to the pub to refuel between scenes. In the West End, where some of the theatres are tightly packed together, there were several cases of a pissed actor going on at the right time but in the wrong play. Apparently Wymark was not of their number. A coping toper, he could stay upright in roughly the same spot and say the words in roughly the right order, always with the gravelled timbre that drew all ears to him. But his elocution was the giveaway. In the crowded Traverse on the night in question, speaking on the topic of the social role of the artist, he told an endless story about how people had once laughed at the man working up there in the Sistine ceiling. The audience was held breathless for twenty minutes until he got to his punch line. ‘And that man ... was Leonardo da Vinci.’ Even then, nobody laughed. They knew he meant Michelangelo, but they had been reduced long before to the depths of horror and pity by the way the words were coming out. ‘Sistine ceiling’ came out as ‘sixteen Ealing’. I knew exactly what was happening in his mouth: his tongue had turned to a sea cucumber. You would have thought that I would have got the message about myself then. Actually the penny didn’t drop until years afterwards, and on that night in the Hampstead Portakabin it simply never occurred to me that life was possible without getting fairly regularly plastered. I was only a few minutes into the evening, however, before I abandoned the notion that a performance was possible. The audience had realized already, and so had my cast. Since I had previously threatened to fire any of them who turned up drunk, I had no choice except to call a meeting after the show and fire myself. Nobody protested.

I should have left it at that, because the evidence was in. Looking after other people, in the sense of working on their behalf, was not my strength. I could work with other people – a glib tongue and a desire to be liked would always easily combine to ensure that – but I couldn’t look after them. Really this should have been no surprise, because there is nothing more rare in show business than the talent to handle talent. But I lacked it to a lethal degree. My sense of responsibility was insufficiently developed. I found it hard enough to look after myself. The comparative sloth of my years in the forgiving cloisters had been replaced by a frantic multiple activity of which the theatrical venture was only a part. Except when I was at home in Cambridge, I had no time even to eat properly. So I ate improperly, especially when I was writing. Much of the

writing was done in London, in a tiny room high upstairs in a Swiss Cottage house full of my Footlights contemporaries: the very ones I had made a show of leading to universal success, and who had generously decided not to lynch me when I failed to do so. It was a big night when some of us ate together at the Angus Steak House, where the halved tomatoes were notched like automotive spare parts to indicate luxury. More often I stoked myself with fast food while hitting my second-hand Underwood typewriter. I forget now what the fast food was. I was already forgetting it while I ate it. I don't think Kentucky Fried Chicken had yet invaded Britain. It was probably the British version of fried chicken, which had the same relation to the later American version as the Wimpey hamburger had to a McDonald's Big Mac: i.e. it was begging to be superseded by anything that at least tasted of something, if only of sugar. I vaguely remember sinking my teeth through a crust of crumbs to encounter a rubbery nothingness while I hunted and pecked at the typewriter keyboard with my free hand. The warm tissue having been washed down with even warmer beer, I went back to touch-typing flat out as I transcribed the handwritten draft of my latest article or book review. When dawn came I ate cornflakes.

2. GATEWAY TO GRUB STREET

I was in demand for that kind of work, partly because I had established a fatal reputation for getting it done at short notice. Now that I was theoretically free to pursue a career as a journalist, Nicholas Tomalin of the *New Statesman* would send the kind of book my way that nobody in his right mind wanted to review. Could I do it by Tuesday? When I proved that I could, Richard Boston of *New Society* recognized a potentially useful candidate for reviewing another book in the same doomed category. Could I do it by Thursday? The evidence rapidly mounted that there was a new contender in town for the post that every literary editor needs to fill: the trick pony who can work like a draught-horse. In no time at all I had become a denizen of Grub Street. Naive American scholars sometimes go looking for Grub Street but it has never existed as a geographical entity. Grub Street is a collection of periodicals that deal with literature and of newspapers that have literary pages: a collection of those, and of the people who edit and write for them. Grub Street is like a small Great Rift whose favoured watering holes continually change position. In the times of Swift and Dr Johnson, the gathering places were the coffee houses. In my time, they were the pubs.

In Fleet Street, the pubs were near the newspaper offices: sometimes so near that the drinkers could feel the vibration through the pub wall when the presses started rolling. But a Grub Street pub could be anywhere. The most important one was in Soho. At the Pillars of Hercules in Greek Street, Ian Hamilton set up the drinks while he persuaded me that I was ideal not only for providing unpaid articles for his acerbic little magazine, the *Review*, but paid articles for the *Times Literary Supplement*, of which, wearing his other hat, he was the literary editor. Though the contributor would see his name on a cheque, he would not see it in print: the *TLS* still had its policy of anonymity in those days. The news, however, would soon get around if you could review a whole batch of new poetry books in a thousand words and make the piece more readable than most of the poetry. That part of the challenge wasn't hard: then as now, most of the

poets were writing verse only because they lacked the sense of structure to write prose. The hard part was to get it done. The work would have been easier if Hamilton had been less scrupulous. Right there in the Pillars, he would blue-pencil your copy while everybody else watched. Everybody else included his other reviewers and sometimes, hovering dangerously at the rim of the scrum, one or two of the poets whose slim collections I was presuming to hose on. Hamilton wouldn't kill a phrase on that account – often he would show you how to sharpen it up – but he never let a slack sentence go by. It was invaluable training. I should say at this point that I was smart enough at the start to spot the difference between curatorial editing and blithering interference. Curatorial editing I could benefit from, and to some extent still need even today. My style, if such it is, works by packing stuff in, not stretching it out, and there is always a danger of trying to say too much at once. Hamilton, his own prose a model of sardonic limpidity, had an unerring eye for the slipshod simile and the overblown cadence. The final work of excision and emendation done, I would go on drinking with Hamilton and the others, buying my round along with them but getting drunk much faster. At that time, the Pillars still closed after lunch along with all the other pubs, but there was an upstairs club a few doors away where the diehards would go on soaking until the Pillars opened again for the evening. My light head and frequent visits to the toilet soon became notorious.

The light head would prove to be my salvation in the long run, but I was foolish enough to be ashamed of it then. If I didn't exactly fall over, I certainly bounced off the walls on the way to and from the can. Come to think of it, I did fall over, but not exactly. I fell in various directions. Once, on the last train to Cambridge, I slept all the way to King's Lynn and had to come back in a cab, at a price that the payment for the latest piece would barely cover. My wife, who had been unaware that I had ambitions to recreate the leading role in *The Lost Weekend*, was not impressed. But the piece was safe in Hamilton's pocket. Now suitably shaved, sponged free of its indignities, it would go into the *TLS*, where I would read it with satisfaction. Other people must have done so too, because the invitations kept on coming in. Charles Monteith, the revered senior editor at Faber and Faber, sent a written request that I should call by to see him. I had better sense than to think he was after my poetry, which I knew he had never seen, because a collection of it had been sitting for more than a year on the desk of an editor in a less illustrious house – one of those editors who are so enthusiastic about your manuscript that they will do everything they can to persuade the board of directors to take a chance on an unknown, and are reasonably certain that the green light will be given just as soon as there is an economic upturn on Wall Street and a general withdrawal of Soviet troops from

Eastern Europe. (Such skills for procrastination should be cherished, because they have saved many a young poet from sending out to die a slim volume that was never fit to live.)

But I could scarcely hope that Monteith was after a whole book of prose. He was, however. Sweetly pretending not to be disconcerted by my appearance – I still suffered from the delusion that a satinized polyester tie looked good with a fake Viyella shirt – he suggested that I might consider taking a crack at writing a biography of Louis MacNeice, a Faber poet, not long dead, whose reputation was already cooling in the shadow of W. H. Auden's. In one of my poetry reviews for the *TLS* I had invoked MacNeice's precision of imagery while condemning some respectable windbag's vagueness in the same department, and Monteith had been so taken with my choice of paragon that he foresaw a whole monograph fuelled by the same admiration. Foolishly, so did I, although I already knew that I was short of spare time, and that none could be made available at the price Monteith was suggesting. There were no big advances in those days, but the sum he proposed was more like a retreat. I would practically be paying him. The offer, however, was too flattering to resist. So I didn't resist, and thus once again made a commitment that I couldn't come through on without removing other commitments from my diary. The offence was made easier by the fact that I had no diary. For several years I had kept a journal and would go on keeping it for several more, but a journal dealt with the past. A pocket diary for noting future appointments had never been part of my equipment. I was still under the impression that I could trust my memory. How I had ever got that impression was a bit of a mystery, because there had been evidence since my schooldays that any fixture more than a few hours ahead would disappear from my mind, especially if it entailed an inconvenience. People with that characteristic should above all get out of the habit of saying 'yes' when asked to do things. Since I invariably said 'yes' in order not to disappoint, I was effectively mixing malleability and fecklessness – binary ingredients of a powerful explosive. Eventually I was to learn some measure of reliability, but only because the explosions accounted for so many innocent civilians. For the moment, however, the MacNeice biography joined the list of things I would do soon, once I had dealt with the things I must do that day, because they had been promised for yesterday.

Perhaps the idea that I might have a place in literary life had scrambled my brains. Scrambled them even further, one might say. Back there in Sydney I had loved my evenings in the King's Cross coffee bars. One of them was called the Platypus Room, Another, Vadim's, was named after its New Australian proprietor, a poet manqué. It should hardly need saying that he was no relation to

the Vadim who, back in faraway Europe, would not long later seduce a long line of beautiful young actresses culminating in Jane Fonda. Our Vadim had shortened his name from something like Vadimskapolonskiewicz. Still working hard on his English, Vadim would strain valiantly through the hiss of his Gaggia espresso machine to eavesdrop on the conversation of the half-dozen literary journalists who counted as the city's intelligentsia in those torpid days before the arts boom. But as the new boy I was sitting below the salt, and forced to do much more listening than talking. The London scene was on a grander scale, and although I was a new boy all over again, I could do all the talking that my tongue allowed before the beer and wine numbed it at the root. The Pillars of Hercules was the focal point, but there was a glittering periphery. At Nicholas Tomalin's house in Gloucester Crescent, Camden Town, there were big guns to be seen. The area had already been colonized by some of the people who would make it as famous as the old Bloomsbury. Alan Bennett and Jonathan Miller were both in the area, working on the new careers that would take them beyond *Beyond the Fringe*. But the chief attraction was Nick himself. Unplaceable in the usual social order, he had limitless charm to go with the three qualities that he had notoriously said every journalist must have: a certain amount of literary ability, a plausible manner and rat-like cunning. His charm was the first quality you noticed. Well-connected and beautifully constructed young women fell for him, which made life all too interesting for his wife Claire, but obviously she adored him. It was impossible not to. Young men felt the same, partly because he was a good enough listener to make them feel that they might be almost as fascinating as he was. When you spoke, he had a way of looking sideways and downwards through his heavy black horn-rims that convinced you he was doing so only in order to favour his good ear, not wanting to miss a word. (In fact he had a bad neck, but typically he turned the affliction into a point of style.) What impressed me most was the way he had come to terms with what he saw as his lack of originality. If he couldn't make things up, like a proper writer, he would find the best way of writing down what happened in front of him: corporate fraud, voyages by mad yachtsmen, wars. Actually, of course, this determination was deeply original in itself: he was in at the start of what would later be called the New Journalism. Headed by his famous piece about Vietnam – he had made the notes for it while looking sideways through the open doorway of an American gunship at vibrating miles of jungle stiff with armed men in black pyjamas – his collection of journalism still reads well today, and at the time he seemed to some of us the embodiment of a possibility: permanent work in an ephemeral medium.

Not that he didn't enjoy the passing moment for itself. I made myself popular with him one summer evening when I got the time wrong and turned up an hour

early for dinner, bearing a dubious gift of two bottles of cheap white wine. It wasn't Piat d'Or, which hadn't yet established itself as the would-be sophisticate's cut-price bring-along. It was some variety of Liebfraumuck with a label full of gothic lettering. Nick saluted it gravely as if it were a prize-winning vintage that I had bankrupted myself buying, and actually smiled when I put both bottles in the garden fountain to cool. 'In Australia,' I explained, 'we used to sink the stuff in the river and fish it out later. Sometimes we got more bottles out than we put in.' He guessed immediately that there had been a party in the same spot previously. He loved the idea and told people the story later on as something typical of me, the boy from the bush who could quote Wittgenstein. He was creating a role for me, as he did for everyone. As roles go it wasn't bad, and when I realized I was stuck with it anyway I tried to make the most of it. Not fitting a category: it was a category in itself. Nick, a dazzling example, was one of the first to see it as a social trend. The media meritocracy would be the next Establishment. Most of this I would figure out only gradually and much later, but I could tell straight away that Nick was something new. It meant a lot to me that he seemed to think the same of me. He nodded assent, instead of snorting, when I declared that a literary career could and should draw sustenance from involvement in show business and popular music. My theory that any genre could be practised as if it were a field of poetry prompted some gratifyingly thoughtful puffs on one of his black cigarillos – from both of us, because I was helping myself to his supply. When we fished the first bottle of wine out of the fountain he even pretended to enjoy it as much as the champagne that Claire had been serving us previously, although at the first sniff of my stuff he must have known that it was battery acid. The man who broke the story on the European junk-wine scandal wasn't going to be fooled by a label that looked like a page from Martin Luther's Bible. But he didn't even flinch.

Yes, the literary world should have been enough. But I had already noticed that it was full of casualties. Even the byline journalists tended to die poor after the salary was switched off, and among the poets it had never been switched on. There would have been good reason to think that a more abundant source of income might be worth seeking. Hitting four deadlines a week, I was earning scraps that added up to a pittance. Also I often had to stay up all night to hit them. When I tried doing that at home in Cambridge, the woman who had already realized she had married a maniac was kept awake by a typewriter yammering away like a rivet-gun. (It's one of the ways that a writer's life has most profoundly changed since computers came in: writing used to be noisy.) In Swiss Cottage the noise didn't matter so much: I was just somebody having one essay crisis after another. But I could tell by the way the boys brought me the

occasional cup of instant coffee that I must have looked like someone on the road to ruin. It was instinct, however, and not reason, that led me to keep the theatre thing going. Like a broken love affair, it was begging to be fixed. Eventually, I was convinced, the songs I was still writing with Pete Atkin – in his own small room off the next landing, he was bent over his guitar as he set my latest lyrics about death and destruction – would make us both big money. Meanwhile, the current Footlights bunch, still at university, asked me to direct their Edinburgh Fringe revue on a professional basis.

I did the job with passable results, but there was a bigger job on the near horizon. Still the dominant powers on the Fringe, Oxford and Cambridge teamed up to mount a production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to tour the American colleges. The play was to be directed by a professional, Richard Cottrell, who was excellently qualified: his production of *Richard II* had been a huge hit at the official Edinburgh Festival and later in the West End, with the young Ian McKellen making himself famous in the leading role. I had seen McKellen's performance in Edinburgh and been suitably stunned by how his Olivier-like athleticism was compounded with the ability to float a line like Gielgud. I had seen both Gielgud and Olivier on stage earlier in the decade, but they were in separate plays. McKellen was both of them, made young again and sharing the same body. Cottrell had provided McKellen with a set in which the furiously posturing boy monarch could descend from the upper levels in a series of leaps to appear suddenly on the forestage like Spiderman arriving in a gay nightclub. The future knight was still years away from outing himself but his performance left little room for doubt, just as the production left nothing to be desired for its verve and grace. If all theatre had been like that I would have spent much less time at the movies. The Oxbridge bunch were lucky to have Cottrell aboard, because in normal circumstances a director of his calibre is wasting his time marshalling the limited abilities of amateur players: it's like hiring Michael Schumacher to drive a minicab. But Cottrell, still manfully scraping the money together for his Prospect Theatre Company, agreed to take the Shakespeare job on. Since the Oxbridge bunch also wanted an accompanying revue as part of the tour package, however, he specified that he would direct that only if he could be provided with an assistant director, script doctor and dogsbody – someone steeped in the revue business, about which, he was honest enough to say, he knew little and cared less. Headed by my old friend Jonathan James-Moore, the Oxbridge people approached me. I wasn't hard to find. The whole deal was going to be rehearsed in the Footlights clubroom in Cambridge and I just happened to be standing outside in Petty Cury with my hands in my pockets, whistling. The fee was more than I could earn by reviewing ten different

hopeless books so I said yes, reflecting that if I reviewed the books anyway, I would double my money.

Scarcely an hour of rehearsal had elapsed before I realized I should have said no. Though Cottrell was large-hearted in saying that humour was not his forte, he was also definite about having the last word. There was a power struggle right from the jump, which I was bound to lose. I didn't much like his ideas, he positively hated mine, and the helpless cast were caught in the middle. For them, what should have been a joyous conjunction of two separate undergraduate revue traditions turned into the most miserable time of their young lives. Most of them were also in the *Dream* production and the difference must have been startling. Cottrell did a dazzling job with the play. In an opalized Athenian forest designed by Hugh Durrant, he deployed the student actors almost as if they could act. The cruel truth about university actors is that although they often go far, they rarely do so as actors, mainly because even the most gifted of them have chewed up essential years that they should have spent at RADA learning to speak, move, and fence, or even at Raymond's Revue Bar learning to stand in a spotlight as if they belonged there. Apart from Julie Covington, who made an enchanting Peasblossom, only a few of the *Dream* cast went any distance in the professional theatre later on. Some showed up on the small screen, but as presenters and newsreaders rather than actors. (An exception was Mark Wing-Davey, who eventually grew an extra head to play Zaphod Beeblebrox in *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*.) Michael Wood, now one of the most prominent historians on television, deployed a fine leg as Oberon but would spend his future in tight jeans, not loose tights. Others became bank managers and academics. But they all had bliss to look back on. In that pixillated forest, they had been touched with a magic wand.

When they came back to the Footlights clubroom to rehearse the revue, the contrast was brutal. At the end of the rehearsal period, the revue was ready to go on in the Arts Theatre, and it even held the stage, but the critic for *Varsity* was not the only member of the audience to note that the cast looked as if they had all spent the previous week beside the death-bed of a loved one. Three nights into the run, after three days of re-rehearsing some of the sketches in the attempt to make them funnier than a mock execution, I spat the dummy. One of my last memories of the resulting shambles was of James-Moore, called Jo-Jo for short, throwing up in the washbasin of his dressing room. Many years later he was a power in the land, in charge of comedy at BBC radio, but I bet he didn't forget how his own lunch looked when it was staring back at him. It took me almost as long to get a realistic perspective on what I had helped to let them all in for. Too much of it had been my fault, a truth that I wasn't then equipped to consider.

When it mattered, I had spent too much time taking umbrage and not enough taking pains. I should have settled for my subordinate position, done what was required, and, above all, put the welfare of the troops first. But I threw a tantrum instead, right there in the Green Room of the Arts Theatre, the gift of John Maynard Keynes to civilization. I foamed at the mouth and smashed my fist into a mirror. It was the right target, I now realize, because the true culprit was on the other side of it. The fact of the matter was that I was nowhere near as good at dreaming up sketch material for an ensemble as I had thought. My only reliable ability was to dream up material for myself. The tantrum was an excellent example. Bugsy Siegel would have recognized a gifted imitator, especially when I climaxed the routine by threatening to kill Cottrell. Luckily he was elsewhere at the time, but when he heard about it he put his foot down. Either I was removed from the picture or else the American expedition would not include him. Since the production of the *Dream* was what really mattered, Jo-Jo and his colleagues had no choice. Effectively, I had already fired myself, by converting my tantrum into a nervous breakdown.

I owe my wife the courtesy of leaving her as a background figure in this book, along with my daughters, who would combine to lynch me if I went into detail about their virtues. All three women in my immediate family are united in the belief that private life and publicity are incompatible, and I agree with them. One of the dire consequences of the celebrity culture is that this belief has come to seem perverse. So much for the celebrity culture. But I can say this much: over the next two weeks, my wife got into training for her first baby. I went to bed and stayed there, like Stalin when he got the news that the German army had invaded his country after all, despite his express instructions that it should not. The shock of reality had reduced me to immobility. I sent long groans towards the ceiling while doing nothing except grow a beard. I groaned louder at the effort of turning my pillow to the dry side. I could just about make it to the bathroom on my own. Otherwise I didn't go anywhere, even to the kitchen, where the refrigerator lived which in normal circumstances I could never pass without stopping to look in. But I was indifferent to what I put in my mouth. As long as it was a cigarette, it would do. As soon as I could raise myself on one elbow, I got busy starting small fires in the bedding. For a while I couldn't even read a book: the first time since World War II that I had been unable to do so. The *Guardian* took me all day and the *Observer* took me all Sunday. Finally, from one of these papers, I noticed that there was a four-volume collection of George Orwell's journalism due to come out. I must have grunted at the right moment, because the complete set was brought to me as a gift, ready-wrapped in its jackets of deep Socialist red.

From the first page of the first volume, I was on the road to recovery. Many years and a much bigger bank balance later, at just the moment when she felt the walls of the house were closing in, I bought my wife a 3 Series BMW, and suddenly she was out and about like Emma Peel in *The Avengers*. It was only a partial return for the perfect timing of that Orwell set. Most of the essays I knew by heart already, but here they were in the weekly context of his indefatigable toil. Here was the proof that it took effort to write plain prose but, if you could do so, the results might have the effect of poetry. A simple-seeming sentence could have a cadence to remember. There was also the matter of Orwell's political sagacity. He could be batty on the side issues but on the big issue he was right. It was the main reason he remained relevant, because those who had been wrong had spread a pervasive influence, and some of them remained in business even in old age. While sticking his head above the parapet in the Spanish Civil War, Orwell had said that it wasn't enough to be against the Nazis, you had to be anti-totalitarian, which meant being against the Communists as well. The latter part of this message continued, after more than thirty years, to be a pill hard to swallow for thinkers on the Left. Even if they were ready to accept that Stalin had been conducting a massacre of the innocents, they still wanted to believe that there might be a vegetarian version of absolute state control. Orwell's central belief was thus enduringly unpopular even among those who shared his detestation of capitalism.

No fan of capitalism myself – there had to be something easier than working for a living – I had nevertheless been raised in a house where that central belief of his didn't need to be stated, so when I read him at length it was like a long verification of what I had always felt. My mother and father, both of them prime examples of the suffering proletariat in the 1930s, would have left me a Communist heritage if they had thought that there was anything to it. My father's copy of Bellamy's anti-capitalist classic *Looking Backward* was in the hall cupboard waiting for him while I was growing up. He never came home to read it again, but its presence was a reminder of his championship of workers' rights. Yet my mother assured me that he would have detested the idea of giving the state unbridled power over the individual. Like my father, she had met the Communists before the war when she was working on the production lines, and remembered their tone of voice. But when Prime Minister Menzies staged a referendum to outlaw the Australian Communist Party in 1952, my mother, during a single dinner of beef, potatoes and cabbage, gave me a political education that has lasted me a lifetime. She told me how she had voted in the referendum earlier that day. She had voted against Ming's move to outlaw the Commos. (In Australia, Menzies was Ming and the Communists were the

Commos for linguistic reasons we won't go into here.) She thought the state should not be given so much power to repress opinion, even if the opinion was wrong. That, she said, was the principle my father had fought and died for, and the only reason why his death had meaning.

Still in short pants at the time, I struggled to comprehend, but I was so fascinated that I ate the cabbage. Since the right not to eat cabbage was one of my own most jealously guarded political tenets, this was a large concession, and a tribute to my mother's quiet passion. At the time she spoke, George Orwell had only recently published *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, so my mother was up there with him at the heroic forefront of intellectual adventure. I remembered that moment as I lay there in my smouldering bed, at last telling myself to get up, get out and get going. Above all, the collection was a persuasive demonstration that periodical journalism could be built to last. Much of it had been written for publications of restricted, or no, circulation. I resolved to despise no outlet that would print my work. I also resolved that the theatre thing could still be fixed, if I could just avoid my previous mistakes. With these two resolutions – the first questionable, the second suicidal – firmly in mind, I cast the charred coverlet aside and went back to work. If my wife could go on functioning as a conscientious don while nursing her mental wreck of a husband, the least I could do was persevere. One thing I can tell myself, from this distance, is that I was always pretty good at getting busy again after a catastrophe. I was just bad at realizing that being too busy had got me into the catastrophe in the first place. Hamlet had said it to the corpse of Polonius: 'You find that to be too busy is some danger.' But Polonius wasn't listening, and it turned out that Hamlet wasn't either.

The idea that periodical journalism could be built to last was never likely to apply to *Oz* magazine, but I deluded myself into believing that it could. A new wave of hungry young Australians had hit London, having the immediate effect of making the young Australians who were already there feel that they were getting old. Perhaps that was what drove me to say yes when they asked me to contribute to *Oz*. Richard Neville, the editor, was dedicated to the belief that Play Power could transform politics. I never believed that – I had enough trouble believing in his hairstyle, which he had apparently copied from Bette Davis in *All About Eve* – but I did think that this new emphasis on youth, music, soft drugs and less uptight sex might have an ameliorating effect. My stance, however, was to contend that all thoughts of actual revolution were the kind of nonsense that could be excused only through ignorance. I soon found that Neville and his confrères had plenty of ignorance to excuse themselves with. They seemed to have read nothing but *Naked Lunch*. But my counter-

revolutionary polemics were printed anyway. Usually they were printed in white type on pink paper with an oil-slick overlay, so that there was no danger of the stoned readership actually reading them. Germaine Greer's contributions, by contrast, were printed clearly, often accompanied by startling photographs of their author. One photograph showed her with her legs behind her neck: an advanced position even for a swami. In a previous volume of this memoir I gave Germaine the name Romaine Rand, on the principle that if I was going to attribute foul language to her it would be ungentlemanly to use her real name. In the context of *Oz*, however, it would be ungentlemanly not to, because by that time her habitual and madly entertaining subversion of linguistic decorum stood fully revealed as a big component in a political attitude that was transforming the speech of the country. I admired her boldness, and still do. Though she sometimes seemed to harbour the impression that ordinary young women could liberate themselves if they became groupies for the sort of American rock band that looked like a pack of rapists in search of a fresh victim, she was undoubtedly striking a blow for freedom from stifling conventions. Her weak point, obvious to everyone but her, lay in her generous confidence that women, if they could be released from bondage, would all prove to be as creative as she was. Girls, you don't have to spend all that time wiping the poop off the back end of your child. Hand it to your grandmother while you write a symphony.

My own view, that the shattered conventions might one day become objects of nostalgia, sounded pretty stifling even to me. Luckily nobody could decipher what I said. There was quite a lot of it, and later on I was careful to reprint none of it. Long before the *Oz* trial at the Old Bailey I had tacitly opted out of the Youth Culture: my hair, as it were, didn't make the cut. Even when accompanied by the soft music and pastel swirling smoke of psychedelia, propaganda for a consensus of individual rebellion had no appeal to me as a genre, and it was clear that protesting against rebellion in a rebel publication made no sense at all. When Richard Neville and Felix Dennis appeared in court, it became obvious that this was a mere prelude to their appearance on television. In other words, the trial was a stage: a stage on the road to institutionalized protest, although nobody at the time could guess that Dennis would one day be a publishing tycoon on the scale of Robert Maxwell and Conrad Black, if a bit more careful with the petty cash. The judge, confidently mistaken as English judges so often are, informed the court that Dennis was clearly of low intelligence. The judge lived long enough to find out that he had been wrong by many millions of pounds, but it was never a case of two worlds colliding. It was the one world, hiccuping on a breath of fresh air. The fresh air turned stale later on, as it was bound to do. Social changes get nowhere if they are not needed, and when they succeed they

soon cease to be news. Not having been really a part of it, I was easily out of it, with no regrets except that I no longer had an excuse to gaze at the angelic face of a young woman who rejoiced in the name of Caroline Coon. She was billed as the scene's expert on drugs. I suppose she knew a lot about them for the usual reason – that she had taken a lot of them – but although I had no idea of what she was talking about I loved watching her delicately sculpted mouth when she spoke. No expert about clothing at that stage (certainly I was no expert about my own) I could nevertheless not help noticing that her revolutionary outfits were composed of cashmere, suede and silk, all hanging on the lissom figure of a debutante by Boldini. She was draped across two-page spreads in the colour supplements and the glossies almost as often as Germaine herself. Here was a revolution for men to die for, but strictly in the spiritual sense.

Orwell had said that you could see what was wrong with radical movements by the kind of women they attracted. By that test, the Youth Culture had a lot right with it. There was a great deal of glamour about. One of the spin-offs of *Oz* was an Alternative Newspaper called *Ink*. If anything, it had even less editorial judgement than *Oz* – the itinerant Australian journalist Leon Selkirk even managed to sell it his standard scoop about the missing uranium, a story that he had been carrying around for years – but the office was full of Biba-clad lovelies from the shires wondering what keys to press down on the electric typewriters, which like all the other equipment had been bought instead of hired, thus guaranteeing almost immediate insolvency. None of the girls was more beautiful than the paper's cultural editor Sonny Mehta, whom I had known at Cambridge. (In *May Week Was in June* he appeared as Buddy Rajgupta, so that I might cover myself against the potentially libellous implication that he had done no academic work at all.) Though Sonny was much more focused as a newspaper executive than he had been as a student, the newspaper was doomed from its inception. But I enjoyed his company as always, and later on the connection was to pay off in a big way, as I shall relate.

At the time, my whole activity as a writer for the Alternative Press added up to a no-no. Lest I doubt the fact, Karl Miller of the *Listener* pointed it out firmly, although 'no-no' was not the kind of word he would have used, either then or later. A classically educated Scot, a rebel angel from Dr Leavis's dour Empyrean who gave the impression that he had found its irascible ruler insufficiently serious, Miller had no time for the light-minded. The *Listener* was still the printed voice of the BBC as Lord Reith had once conceived it, and Karl Miller was universally acknowledged as a worthy successor to the paper's founding editor, J. R. Ackerley. Miller had all of Ackerley's discerning attributes and none of the frailties. Miller, you could be sure, would never have a love affair with an

Alsatian dog. (Ackerley did, and recorded his emotional commitment in a book whose sex passages take some swallowing even today.) Such was Miller's reputation that to be invited to write for the *Listener* was a sure mark that one had arrived at the point where Grub Street's reeking gutters turned to polished marble. I entered his office at Langham Place with roughly the feelings I had once had when asked to call on the Deputy Headmaster of Sydney Technical High School. Miller had a similar reputation for severity, although it was fairly certain that he did not keep a cane. But at our first meeting he throttled back on the withering impatience and confined himself to the laconically sarcastic. He made it clear that my involvement in the Alternative Press was a waste of what in a less barbaric context might almost be mistaken for a certain effectiveness in English prose. According to him, there was no such thing as an Alternative Press, there was only the press, which was either responsible or frivolous; just as there was no such thing as Experimental Writing, there was only writing, which was either competent or worthless. Some of what I had done for the *New Statesman* and the *TLS*, he told me, could have been regarded as competent if I had curbed my exuberance. He had already printed a radio script that I had written and delivered for Philip French, BBC radio's omniscient arts editor. (The *Listener* was contractually obliged to reprint a quota of radio scripts, an obligation which sometimes weighed heavily on Miller, but he carried out the duty faithfully, quietly subtracting the solecisms from some eminent professor's would-be mandarin diction.) My script, however, he informed me, had been marred by deficiencies of coherence, which he had felt bound to expunge. I could have said that there had been plenty of other deficiencies of coherence that Philip French had expunged first, but for once I had the sense to shut up and take the compliment. Proof that it had actually been a compliment, even if expressed like a rebuke from Captain Bligh, was provided by what happened next. Miller asked me to try my hand at writing a critical column about radio once every four weeks. There were three other radio critics, he explained, who each also wrote a column every four weeks, the collective thus furnishing the paper with a column every week. While he searched my face for signs that I might not have grasped the mathematics, he further explained that the work had to be taken seriously: I must listen to all the important programmes, analyse their qualities, point out their shortcomings, and provide a concise summary with no deficiencies of coherence. It was easy to assume that the critic I was replacing had died under the strain.

Philip French had a gentler nature but he was just as punishing on the facts and details, partly because he already knew more about everything than all his contributors put together. Both men were models of conscientiousness, and I

could have learned even more from them had I been as good as they were at concentrating on one task at a time. As it happened, I added their deadlines to all my other deadlines, in the belief, sadly correct, that a freelance writer could accumulate his piece-rate fees into a living wage only by working until the night sky paled. My typewriter squeaked as it ran out of oil, its ribbons frayed as they ran out of ink. In order to make marks through a dry ribbon I hit the keys extra hard, thus gradually turning the platen into a cylindrical Rosetta Stone. (How many people are left who know what a platen was? And where did all the typewriters go? In what vast quarry do their rusting frames coagulate?) In those days you needed carbon paper to keep a copy and I can remember choking back a sob when I discovered that I had put the carbon paper in backwards. (In childhood, I had sobbed the same way when I spilled flavoured milk into my box of crayons. In the course of time we cry for different things, but we always cry the same way.) As the plaintive note of these parentheses suggests, there was thus some reason for dreaming of a big score that might get me into another financial league, and so buy me some time to finish that book on Louis MacNeice, or anyway start it.

The big score didn't have to be in the theatre. It could be in the movies. Part of the Oxford and Cambridge Theatre Company disaster had included a proposed film of the revue, to be supervised by me because Richard Cottrell, after taking one look at its proposed financial backers, sensibly didn't want to know. The backers, or at any rate the people who said they could get the backing, were a bunch of grandees from the Lord's Taverners, one of those charitable outfits that do good things for the deprived. Along with a sprinkling of dedicated and efficient philanthropists, such organizations are invariably haunted by a shambling squad of superannuated burghers in continual search of some pointless event that they can have meetings about. It was just such a bunch of blazer-wearing drones who had put themselves in charge of immortalizing our revue on celluloid, thus to benefit their charity from the inevitable worldwide sales. Normally they would have had no means of advancing such a project beyond the stage of getting all of You Young People (that was us) packed together in the Arts Theatre boardroom so that we could admire their Hush Puppies and silk cravats while they told us how diverting Prince Philip had been at their last annual lunch. But they had an ace in the hole: one of their new members was Jack Cardiff, the veteran cinematographer who had been responsible for the look of *Black Narcissus* and *The Red Shoes*. Perhaps in the hope of meeting Prince Philip at next year's lunch, Cardiff had come over from Switzerland to make the film. Success was therefore assured.

3. ENTER THE MASTER SWORDSMAN

What happened next is quickly told: almost nothing. After half a century of dealing with maniacs in the film industry, Cardiff soon spotted that his fellow Lord's Taverners had no idea of what they were doing. A stocky, self-contained figure in his suede car-coat and leather hat, he was not one for any signs of disgust beyond a wry smile and a raised eyebrow, but only the men who had got him into this balls-up could have believed that he was pleased. The camera they had hired for him had last been used by Alfred Hitchcock before he left England in the early 1930s. It took three men to lift it. Nobody had realized that extra lighting would be necessary to film the show inside the Arts Theatre. The Lord's Taverner who went off to hire some lights never returned. The only revue number we got on film was an exterior action sequence. Our jocund young company ran spontaneously along the riverbank above the Mill while a couple of us fell spontaneously out of a punt. Off to one side, a thin crowd of townspeople spontaneously yelled abuse. We would have been better off capturing the abuse, but the camera needed a locomotive to turn it around. Despite the manifest hopelessness of all this, Cardiff was sufficiently impressed with my verbal skills to suggest that I might help him with a screenplay he had in mind. His long career as a cinematographer, for which he had won two Oscars and countless other awards, had eventually earned him the chance to become a director. His first film as a director, *Sons and Lovers*, had done well: the script had already been prepared before he was brought on board, but he was justly praised for the thoughtful handling of actors in a lustrous black and white ambience. More recently, however, and from a script developed by his own hand, he had directed *Girl on a Motorcycle*, which had been a critical disaster. With a big heart to go with his experienced head, Cardiff was slow to blame the young Marian Faithfull's difficulties in staying on the motorcycle, although the filming had taken place during a phase of her life when she was having difficulties staying on a chair. The phrase he used was 'script problems'. Eager to avoid script problems on his next project, he thought I might be just the man he needed.

How wrong he was, but there was no reason for either of us to think that at

HOW WRONG HE WAS, BUT THERE WAS NO REASON FOR EITHER OF US TO THINK THAT AT first. I, indeed, had every reason to believe my family finances would be transformed. For the preliminary script conference in Switzerland, not only would an airline ticket be provided each way, but I would live at Cardiff's expense for a whole week as a guest in his apartment, with an actual fee on top of the largesse. Beyond that, there was the prospect of big rewards when the film went into production. My wife, who could have been an agent in another incarnation, pointed out that the initial fee specified amounted to no more than what I would have received for journalism in the same period, and that I was meanwhile, with winter coming on, running myself ragged hitting the deadlines before I caught the plane. I assured her that my ashen face would benefit from the change of air. The implication that Switzerland had a Caribbean climate was not very convincing, but I was already in the sky and heading for Zurich.

Cardiff picked me up at the airport in his big Mercedes and drove me to his apartment in Vevey, at that time a redoubt for film-world tax exiles: Charlie Chaplin lived on the same hill. Cardiff's apartment occupied the top floor of an ordinary-looking block of offices. Opening out endlessly from a modest vestibule, the apartment was lavishly appointed, especially when it came to works of art. The first thing you saw when you entered the enormous living room was an astonishing pair of Renoirs. One of them, however, though sensitive and accomplished, was patently an exact copy of the other, and not by Renoir himself. When Cardiff challenged me to pick the original, I instantly realized that he himself had painted the copy. Diplomatically, or perhaps hypocritically, I pretended to dither, but finally I summoned up enough integrity to point to the right one. Only mildly disappointed, he explained to me that painting had become the passion of his later years. From further evidence – every Monet and Corot had its eerie twin – I deduced that his concept of painting consisted entirely of reproducing masterpieces already in existence. For him, the look of the thing was everything. Individual expression was not among his motives. He had left school at the age of about twelve and had been hard at work with practicalities ever since. As one of the first colour cinematographers – in the days when the Technicolor camera exposed three separate strips of film and was as big as a small house – he had personally helped to invent the look of modern movies. Female film stars had fallen in love with him one after the other because he not only had the guardianship of their beauty, he was a nice bloke: a cuddly bear in a business populated mainly by hyenas. But he was an interpretative artist, not a creative one, and the raw stuff of movies – the script – depended on a mystery he was not equipped to penetrate. An intelligent man denied a higher education, he was a living demonstration, by negative example,

of what a higher education can do even for the stupid: put them at their ease with the written word. For Jack (I should call him by his first name from now on, because he became dear to me and I owe him a lot) the written word was magic. Sometimes the written word is indeed magic, but only when written by a magician. Jack thought words, any words, had a numinous status simply because they had been written down. Reverently he produced for me the cherished book that he wanted to adapt. Stuck together with Sellotape after being read to pieces, it was *The Jade of Destiny*, by Jeffrey Farnol.

I dimly recognized Farnol's name as one that could be seen on the spines of countless historical novels helping to form the warped and dusty stock of the kind of second-hand bookshop that will soon go out of business. But Jack handled the faded volume as if it were a sacred text. He asked me to open it at any page and recite to him a random sample of what he called 'the marvellous dialogue'. The first word of the marvellous dialogue I saw was 'Gadzooks!' It was followed by the sentence: 'Fain would I not face thy glittering blade, Dinwiddie.' I told Jack, with some truth, that I was not enough of an actor to do it justice. So Jack took over. He didn't need the text to tell the story. Over the course of the next hour, he acted the story out. It concerned Dinwiddie, master swordsman of Elizabethan England, a sort of anglicized version of d'Artagnan, with overtones of the Scarlet Pimpernel. Jack moved energetically about, repelling with his phantom rapier a swarm of attackers. As he did so, he described what the camera would see: the close-ups of Dinwiddie's face, the dolly shots as his opponents were driven backward to the balcony and fell into the garden, the ecstatic cry of Lady Rosalind Wedgwood Fitzcastle ('Touché, Dinwiddie, for it is my heart, too, that you have pierced') as she swooned into his arms. It was obvious that Jack had the whole visual aspect of the thing already worked out. What he needed, he said, in order to persuade Richard Burton to play Dinwiddie, was a ten-page treatment that would outline the story while including plenty of the marvellous dialogue. I thought my heart was already in my boots, but actually it must have been only at about the level of my knees, because I felt it sink further when I began to suspect that Jack thought Jeffrey Farnol had not been an over-productive early twentieth-century hack, but an actual Elizabethan writer. (I should hasten to say that I could have been wrong about what Jack thought. He was not without knowledge of the period. After all, his opinion that Shakespeare's plays had been written by Queen Elizabeth herself had no lack of learned endorsement, although the scholars who supported that thesis tended to gibber and run in small circles when aroused.)

I could do the actual writing, Jack told me, when I got back to England. While I was there in Vevey he wanted me to come along and visit various people who

might be interested in having a stake in the movie or even appearing in it. Next day we went to visit the one-time leading man Brian Aherne, who lived about a hundred yards away in a magnificent house full of art and books. At his place, the Monets and Gauguins appeared one at a time. Possessed of features so finely chiselled that he appeared to be in profile even when viewed from front on, Aherne was very well preserved. Wealth can do that for you. In the Hollywood of the late 1930s and early 1940s he had put most of his large salary into citrus groves, some of which turned out to have oil under them, and his share of the take had never stopped flowing, because he put the earnings into downtown real estate on the principle that one day there would be no such thing as cheap land in Los Angeles. There had never been such a thing as cheap land beside Lake Geneva, but he could afford the tab. I had read *The Jade of Destiny* during the night and was able to supply some of the storyline verbally while Jack, employing me as full-time commentator and occasional stand-in for the minor roles, showed Aherne how the sword fights worked and what Dinwiddie looked like when swirling his cape. I was surprised that Aherne seemed quite interested. Then, during a pause, I noticed, because of its unusually vivid green and white jacket, that one of the books on his well-stocked shelves was Julian Maclaren-Ross's recently published *Memoirs of the Forties*. A literary drifter who lived on reviewing books, writing for radio and taking small advances for projects never completed and rarely even begun, Maclaren-Ross, though a notorious bore in real life, had yet wielded a gift for evoking his era in pungent vignettes. I told Aherne, because I thought he might not know, that my friend Charles Osborne, working at the time for the *London Magazine*, had extracted the book's manuscript from Maclaren-Ross by advancing him, after the delivery of each chapter, enough to live on while he wrote the next. Instantly the panic in Aherne's eyes told me that he not only did not know this, he knew nothing about the book at all, or about any other book on his crowded shelves. They had all been supplied by a sophisticated dealership as an extension of the facade that began with his brushed silver hair and strangely perfect teeth. I have to say, though, that his manners were immaculate. A long friendship with Jack was not enough to account for his failure to pick up the phone and have the both of us arrested. He even waved goodbye as we backed away up the drive, still thrusting and parrying as we faded into the distance.

It went on like that for several days: a total fantasy. We visited old stars whom I had thought dead, and after being with them for a while I realized I had been right. They had time available because nothing else was going on. I suppose that in Los Angeles the same sort of thing happens, only worse, because everybody involved is still on this side of the hill, with real money at stake. Our evenings,

however, were the real education, and I still recall them with gratitude. Jack was going through a rough patch in his marriage at the time, and tended towards melancholy. To suit the mood, he played me his cherished collection of Shirley Bassey records while he told me stories of old Hollywood. He was fascinating about why it was ten times harder to light a beautiful woman's face in colour than in black and white. There weren't many of the great beauties that he hadn't seen through his viewfinder. He didn't talk out of school. It was from other sources that I later learned how Ava Gardner, Marilyn Monroe, Leslie Caron and Sophia Loren had all adored him. But I needed no secondary source to tell me how he had adored them. He spoke of them all with a respect verging on reverence, even when he was telling me how difficult some of them could be. He was the cameraman on *The Prince and the Showgirl*, by which time Marilyn Monroe was becoming harder to handle than plutonium. But he called her ill, not insane, and it was easy to deduce that she must have found his fond patience a valuable refuge. (Jack told me something about Marilyn Monroe and Arthur Miller that I have never seen written anywhere: according to her, it was at Miller's insistence that she wore those low-cut dresses to the premieres – the playwright wanted to show off his prize.)

Without giving anything away, Jack said that there was always an emotional relationship between the actress and the cameraman, even if they didn't sleep together. It was like a troubled patient falling for her psychiatrist. When I asked him whether it was because the power was in his hands to make her look lovely or otherwise, he said it wasn't just that: it was the intimacy. The cameraman can see a long way into her face. He can tell from the whites of her eyes whether she is having a period. And she knows he can tell. It was clear that he was grateful for his wealth of experience, and I was grateful for the way he told me of it. The way he spoke about those women was a lesson for me. He had seen them subjected to punishing regimes of dominance and rejection, and on their behalf he had hated every minute of it. He pronounced the name of one famous director with something as close to loathing as his soft voice could manage. It was because the director had ruled his leading lady by playing on her fears. I could see then one of the key reasons why Jack had wanted to become a director himself: so that he would never again have to be complicit in such conduct. When I said that the life of an actress must be hard, he paused before saying: 'The life of any woman.' We rarely know, at the time, that a casual conversation will become something we will remember all our lives, but I think I knew right then that I wouldn't soon forget what he said. I wouldn't want to claim for myself too much sensitivity on the subject. Marriage to a beauty had done nothing to blind me to the beauty of all the women I had not married: far from it.

If my libido could have been given a face, it would have been the face of Robbie Williams singing a one-night date at a training camp for cheerleaders. All the more reason, however, for registering how Jack's mellow flow of reminiscence got to me. I had rarely been impressed so much by a man's range and depth of sympathy. But the mature example he had set was daunting, because it demanded that I have sympathy for him as I grappled with the question of what on earth I was going to do about Dinwiddie, master swordsman of the Elizabethan age. At the airport, when I looked back to catch my trusting employer's eye, he dropped into a crouch and lunged. I clutched my stomach and threw him a reassuring smile.

Back in London, I drafted and typed a monthly radio column for the *Listener* that managed to disguise how at least a week's programmes had not been listened to. Then I went to ground in Cambridge while I plunged into the world of the master swordsman. There was a baby on the way whose future might partly depend on the viability of this project. Winter was setting in by now. In those days we were still living in the first-floor flat of an annexe to New Hall, my wife's college, so if I wanted to pace about I had to go downstairs into the garden. The garden wasn't big enough for the kind of pacing I needed to do, so I went down the lane, turned left and right, and paced along the Backs of the colleges. One of the courtyards of Trinity was especially good for pacing, because it looked like an appropriate setting for Dinwiddie in action. I could see him leaping through an archway in the cloisters, rapier extended.

What I couldn't do was hear him saying, 'Gadzooks!' I couldn't quote that marvellous dialogue. I knew just enough about how to write a screen treatment to know that it should have a few sample scenes in it, complete with speech. I could have learned a lot more about how to write a screen treatment, and it was arrogant of me not to do so. There were already several handbooks that laid out the principles. (Nowadays there are hundreds of such handbooks, because so many writers who have failed at writing screenplays have compensated by telling others how to succeed.) But even if I had known what I was doing, I would still not have known what to do about the speeches. I knew Jack wanted the marvellous dialogue put in, but I kept on finding ways of leaving it out. I gave paraphrases of speeches: a sure-fire formula for boredom. Today, a few decades too late, I realize that I missed an opportunity. I should have told Jack that the story was cobbler's as a drama, but that it might have stood a chance as a lampoon. Like *The Crimson Pirate*, the tale of Dinwiddie could have gone for the laughs. Taking that course, I could have tried putting in a bit of marvellous dialogue of my own. Much later on, William Goldman wrote a screenplay for *The Princess Bride* that was a heady cocktail of camp sword-play and real

romance. But I wasn't William Goldman, there was no studio executive to weigh the possibilities, and Jack, jealous owner of a dramatic project, would scarcely have been likely to see the virtues of converting it into a comedy. That, I would like to think, was the real reason why it didn't occur to me to try persuading him.

But I'm afraid the truth is that it just didn't occur to me. Deficient both in imagination and in candour, I had put myself, and my mentor along with me, in the worst possible position: a slave to the material, with no authority over its purpose, I was engaged in dressing the corpse of a dead duck. The text of Emperor Hirohito's surrender broadcast had been composed with a lighter heart. After about a fortnight's slow work, with little attention paid to the radio, I had a fistful of manuscript to be taken to London and put through the typewriter. There I paid no attention to the radio at all while I glumly typed away, fitfully embellishing paragraphs already stiff beyond redemption, each new page feeling like a fresh betrayal. I ended up with twenty typed quarto pages of pertly phrased dross. It sounded better than Jeffrey Farnol, but only because there was no 'Gadzooks!' It lacked, in other words, the very thing that Jack had most urgently specified. Or rather, it had that thing, but in other words. Instead of merely quoting Dinwiddie as saying 'Gadzooks!' I would say that he uttered a contemporary Elizabethan expletive. Try filming that. I mailed the finished treatment to Switzerland and heard nothing. A few weeks later Jack came to London on other business, met me in the bar of Claridge's and handed me two hundred pounds as a quitting fee. The two hundred was in ten-pound notes: the first such things I had ever handled more than one at a time. Jack looked more puzzled than angry. He said: 'You didn't put in any of the marvellous dialogue.'

4. EARLY STEPS IN OPPOSITE DIRECTIONS

So ended another fiasco, but I could tell myself that it was a sideshow compared with the interview I had only recently endured with Karl Miller at the *Listener* office. While wrestling day and night with the screen treatment of *The Jade of Destiny*, I had contrived to miss almost everything that mattered on radio, and this time the shortfall showed up unmistakably in my column. Miller carpeted me for a dressing-down that felt like the worst moment of my professional life to date. He did not look beautiful when he was angry. 'If you don't want to do this job properly then for God's sake move aside for someone who does.' Though he was immobile behind his desk, the effect of his words was of Rob Roy McGregor running towards me swinging the broadest of swords. None of Dinwiddie's rapier thrusts: at this rate my head would be coming right off. Caving in immediately, I offered feeble apologies along with a moist-eyed goodbye, backed out of his office and scuttled down the corridor, with the intention of drowning myself in the nearest pub. I had not reached the stairwell, however, before I was overtaken by Miller's secretary. As I recall the scene, she was holding one of her shoes in each hand, but I admit that my memory tends to dress the picture. Probably she just had the gift of sprinting in high heels. I was requested to return to Miller's office immediately. 'His bark,' she said, 'is far worse than his bite, you know.' No doubt Vlad the Impaler's secretary said the same about him.

Back on the carpet in Miller's sanctum, and blowing my nose on the Kleenex his secretary had supplied, I detected a slight shift in the editor's anger, although his words were no more mollifying than before. 'If you can't take a cross word, you shouldn't be doing this sort of thing.' He was right, of course. Even today I will do a lot to get out of a face-to-face disagreement. I could ascribe this debilitating characteristic to a desire to be perfect, and a concomitant disinclination to hear any evidence that I am not, but a simpler explanation could be moral cowardice. When I hear the characters in *The West Wing* reading each other the bad news about themselves in that typical American way, they strike

me as being braver than samurai. Please, leave me to my illusions. Convicted of dereliction and touchiness in two rapidly succeeding rockets from the magisterial Miller, I was ready for the scrapheap. But then the message changed along with the mood. 'It's obvious that you don't listen to radio as a matter of course. I expect it's because you're too busy watching the television.' He called it 'the' television, as if it had only recently been invented. 'Perhaps,' he said tentatively, 'you might consider writing about that instead.' Instantly I saw a path into the clear. I did indeed watch television the way I smoked and drank. In Swiss Cottage I would channel-hop throughout the evening before I settled down to hit deadlines until dawn. In Cambridge there had been a television set in the Footlights clubroom and I had watched everything, even *Match of the Day*, until transmission shut down for the night and our barman went home. Only then would Atkin and I go up onto the little stage and start working on a new song. I was a pioneer couch potato. I had even been on television a few times: not as often as I had been on radio, but often enough to get the bug.

In Australia, television had not arrived until the late 1950s. It made a primitive start. The first television news announcer prepared himself with two weeks in Hawaii to acquire an American accent. 'I'm Chuck Faulkner. Here is the nooze.' In that context of discovery, I had been a panellist on a dire discussion programme about the arts, chaired by a woman in a beret who billed herself as 'a Left Bank bohemian from way back'. Actually she was from the outback, where she must have got a lot of practice at talking to herself. The few words I managed to get in uninterrupted were not very well chosen, but I was enchanted by the whole idea of my mouth moving in vision. In England, a couple of my Footlights shows had reached the small screen. My monologue was cut from one of them, to my petulant grief, and in the other I had not been a member of the cast, but in my role as director I was allowed to sit in the control gallery, where the technical palaver enchanted me. As in a hospital, it doesn't matter whether the person giving the orders is competent or not: the jargon sounds great. 'Ready with the close-up on camera two. Show me the wide shot, three.' It was like watching a movie about submarines. Torpedoes away! And now here I was in Karl's headquarters, being asked to register my interest. I knew instantly that I could bring an almost insane enthusiasm to the task. Knowing also that Miller might be afraid of exactly that, I managed to make my cry of assent sound suitably judicious. Incipient tears helped. I was well aware that I had barely escaped professional injury.

It was a reminder of how often, and how unjustifiably, I had been spared physical injury in my childhood. As I recorded in *Unreliable Memoirs*, it was the merest fluke I landed flat on my back, instead of at a damaging angle, after I

jumped off the roof of an unfinished council house while dressed as the Flash of Lightning. There were other narrow squeaks that I failed to include in that book because I had forgotten them. For some reason they come back to me now with ever-increasing vividness. Many a time, after instructions from my mother that I should check the bottom of the muddy river before diving into it, I dived in without checking. It was the boy from the next street who became the quadriplegic, not me. When, late one evening, I rode my bicycle flat out over the bridge across the creek in the park – I was crouched for speed, my legs a blur – I had no idea that the park ranger had closed the bridge by putting a heavy wooden bar across it until next morning. I found out the hard way, but it could have been harder. The wooden bar hit me exactly in the centre of the forehead instead of converting my skull into a head-hunter's ornamental ashtray. I came to with nothing more serious than a bruised brain. Nor has the same capacity to flirt with doom been sufficiently absent from my adult years. Not long ago I stepped idly in front of a turning London bus whose Sikh driver must have had the reflexes of a fighter pilot. When I looked up and saw his turbaned head bent over the wheel I thought he was praying, until I noticed all the upstairs passengers gathered together at the front window. I should have prayed myself, giving thanks. Similarly, the number of times in my life when inattention should have led to professional ruin, or, more mercifully, to professional death, is too embarrassing to recount in full at this point. Enough to say that when I backed out of Miller's presence, like Anna from an audience with the King of Siam, I was all too conscious of having once again been spared. I had no idea, however, that it was a turning point in my career. You realize these things only later, and I am a bit impatient with memoirists who claim to have foreseen their destiny. I have never been able to foresee very far beyond tomorrow. Even when I lay a long plan, it is never in the expectation that I will live to see it fulfilled. I remember too well the day that the Flash of Lightning lay winded in the sandpit of the building site, breathlessly wondering if he dared to lift a finger.

Call no man happy if he has never been ordered to go home and watch television. Watching habitually yet writing only one column per month, I would have all too much to talk about, rather than, as with radio, all too little. Had I been doing nothing else, I might have choked on the abundance of stimulus, but luckily there were plenty of other things to distract me, quite apart from the ghost of Louis MacNeice, who would visit me during my afternoons of sleep to tell me that everyone else in his part of the underworld had a biography and they were all wondering what had happened to his. The ghost wore a trench coat, like Humphrey Bogart. Soon I would get started, but first there were all these articles and reviews to attend to, and a request from BBC radio to interview C. P. Snow.

It was kind of them to ask, because not long before I had turned up a week late to interview the ballet pundit Richard Buckle. The producer, normally a very decorous woman, had called me a stupid bastard. Tacitly conceding that she might have hit on the explanation, I bought my first pocket diary, into which C. P. Snow's name was duly entered, with the date, time and place. Humming with efficiency, I even made time to reacquaint myself with the dizzy excitement of one of Snow's novels. 'Part Two: A Decision is Taken. Chapter One: The Lighting of a Cigarette.' There was also a request from Stella Richman of London Weekend International that I should call in at her office off Savile Row. London Weekend Television, or LWT, was one of the two London franchises: I knew that much. But I had no idea of what London Weekend International did. The name sounded enticing, however, and the office was promisingly placed, opposite a tailoring firm called James & James. It turned out that Stella Richman, on behalf of the parent franchise, was charged with the discovery and development of new and unconventional talent. Elegantly groomed, she was very nice about not minding that I knew so little about her. Actually any aspiring television critic, no matter how green, should have known that she had a distinguished track record as a producer. She, on the other hand, knew a daunting amount about me. She had been keeping cuttings on our recent Footlights adventures and had even attended one of the few evenings at Hampstead Theatre Club when I had not looked like a rat packing its tiny bags on the deck of a sinking ship. She declared that my proved ability to marshal the talents of young writers and performers could prove valuable for television. Clearly she had either not heard of the Oxford and Cambridge Revue imbroglio or else chosen to ignore it. Even more cheering from the viewpoint of my twitching ego, she had decided that I myself might have 'presence' on screen. 'Nobody would call you handsome, but you have a face.' Though the same could have been said with equal justice to Lyndon Johnson, I still liked the sound of that.

I would have liked it even better if I could have appreciated the leap of imagination it must have taken on her part, because I had put on my best front for the visit – brown velvet jacket, fawn corduroy trousers, zipped boots, tartan tie with the paisley shirt and new beard quite recently washed – and thus could have been auditioning only for the kind of role that required the wearing of a rubber suit, like the Creature from the Black Lagoon. But Stella (first-name terms were mandatory from the jump) was engaged in the search for potential, which is almost always a matter of discounting the visible actuality. She wanted me to suggest some small programmes that I and my closest colleagues might like to do. I had two ideas right there on the spot. One was for a kind of

miscellaneous arts programme done as a two-handed exchange between me and Russell Davies, widely acclaimed as the most gifted all-round writer–performer that the Footlights had hatched since World War II, or possibly since World War I. Stella said that I didn't have to sell him to her: she had seen him in action and thought he was the goods. 'Yes, we could do that with two cameras. Get the pilot right and we can make a set of six for a half-hour slot.' Clueless as I was, I had no inkling that Santa Claus had just run me over with his sleigh and left me buried under a heap of toys, so I forged on with another idea, meant to be more attractive because I wasn't asking to appear in it. How about a song show with Julie Covington and Pete Atkin singing the songs that Atkin and I had written? I explained that not all of our songs had been featured in the stage shows, but Stella was ahead of me. 'Yes, I've got the records that you made in Cambridge.' Before I had time to apologize for their low-budget production values – they had been made on a single tape with hung blankets to adjust the sound balance – she was saying: 'Three cameras. We could do half a dozen of those as well.' She proposed contracts for both shows, with another contract for an option on my further services. I had no agent at the time, but who haggles with the Fairy Godmother? I guessed that she would look after me well: a guess that was to prove correct. I have sometimes been wrong about a father figure, but at sizing up a mother figure I have been right almost every time. Qualified mother figures have the knack of getting you to eat the cabbage, if only by forbidding you to touch it. You can see it in their eyes: they see through to the boy and make a man of him. So there I was once again, happily committing myself to more work than I could possibly handle. But I was also committing myself to something like a salary. For a moment I wondered whether I should be bothering with literary journalism at all.

But only for a moment. Back downstairs in the street, I was already considering the possibility of plunging forward into the new dream without letting go of my previous gains. A double career, that was the ticket. James & James: it was up there on a sign. Though a chance at television stardom was too good to pass up, my instinct – for once functioning helpfully – told me that in show business I would never enjoy the precious freedom to be alone. I had already noticed that television worked like an army, with fifty people pushing paper for every soldier holding a rifle. In journalism, it was just me, the blank sheet of paper, and the cigarette dangling romantically from the lower lip. The attraction, I think, wasn't so much that nobody else could share the glory, as that nobody else could get hurt. In a solo activity I might be disappointed, but in a group effort I might be disappointing: a much more unsettling prospect. So back I went to the typewriter, first to knock out an outline for the programmes as

Stella had requested, but then to review other people's programmes for my *Listener* column. I flattered myself that to be engaged in the first activity made me more of an expert on the second. Actually I was fooling myself. As yet I knew very little about the practicalities of making television, and it probably would have acted against me as a reviewer if I had known more. In any field of criticism, there is nothing more damaging than knowing a little bit about how the art you criticize actually gets made. If you don't know everything, it is better to know nothing. What you do have to know is how to register your response, and your first response should be naive, not sophisticated. Was I repelled by what I saw, or was I pleased? Was I interested or not? Was I interested in what was supposed to be interesting, or was I more interested in what was supposed to be trivial? It was a matter of judgement, but the judgement had to be emotional before it was intellectual. My first breakthrough came when I realized that the most fascinating thing about the supposedly realistic police series *Softly, Softly* was the unreal frequency with which the powerfully built Inspector Harry Hawkins (played by Norman Bowler) opened and closed doors. In any given episode, he would open or close every door in the police station. Sometimes he would open and close the same door in rapid succession. He would leave the room just so that he could open the door, close it behind him, open it again, and come back in. He gritted his powerfully built teeth while opening and closing doors, as if opening and closing doors were a feat not just of physical strength, but of mental concentration. I wrote all this down in my column, giving him the nickname Harry the Hawk.

Taking this approach, I found myself writing with a compulsive flow uninhibited even by the thought that Karl Miller might react as John Calvin would have done to a copy of *Playboy*. But I was having too much fun to stop writing, and I soon discovered, when I took the finished pieces to his office, that he was having too much fun to stop reading. I can't exactly say that he laughed aloud, but there were small rearrangements of his tight lips that were almost certainly the indication of a repressed smile, as the armour of some ancient Norse warrior might gleam within a glacier. No doubt there were calculations being made. He had three other television critics of unassailable solemnity. There was perhaps room for a fourth critic to wear a putty nose and a revolving bow tie. Meanwhile I was making calculations of my own. If I put in enough straight-faced stuff about the programmes that mattered, I could do some lampooning of the programmes that didn't. On the *Guardian*, the excellent Nancy Banks-Smith had been striking just such a balance for some time, so the approach was not without precedent. What was without precedent was my next breakthrough. I started writing about television phenomena that couldn't really

be classified as programmes at all. Sports commentators, for example, were a rich source of absurdity that often had only to be quoted in order to uncover the remarkable. At Cambridge I had written a Footlights routine, brilliantly delivered by Jonathan James-Moore, about a sports commentator called Alexander Palace: one of the old school, with RAF moustache taking off vibrantly from his top lip and Olympic rings on his white crew-neck pullover. But now a new breed, harder to place by class origin yet even more patriotic, was colonizing the glass tube. David Coleman spoke in a new voice, almost in a new language. This new language was already highly developed, but nobody had yet made it a subject of study. There were social changes going on all over the screen, signalled by speech patterns, hairstyles, gestures. I tried to get some of that in. Miller, whose range of cultural reference was much wider than his strict education might have dictated (the man who printed some of Philip Larkin's poems for the first time had also been one of the first serious critics to write about John Lennon), clearly thought I was on to something. If he hadn't thought that, he would have lowered the boom right across my fingers. So I pushed on with the approach, even if the occasional reader's letter might complain that untamed colonials were destroying the last values of the old Empire. There were other letters that approved. More importantly, the editor didn't disapprove. When the piece was set up in galley, he would move his metal rule down the column line by line, still on the lookout for blemishes. Even at that late stage, a cherished sentence might be struck out. But most of what I had written stayed in place. Making him fight back a smile became a goal in life. The world was too much with him. Once when I entered his office he was in his chair but holding an open umbrella, 'to ward off my troubles'. I was glad to see that he lowered the umbrella somewhere during my second paragraph.

Though a fresh idea usually happens quite quickly, to make it a reality invariably takes more time than we care to remember. My *Listener* TV column felt its way forward month by month, and there was no single occasion when I sat down and nussed out exactly where I thought it should go next. For one thing, there was too much else going on. Pete Atkin and I, still writing songs, were beginning to entertain the idea that it might be advantageous for him to make an album with a proper label so that we could both become millionaires, but the plan rather depended on a proper label having the same idea. Perhaps the London Weekend song-show programmes would help with that. But the two-man show with Russell Davies had to be done first, and before I could start with my share of writing the pilot, I had to clear my Grub Street deadlines. After an exhausting week of work I had done so, but I was in no great shape when I shambled into the London Weekend office to meet our executive producer,

David Reed. Russell Davies, who was leading the same kind of life as I was but with possibly even less sense of ruthless efficiency, looked as vague as I did. We were both late for the appointment by several hours. David Reed, a small, dapper man who later proved to have a kind nature, wasn't a bit kind that day, and I can't blame him. In any branch of show business, there is nothing quite so depressing as to be put in charge of young people intent on blowing their opportunity. 'Don't,' he said quietly, 'waste my time again.'

From that moment I was careful not to miss an appointment with anybody, and eventually timekeeping became a fetish. Today, I would rather hire a helicopter than be five minutes late for a speaking engagement – an expensive obsession, when the speaking engagement is in the local bookshop – but that's to leap ahead. On the day in question, Davies and I, suitably abashed, pooled our talents along with our hangovers to come up with a title and a format. The title we thought fitting was *Think Twice*: because there were two of us, you see, and we would be doing quite a lot of thinking. (Years later, Joan Bakewell, possibly having forgotten that I was in the show, told me she thought it was the most irritating single television programme she had ever seen, and that her irritation had begun when she heard its name.) We sketched out possible items about our interests: jazz, movies, out-of-the-way literature. Today it would be called a standard postmodern emphasis but it was unusual for the time. David Reed picked out the subjects he thought might suit the pilot and we were given a desk at which to write the actual scripts. This proved to be a lot harder than sketching the outlines. Several times, as we sat and worked, Stella Richman went by, smiling nicely at her unconventional new talent. Eventually she and David Reed gave us our very own producer, a tall and improbably handsome young man called Paul Knight. Later on, for Goldcrest, Paul Knight produced the only solid television hit that ill-fated organization ever had, *Robin of Sherwood*. But at the beginning of his career he got us. He was very nice about it, but also very firm. He said that most of our subject matter was beyond him, but if we couldn't write it so that he could follow the argument, it would be beyond everybody. This was sound advice, embodying a principle I have tried to stick to ever since: the more abstruse the topic, the clearer you should be. (The converse holds: if you are reading deliberately abstruse prose, it has almost certainly been written about nothing.) Thus supervised, we wrote steadily until the day of the first pilot, which we taped nearby in a studio not much bigger than a bathroom.

I had ditched the beard by then, with some regret because it was the best of my beards to date, less like the old salt on the Player's Navy Cut cigarette packet and more like Dinwiddie, master swordsman of the Elizabethan age. The beard had been a sign of my unwillingness to compromise, and its disappearance was a

sign of how my unwillingness could be overcome by the prospect of getting more of my face on screen. The space left by the beard's removal also left room for the knot of my tie to show: a relatively plain tie this time, although there was nothing plain about the shirt, which I remember as some sort of Liberty print on brushed nylon, fresh out of Carnaby Street after falling off a van from Yugoslavia. 'It's only a pilot,' muttered Paul Knight, but he and the studio director had bigger problems with me than that. Davies took easily to the teleprompter as he took easily to everything – he could play most musical instruments as soon as he picked them up and could probably have flown a plane after a few minutes to study the controls – but I had trouble grasping the simple principle that the teleprompter would scroll its message at the same speed as I spoke. I was under the impression that I had to speak as fast as the teleprompter was going. Since reading a text aloud at high speed had always been one of my party tricks, I read faster and faster, unable to believe that the teleprompter was following me, not I it. In those days the teleprompter, not yet called an autocue, stood separately to one side of the camera, so the effect I made on screen was of a man talking rapidly sideways to an invisible window cleaner. But Stella liked the pilot even though some of her fellow executives didn't (one of them threatened to resign) and she scheduled two days in studio to shoot a set of six.

The scheduled shooting days were only a few weeks ahead, so we had to write like a pair of convicts petitioning against an imminent death sentence. By night we wrote in pubs, in Wimpy bars, at the Angus Steak House. By day we were in our corner of the open-plan office, somehow finding room for our elbows among the coffee cups, sandwich crusts, and foully heaped ashtrays. Off to one side, behind a glass partition, sat Paul Knight, shaking his head over our scripts. Beautiful young secretaries queued up to take him coffee. None of them came near us: we had to make our own. I can still remember one of our script segments as being not half bad. It was about Michael Frayn, who had not yet begun his second career as a playwright. But as a columnist and novelist he was an inspiration to both of us. Frayn's 'Miscellany' column in the *Guardian* had been one of the things that made my life seem worth living even during my first winter in England. The thought that I might never have to be so poor and cold again no doubt gave my share of the script wings. I wrote the exposition while Davies, armed with a copy each of Frayn's paperback collections *The Day of the Dog*, *The Book of Fub* and *At Bay in Gear Street*, worked on the voicing of the extracts. His powers of mimicry were our best weapon, and the whole office would stop when he tried the voices out. My job was to provide the framework for his virtuosity.

Rehearsed in the studio, the result gave at least a hint of how that kind of arts

presentation could look and sound: rich in content and unforced in vocal style, even if one of the voices, mine, belonged to a Benzedrine addict being held at gunpoint. The rehearsal came in useful for staving off at least one incipient blunder on my part. Paul Knight emerged from the control gallery to gently disabuse me of the idea that I should reinforce my vocal points with physical gestures. I had made the classic mistake of assuming that the illustrative use of the hands might be useful on television merely because it was so useless on radio. The assumption is natural but exactly wrong: rather than raise the hands into shot, it is less distracting to sit on them. Rehearsals were so prolonged that fatigue set in, which proved beneficial for me, because I slowed down and even managed the occasional pause in my tirade. A pause on radio sounds as if the world has come to an end, but on television it looks like thought. I had learned something. When we went for the tape I looked less like a man about to be shot and more like a man who had been shot already. You could call it relaxation, of a kind. Because the programmes were wiped as soon as screened – it was still quite rare to keep a tape after transmission – I can safely say they weren't bad. They went to air in a graveyard slot where they were immune from criticism, because nobody was watching except Joan Bakewell.

The song show was to be called *The Party's Moving On*. Pete and Julie were already hard at work rehearsing for it. Though required to be in attendance to help supervise the format, I had much less scripting to do, which was lucky, because the *Observer* had sent me a book to review. In those days the *Observer* was the most important Sunday paper by a long mile. Edited as a family fiefdom by David Astor, it had arts pages that left those of any rival paper for dead. Not even the *Sunday Times* came close. The *Observer's* arts editor was Terence Kilmartin. During the war, Kilmartin had saved Astor's life somewhere behind enemy lines. Doing a favour in return, Astor gave Kilmartin a free hand to run the arts pages as a kind of university campus. The roster of the faculty was dazzling. Although Kenneth Tynan was no longer reviewing regularly, he was still writing features. Penelope Gilliatt was the latest film critic in a line that went back to C. E. Lejeune. Katharine Whitehorn, author of *Cooking in a Bedsitter*, was a style-setter for woman journalists writing about all the practical matters of everyday life that had never previously got a mention. Edward Crankshaw, author of one of the best books about old Vienna, wrote on politics. John Weightman wrote so authoritatively about French literature that the French government gave him a decoration for his buttonhole. Even the man who wrote the round-up review of crime novels, John Coleman, was a recognized wit. John Silverlight, one of the section editors, was an outstanding example of a type now vanished: the expert on English usage who kept a strict eye on grammar and

syntax throughout the paper. The whole thing was required reading every Sunday for the brightest million people in the country. For a Grub Street foot-slogger to get the nod from Kilmartin was like being commissioned in the field. Overawed at being asked, I over-wrote my first article to the point of sclerosis. Would-be epigrams met each other, fought and froze. Pointless erudition and strained jocularities formed a rigid amalgam. Correctly estimating that the result could have been written by no one else, I mailed it in. Fortunately Kilmartin was used to that reaction from new writers and instead of spiking the piece he called me down to the *Observer* office to discuss it. The office, in that era, was in the old *Times* building on Printing House Square, near the City end of Blackfriars Bridge, about a hundred yards south of the point where Ludgate Hill, plunging down from St Paul's, changed its name to Fleet Street. Let's say that name again. Fleet Street! I couldn't believe it. Nowadays, with the newspaper offices scattered all over London, the personnel who remember when they were still concentrated in and around Fleet Street are dying off like old soldiers. At the time when I made my way to the *Observer*'s door, however, such a diaspora was still inconceivable. Fleet Street was a boulevard of unbroken dreams and the *Observer* was the dream I held most dear. If Kilmartin turned me away, the Thames was conveniently nearby. I could just jump in.

He didn't turn me away, but he did scare me half to death. Not that there was anything terrifying about his manner: quite the reverse. Rising politely from his plain chair behind the book-piled desk in his book-lined office, he held out a dry firm hand that must have detected the residue of the sweat I had just wiped off against my trouser leg, but his face registered no disgust. It was too busy registering handsomeness. Kilmartin was as good looking as a man can be without ceasing to look intelligent as well. Of Irish origin, he was self-admittedly of the type that his countrymen call Desperate Chancer. There was a story that he once spent a night in jail in Paris after getting into a fight with the police. But none of that showed. He looked like the ideal English gentleman, in the exclusive sub-category of ideal English gentlemen who wield natural authority, speak perfect French, are charming to women and read ten books a week. It was a face to lead men into battle. There was only one item missing from the full kit of a commanding manner.

Scarcely a minute into our first conversation, I realized that he took a while to say things. Between any two words he said either 'um' or 'ah', except when either of these sounds occurred twice, in which case it would be separated by the other. The effect was to stop time. 'Your, um, piece, ah, needs, um ah um, some, um, attention.' By then we were sitting down, he had put on a pair of half-glasses, and he was pointing at my first paragraph with a blue pencil. 'Where,

um, you, um, say, um ah um, this, ah, hugely, ah, impressive, um ah um, novel ...' Then an extraordinary thing happened. Suddenly several words came out uninterrupted. 'I should have thought we didn't need the "hugely". I mean, if you call it "impressive" then you're already ...' There was a pause, as if to recuperate. After a small eternity, normal service was resumed. 'Either, um, you're, ah, impressed, or, ah, you're, um ah um, not.' We were three lines into the piece with about ninety-seven lines to go. He was right, of course, and I quickly saw that my manuscript was going to end up a lot shorter. But it was equally clear that I was going to end up a lot older. I never doubted, however, that I was in good hands. Twenty minutes later, the fourth paragraph that had given me so much trouble to get right revealed why: it was all wrong. Trying to say too much at once, I had constructed a sentence out of clauses that should have been sentences in themselves. With apologetic regret, he prised them apart. Writing in my head, I supplied new beginnings for each. 'That, um, sounds, ah, much, um, more, um ah um, natural.' His secretary brought tea. At this rate she would have to bring us food and medical supplies.

But he was right every time. At the speed of a glacier, my overwrought piece was brought back in touch with living speech. It was my conversational tone, he told me, that he was after: there was no need to get up on stilts. It took him a long time to tell me, but that probably helped to drive the lesson home. 'We, um, can, ah, print, um, this, ah um ah, now.' It would have been an affectation to show my delight, because I had realized in the first few minutes that he wouldn't have been taking the trouble if he had thought the piece beyond salvation. But there was another wonder to come, and this time there was no holding back a laugh of disbelief. He showed me a row of upcoming books and asked me which one I would like to review next. No doubt it was the slush pile left over after the big stuff had been sent out to the name reviewers, but being granted access had to mean that I was in. Instantly I conceived a whole new ambition. Just as I aimed to write a piece for Miller that would make him smile, so I would aim to write a piece for Kilmartin that he would print without consuming more than an epoch to take me through the manuscript. Simultaneously exalted and exhausted, I limped along Fleet Street past the celebrated landmarks of my new trade. Outside El Vino's, the most famous of all the Fleet Street hostelries, a byline journalist whose face I recognized from photographs was standing on the edge of the gutter, gathering his concentration for the six-inch descent into the carriageway. He was so drunk that he swayed in the wind of a passing cab. A hundred yards further on, I looked back, and he was still in place. But not even he could depress me. He might be standing on the edge of doom, but I was walking on air.

5. NIGHT OF THE KILLER JOINT

But it was my effort in Grub Street that had led to my first toehold in Fleet Street, and, for a while yet, Grub Street would continue to be my main base. There could be no base more shaky: it was like Khe Sahn in there. You had to be on the alert twenty-four hours a day just to hold the perimeter, or you would wake up sharing your sleeping bag with several small men in conical hats. To keep up with the punishing requirement of putting an income together out of piecework, the temptation was to find a neutral style and just fill the various spaces as specified. But my instinct dictated otherwise. I tried to give each piece everything, composing it as if it were a poem, with every word considered before it was placed, as if I were a mad bricklayer building a garden wall out of precious stones. If I had known how to write with less effort I might have written more. Luckily the extra lolly from London Weekend took off some of the pressure, so that I never got to the point, quite common among veterans of the genre, where I was not only jobbing all over the place but doing each job with cheap materials, like a cowboy plumber. It thus became possible for me to overfulfil a specification: a possibility which, I later concluded – once again I didn't realize it at the time – is one of the keys to attaining a recognized competence in any field, and also of escaping from it when the moment comes.

If you just do the minimum you will get stuck. Give it the maximum and you will make your employer feel that you are doing him a favour, instead of he you. An example of this was when Ian Hamilton asked me to do a round-up review for the *TLS* of Edmund Wilson's last few books. I thought Edmund Wilson was not just America's most comprehensive man of letters, but the greatest critic alive anywhere: and now he was on the point of death. Writing about him anonymously for Britain's most hallowed literary institution, the *TLS*, I would be giving him a send-off worthy of his stature. (One measure of the stature was that his English publisher had gone on bringing out his books right to the end, even though they went straight to the remainder shops: heavy evidence that commitment to quality can be a commercial disaster.) Anonymity would work

for the venture instead of against it, because it would be the institution talking, and not just some Australian swagman humping his bluey through the early stages of the road to Hullaboola. Hamilton would have been content if I had wrapped the task up in two thousand words. I gave him eleven thousand, plus a suggested title, 'The Metropolitan Critic'. Hamilton cut it back to ten thousand, kept the title, and the piece ran, filling several pages of the paper. I'm not sure what the effect was on Wilson – I like to think it was not necessarily a bad sign that he died a few days after the tribute appeared – but it had a stirring effect on some other established writers, who might have quite liked the idea of one of their number being celebrated as a crucial figure in modern intellectual history. If him, why not them? No doubt inspired by motives rather more exalted than that, Graham Greene asked the *TLS* chief editor Arthur Crook who had written the Wilson piece. Crook having spilled the beans, I duly received a letter from Greene himself, telling me that he, too, held a high opinion of Wilson, but that he was very glad someone so young should have written the opinion down. Flatteringly avuncular, Greene suggested that I might consider the discursive critical essay as my destined field of operations. The piece wasn't as long as the letter I wrote in reply, which was probably the reason I never heard from him again. (I had not yet learned that any writer, even when much less prominent than Greene, is swamped with correspondence and should never be communicated with at any length greater than a single paragraph. A single sentence is plenty.) Still, I had that first letter from him, and there were many other letters from other people to back it up. I had done something right, and had done it, not with one eye on my ambitions, but by submitting myself to an obligation.

The lesson was not lost on me, although I was a long time figuring out the full range of implication. The range can be summed up thus: given the choice between personal opportunism and public duty, go with the duty. The rewards might not show up straight away, but they will outlast the quick returns for cynicism. Since rewards are still in mind, that interpretation might seem opportunistic in itself, but only because of a supervening paradox: virtue resides in the taming of a baser instinct, not in its elimination. Our baser instincts act in our interests, to get us fed, to make us loved, to keep our children safe. For all but the saints, neglect of one's own interests limits the power even to be altruistic. One gets more free time, but only to interfere. It must have been just about then, in her *Observer* column, that Katherine Whitehorn wrote, 'You can recognize the people who live for others by the haunted look on the faces of the others.' I didn't have to write it down: it went straight to memory, which may have displaced some of the words, but the balance of the sentence was

unforgettable. With the best writers for the Sunday papers and literary magazines in those days, one of the pleasures was their confidence of aphorism – a confidence generated, as always, by the receptivity of the audience. The resonant sentence has been a basic form throughout the history of philosophy; a form in which all the best writers sound the same and time collapses into a permanent present. Consider one of my favourite moments from Seneca, his warning to the tyrant: you can kill as many enemies as you like, but your successor will be among those who survive. It's an insight anyone can have, but made penetrating by the compactness with which it is put.

I loved the idea of talking that way on the page. It had only dimly occurred to me that the same sort of thing might be possible on radio, and as yet I had no idea at all that it might be possible on television. (Not for me, at any rate: it was already the quality I admired most in veteran broadcasters like Rene Cutforth, Robert Kee, Charles Wheeler, Ludovic Kennedy and numerous others in those great days of the overqualified front man.) But the success of the piece on Wilson was the beginning of my confidence in a tactical approach to print journalism by which I might get away with combining the apparently antagonistic roles of wiseacre and smart Alec. After all, if a reasonable proportion of the audience read such a long piece to the end, I must have got the tone right. Otherwise there would have been cancelled subscriptions en masse.

Thus glowing with self-esteem, I was better equipped to handle my status as gooseberry when Pete and Julie went to studio with *The Party's Moving On*. Though my name was on the roller somewhere as writer and script editor, the humbling truth was that my contribution had ceased to be useful after Pete had set my lyrics to music. Needing the full range of cameras and lights, the shows were taped at the old Rediffusion studios in Wembley, a district no lovelier then than it is now. All the tapes were wiped long ago, so once again it is safe to say that the results were good. They had enough impact at the time to help Pete get his first recording contract, with Philips: part of a tangled story that would have dominated my life in the first half of the 1970s if I had been doing nothing else, and came close to breaking my nerve even though I was. More of that later, because, for the moment, *The Party's Moving On* shows were sheer euphoria for the two of us who had written the songs, and I shouldn't let those real feelings of satisfaction be blunted by the unearned maturity of retrospect, which is always a false perspective if it invalidates past emotions. It's like belittling a lost love: you are calling yourself stupid for ever getting into it, when actually you were at your best, and you would not be wiser now if you had not been foolish then. When I watched Pete and Julie singing our songs, I was as proud as I have ever been in my life: I thought we were all on the road to immortality. The long truth

was that we had no chance of general popularity as song writers, but in the short run it felt as if we had, because there was our stuff, right there on television. As Pete would be the first to admit, Julie was the radiant centre of the appeal. She looked and sounded like a blessing, and you would have sworn – you and almost any showbiz executive who saw and heard her in action – that she was headed for great things. Whether or not she would accept her destiny was up to her. If, in the course of time, she did not become one of the biggest stars in the world, it can only have been because she chose not to.

For those of us less gifted, the choice is not so open. We have to chase our luck or else run out of it. Making the dreary train journey to Wembley for what often seemed no good reason, I soon found that my opinion of myself as a spare wheel was not shared by Stella, who gave me all kinds of credit for the song shows, which she somehow decided I had been supervising by telepathy from my position in the canteen or, more often, the bar. Any impression of mental puissance might have been increased by the fact that I was usually to be seen working hard with notebook and biro, shaping up a new book review or a linking script for BBC radio's *Kaleidoscope*, on which I had graduated from occasional contributor to semi-regular front-man. In aid of these projects, books would be stacked up on the table at which I sat. For television executives, who are more likely to err through an excess of respect for the clerical life than through a deficiency, there could have been no more convincing evidence of cerebral fecundity. People must have tiptoed to Stella's office and told her that I was reading, writing, drinking and smoking simultaneously. Stella in her turn must have been further convinced that she was hatching a new Leonardo da Vinci. She informed Paul Knight that I was to be regarded as the key man, the potential presiding genius, for a new series of light-entertainment shows that would exploit the coruscating talents of all my young graduate colleagues. The conversations between Paul and Stella took place high up in LWT's office building near the studios. Had Paul but known it, this was the exact moment to strap on his parachute and step out of the window. Even if, the parachute given insufficient time to deploy, he had arrived in the car park at terminal velocity, the quick journey downward would have been less painful for him than what was to happen next. But he didn't know that yet. Later in his career, he would be better equipped to detect the shadow of an oncoming turkey. I can take some credit for sharpening that awareness.

Back in the Angus Steak House in Swiss Cottage, I got together with my troops. In a kind of Round Table conference with yet another notched tomato-half as a centre piece, we persuaded ourselves that a good title for the new spectacular would be *What Are You Doing After the Show?*. It is never a good

idea for a title to ask a question, because in the event of mishap the question is an open invitation for sardonic onlookers to supply the answer. As time would prove, the answer to ‘What are you doing after the show?’ was ‘I am going to crawl away behind a dung-heap and die in agony.’ But we didn’t know that then. Prescience came after the event, as it almost always does. Before the event, we were high on the possibilities of replacing the moribund traditions of television variety with the teeming, tumbling enthusiasm of our bright young selves. We were partly right about the moribund traditions – if *The Black and White Minstrel Show* wasn’t still on the air, it hadn’t been off the air long – but we were wholly wrong about having the wherewithal to replace them. My troops were clever and in some cases brilliant, but as far as material went, they had just about enough new ideas in stock to furnish a single show. It should have been evident to me that the series would run out of substance soon after it was launched. It would be a Chinese paper skyrocket. More accurately, considering the size of its budget, it would be a huge new ship sliding backwards down the slipway and continuing its trajectory until it disappeared under the waters of the Clyde, leaving a lot of people with rattles in their hands silently examining a vast area of foam.

Perhaps this likelihood, not evident to me at the time, should have been evident to those who had hired me, but it would be unfair to blame them. After all, I had done my share of talking them into it, and nobody who has ever complained about his unique vision being stifled has a right to object when the supposedly repressive forces remove the pillow from his face and give him permission to rise up and strut his stuff. Later on I made a lot of bitter comments about how Stella and her executives had no real idea of what originality was. Stella, in particular, kept saying that she wanted ‘something new, like the *Laugh-In*’. At the time, *Rowan and Martin’s Laugh-In*, freshly syndicated from America, was making everything else on British television look horse-drawn. The show was fronted by the two men with their names in the title. Their names were practically all they had to contribute. A pair of cocktail-lounge hacks as far below Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis as you could get before arriving at Abbot and Costello, on screen they reprised their perennial on-stage relationship in short front-of-curtain numbers between sketches featuring the show’s true talents, a bunch of young eccentrics ranging from Arte Johnson to Henry Gibson, by way of Lily Tomlin and Goldie Hawn. The ideal *Laugh-In* sketch was scarcely longer than its own punchline. I learned a lot from watching, but the part that I should have studied harder was the roller. The names of the writers went on for ever. In other words, the onscreen talents, almost without exception, were not writing their own stuff. So when our executives said they wanted

‘something new, like the *Laugh-In*’, there were actually asking for a large-scale operation without any logistical support.

But I could have pointed that out, had I been wiser. Paul Knight would have listened. A bit later on, as the disaster unfolded, he was the first to spot that we needed to recruit other writers pronto. Any writers: V. S. Naipaul if he was available. Had I foreseen the necessity, I could have cast myself in the role of co-ordinator and catalyst. On the *Laugh-In*, that very role had been played by an Australian wanderer called Digby Wolfe, who remains, to this day, one of the unsung heroes of a TV revolution. (Another was Ernie Kovacs, whose fame as a performer eclipsed his influential originality as an ideas man.) In an earlier phase of American TV, programmes like *Your Show of Shows* had a table of writers so numerous that Mel Brooks, Woody Allen and Dick Cavett were lost among them. But the tumult could be kept under control by the central ego of the single star, such as Jackie Gleason or Sid Caesar. The *Laugh-In*, with a whole bunch of stars, needed someone to channel its writing staff. Digby Wolfe was the right man. From this distance, I no doubt tend to idealize him, but I should be quick to say that my estimation of his importance did not come from him. Indeed I never met him. He would have been hard to know anyway, as the buccaneering showbiz writers so often are. But I know them as a type, and have fondness for them. Buck Henry was one of them. Terry Southern was another. Southern was unclassifiable until he hit the big money in Hollywood. Not surprisingly, considering his personal habits, the big money hit him right back. By the time that there were no substances left to abuse, he had disappeared into an endless mess of aborted projects – first finished but useless, then unfinished, then half-finished, then unstarted. But the essence of the man was never on the screen anyway: not even in *Easy Rider* or the best bits of *Doctor Strangelove*. The essence was in *Candy* and *The Magic Christian*, and in some of the factual stories in *Red Dirt Marijuana*. I never stole anything from him but I admired his colloquial tone. (Listen to Aunt Livia in *Candy* and ask yourself if Ring Lardner, J. D. Salinger or Philip Roth ever eavesdropped on everyday conversation with quite so acute an ear.) It was easy to guess that Southern’s judgement of pitch had a lot to do with his itinerant life. He was a pirate. Fancying that I, too, sailed under a black flag, I forgave him too readily for his compulsive urge to screw up almost every task he took on. I should have realized that he had not forgiven himself: hence the capacity for self-destruction. Though a direct product of his fecklessness, his appetite for mind-altering drugs was a proclivity I was less inclined to be understanding about, and had no urge at all to emulate.

The evidence of what drink could do to me was by that time impressing even me, and there was obviously something wrong with the logic of replacing

alcohol with dope. The counterculture's growing population of drug experts were vocally certain that marijuana provided a more benevolent high than alcohol. There may have been something to that argument, since even today I know people from that time whose long-term relationship with the weed has lent them a lasting mellowness, in sharp contrast to the many drunks I have known who crashed early, and – the worst aspect – took innocent civilians with them. I may go into this subject further at the appropriate moment. For now, enough to say that the notion of hash as a substitute for alcohol, whether the proposal is valid or not, must surely be dependent on the premise that the intake of sweet smoke should be moderate.

Unfortunately I found that my intake of funny cigarettes was no easier to control than my intake of ordinary ones. I never exactly lit one joint off another, but there was only a short pause for contemplation, right up until the point when a state of suspended animation left me deprived of power to reach for a cigarette paper, lay down a line of tobacco, and sprinkle it with expensive crumbs. At somewhere about this time, our colony shifted from Swiss Cottage to Gibson Square, a rundown but finely proportioned Georgian feature of the not-yet-fashionable Islington. I can't remember a single detail of how we made the move, and you can guess the reason. I'm fairly sure that I had to be carried. At Wembley I was never high in the daytime. Circumstances there were so desperate that I would probably have sobered up within seconds even if I had arrived stoned. At the rate it was going, *What Are You Doing After the Show?* would run out of material entirely somewhere in the middle of the third instalment. The performers were too busy rehearsing to come up with new sketches even had they been inspired to. Since I was not on screen myself, in theory I had plenty of time to write material, but somehow, even under the gun, I found it hard to write lines for anyone except myself. Thus I became a large part of the problem. I thought I knew the answer: persuade any Footlights writers, present or past, to rally to the flag. Paul gave me carte blanche, and a budget, to do the persuading. The prospect of getting paid lured some of them to attend meetings at Wembley. But I had forgotten that most of the Footlights writers I had known in recent years had never produced more than three sketches a year for term-time smoking concerts, and, of those three sketches, only one would make it into the May Week revue, where it was usually performed by the writer himself, and not always to a storm of applause. Now engaged in the early stages of a career in the responsible professions, but still hankering for a time when they had trailed small clouds of thespian glory, these wistful luminaries seemed keen enough for the task. But when they went away to write something for us, they usually came back with something suitable only for themselves. Often they

did not come back at all, which left me making explanations about their mercurial individuality.

Even more humiliating, I arranged a meeting with my fellow ex-President of Footlights Graeme Garden at the Salisbury pub in St Martin's Lane, where I did an upright version of going on my hands and knees. The vertical grovel tended towards the horizontal as I finally grasped that he had no reason to take the bait. He, Bill Oddie and Tim Brooke-Taylor had something else in mind. They had already slogged for several years each in sketch shows and were cooking up a format that would sustain itself without the exhausting search for a punchline. Eventually *The Goodies* would out-rate even *Monty Python*. The standard gag about *The Goodies* was that half the ratings consisted of Orson Welles, who for some reason found the three bumbling chums exquisitely amusing. But the standard gag was simply envy talking. Liberating its three stars from the deadly treadmill of sketch humour, *The Goodies* was a solid hit. It was still just an idea at the time when I was begging for my life from Garden, but it was a real idea, and he had needed only to hear my sales pitch to realize that our idea wasn't. Paul Knight, with typical realism, analysed my dilemma on the basis of results. Leafing through the pitifully small heap of our scripts, he told me the truth. 'We are in deep shtuck.' I had seen the word printed, but had never heard it said, so I hadn't known that it was pronounced to rhyme with 'book'. Perhaps provoked by the way I seemed to relish what he was saying rather than being disturbed by it, he went on to explain how most of my admittedly gifted colleagues invented material only when the mood took them, and that what we now needed were professionals, who would turn the stuff out against the clock. He then amplified on his preliminary remark. 'We are in deep, deep shtuck.' I savoured the expression even as it plunged me into gloom. I liked his style. For some reason he also liked mine, even though I had helped get him into the profound ordure that would close over our heads if something drastic were not done soon.

Having determined the true nature of the emergency, Paul whistled in the first two of what would eventually be half a dozen writers previously unknown to us even by name, but who had solid track records as suppliers of material to the sort of variety shows we theoretically despised. The first two were called Mike and Dave. They were very young. Their attire seemed designed to demonstrate that the 1970s would be an era unprecedented for its ill-judged extravagance of men's clothes. I won't go into details about the synthetic materials and the clash of colours. Enough to say that when Mike and Dave stood close together they created static. If you scanned them from their platform boots upwards, your capacity for response was already sapped before you arrived at the part where their faces should have been separately visible. Standing up, they were already

hanging loose. Sitting down, they were a shambles. A luxuriance of hair, sideboards and moustache, punctuated by two pairs of rimless dark glasses, made it hard to tell if they were awake or even alive. They spoke in a relaxed, combined mumble that transmitted little beyond an abstract amiability, but they proved commendably flexible in adapting their writing style to ours. Indeed they did so with daunting ease. The same proved true with most of the other writers who were brought in to join them. After our first studio date yielded a show that made it clear we were already running out of our own stuff, reinforcements arrived by taxi. Without exception they were object lessons in professionalism.

Long before I grew older and wiser, I could already see that these peripatetic writers were the essential logistic element of British comedy, as crucial to a long campaign as the PLUTO pipeline was to the Allied invasion of Europe. Today, if you want to get the history of what happened in British light entertainment from music hall and ENSA onwards through radio and into television, you would be wasting your time asking even the best qualified academic. The people to ask are jobbing script doctors like Barry Cryer. In the course of about a hundred years Cryer has written for almost every comedian and tells a better story than all of them. But he has always been too canny to squander his personal stories on the air. Instead, apart from a little touring stage show that fits into a suitcase, he largely confines himself to after-dinner speaking, by which he makes unimaginable amounts of money. Laconically recounted, his anecdotes stem from hands-on experience of every showbiz era since Ralph Roister-Doister devised the first greased-pig-and-flaming-fart act at the court of Edward II. In our era, Cryer was working on every show in the building except ours. We couldn't afford him. Sometimes on the elevated railway platform at Wembley I would meet him. He was comfortably insulated by a fleece-lined car-coat against the wind. Even at that slightly earlier stage of his long career he could have been travelling in the back of a Rolls had he wished: but like most of the more prudent people in show business he believed in keeping the costs down. As we gazed out over square miles of urban blight that the Luftwaffe had never summoned the energy to bomb, he kindly predicted that the biggest thing I would have going for me in my career was that I performed my own stuff, so I would never be able to fire my writer, even if I felt like it.

Though he phrased this as amiable banter, actually he was touching on a theme crucial to the whole field of comedy in whatever medium. But the theme is rarely mentioned, because the cult of celebrity gets in the way. It is really quite useless to talk about the career of Tony Hancock, for example, without taking notice of the fact that he did not write his own stuff. His talent was solely for delivery. Fatally for him, he grew much too fond of being called a genius,

and much too reluctant to admit that a proper script was essential. Ego duly eroded judgement, and he got rid of his best writers, Galton and Simpson, hoping to prove thereby that he had never needed them. His subsequent decline proved that the need had been desperate. Morecambe and Wise, on the other hand, were always smart enough to admit that they relied on the writing of Eddie Braben. Trace back the tradition of television comedy and you arrive at the radio studios where a hidden elite of writers served nearly all the famous names. Within the business, the writers were famous names themselves. A comparable figure to Cryer was Barry Took, who had always done valuable work as a radio writer behind the scenes. But the moment came when he was offered executive power in television, and he saw the virtues of taking a rest from the hard graft of personally turning out the funny stuff. Instead, he would supervise other people while they did it. Unfortunately for me, this was the moment. Rupert Murdoch was on the point of taking over at LWT. Stella Richman was feeling the cold. *What Are You Doing After the Show?* was less than a triumph – the few people watching it were still waiting to find out what it was about – and Barry Took discovered, no doubt to his alarm, that one of his new executive duties was to make our bright idea look worth its budget.

He was in a difficult position, but it's a rule of the game that if the man in charge of you is in a difficult position, it will never feel quite as difficult as yours. Barry Took had a lot of experience in script construction and unlike many weathered veterans he was not jealous of his turf. Later on, as a light-entertainment executive at the BBC, he helped the *Monty Python* crew when he could easily have hindered them. Showbiz journalists, who are always looking for an angle, often identify Took as the secret genius behind *Monty Python*: an opinion which, when it began to circulate, he was understandably slow to contradict. In cold fact, and in a far more complicated story than any journalist had the patience to unscramble, the Pythons, one and all, had climbed bloodily through a string of less original shows and had learned to look after themselves individually long before. But when they finally got together, undoubtedly it was Took who made sure that the door was held open while they trooped through it. He thus had some right to have his name embroidered on the nappy of their brainchild. He would probably have done the same for us if our brainchild was still in the womb. But it was already in the world, and it was ill. Took, therefore, was not just in the position of marshalling talent. He had to supply some talent of his own. Talent he unquestionably had, but he lacked the further talent of being tactful about it. He knew better than us. He might have been right about that, but by sending our stuff back for review after Paul Knight had already approved it he inevitably trod crushingly on our immediate mentor's well-shod toes. The

suave Paul was a hard man to ruffle, but when he emerged from his first one-on-one meeting with Took he had a disturbing new variation on his standard theme of despair. 'We,' he said thoughtfully, 'are in deep Took.'

At one point Paul confided to me that any potential faith he might have had in his new commander evaporated when he ran into him in a lift. 'He started imitating Skippy the Kangaroo.' No doubt Took, for whom the aforesaid Skippy was an important item on his curriculum vitae, had merely been trying to establish an atmosphere of ebullience, but Paul wasn't the ebullient type. Everyone who prattles would like to drawl, and Paul was a drawler. As a consequence he gave Took the jumps. With our two big wheels turning out of synch, the whole engine shook itself to bits. After a particularly disastrous script meeting at which Took informed me and the assembled company that our latest batch of scripts needed the kind of excellent jokes once so prevalent on *Round the Horne* – he recited several of these from memory – I told Paul that I saw no point in staying. Paul let me go with depressing ease. He was well aware that I had played a large part in creating the problem that Took was failing to solve. Deprived of my help, the show looked no worse than before. Though there were plays by Ibsen that were funnier, and several Noh dramas with more pace, very few of the people who continued to tune in actually sued for damages, and apparently a financial problem accounted for the family that committed suicide. But it was a mercy when the show was taken off in mid-series. When the Murdoch buy-in was a done deal, one of the first things he did was to pull the plugs on *What Are You Doing After the Show?*. It seems that his own answer to its interrogative title had been: 'Not wasting my money.' There is never any argument with that, and any young writer who thinks there is had better stick to poetry. I always have, by the way. Especially in bad times, it can help to be alone with the pen and paper, working on a self-contained creation that the money men can't stop. But it might also be something that they will not publish. Best to have something in the bank, then, before you start feeling brave.

Unjustified self-righteousness helped to ease my retreat. I did some of my usual talking to the troops about how 'the system' had conspired to frustrate us. But experience was already playing its valuable role of chastening delusion, and this time I spoke less fluently. It might even have been that I spoke less. A help towards taciturnity, and perhaps towards heart's ease, was the dreaded weed. Mike and Dave resembled the Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers not only in their appearance but in their unlimited supply of high-octane dope. Either in Swiss Cottage or in Gibson Square – I forget which, and given the circumstances I would have forgotten the location even had it been Easter Island – they showed up one evening with what they called a baggy. The baggy turned out to be a sack

of hash so thick and rich that you could have bitten into it like a bar of chocolate. Today a stash that size would get you executed in Singapore, and in Thailand they would want to execute your relatives as well. From then on, I and selected members of my squad got used to lighting up with Mike and Dave. I should hasten to say that Pete never touched the stuff, perhaps because he had noticed how it robbed me of my judgement. The lyrics I composed under its influence were the nearest I ever got to writing perfect nonsense, and after trying out a few chords he would wait for the sober version. Nevertheless he was tolerant, which he had to be, because the sweet smoke was everywhere, turning the house into one big tunnel for the Marrakesh Express. We would never have got away with it at the Wembley offices, which were open plan, but at home the very air was heavy with the perfume of burning angel's wings. On the day I resigned from the show, Mike and Dave promised me a present for that evening. When they arrived at Gibson Square, they had the present in a flute case. Reverently they opened the lid. Inside, lying in a trough of worn blue velvet, was what they told me was the World's Biggest Joint. The flute case could have been a suitcase and the super-joint would still have been prominent. In the context of its modest container, it looked majestic, like a zeppelin. Mike and Dave, guiding their creation out of its hangar, assured us that the calculations for building it had been precise: this was as long and fat as a joint could be without collapsing under its own weight. Much of the weight, it was explained, consisted of the active ingredient, sprinkled on the loose tobacco to a density never previously achieved by man. 'You have to imagine,' murmured Dave, 'a car-park full of tumbleweed, and then there's this rain of shit.' They bent close over their masterpiece. Mike's voice came, as always, from a distance. 'We make these all the time,' he mumbled. 'But this is the biggest.' Dave lit a match.

If this book were pure fiction, I could say that my encounter with the super-joint marked the end of my period of Experimenting With Drugs. (Nobody ever explained how stoking yourself with proven narcotics could plausibly be called 'experimenting', or why the expression 'experimenting with alcohol' had never been heard even from the kind of drinker who wakes up in the police station after driving his car through a bus queue.) In truth, however, the facts are seldom so tidy. My terminal experience didn't take place until the next night. On the night of the super-joint, I deeply relished every drag. Hidden in the stereo system of the living room, Sandy Denny sang 'Who Knows Where the Time Goes?'. She could sing that again. Grouped around the dining table in the kitchen, we passed the super-joint around from hand to hand, or rather, in the early stages, from both hands to both hands. The quality was as outstanding as the quantity. After a few turns I was coining philosophical aphorisms, and after a few more

turns I couldn't understand them either. One of the dangerously charming effects of pot is that it lends your most banal comments an alluring depth in your own ears, which is probably the main reason you make exactly the same comments again. Drunks can usually tell that they are being boring but they can't stop. Pot-heads really believe that they are Socrates or Dorothy Parker. At one point, offering unsolicited comments on Cocteau's experience with opium, I attempted to quote his aphorism about the only useful help you can give to an aspiring young artist: open the door and show him the tightrope. 'Open the door,' I said very slowly, 'and show him the tide.' I had run out of energy, but Dave nodded in agreement. 'That's good. Room full of ocean. Who was that again?' With a last burst of effort, I said the name again. 'Cock. Toe. Cocteau.' Mike said he had once worked with him at Thames Television.

Next morning I woke up in bed, but felt unusually hot. It was because I was still fully dressed, including shoes. My head felt clear, however: much more so than it would have done had I been drinking. After a hard day at the typewriter, carving into the first of the half dozen deadlines I needed to catch up on, I began to fancy that I had life well worked out. If I could just wean myself away from the sauce to the grass, I would have a dependable release from the anguish of writing that would not interfere with the brain that produced the words. Look at the piece I was writing now, for example: how vibrant in argument, how bold in its use of metaphor! I was alone with my inspiration. The boys were all off in Wembley for the studio day of the final show, and would not be back until late at night, after the inevitable wake. Tough on them. After dining on fish and chips – the fish identical in texture to the chips – I knocked out the final paragraph of the day. It seemed to me that Swift had seldom been so pungently clear, Burke so meticulous in his control of rhythm, Hazlitt so universal in his understanding. Then I settled down in front of the television with my notebook and the makings of a small joint. Compared with the super-joint, of course, all joints were small, but this one really was quite modest: no bigger than a gorilla's little finger. In consideration of its diffident proportions, however, it seemed permissible, nay mandatory, to be generous with the magic sprinkle. I crop-dusted the tobacco with the prodigality of an American child decorating a scoop of ice-cream with uninhibited use of the toppings supplied. If these metaphors are mixed, they are no more so than the ones I had been concocting during the day, in the flow of a creative confidence I had thought uncommonly lucid. As you will have already guessed, I was still high from the previous night. But I had no means of knowing that, because even my movements in rolling this shyly harmless new spliff were of uncanny precision. The finished product was as tight and neat as a fresh tampon. Almost a pity, really, to set it on fire. At the time there was a catchy Californian expression: 'Don't Report that joint? Just don't Report that joint?'

Californian expression: 'Don't Bogart that joint.' I not only Bogarted that joint, I Lee Marvined it. In about ten minutes it was gone, and in about twelve minutes so was I.

As I recall, there was not even a brief period of tranquillity before the unpleasantness began. The wave of nausea came straight up the beach, flooded the highway, knocked down the motel, and washed me upside down into the trees. Ever since childhood, the moment I knew I was about to vomit had been a blessed relief from the agonizing hope that it wouldn't happen. This time the moment of certainty never came. I just felt that the fish and chips were stuck between floors. Meanwhile I myself was steadily ascending, yet for some reason the ceiling got no closer. I was falling upwards, yet not moving. Once again, it would have been a relief if I had. I could nestle against that plaster rosette up there and wait until my stomach made up its mind. But I was pinned to the couch. After about the time it took to build the Sydney Harbour Bridge, I managed to manoeuvre through ninety degrees, hoping to feel better if I lay down.

I felt almost incomparably worse. It was like being taken out to sea by a rip tide. Theoretically you should go with the rip until it brings you back in further along the coast, but there are sharks out there, so you try to swim against it. You get very tired: too tired to lift an arm so that the lifesaver can see you. Lounging superbly in his elevated chair, the lifesaver is checking out the apricot bottoms of the bikini girls on the beach, choosing the one that he will peel and slowly suck the juice out of back in his room while the Great White is biting you in half. The thought that you will soon die is overwhelming. I was having exactly that thought on a ratty mock-leather couch in Islington. I was sweating peanut oil yet my hands were dry: how could that be? My sinuses were full of molten lead. Somehow I knew, without being able to reach down and verify the fact, that my genital area was being redeveloped as a shopping mall. The project would take years to complete, but I didn't have that long. My life would end in another five minutes. And then another five. All right, another ten. The television screen said goodnight and shrank to a fizzing white dot, the universe ending with a small bang and a long whimper. Time must have a stop. But it doesn't. We do. I do. What a way to spend eternity, with a growing but forever unconsummated belief that you are about to dump your guts. When the boys finally came rollicking home and asked me what was wrong, I had to answer them with the shortest words I could think of, the words widely spaced by long clenched teeth, as though I were posing for a very old camera with a long exposure time. The clenched teeth held back a blob of ectoplasm the size of a water bed that I could feel occupying every cubic centimetre of my alimentary tract. 'Joint,' I said. 'Too,' I added. 'Much.' From far away there came a voice. 'Christ, it's an

TOO, I added. MUCH. FROM FAR AWAY THERE CAME A VOICE. 'CHRIST, IT'S AN overdose.' Then another voice. 'Never. You can't O.D. on pot.' The first voice again: 'He can.'

The first voice was right. People who say they have an addictive personality are usually just transferring the blame for their deficiency of resolve, but if there really is such a thing as an addictive personality, then I have one. The night of the killer joint was just further proof of a propensity that had been manifest since childhood. Partly as a result of my marijuana experiments, I was able to avoid the harder drugs that were soon to become fashionable. The mere thought of heroin made me remember what had happened to Frank Sinatra in *The Man With The Golden Arm* when I first saw the film at Ramsgate Odeon in the early 1950s. Actually I had quite liked the thought of being soothed against the luscious bosom of Kim Novak. Sexual experience looked like a good thing to have, even at the cost of sticking a needle in your arm. But the drastic result of the needle being withdrawn looked all too convincing, and from that time forward the cold-turkey episodes of my life – cutting out my daily packet of Jaffas, for example – had been accompanied in my mind by a Saul Bass title sequence and the music of Elmer Bernstein. As to cocaine, I could never see the point, because the people I knew who were burying their heads in heaps of white dynamite seemed to attain no higher state of mental alertness than the one that I was doomed to live in all the time. At one point a medical friend, kindly acting as an unpaid consultant in a period when I was actively shopping for some means of relief from my perennial melancholy, assured me that although it was unlikely that I was naturally secreting $C_{17}H_{21}NO_4$, there is indeed such a thing as a constitutionally determined hyperaesthetic state. The idea checks out with my introspection, to the extent that I have time for it.

To put it in non-technical language, I have a metabolism like Colombia. Unfortunately it is no better governed, and will immediately demand industrial amounts of anything it likes the taste of. In the first volume of this memoir I recorded how I had been the only infant in my district to overdose on marshmallows. In my early teens, down at the local shopping centre, I bought my mother a box of Winning Post chocolates for her birthday – if I have told you this before, it is because the shame has never left me – and ate nearly all of them before I got home. (Presenting her with the almost empty box, I said that there had been an accident. Her reception of the story armed me for life against any reliance on the classic excuse about the dog that ate my homework.) In late adolescence and early maturity, I quickly outstripped my contemporaries as a smoker, and would have done so as a drinker had I possessed a hollow leg to match my thirst. Even today, I can't buy a roll of Extra Strong peppermints – indispensable equipment for the secret nicotine addict – without swallowing

indispensable equipment for the secret nicotine addict – without swallowing them all one after the other after chewing each no more than twice. Don't Bogart those sweets? What else are they for? No use asking me to be moderate. Just steer me towards something safe that I can overdo. After a whole roll of instantly inhaled Extra Strong peppermints, for instance, the lips develop a chlorinated tingle, as if after drinking from a swimming pool. Nor does high expense temper the intake. A pot of caviar, no matter how big, rings empty in a few minutes, even though, absorbed at that rate, the soft black buckshot converts the interior of the mouth into a whaling station. Cursed with this tropism, I have never found anything strange about the more decadent Roman emperors and their raging quest for satiety. On the contrary, I marvel at Nero's restraint.

6. WAKING UP ABSURD

But the night of the killer joint spelled the end of the affair between me and marijuana, and, by extension (I hope it will bear being said again), of any possible flirtation with the more serious drugs that were already creeping into the scene. At the time, the pot-head lobby was still peddling the message that their beloved weed was the gentle alternative to booze. Even today, I know adepts from the period who have built their recreational lives around hash while sidelining the bottle, undoubtedly to the benefit of their personalities. One of them, among our most prominent novelists, is the nicest man I know. He would probably still have been sweet-natured even without his rare knack for growing an infinitely renewable crop of vintage hemp in the window boxes of his apartment, but the stuff certainly didn't hurt. The second message of the pot brigade, however, sounded dubious even then. Moderate indulgence in the gentle habit, it was alleged, would stave off any urge to get involved with smack. Implicit in this argument was the notion that getting high would somehow increase one's sense of consequence instead of diminishing it. The time soon came when needle-freaks could be heard announcing that their consumption of brown sugar was well under control. They were seldom in a position to announce this very loudly. Quite often they were in the sitting position, drowsily engaged in the search for a vein, and often enough they were in the supine position, persuasively impersonating a dead Christ by Cranach.

Wishful thinking and drugs are variations on the same theme, so it was no surprise that nothing on the subject sounded true except when said by someone who had been all the way to the limit and somehow contrived to return. Decades before, in the truly alternative society of jazz, Charlie Parker, in one of the rare moments when he was not strung out like a line of washing, had insisted that anyone who thought he could play better when he was high was dreaming. Keith Richards is unlikely to agree with that: after all, he still plays his instrument better than almost anyone else. He could also say that the needle has given him a range of extreme insight that lends depth to his playing, although it is hard to see how music can transmit the experience of flying to get your hair cut in

How music can transmit the experience of trying to get your hair cut in Switzerland and waking up in Tokyo. But no reliable account will ever come from paid-up citizens of the artificial paradise. There is a certain glamour, however, to the way they fantasize: a glamour, and even an authority. Vice always finds it easy to make virtue look naive. Yet it is noteworthy that the knowing voices of the stoned can say so little in rebuttal when a veteran adept tries to point out that the drug thing was always a mistake even though Nancy Reagan said the same. John Phillips of the Mamas and the Papas, during a reprieve from the effects of combining all the habits it was possible to have, said that his long personal disaster began with the delectable fumes of marijuana, because they helped to normalize the expectation of getting high. All over the world, old-time hippies who were still dreaming about California greeted Phillips's admonitions with an orchestrated silence. They just breathed in and waited for what he said to go away.

The same could be said about Carrie Fisher's excellent debut novel *Postcards From the Edge*, which remains one of the most fearlessly penetrating memoirs about what cocaine can do to an original intelligence. It doesn't make the intelligence less intelligent. But it does make the intelligence less able to apply itself: a high price to pay for the bruised charms of an outlaw vocabulary. The remorse that saturates the book's enchantingly colloquial prose is concentrated in a single moment of the movie version, when Gene Hackman, playing the film director, calls the newly sober actress played by Meryl Streep into the looping studio to show her the scene she thought she had done so well, and she realizes that she made a mess of it. For any kind of artist, that's the worst feeling there is, and drugs are more likely to ensure you will feel it than to stave it off. There might be such a thing as a self-controlled user who can still create – it was Keith Richards who could play a duet with Chuck Berry, not me – but for those of us who can use up a lifetime's supply of anything in a fortnight, drugs are out of the question. That was the conclusion I reached when I woke up at about five o'clock in the evening on the day after the night I have described. I went down to the King's Head and sat alone while I made my resolution. A half pint of lager in one hand and a cigarette in the other, I vowed to stick to the devils I knew. In Cambridge, when the baby arrived, I saw myself as a model of probity, cherishing in my mind a silent pledge: though I might breathe beer on you and blow smoke in your face, I probably won't drop you out of a window or leave you forgotten in the back of a car. Not that we had a car. Come to think of it, if I didn't double my output of journalism we wouldn't even have a roof. Time, as we say in Australia, to take a good pull on myself.

A family would need a house, or at least a bigger flat. The wherewithal was

thin on the ground. Sometimes I still dream of it: a sparse blizzard of little cheques. In reality, the cheques were bigger than snowflakes, but in my nightmares they are as tiny as the amounts of money written on them. The cheques for the monthly *Listener* TV column were the nearest to being a predictable event, like a female sparrow's period. There were other cheques from the different newspapers and magazines. There were the occasional cheques for appearing on BBC radio panels, the more occasional cheques for chairing the panel, and the very occasional cheques for contributing material for a radio series like *I'm Sorry, I'll Read That Again*, with which I had a loose connection but no regular contract. The songs would of course make millions one day but so far, with Pete's first album still waiting for release, they had earned only the standard payments for being played on the radio: payments that were collected by the Performing Rights Society and extremely occasionally transformed into the smallest cheques of the lot. (Sometimes they were for less than a pound.) Nowhere among these drifts of unimpressive bits of paper was there any mention of a pension or insurance. If I got sick for a week, our whole financial system shrank to fit my wife's not very startling salary as a junior academic. I had long been accustomed to more than my fair share of that, but always on the understanding that my creative efforts would eventually generate the cash to pay her back and to pay my way, with something left over so that the family might flourish.

That result was still in prospect, but it was all very chancy. So far the baby didn't do much except eat, but it wasn't hard to imagine her wanting other things: clothes, a bicycle, ballet lessons. From that viewpoint, I couldn't afford to have flu or even a bad cold. I avoided snifflers in trains. Anxiety had barely taken hold, however, before an invitation came from Granada Television. In those days, most of the best programmes on British commercial television were produced by Granada. *All Our Yesterdays*, *What the Papers Say* and *Cinema* were all Granada programmes. For a long time I had been under the impression that Granada Television was broadcast from Spain: an offshore enterprise like pirate radio. Actually Granada was a company based in Manchester, where it was presided over by Lord Bernstein, one of the great generation of Jewish grandees who enriched Britain's post-war drive to educational justice with their combination of money-making efficiency and an unquenchable philanthropic urge. Possessed of cultural taste and the financial wherewithal to spread its benefits, they played a crucial part in extending cosmopolitan enlightenment to ordinary people. They had seen civilization brought to the brink of ruin and they wanted to bring it back. Bernstein was the pick of the bunch. His flagpole programmes did what the BBC was meant to do but all too often didn't.

Among those programmes, *Cinema* had the biggest audience. Michael Parkinson, otherwise the best-known sports journalist in the Midlands, had made his television name as the presenter of *Cinema*. Now he had decided to move south and to move on. Granada was auditioning for a replacement. The producer of the show, Arthur Taylor, was a young man of rare qualities. He had not risen to his position from the usual Oxbridge background. He had got there by natural initiative. One of the marks of his originality was that he had actually seen a few episodes of *Think Twice*, a feat of selective attention comparable to having noted down the number plate of the Loch Ness monster. More stunning still, he had picked me as a possible substitute for the suave, neatly dressed and very personable Parkinson. Then as later, the mark of Parkinson's style on screen was to look as if he was hardly trying. Later on, as a critic, I was to make the mistake of echoing this common opinion in print. The fact, of course, was that he knew exactly what he was doing. But even then, when I didn't know how he did it, I doubted I could have the same effect of taking it easy on the air. On radio I had managed to slow myself down a bit by that stage, but I still got jumpy enough to swallow the front of every sentence. Couldn't stop doing it. Kind of verbal impressionism. In a rare fit of honesty, I conveyed some of these doubts to Arthur Taylor by telephone: briefly, because I was worried about the cost of the call. I told him that, too, and he said that a train ticket would be waiting for me at King's Cross.

The ticket was a first-class return. Today you could fly to Budapest for the cost of a first-class return to Manchester, but the ticket represented a considerable sum of money even then. A quick mental calculation told me that if I was that much ahead I might as well drink the difference. The first-class steward, who had once worked on the *Queen Mary* and looked distinguished enough to have been her lover, brought supplies of excellent beer to my seat. Luckily, nerves offset some of the effects, so that when I arrived in Manchester I was able to complete the journey to the Granada studio on foot instead of in an ambulance. Nevertheless, Arthur Taylor must have wondered what he had let himself in for. I had another beard going, even more nautical than the last, plus an abundance of hair swerving down the back of my neck and sticking out at the sides, thus to offset, in my view, the bald patch that was conspicuously surfacing on top of my head like an albino volcanic island. The slurred voice emerging from these cranial enhancements might as well have been singing 'What shall we do with the drunken sailor?' When I told him there was nothing wrong that a hair of the dog wouldn't fix, he told me the truth: Granada was a dry house, but there was plenty of coffee. While supplying me with a gallon of that, he mercifully neglected to say that the hair of the dog was already around my chin.

He himself was clean shaven and immaculately clad in a well-cut leather sports coat, plain shirt with plain tie, and dark trousers with a knife-edge crease. My own shirt was the usual misjudged polyester paisley extravaganza, topped off with a new semi-suede belted jacket that was already showing signs of having been worn too close to a vat spitting hot oil. At no time did Arthur object to any of these features. Instead he gave me a brief outline of what would be required and led me into the biggest TV studio I had ever seen. There was almost nothing in there except a backdrop, a stool, a camera, a monitor, and a teleprompter. This was the entire kit with which Parkinson had made himself famous. If I got the audition right, it could be my turn.

This chapter would be more fun if I could say that I got it wrong. But my guardian angel descended, radiating benevolence. Later on I was told that the guardian angel was wearing the face of Lord Bernstein, who was watching on closed circuit in his office. By rights he should have taken one look and had me thrown me out of the building, with Arthur landing on top of me. But he decided to listen while I did the stuff that saved me. The script on the teleprompter was to be recorded paragraph by paragraph between a string of film clips that would be played in on the monitor. The girl on the teleprompter control desk was of heartbreaking beauty and magnificence of bosom, so even when dazed I marshalled the energy to show off to her. I had learned a few things when doing *Think Twice*, and I ripped through the script without a fluff. My tiny, deep-set eyes turned out to be a plus. If I held my head straight, it was hard to tell from the screen that I was glancing sideways. This remained true even after the lighting gaffer tried to give me some eyes by setting a 10K lamp (it was called a 'brute') on the floor in front of me, pointing upwards. It lit up my cheekbones like Bela Lugosi thirsty for blood but there was still no telling which way I was looking as I prattled on. The film clips had to be rewound in real time, so there was a pause before the next run-through. During the pause, I did something that would have been really smart if my brain had been involved. Powered by the urge to close the physical distance between me and the pretty girl, I leaned over her angora-clad shoulder and told her how every piece of link material should be rewritten. From that angle, her breasts looked like a couple of nuclear submarines nosing out of harbour, but I managed to concentrate.

Writing in my head, I slipped in a back reference to some detail in each of the clips I had just seen, plus a forward reference to some detail in the next one. I can remember how I got in a pretty good crack about Jack Palance: something about how his first meal had been the midwife's fingers. Little did I know, as I inhaled the fragrance of the young lady's hair and she inhaled the fragrance of my breath, that I was in the process of nailing down a job. When we did another

run and I made the cameraman laugh with the re-vamped script, I still didn't know. Later on I learned that Bernstein, from his office, had telephoned Arthur in the control room to ask if anything could possibly be done about my hair. Arthur correctly deduced that this meant Bernstein thought I should be taken on: he wouldn't be asking for modifications to the appearance of someone he was about to reject. Arthur replied that my beard was probably non-negotiable, being, as it was, a symbol of my refusal to compromise with bourgeois values. (Actually if he had asked me about that, he might have found out that my rebellious stance was flexible when faced with the prospect of losing out on a regular income.) Arthur agreed with Bernstein, however, that the wings of lengthy back-hair that stuck out at the sides, giving the effect of two squirrels hiding nose to nose behind my head, would have to go. When Arthur raised the question tentatively with me, I was too dumb to realize that I was being offered the job. I thought we were discussing a change of costume preparatory to another rehearsal.

But over drinks in the late afternoon, the sweet facts sank in. We took the drinks at a mid-town private club called the Grapes. Arthur explained to me that Granada was dry at Lord Bernstein's insistence. He had some old-fashioned idea that people worked harder if they weren't pissed. Granada personnel who wanted a beer during the day had to get it at the nearest pub, and not to be observed when going there. Apparently there was a circuitous route that could not be seen either from the executive floor or from the front desk in the lobby. Threading down fire escapes and along behind annexes, this route was known as the Ho Chi Minh trail. One of the trail's branches led to the Grapes, where alcoholic drinks were served even outside pub hours. The Manchester United star footballer George Best, then in the last phase of his career but more famous than ever, was often there, attending to his business affairs. 'Attending to my business affairs' was a phrase he often used when answering questions from the tabloid reporters who were seldom far away, although mercifully they could gain no access to a private club. At the time, Best owned a Manchester boutique which was inexorably going broke while he sat in the Grapes pulling birds. He was present while Arthur and I had our discussion. Sitting only a few tables away, Best was communicating by telepathy with two attendant blondes while he threw beer coasters in the air and caught them without looking. Arthur assured me that this process was known as a Business Discussion. Our own business discussion seemed equally fantastic to me. I was being offered a contract that would bind me to recording two half-hour shows every second Wednesday for £60 a week each, plus first-class travel each way on the Midland Pullman and a night in the Midland Hotel after the day of recording. There would also be a full day's work

per week in London at the Granada annexe in Golden Square, Soho, where the film clips for the shows would be marked up and the skeleton script worked out, mainly by me. It sounded like a lot of work but in those days £60 a show was big money for a beginner. A guaranteed first series of thirteen shows would produce something like a regular income even if they dropped my option afterwards.

Suddenly I was a breadwinner. As far as I can examine my own motives from this distance, the income was the main consideration, although I suppose the prospect of sudden fame was not without its attractions. The show had made Parkinson well known enough to earn the envy of his fellow journalists – the envy being expressed in the form of vituperation, as usual – and there was also the spectacle, edifyingly close to hand, of George Best and his supporting courtesans. They were looking at him as if he could work miracles. Since the only miracle he was currently working was to toss a beer coaster in the air and catch it without looking, this should have been evidence of their stupidity. But they didn't look stupid. They looked like the kind of Scandinavian air hostess who could speak four languages and fly the plane if the pilot died of food poisoning. So it should have been clear to them that their hero, when away from the football pitch, had little to offer except a snarl of lechery. But it didn't work that way. Fame was a universal solvent. Up went the beer coaster, and their eyes flashed as he caught it. You could tell that their underwear, if separated from their bodies, would just hang in the air, like a cloud. I said yes, and somehow made it to the Midland Hotel before I collapsed. I woke up again in time to catch a meal in the dining room before it shut down for the night. I can remember sitting there alone, trying to find my key so that I could prove to the waiter that I was allowed to sign the bill. The key, of course, was in my room, on the bedside table where I had left it after stripping my pockets. It was all very confusing. Something had gone right.

Something else went right not long later. Within a few weeks after taking over the show from Parkinson, I established a working rhythm for the first time in my professional life. Actually it was the first time that I thought of myself as someone who might have a professional life. Until then, everything had been an extension of my student days, minus the academic requirements and plus a sporadic financial reward. Student journalism in Cambridge had been a transition. Hand-to-mouth freelance journalism in London had been a further transition. This was the thing that the transitions were a transition to. This was actually it. I kept all my deadlines going and wrote more poems and songs than ever, but I also had a set task from week to week. Every Thursday I would be in Golden Square, viewing film clips all day and sketching out a commentary. Films that I hadn't actually seen could be viewed at other times: that didn't count

as work. But choosing the clips was quite demanding if it were to be done well, and I wanted to write something more engaging than factual filler. Luckily, for a new movie the clips were already specified by the film companies, so there were no agonies of selection. There were sometimes agonies about what the film companies had been foolish enough to release, but there was no way out of that.

The day's work was sealed by a few beers with Arthur at Soho's most notorious drinking club, the Colony Room. Nothing about the Colony Room was more notorious than its proprietress, the notorious Muriel Belcher. She had a lot of notorious clients, most notoriously the painter Francis Bacon, but they were all outdone for notoriety by Muriel's face, which was a study in unrelenting hatred. I somehow got the idea that she hated me in particular. Perhaps she remembered me for the day in the early sixties when I had been in there in the role of gooseberry at a meeting between Robert Hughes and Colin MacInnes. I had distinguished myself on that occasion by my unfortunate trick of increasing the volume of my voice as it lost coherence. But she had seen plenty of drunks who did the same thing. No, this, surely, was a whole new loathing. I was probably putting too specific a value on her general manner. I thought she had a way, when I was ordering my round, of looking at me as if I were the suppurating corpse of a crushed toad. But she would have done the same for anybody. She looked that way even at Francis Bacon himself, who was often to be seen hulking notoriously beside the bar. He looked like what he was, a mad painter, and Muriel looked as if he had painted her. It was a frightening symbiosis, but it made me feel part of the action.

There was more action later, when Arthur left to catch his train back north and I headed off unsteadily to the Pillars of Hercules. At the Pillars, Ian Hamilton held his usual position at the bar, all set to receive incoming manuscripts and shred them in the presence of their perpetrators. Often I had a manuscript ready to receive this treatment, but now I had more confidence than usual, because I was at the end of a day's work that was, incontrovertibly, work. If I had done the work reasonably well, I was all set for the trip to Manchester every second Wednesday morning on the Midland Pullman. From the culinary angle, the Midland Pullman was the most luxurious thing that had yet happened to me in my life, with the possible exception of a few nights out with my future wife and her friends in a little restaurant near Santa Croce in Florence, in the days when I was too green to know that the pimps and hookers who infested the place were eating like royalty, and that those tiny slices of beef were as good and real as meat can get. Even today I am not much of a one for caring about food, as long as it isn't trying to kill me. Sequestered in my apartment while working on a book or a long essay, I am not quite the kind of slob I might have been if I didn't care at all what I ate. I take pride in my timing. When heating the contents of a

Care at all what I ate. I take pride in my timing. When heating the contents of a can of stewed steak, I keep a watchful eye on the saucepan to make sure I stir the stew at the exact moment when the first bubbles appear. Sometimes I wander off, start fiddling with a sentence, and notice only from the thick smoke and the smell of a crashed oil truck that something has gone awry. But usually I remember to stay near the hob. I try to keep an aesthetic measure to my simple needs. When cutting the corner of the plastic bag of the boil-in-the-bag piece of cod in white sauce, I try to cut it in a clean straight line so that no sauce gets on the scissors. The women at home don't let me eat cod – something about the world's stock being dangerously depleted, apparently by me personally – so when I eat cod in my apartment it tastes like a stolen truffle. But I couldn't care less about presentation. The stew goes into a bowl and the cod goes onto a plate, often with some green stuff added – spinach, beans, broccoli or those sweet little peas from a can – so as to stave off scurvy. The resulting visual arrangement is a legitimate cause for pride, in my view, but I don't call it presentation. On the rare occasions when, usually for business reasons, I am trapped in an up-market restaurant, I have been known to gaze at the exquisitely arranged main course – usually a small edifice of sprigs, shavings and sprouts in the middle of the plate – and wonder aloud when the food is coming. I have never been back to any restaurant where three waiters lift the silver dish covers simultaneously at a murmured signal. They look like a brass band and you'll be eating their sheet music.

Later on, as we move further into a context of financial adequacy, I might return to this theme, but suffice it for now to say that breakfast on the Midland Pullman was a nice change from the Angus Steak House, even though the same notched tomatoes were a feature. In those days it was still true that the secret of eating well in Britain was to have breakfast three times a day. The Midland Pullman breakfast was what the British Indians of today have learned to call an English. Nothing that could make you fat was left out. Even the bread was fried. The black pudding was an ice-hockey puck soaked in the same fat that had drowned the bacon. The sausage, when cut, bled a thick, rich crude oil. The fried eggs were scorched brown around the edges like flying saucers after a battle in space. It was all brought to your table by waiters who expected to live and die in the service of British Rail. Later on I was to see the same dedication in the Qantas stewards of the airline's glory days: swervingly tactile Judy Garland fans who brought a deep love of choreography to the task of treading on the passenger's feet, they would present the next bottle of chardonnay as if it were a newborn baby to which they themselves had given birth. If a Midland Pullman waiter was troubled by the spectre of lingering class divisions, he didn't show it. You were called 'Sir' when asked if the massed calories already supplied were

You were called on when asked if the massive calories already supplied were sufficient to fuel your next heart attack, or would you like an additional plate of fried bread?

Having washed it all down with a couple of beers, I would arrive in Manchester several pounds heavier than when I left London. Under my beard, my first double chin was arriving with the same inevitability as my temples were retreating, but I was still young and dumb enough to feel fighting fit. I had my script ready and I was ready to deliver it. I had kept the rule of having two beers only. They would wear off by the time we went for the tape. I hadn't forgotten the consequences of going on stage drunk at Hampstead – I still haven't forgotten – and I can truthfully say that I was always careful, even in my most dissipated years, never again to get tight before the show. The thought that what I did after the show might be damaging me anyway, with a steadily more devastating effect, had not yet occurred to me – partly because, no doubt, of the thoughtlessness induced by the steady massacre of the brain cells. But there were enough brain cells left over at that stage for their owner to figure out that a certain precision of delivery might be a useful characteristic to cultivate, with benefit for the reputation. And indeed I soon became pretty good at hitting the words in a visual ten-second countdown from the floor manager, and at reciting the long paragraphs without a stumble. In the dressing room before rehearsal, I went through my tongue-twister drills. 'Unique New York,' I intoned. 'Red leather, yellow leather.' There was a useful couplet from Edith Sitwell. 'Pot and pan and copper kettle/ Put upon their proper mettle.' If my tongue felt thick I cooled my head in cold water.

In the studio I could go for hours without a fluff. This ability was doubly important because in a clip show like *Cinema* a fluff could have large consequences. The clips were arranged sequentially on a single roll and were played in on time no matter what, because there were no editing facilities to clear out dead air. If a fluff screwed the cue, the clip roll had to be rewound to the start in real time. A presenter who mangled his words could be there for days on end. Hitting all the marks, I got a reputation as the One-Take Kid. Actually, in the long term, this was a dangerous reputation to have, because, after instant-start tape machines and electronic editing came in, a presenter who never wasted any time was simply setting himself up for putting too much work into the day. But at that time it was not only good manners to get it right first crack, it was a requirement. As I told Arthur over drinks in the Grapes afterwards, I was quite proud of meeting the demands. He smiled tolerantly, which was very nice of him. So I told him again. At dinner, I told the beautiful teleprompter girl the same thing. Under her angora twinset, her magnificent breasts stirred with

emotion as she leaned forward and murmured something that was to live long in my memory. 'I don't think I've ever gone off anyone so fast.' But if I had trouble accepting the fact that I was a married man with a family – a thousand years later I am still struggling with the concept – there was at least a glimmer of awareness that my working life was acquiring a sense of order.

7. SQUARE-EYED IN DARKNESS

The opportunity of restoring it to chaos soon arose. At the *Observer*, Terry Kilmartin was printing my book reviews with sufficient frequency to attract the attention of the editor, David Astor, whose position at the paper was made no less influential by the fact that his family owned it. The paper was looking for a critic who could give the TV column the same sort of currency as the film column. When Penelope Gilliatt wrote the film column, people read it even if they never went to the cinema. The *Observer* bigwigs naturally assumed that the paper's intelligent, upper-crust readership couldn't possibly be watching television regularly. How, then, to make the TV column into a talking point like the film column? They decided that they were looking for a TV critic with a similarly identifiable prose style. Actually they already had a stylist on the job, Maurice Richardson. But Richardson was getting to the end of his career. Early on he had been a substantial name, author of a little classic of humour, *The Exploits of Engelbrecht*. Richardson was never as prolific as Paul Jennings, but he was in the same camp as a colloquial fantasist, and at his best he was of the same rank. Unfortunately he had developed idleness into an art form. He had got to the stage where making a minimum effort shows up in one's prose as a repetitive bag of tricks. He took on a book review mainly with an eye to selling the book afterwards, and had grown so dependent on the book-reviewer's classic perk that he would raid Terry's office at lunchtime for books he could sell even when he wasn't going to review them. His long voyage was ending in a slow shipwreck. I had already seen a few similar cases around Fleet Street and was starting to wonder how I could avoid the same fate for myself. The recurring picture of decrepitude seemed always to be connected with alcohol. There was a conclusion to be drawn from that, but the prospect of drawing it was so depressing that it drove me to the pub, where Terry would assure me that it was a bit early to start worrying about the end of my career. Terry, who found the English social consciousness tedious, enjoyed the company of off-trail vagabonds. By the way he laughed in disbelief, I could tell that he found my

naked ambition refreshing, especially because I seemed less ambitious for anything in particular than for everything at once. As for me, I had found yet another father figure.

But this father figure gave me no clue that the job of TV critic was about to fall vacant, and that I might be up for it. Instead, I was invited to lunch by two of the paper's senior staff, Richard Findlater and Helen Dawson. The lunch took place at Bianchi's, the most written-up media restaurant of the period. The word 'media' might not yet have arrived in the language as a singular noun, but the actual thing, regarded as a collectivity, most definitely had arrived in the social fabric, although its personnel had not yet taken to writing mainly about each other. If you ate in Bianchi's you were part of the new communications meritocracy. Until recently I had been part of the communications underclass which ate at Jimmy the Greek's. Still haunted by the identical cockroaches that had blocked the way to the toilet during my first year in London, Jimmy's was on the same block in Soho as Bianchi's. In fact its distance from Bianchi's could be measured only vertically, because Jimmy's was in the basement and Bianchi's was on the first floor, practically in a straight line upwards. The distance was about fifteen feet but it could seem like fifteen miles to a young man with aspirations. People could lose their hair and gain an extra stomach as they made the climb. (Only Melvyn Bragg ever arrived at the top looking the same as when he left the bottom. In fact he looked younger. Eventually he arrived in the House of Lords looking as if he had just finished a game of conkers. Nobody has ever been able to figure out how he does this.) Breathless from the climb, I was pointed to the table by the front window where Findlater and Dawson were sitting. On the way I stopped to satisfy the curiosity of Nick Tomalin, who was holding court at a table of his *Sunday Times* cronies. Ever the investigative journalist, he asked me how I had got in. I told him that I had no idea. His tilted glance sparkled with suspicion through his thick glasses as I moved on. It was my first experience of table-hopping, a practice that I later came to disapprove of. But apart from murder, bank robbery and rape there has never been much I disapproved of that I didn't try out first, and I was aglow with that wanted feeling as I joined my hosts. The *padrona*, known only but universally as Elena, had just brought them a carafe of wine. Included in the round of introductions, she told me that she never missed an episode of *Cinema*, collected my book reviews in a special folder, and had not realized that my body, now visible at full length without the restrictions imposed by the small screen, would have such an athletic appearance, although she should have guessed it from the strength of my features, so unusually definite for one of such sensitivity. It was easy to see why she was the designated den mother of a

thousand male misfits all thirsty for flattery. Her face glowed with maternal concern. I thought I detected the same fond look in the eyes of Helen Dawson, but for some reason her smile had developed a curl of the top lip. Findlater stared into the far distance, perhaps remembering what it had been like to be young, clueless, and still thrilled to have set foot on the road ahead. He was all too aware that the road ahead led around the block and, unless you were lucky, back down to Jimmy's.

Sharp cop, vague cop. It took me a while to figure out what these two were after. Unnervingly familiar with my monthly *Listener* TV pieces, they asked me why I treated the mass-entertainment programmes at the same length as the important stuff. I told them what I thought: that the mass entertainment was even more important, because a popular programme actually embodied social values, whereas prestige programmes merely examined them. By then this was a theme that I had worked out in detail, and I spared my hosts none of the nuances as the wine started to do its work. As I banged on, Findlater's eyes glazed over like the devilled kidneys he and I both chose for a main course. Later on I was to realize that his eyes were usually that way: I had merely failed to notice. There had been a time when Findlater, as a theatre critic, was level-pegging with Kenneth Tynan, but an era had passed, and now Findlater was one of those figures who haunted the corridors as they worked out their time. His very availability for this mission to size me up was in itself a bad sign, because Helen Dawson, lurching off a leaf of lettuce, was clearly the brains of the outfit. Her tongue was keen to match. Even when she approved of what I said, she spoke as if I were trying to sell her a used car, and she met any loose opinion with plain scorn. Her level of aggression was rare for a woman in an English context, and would have been rare for a leopard in an African context.

Not long later, that must have been one of the qualities that made her appealing to John Osborne, who was unusual among playwrights in his propensity for staging a scene in real life. Indeed he got to the point where he would rather do it there than in the theatre. After he married Helen Dawson, their conversations must have been like the plays he might have written instead. They lived in a large country house, which no doubt gave Osborne plenty of extra rooms in which to conceal himself. In Bianchi's I was at the future Mrs Osborne's mercy. Feeling as if I were somewhere in the middle of Act Two of *Look Back in Anger*, I nevertheless pressed on, as if stimulated by her sour interjections. The penny dropped when she asked me if I thought I could keep up a weekly schedule. Writing once a month in the *Listener*, she informed me, I might be able to scrape a thousand words together from intermittent viewing, but writing once a week would be a full-time job. At last it occurred to me that a

full-time job was on offer. Suddenly I became taciturn. It was because I was stunned and frightened, but it must have looked as if I was indifferent. Not for the last time in my life, it didn't hurt to let the bait drift by instead of lunging at it. Findlater came momentarily into focus. 'What can we do to persuade you to come to us?' Mentally I replied that a large salary would help. Then I heard myself saying it. 'A large salary would help.'

Helen Dawson liked that. It was her kind of talk. 'How about an ordinary salary?' At least that's how I remember what she said. She might have said, 'Don't be a prick.' Whatever she said, I felt emboldened to explain that my stint on *Cinema* would not be something I would willingly give up if Granada renewed my contract after the first series, so I would be letting myself in for working night and day. It was clever of me not to say that I was already working night and day. In fact it was more than clever: it was an outright suppression of the truth. More accurately, it was a lie. But with my remaining powers of reason, I thought it might be better to secure the offer first and then figure out what to do next, rather than pointing out the impossibilities in advance. The sharp cop must have known that she was being hustled, but perhaps she was pleased to meet a whippersnapper who was ready for anything. Findlater, who had snapped his last whip long ago, was calling for the bill. The effect of waving to the waitress took all the energy he had left. His companion's parting shot was something about how refreshing it was to meet an Aussie so patently on the make. She even pronounced 'Aussie' correctly, which was an unusual skill among English journalists in those days. But her sardonic bent carried the virtue of honesty. The job, she said, was mine for the taking. Suddenly I was looking at the furniture of Bianchi's as if I had become part of it. In the distance, the suspicion framed by Nick Tomalin's horn-rims had become a certainty. He was smiling at an angle.

I can remember the restaurant, but I can't remember how I left it. Whether horizontal or vertical, I should have been feeling ten feet tall. A more reasonable estimate, however, would be ten millimetres, because even in a state of euphoria I could see a problem looming that would tax my reserves of moral courage a long way beyond the limit. Karl Miller would have to be told, and told before rumours of this offer reached him. Since Fleet Street ran on rumours the way that a sperm whale ran on krill, I had about a day to get to him before I found him sitting there with a cocked shillelagh on his desk. Asking myself to do this was like asking myself to get to a dentist just because a tooth was hurting, or to open a brown envelope just because it was marked FINAL NOTICE in red. But a dimly flickering sense of rectitude told me that for once I had better shape up to a potentially unpleasant confrontation. Next day, after only a few tours of the block and an unprecedented visit to St Whatname's in order to study its

entablature, I entered Karl's office to face a character analysis that began with flagellation and went downhill from there. On a technical level he was so brilliant that he must have had his stuff ready. Perhaps he had figured out that if I was turning up before my next piece was due I could only be there to tell him that I wouldn't be writing it. More likely, he had already heard the news overnight. The *Observer's* internal security was not great, and he had close friends in the building. Either way, he was well prepared with invective. There was none of the standard headmaster stuff about letting myself down along with the school. Instead there was quite a lot about treachery, duplicity and the spiteful biting of the hand that fed. The same man I had seen sitting behind his desk with an open umbrella above his head to ward off his troubles showed no humorous self-deprecation today. The deprecation was all for me. Falsely assuring me that he lacked the words to express his contempt, he invoked historical parallels with Culloden, Vichy France, the suppression of the 1956 Hungarian uprising, and other episodes in which devious opportunism had played a role. The historical overview expanded to embrace the cosmic: Satan himself had probably been an Australian. In his peroration, he expressed his relief that at least he would never have to clap eyes on me again. But just before I left, he wanted me to know that I shouldn't feel too certain that my readiness to serve the enemy would ensure a glittering future: Vidkun Quisling had once felt the same about his prospects in Norway. Awaiting the disloyal, he reminded me, there was a circle of Dante's Inferno which punished them with each other's company in perpetuity, so deeply shut off from the civilized world that nobody virtuous had ever heard their screams. Never, he whispered hoarsely, never did any of them return to the sweet light of day. Finally it was all over and I was removed from his office in sections.

Later on, when I recounted the episode to fellow writers of more experience, I was told I had got off lightly. By Karl's standards, it had been a caress, and indeed he was speaking to me again after less than a quarter of a century, telling me fondly that he had always found my sensitivity and diffidence quite touching. At the time, I was poleaxed. A reluctance to tell people what they don't want to hear has always been among my worst weaknesses of character. It still gets me into trouble today, but early on it led me into a kind of paralysis, and would have earned me a crippling reputation for deviousness if I had been less lucky. This confrontation with Karl was proof that the reluctance had a deep purpose, because to overcome it might hurt, and I was ill-equipped to take the hit. Above all, I hated making an enemy. Ian Hamilton, reigning supreme at the Pillars of Hercules like John Calvin in Geneva, once told me that he counted it a bad week if he didn't make a new enemy. I told him that it was one of those things I

couldn't understand about him. I told him that I brought suffering upon myself and others by a psychotic inability to say what was on my mind. Sipping a Scotch through his fixed sneer, he said, 'You're a very complex character.' Instantly I realized that he wouldn't mind making an enemy out of me either, if it came to the point. Cravenly I vowed to myself that it would never come to that. But it had come to that with Karl. Remembering his anger, I lost sleep. But I was going to be losing plenty of that anyway. When I told Arthur Taylor that I planned to take on the *Observer* TV column, in addition to *Cinema*, he said, 'You're going to do *that*?' as if I had outlined a plan for splitting myself in half so as to be in two places at once. In attempted mitigation, I explained, with some element of truth, that with a steady commitment in a Sunday paper I could cut back on some of the casual journalism that had been filling my spare time, and thus lead a more efficient working life.

He swallowed it because he had to. My Granada contract specified exclusivity only for television. There was nothing to stop me taking on a full-time job in any other field: nothing except sanity, which was clearly not among my attributes. As for the *Observer*, they could not restrict my outside activities either, as long as I did not write about television for any other weekly newspaper. They could have controlled more of my time if they had taken me on staff, but David Astor, after one look at my beard, nylon corduroys and brown reinforced wool tie with electric-blue shirt, had instructed his accounts department to offer me only a freelance contract. Himself a picture of the gentlemanly Establishment – even his underwear must have been tailored in Savile Row – he probably thought that anyone who turned himself out like me could not live long. Eventually I heard that it had been Terry who persuaded Astor to offer me any kind of extended deal at all. Astor had a solid track record of hiring refugees from Europe, but they were in flight from persecution. I was an Australian in flight from nothing except ordinary standards of personal appearance. In fairness, however, it should be said that Astor was a genuine connoisseur of writing. I would like to think that my writing, even though still in a raw state, had something that would have led him to set aside his fastidious objections even if his most trusted troops had not told him that he should. But perhaps this is wishful thinking. A freelance contract, after all, was close to being an invitation to drop dead as soon as possible. No staff privileges, no pension, no nothing except a fixed fee each for forty-eight pieces in the year ahead, the deal terminable at any time with only three months' worth of fees as a pay-off. If I had had an agent, she would have told me to get a lawyer. If they had ever fired me, I would have been on the scrap heap, because it would have been plain for all to see that I had tried and failed. But I didn't plan to get fired. In the same way, my hero Evel Knievel,

when he took off from the ramp on his motorcycle to leap high in diamanté-studded white-leather outline against the dazzling nightscape of Las Vegas, didn't plan to end up in hospital with his bones being joined back together by metal pins.

Although careful, for once, to play myself in slowly, I got lucky with the *Observer* TV column from the start. By 1972 the sports commentators were operating in full force and the screen teemed with real-life characters richer than anything in the soap operas or the police series. A fashion parade of sheepskin-lined car-coats and sporting hats, David Coleman, Ron Pickering, David Vine and Alan Weeks continued to be reliable sources of unintentional innuendo. ('And once again Tompkins pulls out the big one!') Heart-rending in their unguarded patriotism, they provided one quotable double entendre after another as they praised British contestants not for how well they played the game, but for having taken part. ('And he is inside Podborski! He is inside Podborski by a long way!') I won't indulge here in too much quotation from myself. What I wrote in those years is available in my 1991 collection *On Television*, or would be available if the book were available. It is out of print now, but there are still some young would-be writers who are kind enough to look for it second-hand. When they find it, they are bound to conclude that many of the contemporary references have gone out of date. But history consists entirely of contemporary references that have gone out of date, and what I was writing was a kind of social history, as it was transmitted through the voices, clothes, hairstyles and mannerisms of the people on screen: not the actors in the dramas, but the permanent staff who were bringing us their interpretation of reality, and creating a whole new alternative reality by doing so. If my approach clicked, it was because the audience already thought the same, but had not previously written it down.

The key element of the column's gratifying impact was that its readers were already talking that way at home. They had not only been watching much more television than the *Observer* bigwigs suspected, they had incorporated television's repertory cast of presenters and pundits into their folklore and frame of reference. They made cruel jokes about Fanny Craddock. The thinly rewarded jingoism of the sports commentators ('And Wilkins quite content with his fifth place. He can build on that') was as hilarious to them as it was to me. Thus one of the best things about Britain – the readiness of its educated class to see the funny side of a fading dream – worked in my favour. I covered the serious programmes too, and indeed, right from the start, I spent more time praising than blaming. The praise drew a bigger response when it was unexpected. I thought, and said, that the unknown women who had written, produced, and directed a

series like *The Girls of Slender Means* were worth all the famous males in the West End. When I praised many of the popular programmes as if they were more serious than the solemn ones, it was meant as the endorsement of a value, not as the mocking of it. Good comedy, I argued, was better than bad drama because good comedy was more dramatic, and almost always better written. Sometimes I spelled such principles out in what was meant to be an aphorism, but gradually I learned to illustrate them by implication.

There could be no doubt, however, that outright denigration was the most fun to read, and easiest to remember. If I am remembered as an attacking critic, that was the reason. It was never really true, but there is no point complaining now, and I had no call to complain then. Letters flooded in. Journalists commonly call any number of letters greater than two a flood, but this really was a lot of mail. It was waiting for me on my desk every Friday morning when I came in to type up the column. Until I was instructed by the management to answer every letter, I dealt with the correspondence by putting it in the bin after having read it. Since most of it was literate and thoughtful, and some of it was signed with names I would later have recognized, to dump it was unwise as well as intolerably rude, but I have always had the twin bad habits of treating praise as my due, and the acknowledgement of it as a depletion of precious energy. Nowadays, I try to be more grateful, but a considerate personal letter is still likely to go into my Must Answer By Hand file, where its paper will dry and its ink fade as the years elapse. In the early seventies I just automatically ditched everything, using youth as an excuse. In the early seventies I was already in my early thirties, so the excuse was getting rusty. But I had trouble grasping that all this attention was quite real. (Being unable to accept praise gracefully is quite compatible with needing a lot of it: in fact the second failing is often a direct product of the first.) I felt the same way about life itself: if I stopped running even for a moment, there would be nothing to hold on to. The speed was keeping me upright. Compulsively productive, I couldn't even get drunk without working on my next piece of writing somewhere in the back of my addled brain.

With time off for my *Cinema* obligations, and for all the literary journalism assignments that I had promised to cut back on but in fact allowed to increase, I was writing the TV column in my head all week, even as I made written notes in my workbook while actually watching the little screen. Much of the viewing I could do at home in Cambridge. This would have made me popular if it weren't that a man watching television all the time was effectively as absent as an astronaut orbiting the Earth. On the Thursday night I was in London, going through my notes and deciding on the running order – the right term, because my column was essentially a one-man Footlights smoking concert in miniature form.

It needed an opening number, a monologue, a love song, a knockabout sketch, a closing number, and a spontaneous encore. And they all had to happen in a thousand words. That took thought, which I recorded as a skeletal frame, listing and shuffling the desirable events, outlining the themes, joining them up with arrows. Next morning, I was in the open-plan office at my assigned desk, which during the week had been used by other people doing other things. Nothing in, or on, the desk, was my property, not even the typewriter, into which I fiddled my first sheet of self-carbonating paper at about ten a.m., with the deadline set at noon. Double spaced, a thousand words filled three and a bit sheets of foolscap. I filled them as if they had offended me through their ever having been empty. For two hours my hands were a blur, reappearing in focus only when I ejected a full sheet of paper and reached for the next.

I was soon told that I was an infuriating spectacle while doing this. Manning desks all around me and far into the distance, there were a lot of full-time journalists slogging dutifully at their mandatory tasks, and for them it was no pleasure to see a part-time carpet-bagger earning the full whack in two hours, hammering away as if being fed his whole piece by dictation through an electrode implanted in his skull. Apparently the least prepossessing element was my tendency to rock with silent laughter at my own jokes. There was a reason for that. The jokes were the last aspect to form on the page. I had the line of argument already worked out, but when a tricky thought suddenly condensed into a gag I was surprised every time. When the piece was done, I took it to Findlater for editing. Out in the middle of a nominally open-plan office with acres of people all subject to one another's scrutiny, he had managed to build himself a cubicle out of filing cabinets and bookshelves. Inside this cubicle he might or might not be hiding. Invisible even when he was there, for much of the time he was absent, slowly stalking the corridors, where he would meet other, similarly venerable corridor-stalkers who were taking leave from self-constructed cubicles of their own. But he was usually in residence at the appointed time to receive my copy, on which he would make a few marks with an antique fountain pen – almost certainly a school prize – that looked as if it weighed a ton. It moved as if inhabiting the gravity field of Jupiter. The marks it made were usually helpful but he had a bad tendency to put a comma in at random near the middle of a sentence if he thought it had been going on too long. Because I had already devoted several years to developing a style that would crack along instead of hanging about, extra commas affected me like mosquitoes that had got in under the net on a hot night. Ready to fight for once, I would demand that the commas be taken out again. The demand no doubt sounded more like a tearful plea, but Findlater found it easier to comply than to

resist. Lying back in his chintz easy chair – how had he got it into the building? – he looked up at me as if wondering at his own part in creating a monster. But he took out the commas. Later on, after Findlater had finally faded away altogether and his cubicle had been dismantled, Terry Kilmartin personally took over the task of editing my copy. Though untroubled by my calculated dearth of commas, he proved a much harder nut to crack if he thought that some extravagance I had committed needed to be taken out. Much of my lexical intemperance had already been torched out of me by Karl's acetylene scrutiny, but there was plenty left for Terry to purse his lips at. He stared at me over the top rim of his half glasses as his blue pencil softly struck. Findlater rarely questioned an excess, perhaps aware that anything stupid would be picked up later, at proof stage, when Terry would see the piece anyway. Findlater wanted a quiet life. The trouble he had gone to in order to secure it was impressive even to a tyro. He had everything in that nest of his except a hip bath. Burrowing my way out, I would go to lunch.

Lunch, at first, I usually took at the Black Friars pub, an *Observer* haunt only a few steps away. John Silverlight used the place to run an informal seminar on English grammar for all who cared to listen. Many did, in those blessed days when the precision of the language, in the city where it first flowered, was still thought essential to its beauty. Terry was often there and we would eke out the beer with a few sausages. After a couple of months we took to lunching à deux at Mother Bunch's, another *Observer* filling station, where you could order an actual plate of something, instead of eating it with your fingers. Later still, the occasion acquired extra personnel, as I shall relate, but in my first days as a working visitor to the paper I was regarded, and regarded myself, as a strange bird strictly passing through. This worked my way, because I was allowed to break rules. It was correctly supposed that I didn't know what the rules were. After lunch I went back to read my proofs. Sometimes there had been drastic subtractions because the legal department, which had been separately reading my carbon copies (they were called 'the blacks'), had objections on grounds of libel. Some of these objections struck me as foolish. In a paragraph about the burgeoning human traffic on the peak of Everest I had written: 'Régine has plans to open a restaurant up there.' The lawyers pointed out that unless she really did have such plans, she could sue. I thought she would be more likely to send us a case of champagne, but I had no choice in the matter.

Quite often the lawyers were right, and saved my skin. Other subtractions were done by Terry. In most cases he was right too. I would put in a plea for a cherished phrase and sometimes save its life by allowing a slight modification. None of this was regarded as troublemaking. It might even have registered as an

uncommon care for detail. The trouble started with what I did next. It was an unwritten rule that no journalist could enter the downstairs composing room where his prose, after being set up in type, was laid out on the flat table called 'the stone'. Unaware of the rule, I would turn up at the stone to see what they were doing with my stuff. In the days of hot metal it was a compositor's skill to read the blocks of type back to front, like Leonardo's mirror writing. I had the same skill from my stint at the *Sydney Morning Herald* in the year after I left university and before I sailed for England. Charged with putting the leader page to bed every Friday night, I had learned quite a lot of the technicalities. The *Observer* compositors, every one of them a member of the only union that could hold Fleet Street to ransom, found themselves being instructed to make adjustments. If I found a line turnover was interfering with the balance of a sentence, I would ask for an extra word to be set up and inserted, or another word to be removed. When a new midshipman turns up on the gundeck to suggest a better way of loading the cannon, the gunners have only two courses of action: either to pitch the little bastard over the side, or else to adopt him as a mascot. Unbeknownst to me, the compositors had a quick chapel meeting and decided on the second course. I got adopted, and for as long as hot metal lasted I was allowed to turn up and help sling the lead that was turning my voice into print. Unaware that it was a privilege, I took it as a mutual recognition of the fact that the piece wasn't finished until the presses rolled. When they rolled, they shook the building. I had already left, but I knew exactly what I would see under my name on Sunday morning.

8. STAR ENCOUNTERS OF THE FIRST KIND

That a million other people would see it too was a datum whose full impact was slow to sink in. After all, the paper was full of good writers. But I had the best subject. When Edward Crankshaw reviewed a book about Stalin, he had to spend the opening paragraph giving the readers a potted history of the Soviet Union. My readers already knew what I was talking about. By that stage, television was a household experience, the first frame of reference in everybody's mind. So I could spend my whole time being as allusive as I liked. In the long term, this privilege was to make all the difference. Because TV took in everything, I could take in everything too. It was the ideal set-up for a cracker-barrel philosopher. The possibilities, however, were slow to dawn, and for the moment my *Observer* column felt like a holiday from *Cinema*, which was the job that counted. For one thing, the job was growing, like the spaceman's hand in *The Quatermass Experiment*. I was still recording the two shows back to back in Manchester every second Wednesday, and preparing for them in London every week, but there was a new policy to supplement the regular shows with irregular specials, which would add up to a series all on their own: a string (not yet called 'a strand') of interviews with the movie stars. Some of the movie stars were quite big, but even the small ones were hard to lure up to Manchester. The first star was very small indeed, although in my own eyes he loomed larger than Betelgeuse. He was the veteran lyricist Johnny Mercer, the very man who wrote 'The Summer Wind' and 'One For My Baby', which today still sets my standards for the way a colloquial phrase can be multiplied in its energy by how it sits on a row of musical notes. But to *Cinema*'s audience he was known only, if at all, as the author of 'Moon River', which everyone knew from the charming way Audrey Hepburn almost managed to sing it in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. Mercer had prominence, but scarcely stardom.

Mercer's relative obscurity was a lucky break for me, because there were few repercussions after I stuffed up the interview so badly that it couldn't be transmitted. Knowing a lot about him, I spent far too much time proving to him that I knew it. An interviewer should certainly be well prepared, but only so that

that I knew it. An interviewer should certainly be well prepared, but only so that the answers won't catch him flat-footed. I made the beginner's classic mistake of including the answer in the question. This left my puzzled guest with little to say beyond 'yes' and 'no'. The interview was done on film in a specially rented room of the London hotel where Mercer was staying. When Mercer had gone back to his own room, no doubt wondering why he had bothered, Arthur sat down in the guest's vacated chair and read me the news. 'We can't use this.' I sat there on the verge of tears while he gave me a quiet but unforgettable lesson in the necessity of asking a plain question so as to make the guest look like the interesting one, and not the host.

Well aware that I had made an expensive mess of things, I took the news in, and it formed the basis of my *modus operandi* from then on. Though I have always choked on such standard questions as 'How did you feel when ... ?' and 'What was it like to work with ... ?', it is better to ask them, or something like them, than to load a question with the very information that it is designed to elicit. I tried to overcome my squeamishness about appearing ignorant to the instructed viewer. The instructed viewer is rarely watching. It's the uninstructed viewer that you're after. Another basic interviewing skill was even more elementary but harder to master: listening to the answer. If you ask someone 'What did you do when you left school?' and he answers 'I murdered my mother and buried her under the patio,' the next thing you say should not be 'And then I suppose you went to university?' Eventually I got better at that one, but luckily I got better straight away at not upstaging the client. The Mercer debacle, plus the subsequent tongue-lashing from my producer, threw a real scare into me. It seemed logical to conclude that I should try to learn from the humiliation. Much, much later, I learned to count this ability to recover from catastrophe as one of my most useful qualities. I could put it down to sensitivity, but it is more likely to depend on the opposite. I have seen some highly talented people put out of action by a failure. They take it for a just estimation of their abilities. I never questioned that I had a right to be there, even when the people who thought I hadn't might seem to have a good case, handed to them by me. No matter what disasters had driven me out of it, I always returned to the centre of attention. The spotlight healed my wounds. I had a thin skin, but a brass neck.

An interview with Richard Burton went better: well enough, in fact, to reach the screen. Burton had a stiff movie to push and was therefore available. Even in those days, you could get the stellar names only when they were flogging a dog. Burton's movie, called *Hammersmith is Out*, barked and chewed bones. I don't think even he ever sat through it. I did, as part of my preparation. Something had gone wrong with every part of the movie. The action never started. On the other

hand, it never ended. As a token that the plot was going nowhere, Burton spent the whole movie standing around. When he walked, it was so that he could stand around somewhere else. Nobody would give a toss. But he was still a star. When Granada proposed to Burton's people that he should be interviewed in Manchester, they proposed Monte Carlo. London was the compromise, but at least we were in a studio. I can't remember which one it was – they all look the same from inside – but I can remember exactly my first impression of Burton. In the press profiles he had always been called stocky, and as his career declined, the journalists took to calling him short. Later on I realized that journalistic estimates of physical stature are always relative to perceived status, but I was still at the stage of believing what I read, so it was a shock to find that Burton was quite tall. What made him look less so, especially on screen, was the size of his head. It was as big as a tea chest. You had to lean sideways to look past him. On the front of that vast expanse of cranium, the features were arranged like a caricature of Richard Burton. I was still getting used to the fact that the stars look so like themselves: it is the first, and sometimes the only, characteristic they have. Burton seemed quite tolerant of my beard. He would probably have been tolerant if I had been dressed as a Maori chieftain. Though upright, with his bulky shoulders squared, he was barely awake. He was sober that afternoon, but the previous day had taken its toll, along with the previous half century.

Fortune decreed, however, that he had his answers ready, whatever the question. I courted disaster only once, when I hesitated to join in with his estimation of Joseph Losey as some kind of genius. If Burton had been in, say, *The Servant*, this might have been a proposition that he could plausibly illustrate, but the Losey film he had been in was *Boom*, which I had once watched go by on the big screen like a stricken luxury liner limping home to port after its passengers all died in a mass outbreak of boredom. As a blacklisted Hollywood director who had gone into exile in Europe and made a string of literate films in conditions of great difficulty, Losey was much revered among British film people: to admire him was a mark of seriousness. But he was short of humour, as his occasional attempt at comedy proved, and his concomitant solemnity – general recognition of which would eventually deprive his back catalogue of its prestige – was perfectly apparent even at the time to anyone not blinded by his legend. My guardian angel stopped me from saying so, and Burton was free to burble on with detailed reminiscences about Losey which were all taken out in the editing, on the correct assumption that the audience wouldn't have known what he was talking about. But I made sure that I dug out of him all the best stories about his more popular movies. Some of them, after all, were pretty good, especially *The Spy Who Came In From the Cold*, which I thought masterly. He

was pleased to hear that, although he would have been less pleased to hear that I thought Oskar Werner attained a naturalness on screen which Burton had never dreamed of. Happily I didn't say that either. Most of the opinions came from the client: a desirable imbalance, because the viewers, on the basis of their own experience, can decide for themselves whether the interviewee is talking nonsense or not, and even if they decide he is, they still find him a lot more interesting than the interviewer. I even managed to look excited when discussing *Hammersmith is Out*, which is more than I can say for Burton. But although never more than half awake, he was also never less than intelligent and civilized. Discounting the occasional flash of his undying belief that his alliance with Elizabeth Taylor had raised him to new artistic heights unknown to the Stratford Memorial Playhouse or the Old Vic, Burton handled his end of the business pretty well, and I was almost as impressed by him as I was by his one-man entourage, a black heavyweight who drove the car and arranged the details. After the heavyweight loaded Burton into the back of the limousine so that he could finish waking up, I was glad to find that I had my producer's favour. 'We can use that.'

When I saw the trimmed version on screen, I could see that it was no triumph for either party. But it wasn't bad. An interview with Robert Mitchum went better still, mainly because Mitchum was more interesting all round. Burton, to prove himself alert to the English language, had to quote Shakespeare or Dylan Thomas. Mitchum could quote himself. There are people you can't take your ears off when they talk, even when they mumble. Mitchum was one of them. His mumble, however, was formidable. Operating through a spokesman in his retinue, he demanded to audition us over lunch at the Dorchester. Arthur and I were there early, and well dug in. Mitchum turned up on time to the minute but we couldn't understand what he was saying. 'I seem fine squaws rive earl.' A trained simultaneous translator from Geneva would have told us that he had said, 'I see my firing squad has arrived early.'

Theoretically Mitchum was on the wagon at the time, but he must have taken one look at my beard and changed his mind, because when the waiter asked him if he would like something to drink he made the waiter bend down and spent a long time whispering in his ear. The whispering was accompanied by illustrative movements of his hands, as if he were passing on arcane secrets in the art of flower arrangement. When the drink arrived it was about two feet tall, changed colour on the way up, and had foliage sprouting from the top, like a core sample from an Amazonian swamp. All it needed was a toucan perched on a branch. There was always the chance that this concoction had no alcohol in it, but it certainly had some kind of active ingredient, because after he had inhaled about

half of it, Mitchum's voice suddenly came into focus. It was still, however, pitched very low. It has always been a practice of the big male movie stars to pitch the voice low when off screen, so as to make the interlocutor lean forward. The angle of inclination is an index of prestige. For a movie star, being interviewed on television counts as being off screen, so the volume is duly screwed down, which duly increases the amplitude of the timbre. This can give a TV sound engineer unmanageable problems. I had seen an interview with Lee Marvin during which I had to lean my head against the TV set, which shook to the reverberation. Here was Mitchum doing the same thing in a restaurant. If he did the same thing in the studio, we were dead. Inspired by fear, I decided to play it deaf. Nowadays it would be no trick, but then I had to fake it. Mitchum took pity on a fellow actor and raised his volume into the range of the audible. Greatly daring, I offered not to ask him about his early stardom in the first-ever celebrity marijuana bust. 'Go ahead.' This answer cleared the air nicely, and the following conversation flowed without a hitch, except for his reluctance to expand on an anecdote after giving us its bare bones. Afterwards, Arthur told me this was a good sign: the client was saving his best stuff for the air.

He did, too. In studio he was tremendous. He liked it that I knew about the off-trail movies as well as the mainstream ones. *Build My Gallows High* was a favourite film noir of mine and I could have proved it by reciting the dialogue from memory, but I had learned my lesson and let him recite it instead. I was a big fan of *Thunder Road*, the low-budget thriller about the best moonshine-liquor driver in the mountains. ('He sets a pace that only a madman can match.') So was Mitchum: the project had been his idea, and he was instantly off and running about the difficulties of getting a pet idea financed and filmed within the prevailing system. His rare intelligence was in every sentence he spoke, and for a wonder he spoke every sentence clearly, although he was still no louder than a mole in hiding. But compared to Lee Marvin, Mitchum was Cicero. It went so well that we asked him if we could keep rolling long enough to turn the footage into two programmes instead of one. He agreed on the spot. It was as if he didn't want to go home. I didn't either. Finally the electricians pulled the plugs, Mitchum wandered off into the gathering dusk, and I waited with some confidence for Arthur's accolade. 'We can certainly use that.' Arthur went off to catch the train to Manchester, where he would have three whole weeks to edit the first of the two programmes.

Early the next day he was on the phone to Cambridge to break the bad news. Mitchum's people had double-crossed us and made their star available for the *Parkinson* programme two weeks from now. Parkinson's BBC talk show was still building up at that stage but it was already the thing for a visiting star to do,

and the studios were already working on the principle that to turn down the exposure just because of a previous promise would be a quixotic price to pay for a little thing like integrity. It was no use complaining to Mitchum himself, who probably had no idea of what was going on. The only answer was to edit the first of our programmes immediately and get it on the air before *Parkinson*. A ticket awaited me at Euston. I was direly enjoined not to have too big a breakfast on the Pullman and to be sure to write my introduction on the way, because we would have to tape it as soon as I got there.

Drinking nothing but orange juice and water, I wrote the script on the train, taped it successfully when I arrived, and sat in on quite a lot of the editing, which was a revelation. We were cutting film, not splicing tape, so it took two moviolas and a pot of glue to accomplish in an hour what an Avid machine would later do in five minutes. The revelation lay in what you could cut out and still keep the sense. Next morning I left them to it and went back to London on the early train to write my TV column, feeling like a fighter-bomber pilot flying multiple missions to the Falaise Gap in 1944. This was the life.

Or to put it another way, this was madness. Military analogies are always the tip-off that a writer is dramatizing himself, but there could be no doubt that I was outrunning my supply lines even as I stormed forward. An example of what madness looked like was provided by Burt Lancaster, who suddenly became available after our first Mitchum programme was successfully screened. We managed to get it on the air a few days before the *Parkinson* interview, which duly undercut the impact of our second programme that followed later. But on any objective assessment I could say truly that Mitchum did better with us than with Parkinson. Like all people with a feel for language, Mitchum was reluctant to say the same thing again in the same words, so he gave Parkinson a more circumlocutory set of responses. It wasn't Parkinson's fault. But I had a subjective assessment going along with the objective one, and I preferred to think that it *was* his fault. I was a bit chippy about Parky's having jumped our claim. Nevertheless, we had got our first programme into the leading spot, and Lancaster's people were sufficiently impressed with what they saw to think that we might do the same for their man. For them, it would be good advance publicity for a Michael Winner movie called *Scorpio*, then in the last stages of filming at Shepperton. The deal was that I would interview Lancaster at an exterior location, somewhere not far from the studio but far enough to ensure that it would be difficult to control the sound. Open-air interviews are hard for just that reason. Unless you are using two cameras at once, noise in the background makes the footage hard to edit, so that you are always going for another take on an interchange that might not have gone very well already, but

will be certain to go worse when you shoot it again. Arthur told me it would be good practice, and anyway, this was our only chance to get Lancaster, even though his career was in the doldrums by then. After personally revolutionizing the Hollywood production system so that actors acquired real creative power for the first time, he had clung on too long to his status as the magnetic leading man. (Later on, when he allowed himself to be cast as the old timer, his career entered a second phase of glory, with movies like *Local Hero* and *Atlantic City* being built around his hulking but always gracefully moving presence, whose boundless vitality had at last mellowed towards the bearable: he became less of a ham as he lost vigour.) But if, at that stage, he was no longer what he was, he was still a huge name. We would have said yes if he had been in jail.

So down we went to the location, in an open field where there were tents for dressing rooms, tents for offices, and tents for two different grades of dining hall, one for the dogsbodies, and the other, a hundred yards further away, for the director and the star. One glance at the film's prospectus told me that it was a tired old spy drama that would be released only into oblivion, like a blob of spit aimed at a hot stove. But I had no reason to despise Michael Winner and indeed I still don't today. *Death Wish* might be a favourite movie among gun nuts but it is not without a measure of narrative drive, and at least Winner got his movies made, when so many other British directors were sitting around moaning about their wounded artistic purity, which they didn't mind compromising by making commercials anonymously. Recently I read Winner's autobiography and it wasn't half bad. It was three-quarters bad, but only because of its many thousands of superfluous exclamation marks. Clear those out into a skip and the book would be a fascinating, if much shorter, story of diligence rewarded, told in a prose admirably forthcoming if not always edifying. One of the sub-stories in the book concerns Winner's love-hate relationship with Burt Lancaster. You might wonder why it wasn't hate-hate. Once, on location in Mexico, Lancaster had grasped Winner by the throat and hung him out over a high cliff. It's either kind or craven for Winner to remember this behaviour as somehow an indication of Lancaster's lovable volatility, because it sounds exactly like homicidal mania.

On location near Shepperton, things were more restrained, but still very weird. The unit was between set-ups when we arrived. Sitting intensely in a canvas-backed folding chair marked BURT LANCASTER, the star stuck a cigarette in his mouth and waited. He had to wait only a few seconds before Winner shouted, 'A light for Mr Lancaster!' A factotum bounded forward with a cigarette lighter already spouting flame. After the next shot, lunch was called. The smaller mess tent for the star and the director was in plain sight, about two hundred yards away. Lancaster stood up from his chair, but that was as far as he went by

himself. He stared at Winner with a weary impatience. Winner took the cue and shouted, 'A car for Mr Lancaster!' A black Mercedes 600 longer than a school bus loomed across the grass and stopped precisely so that the action hero could step directly into it after the back door had been opened by the assistant director, the PR attaché, and other members of the door-opening party that I could not identify. The Mercedes set off on its epic journey across two hundred yards of grass, arriving at the sacred tent only a short time before the rest of us arrived on foot. Lancaster's door remained firmly closed until it was opened by the chauffeur, the assistant director, the PR attaché, the other members of the door-opening party, and Winner himself. Winner congratulated Lancaster on his successful voyage in terms which would have embarrassed Lindbergh after his arrival in Paris. It was a graphic demonstration of the perennial need for the institution of monarchy: because there is a total, ineradicable potential for subservient ceremonial bullshit in the universe and it all has to go somewhere.

I would have been open-mouthed if Arthur had not conveyed to me in a whisper the vital necessity of keeping my trap shut. I already knew that Lancaster had not attained his position as one of Hollywood's most powerfully creative figures by self-denial and humility. His company Hecht, Hill and Lancaster had changed the industry, making it possible, for the first time, for a star to be in full charge of his career. Lancaster had not only starred in more than his share of important movies, he had produced them, and often developed them from the initial idea. To do all that, he had to get some respect, and had frequently got it by imposing his personality with the full force of his improbably gleaming teeth, sometimes implanting them in the outstretched neck of a courtier he found insufficiently supplicatory. But this stuff on the *Scorpio* location went beyond self-assertion. This was megalomania. Lancaster wasn't precisely carried into the tent, but its flaps were held aside by two men who had clearly learned their flap-holding skills at the court of Hailie Selassie, and the business of making sure that Mr Lancaster sat down safely would have been familiar to Louis XIV. As Lancaster, once a champion acrobat and still in superb physical shape, lowered himself from the standing to the sitting position, Winner, from the other side of the table, flung out one hand in a gesture of caution, as if the star might be putting his life in peril from the speed of transition and change of altitude. You could see the instruction hovering on the director's lips: 'A parachute for Mr Lancaster!' From our position in one corner of the tent, I watched Mr Lancaster eat. Chesterton once said, on the subject of innate human dignity, that it all depended on the presence of the holy spirit, and that it was otherwise hard to take the human body seriously, belonging as it did to a creature that nourished itself by pushing food into a hole at the bottom of its

face. But everybody at Lancaster's table watched him eat as if their fate depended on the proper functioning of his digestive system. I was disappointed that there was nobody to taste his food first, in case of poison, but would not have been astounded to learn that his excrement was weighed afterwards, in the same way that the output of the Chinese emperors was examined for portents.

After lunch, the interview took place in another tent at the edge of the compound. Once again, Lancaster was transported by limousine. But in our preliminary conversation he seemed to like my references to his early career as a gymnast. Flying on the high bar, Lancaster had forged in a touring circus the magnificent athleticism that made him, on screen, so beautifully poised even when he was standing still. It is always a plus, when warming up a difficult subject, to get him or her talking about their formative skills. This gives them a chance to instruct you. I hadn't yet formulated this as a principle: I had got it right merely by luck. It was flattery, of course, a version of 'A light for Mr Lancaster!' But it worked. He scaled down the hauteur considerably. Instead of being Louis XIV, suddenly he was merely Napoleon Bonaparte. By the time our cameras rolled he was practically mortal. From *The Crimson Pirate* onwards, I got a good story out of him about every movie that counted, and from each story he emerged as a model of reason, taste, and judgement. There was only one moment when he seemed insane. When I made the mistake of praising Alexander Mackendrick, director of *The Sweet Smell of Success* – by common consent the greatest film that Lancaster was ever in – the star said that Mackendrick had been so slow with the set-ups 'we almost fired him'. By 'we', of course, he meant 'I', and my jaw, against strict instructions, dropped. But my moment of revulsion could be cut out of the finished interview, and forty years later, from a detailed biography of Lancaster, I found out that he had been telling the truth. Mackendrick's slow shooting threatened to put the masterpiece a mile over its budget, thus threatening Lancaster's finances. His film company was the biggest of the independents, but it was still betting the farm on every project. He really was a brave, intelligent, and original man, although I always thought him a ham actor until time forced him to commit less energy. But I left that unmentioned, and at the end of the interview he indicated his satisfaction in a way that had been lighting up the screen for decades. His teeth looked like tombstones anyway, and when he bared them in a smile it looked like a carnival in a graveyard. Film stardom has more to do with presence than with acting, and Lancaster had always had so much presence that everyone else felt absent. He still had it. Getting away from him as far as possible seemed the only thing to do. As Lancaster, once again surrounded by his entourage, prepared to enter the limo for the awe-inspiring journey to the tent next door, and I followed our crew

towards our humble van, Arthur muttered, ‘Don’t say anything. He might be listening.’

The Lancaster interview looked good on screen, but it made me wonder if I was really cut out for soothing the frailties of these fabled beasts. The mild-looking ones could be as dangerous as the known killers. Riding a tiger was one thing, but stroking an antelope could cost you your eyesight if the creature rounded on you and stuck out its tongue. Already I was wondering if I wanted to go on much further with *Cinema*. Pete was about to go into studio with the first album of our songs, the *Review* and the *TLS* were hungry for copy, the *Observer* TV column was nominally a full-time job anyway, and there was always Louis MacNeice showing up in my troubled dreams like Banquo’s ghost. Did I really need the anxiety of talking to madhouse people with household names? The question was settled by my next big *Cinema* special, an interview with Peter Sellers.

Universally acclaimed as a comic genius, Sellers, after *Dr. Strangelove* and *A Shot in the Dark*, was still on a high plinth, but the cracks were starting to show. There were stories that he was driven by his own version of Tony Hancock’s fatal reluctance to admit that a comic star might be to a certain extent dependent on those who supplied the words he said. As I mentioned earlier, but always feel bound to mention again, when Hancock heard too often that the scripts provided for him by Galton and Simpson were essential to his screen persona, he met the threat by firing them. His final destruction duly followed. Sellers wasn’t as stupid as that, but he had already reached the dangerous state, for a comedian, of wanting to be cast as a romantic lead, as if he had more than comedy to offer. Successful comedy is already ‘more than’ almost anything else, but there will always be comedians who regard their reputation for getting laughs as a cruel diminishment of their real qualities. It had become known that Sellers was one of these. It had also been attested that his famous range of mimicry included no character that could reliably be identified as Peter Sellers himself. He bought a new car every week, changed women every few months – usually after giving a press conference to declare that the latest tie was eternal – and generally showed all the signs of someone short of an identity trying to supply it with a sufficiency of fancy toys, ranging from the latest automatic camera to Princess Margaret. All of these things I had read about but most of them I had discounted, on the assumption that he had attracted journalistic envy.

There could be no safer assumption than that, but within minutes of meeting him I realized that the press had been giving him an easy run. The encounter took place at some swish restaurant whose name I have repressed: it might have been Odin’s. Sellers and his latest agent were in position at the table before

Arthur and I arrived. While Sellers was regaling Arthur with a superb imitation of John Gielgud, the agent leaned in my direction and said, 'He's a vegetarian this week.' The implication was that the star didn't want even to smell meat, so Arthur and I ended up eating a small pile of vegetables each while Sellers became Laurence Olivier, Ralph Richardson, Richard Burton, and Alec Guinness. In broad daylight, it was a jamboree of spectres. When a student, I had loved his Alec Guinness routine in 'The Bridge on the River Wye' sketch, and here it was again, the replica of a replica. He went on to become Field Marshal Montgomery, President Nixon, Bing Crosby, Winston Churchill, Adolf Hitler, and Marlene Dietrich. The only dud in the range was when he was pretending to be himself. His beautifully produced standard BBC English had the unmistakable gleam of a freshly forged banknote. But it was what he was actually saying, in this voice purportedly his own, that rang the alarm bells. He launched into an account of how Blake Edwards, the director of *A Shot in the Dark*, had screwed up the billiard-room scene. As his agent studied the ceiling while looking down at his plate – the trick needs a practised pair of eyeballs – Sellers moved pieces of cutlery about to demonstrate that whereas on screen the sequence had gone like that, it should have gone like this. Edwards, apparently, had deviously seemed to agree with Sellers' suggestions on the sound stage, but had double-crossed him in the cutting room. As the well-modulated tirade went on, Arthur and I exchanged the glance shared by two coal-miners when they hear water coming down the tunnel. Arthur told me later that this was the moment when he started thinking about the relative ease of dealing with Burt Lancaster. I was thinking of *A Shot in the Dark*. Sellers had come up with the perfect face, voice, and set of movements for Inspector Clouseau, but he was everywhere abetted by well-planned scenes that could only have been the work of the director, because they were the product of concentration, and Sellers was clearly incapable of concentrating on anything for five minutes, except, probably, on Sophia Loren in the passenger seat of his new Ferrari.

According to him, however, the movie was all his. Transparently untrue, this contention was a sign that he was already far gone in the fatal delusion that the people who helped him to succeed were conspiring to his downfall. The sure sign of a weak man who ascends to glory is that he can't tolerate having strong men around him. But it would be a long time before I figured that out as a general principle. At that moment, I was too busy remembering the scene in which Clouseau hurls himself at the door of the upstairs concert room in the castle, hurtles across the room in long shot, and is then seen, in the exterior shot, bursting through the window and falling, still running, into the moat below. Out of those three shots, his stunt double could have done the second and almost

certainly did the third. In *The Pink Panther*, also directed by Edwards, Clouseau, preparing for a rare night of passion with his wife, heads into the bathroom while holding a bottle of pills. Of course, being Clouseau, he will spill them. But when he does, we don't even see him. We just hear the pills hit the tiled floor. The camera is looking at Capucine, who doubles the laugh by putting her hand over her eyes in resignation. Clouseau is present only as an idea. The joke emerges from the character, who has been created not just by the actor but by the writers and the director. How could Sellers be so ungenerous as not to concede that? He could even have been proud of it, because without his talent at the centre, none of all these other talents would ever have formed around him. The answer was not long in coming. He was ungenerous because he was unrealistic. When Charles Chaplin thought he could do everything, he could provide the evidence to back up the claim, although the evidence ran thinner when sound came in and it turned out that his touch with a story did not extend to its dialogue. But Sellers had always needed other people. The need, however, conflicted with his nature, which was that of a solipsist. To be a solipsist is to be deluded about the world, which would not be worth living in if it did not exist independently from the self.

I was wrong, however, to suppose that Sellers thought the world revolved around him. He thought the cosmos did too, and history, and the fates. After the endless lunch had ground to its conclusion, we headed off around the corner to the hotel in which our crew had taken over a room to rig the cameras and lights. The moment that Sellers saw which hotel it was, the really weird stuff started. He had drunk nothing during lunch except some special water that had to be brought in by courier from high in the Himalayas, where it had been strained through the loincloth of a swami. So he couldn't have been drunk. But suddenly he was staggered. 'Oh no,' he said, in a version of the Sellers voice that sounded like his cockney accent in *The Wrong Arm of the Law*. I suspected that these might be his true tones, to the extent that they could be resurrected. Resurrected was the right word, because he looked like living death. 'Oh no. No. Can't go in there.' While he stood staring paralysed at the hotel's front door, his agent whispered to us fiercely: 'Jesus, what made you pick this place? He can't go through the door.' It turned out that we had chanced on the very hotel where Sellers had begun his liaison with Britt Ekland. Their eternal alliance having ended with the usual bitter abruptness, bad karma had gathered around the doorway of the place where the universal catastrophe had begun under the guise of bliss. Evil spirits walked and groaned. Voodoo tom-toms, inaudible to us, pulsed. Negative feng shui enveloped the building. All of it, apparently, except the roof. When Arthur explained that there was no time left to hire another venue and reposition the camera, agent asked client if there was any way of getting into

the building that would not offend its incorporeal guardians. Blinking as if called upon to assent to the sacrifice of his immortal soul, Sellers whispered that an indirect approach might be all right. 'We could go in over the roof.' It took ten minutes to navigate upwards through the building next door, Sellers giving autographs all the way, with the terrible smile of the condemned. You could imagine Christ ascending Golgotha, asking the autograph hounds to hold their books still so that he could sign one-handed while dragging the cross. The transition over the rooftop would have been quicker if Sellers had not been bailed up by a particularly hostile spiritual presence speaking Swedish. Sellers spent several minutes negotiating with thin air. Inside the hotel, certain corridors had to be avoided. Our small party was exhausted when it finally attained the room full of lights, cameras, and technicians.

The interview itself could have been worse. Sellers decided to impersonate a normal, even reasonable, human being. In a position, by now, to realize that this was the most remarkable acting feat of his life, I managed, while the magazines were being changed, to keep him occupied by proving myself familiar with the details of his more off-trail achievements, the ones we weren't talking about on camera. I was further struck, however, by the way he was not in the least surprised to encounter someone in possession of all this knowledge. He thought everyone knew it. Like every egomaniac, he behaved as if everybody else spent their day being as interested in him as he was. Even at the time, I had enough sense to mark this down as a lesson for life. Self-regard would get out of hand, if it were given the power, so watch for the symptoms. Sanity would be hard to get back if it were ever let go of. At the end of his career, Sellers would show signs of wanting to get it back. After a long and progressively disastrous series of scripts chosen on the grounds that they presented him as an irresistible sexual object, he elected to star in *Being There*, a movie about a man minus a personality who rises to prominence because people can read their dreams into him. Perfect for the part, he was able to go out on a high note. His whole career might have been like that if he had always been so judicious. But it would have been a lot to ask. He had a conspicuous individual talent, but it was interpretive, not directly creative. He could never have emulated Chaplin, Keaton, or Jacques Tati and set up a whole project by himself, controlling its every detail even if the task took years. But there is no point carping. He had such a protean capacity that it would have been a miracle if he had been in full command of it. Those of us with less to offer earn no points for ordering our lives better. Wagner couldn't compose unless he was living in Byzantine luxury, worshipped as a living god. You and I aren't quite that nuts, but we didn't write the Magic Fire music in the last pages of *Die Walkure*, either. When Sellers was far gone on the road to self-

destruction, I tried to remember him as Dr Strangelove, strangling himself with one black-gloved hand. It was all too symbolic. But it was also his idea, a moment of brilliant improvisation. He just thought of something perfectly expressive on the spot, and hardly anybody can do that.

When the Sellers interview went to air it looked a lot more interesting than an exercise in hagiography. There was information and the occasional cause for amusement. And Sellers was undoubtedly a vivid illustration of the truth that the new, classless arts-media elite left the old social Establishment looking as tedious as a pair of green wellingtons caked with mud. An interview with the Governor of the Bank of England would probably have had less brio, unless he could do card tricks. But I was already making up my mind that my time on *Cinema* had run its course. After three series of thirteen regular weekly programmes, I had learned all I could about writing a clip show. When the time came for the tapes to be wiped – as, in those days, nearly all tapes were – one of them was preserved and given to the National Film Theatre, for the collection that was later to form the core of the Museum of the Moving Image. I chose the representative show myself: it was on the subject of the Hollywood Heavies, and I was quite proud of the bit about Lee Marvin. But anyone who saw it today would soon spot that I had a formula worked out. The prize for finding a formula is that you can pack more in. The penalty is that you will quickly exhaust the possibilities. The troubled but inexhaustibly inventive Kenny Everett, who really was a genius in a way that Peter Sellers was only talked about as being, was currently in the hilarious process of developing a television formula that could be elaborated for ever. Indeed other people are still elaborating it today. But for mere mortals, a television formula soon becomes a cocoon. (The great thing about a pre-industrial art form like poetry is that there is no formula to find: it's a new start every time. Not even Dante exhausted the possibilities of the terza rima, and Shakespeare, had he wished to, could have gone on writing sonnets for ever.) The specials, had I gone on with them, might have led to a more expansive layout than the simple interview with written top and tail, but there was an inhibiting factor, looming already even in those early days of rule by PR: the studios, in control of access, also limited the tone. No new movie could be dismissed as worthless. Everything the star had done was important and nothing was a waste of time. These precepts might have been a guarantee of decent deference – which on the whole I really felt, because I respected public opinion too much to believe that anyone ever got famous for nothing – but they were undoubtedly restrictions on expression. In the TV column I was much more free to let rip.

9. A LUNCH IS BORN

This last point was part of the message I had been receiving from the *Observer*. The paper's numerous corridor-stalkers were of the opinion (they spent a lot of time being 'of the opinion') that my exalted freedom as a critic could only be compromised by the lowly pressures of television. Exerting subtle but relentless pressure of their own, they sent the opinion down the descending layers of corridors until it reached me. Terry was disposed to ignore it. He gave me the courage of his convictions as well as my own. He had no respect for the corridor-stalkers. They reminded him (he didn't tell me this, but I worked it out from secondary sources) of the same distinguished boneheads who had chosen to call him a troublemaker when he pointed out that the persistent absence of the preliminary safety-code group on the messages from Holland was a clear indication that the safety-code group had in fact performed its function. The people sending the messages were not our agents. They were Germans. The corridor-stalkers, persisting in their belief that no circumstance so inconvenient to themselves could possibly be true, went on sending in more agents, who ended up in Buchenwald if they were not tortured and shot on the spot. Corridor-stalkers are placemen, more concerned with protecting their position than exercising judgement. At the *Observer* their position was ideal: worshipping, as well they might, the publication from which they still drew a salary even though they no longer actually wrote anything, they had a free hand to cherish 'the spirit of the *Observer*'. There was something to it. The *Observer* was still a great newspaper, and perhaps I was being cavalier in making my column look like a casual concern, instead of my main effort. Without doubt there was an anomaly when I sat at Richard Burton's feet on *Cinema* and then, in the same week, talked in my TV column about his gala television appearance with Bob Hope as resembling two drunks trapped in a revolving door. If it didn't actually feel like a conflict of interest – a conflict of interest rarely does – the point still niggled.

Add all these considerations together and they amounted to a reason to call it a day. But perhaps I was just restless. By other journalists I was already being

called ('dubbed' as they would have put it) the *Cinema* man. If I wanted to escape an imposed identity, the time to make the break was sooner, rather than later. It could also have been that I was sick of the Midland Pullman. No doubt I had been remiss in not more assiduously exploring the marvels of Manchester, but apart from a few pre-Raphaelite paintings they seemed to consist mainly of George Best pulling birds in the Grapes. I hated the pre-Raphaelites and had seen enough of Best tossing beer coasters. Arthur took the news depressingly well. Never in favour of my holding on to the *Observer* job, he had probably concluded that my divided loyalties were bound to wear me down in the end. He made a civilized offer to try talking the Granada bean-counters into raising the stipend, but we both knew that the offer was just routine. Ego demanded that he fall to the floor, hold on to my ankles, and beg; but he had an ego of his own. So at the Midland Hotel we had one of those last suppers where you say far too much but forget it in the morning. When the morning came, the Pullman took me to London. In the future I would return to Manchester many times, mainly to present *What the Papers Say*, but I had renounced my chance to be a cherished adopted son of the great house. There could have been a psychological component in that refusal, because in the future I was to do it several times again, with other institutions equally venerable. They threatened to put a crimp in my lust for unbelonging. I don't exactly like being alone, but I prefer to be seen that way. There is something about a mentoring arm around my shoulder that makes me want to cut and run. Too well groomed, that comforting presence. I can smell the grave in the aftershave.

With *Cinema* out of the way, there should have been time for other things. As always, the spare time filled up overnight. The success of my *TLS* piece on Edmund Wilson gave me a Quixotic taste for writing articles longer than requested for pay that did not commensurately increase: a whole new way of doing more for less. Spotting this, Ian Hamilton gave me a chance to write a long piece for the *Review* for no pay at all. Though it meant that I would be conspiring to starve my own children, I found myself accepting the assignment. How Hamilton inspired this suicidal commitment from his writers remains a matter of debate. Some talk of hypnotism, others of a kamikaze commander's knack for instilling a sense of shame in any of his flyers who acquired the urge to come back alive. The second explanation was closer to the mark in this case. The subject was *The Savage God*, a new book by the redoubtable A. Alvarez. It was a treatise on how the purportedly unique pressures of being an artist in the twentieth century had led a disproportionate number of the greatest practitioners to untimely death, all too often self-inflicted. Ian asked me whether I could find time in my demanding show-business schedule to treat this undoubtedly serious

book at some length. From subtle signs, I got the sense that if I turned the job down I would be confirming his estimation that the bright lights were eroding my sense of purpose. 'Or are you too busy being sucked off by starlets?'

For length, my resulting review of Alvarez's book left even the Wilson piece behind. I had a lot to say, and possibly too much of it consisted of cultural references brought to the siege in order to hammer at a wall already crumbling. Alvarez had a point about the number of modern suicides. But there was a corollary that he left unexamined, as if it would carry itself by default. He gave the idea that a suicidal commitment was necessary for quality. Since Philip Larkin, for example, had shown no signs of wanting to kill himself or of favouring the same course in anybody else, he was ranked automatically below Sylvia Plath. This idea seemed false to me, but not patently so: it needed rebuttal, and I piled on the historical examples in the attempt to match the easy flow of Alvarez's prose. He had always written and spoken with the natural authority of a man at ease with the big subjects. As Philip French had once famously said, the best way for a newcomer to survive on the BBC 'Critics' programme was to say, at any awkward moment, 'I agree with Alvarez.' I was disagreeing with Alvarez and I wanted to look as if I had the qualifications to take him on. There is a possibility that my attempts to evoke the full range of cultural history since ancient Athens had an element of showing off, but a more likely motivation was nervousness. Though not very big in physical dimensions, Alvarez was a giant. This was my first giant-killing mission since I had taken on George Steiner when I was an undergraduate. I had spoiled that effort by taking far too much delight in cutting him up. He took umbrage, and in short order I saw that he had been right. (He forgave me later on, although he had no need to: the best kind of forgiveness, when you think about it.) With that in mind, I took care, in the Alvarez piece, to give the devil his due. I can safely recommend this practice to any young critic preparing to make his way forward over the corpses of sacred cows. As long as it is in defence of a value, there is nothing wrong with writing an attack: any critic would be too bland who never did. But even if responsible for some obvious pile of steaming ordure like *The Da Vinci Code*, most of the authors who achieve a regular following do so because of some quality. It might not be an especially admirable quality – it might just be the elementary ability to narrate some dumb story so that you can't help vaguely wondering if the stolen virus will destroy civilization – but by saying he hasn't got it you automatically denigrate all those who think he has, while laying yourself open to accusations of envy. Those accusations will quite often be right. After Tynan attacked Noel Coward in print, he was impressed when, after meeting Coward by chance in a hotel dining room in Switzerland, he was asked

by Coward to sit down. Actually he said: 'Tynan, you're a frightful shit. Sit down.' The true wording makes Coward's magnanimity even more striking. In recording this, Tynan might have added a further truth. Though Tynan seriously thought that the politically committed theatre after Brecht had put paid to the old West End world of Binkie Beaumont (upstage French windows, 'Anyone for tennis?' etc.), Tynan, at a deeper level, knew that his own achievement in criticism was outweighed for permanence, and even for entertainment, by the least line in *Private Lives*. In other words, he was envious of Coward's place in the theatre.

I was envious of Alvarez's renown as a literary critic and would have quite liked some of it for myself, but I can honestly say that I had a better reason for going after him. I thought he was wrong, and wrong on an important theme: one on which the young ought not to be misled. From that viewpoint, I can regard my capacity for going overboard as a virtue. Almost always I have written from a true impulse, even when it is counterproductive. Dismantling somebody's arguments can be counterproductive indeed – he might reassemble his strength and go for you – but you are more likely to get away with it if you remember that your chosen enemy is a human being. This is not just good tactics, it is civilized behaviour, which you yourself are trying to embody anyway, or you shouldn't be writing. As you can tell from my tone, I could give a course of lectures on this one subject. It is because I have a lot of guilt churning. Critics who actually enjoy causing pain have an easier time, but there is a name for the uniform they should be wearing, and invariably they are soon forgotten, because memorable prose simply refuses to be written below a certain level of human decency. It should always be kept in mind that the notion of a critical 'attack' is strictly a metaphor. A Rottweiler attacks a human being. A critic judges what a human being does. I could go on, but it would be better to do so later, because at the time we are talking about I was still a long way from working most of this stuff out in detail.

Alvarez, when he saw an advance copy of the issue in which my piece was front-paged, thought that I had got him wrong but asked me to dinner anyway. Comfortably installed at Bianchi's, he proved delightful company. For the young literatus on his way up the greased ramp, nothing quite beats hearing the veterans growling away about what they once said to T. S. Eliot while William Empson was pissing in the pot plant. And here I was, getting in amongst it. When the magazine officially came out, my Alvarez piece, called 'Big Medicine', caused a gratifying stir in the literary world. It should be remembered that the literary world was still a very tiny part of the galaxy, in those days before the Booker Prize and a dozen cultural supplements created the conditions

by which its population could be multiplied by thousands of people with no literary gift whatsoever, except for publicity. When the literary world was still small, there was an automatic mitigating circumstance for the naked urge to get in amongst it. We're talking about only a few hundred people. But they were among the brightest people in the country, and there was nothing slavish about wanting to earn their regard. While an undergraduate, I already knew enough about how the British cultural establishment worked to find F. R. Leavis absurd when he attributed a herd instinct to its literary component. The reverse was clearly the case. Cliques had often formed; there would always be a mafia of the talented; but an all-embracing orthodoxy there had never been, and couldn't be. Nothing like the *gauchiste* dogma that engulfed the post-war French intelligentsia had happened to its British equivalent. The English were just too eccentric. For one thing, there were too many Scots among them. There was not much chance of a herd instinct forming when someone like Karl Miller could still hold a blue pencil. Karl had been a student of Leavis, but remembered his own roots too well to put lasting faith in clerical rule – which, of course, Leavis was trying to impose. Leavis was John Calvin in another cloak. The spectacle of a collegiate martinet accusing the metropolitan culturati of orthodoxy should have been too funny for words. Unfortunately, it was. People choked on the subject. Though patently more batty by the day, the good doctor was still draped in an awe-inspiring prestige. Bemoaning this anomaly one Friday while at lunch with Terry at Mother Bunch's, I hit on the idea of making Leavis's mad fantasies of a London conspiracy come true by actually starting one up. Couldn't we whistle in a few recruits and make the Friday lunch look like a plot to control the collective mind of the capital? Terry, no doubt recalling the long-lost days of the SOE, thought the idea silly enough to work. But true inspiration hit me when I thought of giving the proposed cabal a title drawn from the paranoid fantasies of Leavis himself: the Modish London Literary World.

So that's how it started. In the long run I am fated to be written out of the history of the Modish London Literary World, because so many more illustrious people joined it: Martin Amis, Julian Barnes, Ian McEwan, Mark Boxer, James Fenton, Craig Raine, Christopher Hitchens, Russell Davies, Piers Paul Read, to name only the junior regulars. Kingsley Amis and Robert Conquest counted as senior regulars, with Peter Porter somewhere in between. Among the irregulars there were several women in the early days, but the lunch quickly settled – ossified, if you like – into the sort of all-male scene that would be frowned upon today. Perhaps I am lucky that I no longer feature in folklore as its instigator. But as I sink towards obscurity I grow less inclined to have my few original moves forgotten, and the Modish London Literary World was one of them. In

the course of time its name contracted to the Literary World, and finally to the Friday lunch. The location changed, as with a floating crap-game. In the course of more time still, the frequency changed too, as people became less available, the senior participants because they were getting older, the junior because they were getting busier, almost everyone because they were either getting married and starting a family, or else (even more time-consuming) getting divorced, married again, and starting a second family while working a double shift to meet the payments on the first. But for years the thing went on, achieving endurance because it fulfilled the simple need for what the Spanish call a *tertulia*. It was a talking shop where you could actually talk shop, while pursuing any other topic that emerged. Quite often that meant scandal, which in that era could still be enjoyed aloud. After the gossip requirements of the expanding number of upmarket media outlets filled even the literary world with snoops, spies, and delators, you had to assume that the enemy was always listening.

Apart from Terry and myself, who recruited each other, one of the first recruits was Russell Davies, already embarked on the same sort of chaotically multiple career as my own, although possessed of many more talents to help drive him to distraction. A musician and an actor as well as a caricaturist and a writer, he had the mimetic gift that often goes with a musical ear, and the actor's skills to project it, although he rarely raised his voice. People would come just to hear him speak in tongues. If the subject was Robert Lowell, for example, Davies would become Robert Lowell. Since the impersonation gained wit from jokes thrown in, it was better than having the actual Lowell present. (A lot better, as I was to find out.) Another founder member was the freshman novelist Martin Amis. You will notice how I avoid the air of portent. ('Compactly stylish in appearance, already surrounded by a small cloud of glory from the succès d'estime of his first, trend-setting novel, this shy but somehow dauntingly self-assured young man was called Martin ... Martin Anscombe.') Actually a note of portent would be appropriate, because he was clearly destined for great things. You could tell from his conversation, which was not just wise in judgement – precocity can sometimes deliver that, although not often – but wonderfully funny. Clearly, if he could get that kind of talk on paper, he would have no trouble emerging from the shadow cast by his father's fame. For all those of us who could recite passages of *Lucky Jim* by heart, Kingsley Amis was a big star, but the young Martin generated his own light: he wasn't just a planet. The effect of his conversation was multiplied by the fact that he rarely smiled to signal the arrival of a joke. There was a reason for that, beyond the requirements of elementary tact. The victim of an orthodontic condition that would eventually threaten his general health, he preferred to keep his teeth in the background. He

had already developed the tic of raising his hand to his mouth when he laughed. We called it a victory if we could make him laugh before he could get his hand into position. Actually the dentition thus revealed looked perfectly ordinary, but it didn't feel that way to him. He was carrying a permanent headache in his mouth. As his early novels were to suggest, he had nightmares of spitting his teeth out a few at a time, as if after a fist-fight. The point is worth noting for the sake of justice, because much later on, in the years of his worldwide fame, the swarming parasites of the British cultural press were to turn on him for the supposed excess of his having had cosmetic dentistry. They might as well have attacked him for having had a failed gall-bladder removed. But early on he was still living with his condition. It formed part of a general self-consciousness about his physical appearance: a self-consciousness which, when expressed in his early novels, enslaved a generation growing up in the media culture that rated sex appeal as a virtue rather than a characteristic. The paradox, in his case, was that beautiful women were drawn to him like pigeons on their way home. He only had to stand there and he was in like Flynn. He would have liked to have been a few inches taller, but the same went for Alexander the Great and Josef Stalin, and neither of them ever made a table rock with laughter. When Martin was on song, men who fancied themselves as wits laughed helplessly, glad to concede that there were in the presence of a superior practitioner. Those not so glad felt guilty at their own churlishness.

But the full flush of the Modish London Literary World lay somewhere in the future, like any semblance of equilibrium for the self-generated dogfight that I did not yet dare to call my career. Having consistently lost money with the *Review*, which came out only occasionally, Ian Hamilton thought of a way to lose a lot more money by launching the *New Review*, a quarto-format glossy that would come out every month. Swept up in this project, I initially committed myself to writing long articles. Tactically, if I had been capable of thinking tactically, this would have been a useful way of proving publicly (the *TLS* was still anonymous) that my name was good for something more substantial than the fizz and crackle of the TV column. Though I had foreseen that the TV column might prove more accommodating to reasoned argument than it first appeared, it did not offer the opportunity to write seriously at length, and be known to be doing so. The facts say, however, that I wrote my *New Review* pieces because Ian told me to, with the usual baleful implication that to turn him down would be tantamount to a betrayal of him, myself, and Western civilization. But it was my own idea to write even more stuff for the *New Review* under the name of Rudolph Regulus, thus to help fill the magazine's demand for copy, which proved insatiable from the jump. Most of this pseudonymous

material was meant to be funny, and I hope some of it was, but there was nothing amusing about the way I had searched out yet another opportunity to overwork. When I turned up in Cambridge, I was a second baby to look after, with the difference that I could sit up in a proper chair and smoke. I smoked so much that I needed the hubcap of a Bedford van as an ashtray. I had found the hubcap lying in the gutter in Trumpington Street, and thought: 'That will make an ideal ashtray.' A man who thinks like that has to be a real smoker. From then on, with the help of the hubcap, I proved I was. At the end of the day – a phrase I usually like to avoid, unless I am actually talking, as here, about the end of the day – the hubcap would be full of cigarette butts. There was another baby on the way by then, which would make three. Playing the good provider, I had some excuse to be a burden, but it occasionally occurred to me that I must have been no source of joy. When it occurred to me, I worked harder, vaguely formulating plans for making a big enough score to hire a nanny. Still enjoying the blissful dawn of the two-career-family concept, like most toiling husbands I cherished the illusion that a toiling wife could be taken off the hook by a nanny, instead of saddled with the extra obligation to look after the nanny as well. Taken off the hook? Saddled? The mixed metaphor illustrates the mental confusion.

Pete went into studio with our first album at about that time and I would follow him in, so that I could sit around watching. I was convinced that the music business would provide the really big score that would set us all free of the alarm clock forever. In the popular-music business there were only two kinds of money you could make: not enough to keep a flea alive, and more than you could imagine. At the risk of sabotaging the narrative tension I feel bound to say now that we only ever made the first kind, but in the early days I would sit in the production booth of the recording studio and nurse the expectation that the sounds being mixed on the desk would not only satisfy the demands of uncompromising artistic integrity but also generate cash flow, as if a successful oil well could be sunk in the vegetable garden of a monastery. Yet there seemed some warrant for the expectation. Our music publisher, David Platz at Essex Music, had told us outright that if we couldn't get a hit single then our plan to make highbrow LPs would result in a long agony. Kenny Everett, however, thought we had written a hit already. At the height of his radio glory, before he rose to an apotheosis as the most original mind on television, Everett was still running a BBC show that all the bright young people listened to. If he spun your record, it could get you an audience. He took to one of the songs on Pete's first LP for Philips, *Beware of the Beautiful Stranger*. The song that Everett liked was called 'The Master of the Revels'. Perhaps seeing himself in the title role, Everett spun the disc on every show he did for weeks on end. He raved about it.

Just as we were poised to take off, he got fired for making a libellous joke which allowed the interpretation that the Minister of Transport's wife might have had an easy time passing her driving test.

We found it hard to believe our bad luck, because the one thing we knew about getting a hit was that airplay was everything. Hence the life-or-death importance of the BBC playlist. If your record was on the playlist, it wouldn't necessarily get a bullet beside it, but if it was banned from the playlist you would get a bullet through the head. We had high hopes for a song called 'Have You Got a Biro I Can Borrow?'. The BBC said that 'Biro' was still a registered brand name in Hungary and that they therefore couldn't broadcast the word, because that would breach their house rules about advertising. Otherwise they would be glad to put the track on the playlist. Could I change the word? How about 'Have You Got a Ball-point I Can Borrow?' I had an attack of artistic integrity and said, 'Over my dead body.' Well, the BBC could arrange that. As far as that song was concerned, my body was duly dead. Unfortunately Pete's was too. What I should have done, of course, was cave in immediately. Even the Rolling Stones would change a word to get on the air. But I still had a bad tendency to look down on the fundamentals before I had submitted to them. It made me outspoken at the wrong times. The plain speaking that I directed pointlessly at the featureless face of the BBC monolith I should have employed in the recording studio for Pete's album, where I thought that a mistake was being made in mixing the vocal so far forward, so that the words reached the listener before the music did. Not out of modesty (definitely not), but out of a real conviction that a song should hit you in the knees first and climb to the brain later, I wanted the words to filter through, not leap out. I should have said so. It might have helped. But everybody else present, with Pete himself to the fore, was either a musician or a sound technician. I respected their expertise at the exact moment when an ordinary punter's view, the only thing I was good for, might have altered the balance. Still, it was undeniably an ego boost to hear my lyrics coming out of the loudspeakers, and there were people saner than Everett who seemed to admire some of the results.

Nick Tomalin was prominent among them. I inflicted the discs on him and he found time to listen. (In retrospect I wonder how that last part happened: at this end of my career, young people flatteringly weigh me down with more of their first records, novels, and books of poetry than I could possibly listen to even if I did nothing else.) Nick, whose opinions I respected about the fertile ground between popular and serious culture – respected them, I suppose, because they coincided with my wishes – would recite one of my own lyrics back to me and say that he thought there would be a market for our kind of stuff if we could only

get it on the air. The lyric he quoted was called 'Carnations on the Roof'. It was the story of a dead metal worker whose hands, when he is cremated, burst into coloured flames because of the grains of metal embedded in the skin. It was my version of the Dyer's Hand. Nick liked the idea that I had once worked in a factory and had actually seen a man like that. It satisfied Nick's idea of journalistic authenticity, which, he believed, could only arise from the weighing and judging of observed reality. This was a pretty deep idea to follow on from hearing a pop lyric, and I thought that to arouse such a response would be a worthwhile reason to pursue our course to the limit, win or lose. The day was there to be seized. The most telling phrase that Horace attached to *carpe diem* was *spem non pone secutas*. Put no faith in the future. That idea came into sharp focus when Nick got killed.

He went to cover the Yom Kippur War. Somewhere on the Golan heights, he got out of the jeep and was no doubt glancing obliquely at an expanse of hot geography when the rocket-propelled grenade arrived. I must have been in the middle of typing up my latest TV column when the thing happened, because just as I was making my last corrections I looked up and saw Terry's assistant literary editor, Miriam Gross, standing up and holding the telephone as if it had just stung her. Still, today, one of the most beautiful women in London, Miriam in those days was the object of all male eyes and it was not unusual to look at her on any excuse at all. But this was different. In my childhood I got early practice at watching a woman receiving the news of death, so I guessed immediately what was up, although I would never have guessed who was involved until she said his name. She said his whole name. 'Nick Tomalin's been killed.' Silence raced through the open-plan office, and then the whole building, as the shock wave spread.

Scratch one more father figure. As usual I got the mental barriers up immediately. But there was no shutting out the sense of squandered promise. Later on it happened again when the gifted poet and political writer Francis Hope was lost on the DC-10 that went down outside Paris after some poor dunces at Charles de Gaulle airport jammed a cargo door shut instead of locking it properly. A ten-dollar RPG round, a door that should have been designed to open in instead of out: the discrepancy between cause and effect is part of the pattern, and a chilling reminder, for those who need it, that chance has no respect for what has been achieved. But Nick had already proved himself. What could I be said to have achieved if I were taken now? Time to look after one's health. Time for a long, life-enhancing drag on a cigarette. But above all, time to get serious.

10. PASTING IT TOGETHER

One way to get serious would have been to do something about Louis MacNeice. Alas, my few pages of notes reminded me all too vividly of my PhD thesis about Shelley, an opus that had never advanced far beyond an outline. A good general tip for would-be writers in any field is to beware of outlines. If you keep going back to elaborate the outline, instead of getting to work on the first of its listed topics, then the outline has become a substitute for the project, which will never get done. It works like a cargo cult: the natives lay out bits and pieces of junk in the rough shape of an aircraft, and wait for it to fly. They start fighting over who gets the window seat. But the thing never stirs, and eventually the jungle closes over its forlorn outline. Even on that level, my MacNeice outline looked skimpy. Lacking the nerve to tell Charles Monteith that I had got nowhere, I told Ian Hamilton instead. As he did so often, the world's least practical man came through with the right practical advice. He could do that for everyone except himself. On this occasion, while we both stood in the Pillars drinking beer for starters and Scotch for chasers, he cut my tale of woe short with his trademark amused sneer and said the thing that had never occurred to me. 'Give them another book.' This, he said, would help cure my chief problem. I had a blurred image. I was arousing resentment on all sides by playing with every toy in the kindergarten. The literati, in particular, were pissed off because I was writing articles out of what seemed no particular qualification except an urge to take their space. 'Everybody knows who you are, but nobody knows what you do.' I can remember these sentences of his because they stung. His advice was that I should collect all my literary pieces into a book, give it a title that made it sound as if it meant business, and thus promote the impression that my whole miscellaneous activity was part of a plan. 'Everything changes when you get a book out,' he snarled. 'Suddenly you're an author.' The Edmund Wilson piece, he suggested, would be a good lead-off for the book. Here, I made my own contribution to the scheme. 'I could call the book *The Metropolitan Critic*.' He nodded. 'Perfect. Sounds confident. Sounds arrogant as hell, in fact. Let the

bastards argue with that.'

For the first time in my life, I sat down with a large pair of scissors to cut out my recent articles from their respective magazines and newspapers. There were quite a few that didn't make the cut, as it were. Already forming the resolution not to write anything that I couldn't at least consider for future publication in book form, I consigned them to the scrap heap. Those which I thought passed muster I further cut into column-width strips and pasted them onto sheets of foolscap. Haunted by distant memories of unsuccessful school projects, I nervously contemplated the crinkled and blotched strip running down the middle of each page, leaving room on each side for corrections, for rewriting, and for toning down. Plenty of that last thing proved necessary. Phrases which had only last year struck me as beaten gold now looked gimcrack. Actually too many of them stayed in, but I failed to spot them for the same reason that I had written them: lack of tone control. On a charitable view, faults of tone are the inevitable consequence of early exuberance: only a dullard is infallibly decorous from his first day. On a less charitable view, faults of tone are the deadly product of a tin ear working in combination with a loose mouth. But as I cut, pasted, and cursed far into the night, I could congratulate myself that a further stage was being reached. Somewhere inside the bumpy pages that piled up like popadoms, a picture was forming. This was the literary commentary of someone who had no academic job, no prospect of official preferment, and indeed no obvious credentials except as a common reader. Clumsy or not, it was all done for love. The finished manuscript just fitted into a box-file that bulged when I buttoned it shut. I tried to suppress the sceptical inner voice that said the box-file would become an actual book only if Faber agreed. Otherwise, like so many other unpublished authors, I would be merely toting a manuscript, like that mad don I used to see around Cambridge, endlessly carrying his stack of old newspapers on their random journey to nowhere. And my manuscript didn't even look like a manuscript. When I unbuttoned the box, the top pages came burgeoning upwards as if the paste were yeast. The Andromeda Strain! It's growing!

But Faber went for it. Charles Monteith, who must have guessed long before that the MacNeice project had the same chance of becoming operational as Blue Steel or Skybolt, even looked pleasantly surprised to be getting something out of nothing. He muttered dark obscurities about the difficulties of transferring the contract, but I was able to mutter back that my agent would be taking care of that. Yes, I had finally acquired an agent, or rather an agent had acquired me. Young, pretty, and still assembling her first roster of likely prospects, Christine Pevitt of Farquhar's had been following my work and roped me in at just the right moment. I often get asked by young writers about how one goes about

getting an agent, and the answer is that I have no idea. Look busy enough and an agent will get you. She herself will probably be only at the start of her career, and on the lookout for clients. Later on, her client list will be full. Never mind: when you, the hungry young writer, succeed in getting a few big pieces published in magazines, or in placing a manuscript of any kind with a publisher, some hungry young agent will probably turn up. But agents themselves don't place manuscripts with publishers, or at least they didn't in those days. Publishers didn't take recommendations from agents, from other writers, or from anybody. Publishers were in the business of looking for publishable manuscripts, and they had paid readers of their own to aid them in the search. Similarly, the editors of magazines and newspapers commissioned articles directly from the writers of their choice. The agent's job was to look after the contracts, from whatever source, making sure that writer's take was negotiated upwards to the limit of what the market would bear, and that the resulting cash was collected in due time, instead of being conveniently left in the publisher's bank to earn interest for him instead of the writer. All this was quite a big enough job without the agent becoming a star too. Nowadays some of the agents are stars, occasionally rather bigger ones than most of their clients, and we are told that they handle a lot more than these mundane details, even to the extent of creating new talents out of nowhere. It seems more likely that they poach from each other names already established, and that all those routine requirements I just mentioned still apply. But the work is so painstaking that you can't blame the occasional agent for welcoming an attribution of glamour, which the culture-page journalists are increasingly eager to grant, even when the agent is not, as so often, a personable woman. In fact the unpersonable men have become the biggest charisma-merchants of the lot, sometimes even carrying code names, like terrorist masterminds in the kind of movie that Bruce Willis turns down so they get Jean-Claude Van Damme instead. (Imagine some dweeb adjusting his tie while he looks into the mirror and mutters, 'They call me the Vulture.') Though some of today's big-name writers have undoubtedly benefited from the kind of agent who is shown to the best table while demanding top dollar, whether the agent's job has really changed all that much is a matter for doubt. But in those days there was no doubt: the job was quite big enough, and no agent, however cunning, could turn a duffer into a desirable publishing proposition, just as no makeover, even if it includes plastic surgery, can turn an ordinary but glamour-struck young woman into Natalie Portman. This is only a brief disquisition about an extensive subject, but I put it in writing here because so many new writers, when they encounter their first disappointments, are driven to conclude that the reaction of the publishing world to their sincere and self-sacrificing efforts must

be some kind of conspiracy, which could be circumvented if they had the right representation. There is no such conspiracy. There is only a market, which you can get into only by having something to sell – and something to sell means something that people want to buy.

That last bit is the poser. Quite apart from the obvious nutters, many a good soul has come to grief through failing to accept that nobody very much wants what they have to give. Since the necessary determination to press on in spite of failure – a determination that any artist must have – is indistinguishable from the futile determination to persist in a hopeless cause, the possibilities for self-delusion are almost infinite. You can even take universal rejection as a sign of your essential seriousness. You will take it to the grave, but there are worse ways to waste your life. With any luck, however, the penny drops, and the aspirant redirects his courage into one of the support branches of the art form in which he longed to shine. It is a desirable outcome. If all the accomplished but not especially interesting would-be writers became schoolteachers and taught grammar, the country would be on the road to recovery. The sky has more stars than it knows what to do with, but it can't do without gravity. I can give myself credit for realizing this quite early on, although for a long while I was too arrogant to give credit where credit was due. But I did manage to notice that almost everyone who gave service in the cultural world was an unpublished novelist, and that most of the published novelists had been forced, over time, to accept the fact that they might as well have stayed unpublished. After they accepted it, they turned, reinforced by self-knowledge, to other and more beneficial things. They had made something useful out of rejection, which is a far harder test of character than to make something useful out of acceptance.

For the moment, I had been accepted. *The Metropolitan Critic* was on its way to being a book. Somewhere in a back room at Faber in Russell Square, the popadoms were out of the box. Christine was in no position to renegotiate the MacNeice contract's tiny advance, but she did somehow manage to rewrite the small print so that I was neither prosecuted for non-compliance nor deprived of the fee for delivery. As I remember, the total amount of money involved was about a hundred pounds – worth ten times as much in those days, but still not a lot. The author, however, felt as if he was rolling in it. Part of this euphoria was relief. I had been sprung free from a haunting bind, in relation to which everything else had been a displacement activity. Now I could concentrate on the displacement activities as if they added up to the main event. In practical terms they got in each other's way, but at least I wasn't pursuing them all as a means of dodging a promise. In Cambridge my elder daughter was up to about the fifth rung of the climbing frame. She won't thank me for saying that to me she looked

more heroic than Sir Edmund Hillary at the peak of Everest. To mention her pixie hat will cost me a drubbing, but I can't leave out how, from my invigilating position on the park bench, I gazed upwards – well, if not precisely upwards, still a bit better than straight and level – with a mixture of pride and alarm. By the nature of my work and the nature of my nature, I was an absentee father who might as well have been serving in a nuclear submarine. If my wife was not to be crushed flat by the combined burdens of scrupulously fulfilling her duties as a don while simultaneously bringing up not just one of these things in pixie hats, but two of them, then I still had to make a big score. The book, when published, would, of course, make me millions. The music business would make me zillions. But not, in either case, yet.

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Meanwhile there was enough to pay the nanny: my one unarguably valuable connection. Myself useful only for lifting heavy objects, I tried to do my share of the cooking. I mastered the art of divvying up a batch of mincemeat into small dollops and frying sixteen mini-burgers at once. Nobody except me wanted to eat them and they went straight to my waistline. My shoulders were still the widest part of me, but the body of the Australian surfing hero was no longer what it was. I got some useful weight training when I helped shift our stuff out of the flat at New Hall to a small house in St John's Road, near Jesus Green. Staggering along with one of about fifty tea chests full of books, I could fancy that I was doing my bit. But being the helpmeet ate into my time for being the good provider, which seemed the more useful role, considering the fact that I couldn't even unpack the books without sitting down to read one of them, and then putting even that aside while I worked on a poem. Even a student of Dante, who was famed for his ability to concentrate on his poetry when swarms of Florentine factional street-brawlers were stabbing each other all around him, is likely to grow impatient if her nominal soulmate sits fiddling with a rhyme when he is meant to be carrying a refrigerator. As he offered to do, by the way. That's the worst of living with artists: they volunteer to do things, and then they glaze over when the rapture hits them, and they're gone, even when they're still there.

So I was in no fit state to turn down a windfall. After the first year the *Observer* had offered me the same freelance contract again, with a gratifying but not very startling increase. It might have been more startling if I had not negotiated the contract myself, without benefit of an agent, but my first contact with a newspaper editor was always personal; and even after I was fully armed with representation I was to go on, until recent years, with keeping my

newspaper deals to myself. I had noticed that a newspaper will up the stakes just to cut down on the paperwork. They might be screwing you, but in such intimate circumstances you stand a good chance of screwing them right back. Both of you are screwing the agent, who needs to be tolerant about being cut out of the loop, but since the marketability of her asset is likely to increase, all three parties gain. At that first try, however, I had not gained all that much. Staff members might have thought otherwise. Sitting chained to their desks as I came and went, they tended to forget that they were also sitting on their pension. I never forgot it. Never much good at being properly fearful for my own future, I knew no inhibitions about being fearful for the future of my family. I had heard too many stories about the loved ones of some famous freelance being reduced to beggary. Tiny upturned faces in pixie hats! With the column steaming along from week to week, there might have been enough money going into the bank, but only just enough, because it was coming out again just as fast. How to get ahead of the curve?

The nagging question was made more so by the sudden prosperity of a friend, Bruce Beresford. In previous volumes I called him Dave Dalziel, for the usual reason: I was attributing to him inappropriate behaviour. But by then his youthful indiscretions were behind him. He was now a respectable, moderate man, instead of what he once had been, the one figure among his young Australian expatriate mates who could actually fulfil his priapic dreams, partly because he was so funny and good-looking, but also because – his secret weapon – he always earned some sort of salary and wore clean clothes. This sound practical initiative was a reflection of his realism, which, among the dreaming young, is forever in short supply. Realism had driven him to accept that if he wanted to make a feature film, the best place to finance it would be in Australia. The success of the ‘Barry McKenzie’ strip in *Private Eye* had opened a window. Barry Humphries, creator of the Bazza character and author of the words, had realized that if Nicholas Garland’s pictures added so much, then moving pictures could add more. He and Bruce cooked up a script together, and Bruce flew home to raise the scratch. The Australian film industry being non-existent at the time, this was no easy matter, but Bruce, with typical persistence, had got it done. Philip Adams, later a huge name in Australia as an expert on everything, was a big help as producer, but he wouldn’t deny that Bruce and Barry were the magic combination, perhaps partly because their combined first names sounded as if they had been inscribed on the scroll at the bottom of modern Australia’s coat of arms. Together they had the right idea for the actor to play Bazza: a singer called (wait for it) Barry Crocker. Tall, gangly, and lantern-jawed, Crocker even looked like Bazza. It was like finding, to play Superman, an actor who could fly. The

film was to be made in London and Bruce had a role for me. (I'm flashing back a bit here, as Bazza might have said: this first Barry McKenzie film was made in 1972, in the first year of my TV column.) I was disappointed to find what the role was. I would be playing someone who had passed out at a party. Bazza would step over my inert form. But at least I would be on the screen, even if appearing only one step above the carpet. And the pay was good: for a couple of days' work, ridiculously good. Extras who lay down got paid more than extras who stood up, because lying down counted as a stunt.

Having found that out, I was able to watch Bruce in action as he marshalled the teeming forces of a full-scale feature movie. In cruel fact, all directors look impressive when a film is being made, even if the results look nothing of the kind. The generalship involved is automatically awe-inspiring. I was stunned by how a contemporary I thought I already knew could be so in control of events. It made me wonder if I would ever achieve the same focus. Responding to the challenge, I put a lot into preparation for my role, practising endlessly to lie down at the right angle. When Bazza stepped over me, he was stepping over an actor who was not just pretending to be unconscious, but inhabiting unconsciousness. I had submitted myself to immobility by finding the essence of that motionless state within my soul. When the movie came out, I wasn't mentioned in the reviews. In the relevant sequence, indeed, I thought that the camera unnecessarily favoured Crocker even in the long shot, and in the close-up the audience had to imagine, from the expression on the star's face, that he was stepping over an unusually convincing unconscious person. But the movie, called simply *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie*, was a success, especially in Australia. The Australian film industry as we know it today was launched, and I felt that I had played my part. When Bruce hinted that there might be a sequel, in which my part would grow even bigger (talking like Bazza is almost impossible to stop once you start), my nostrils flared.

During my agonized wait for film stardom in the sequel, there were other things to do. Some of them helped with the mortgage, but as usual I felt especially drawn towards the ones that didn't. Lest I give the impression that I was always looking for a financial angle, I should record here that, in matters of a central stipend, my best reason for following the money was self-knowledge: given the chance, I had a dangerous propensity for lavishing prodigies of concentration on activities that not only failed to pay, but that I had to pay in order to pursue. Foremost among these activities was poetry. Mentally I was still living from one poem to the next, as I had before and still do today. But in the long list of editors unaccountably dedicated never to caring for what I wrote in verse form, Ian Hamilton was included, and that was a blow. Though he would

print as much of my prose as he could extort, he inspected my proffered poems as if they were not even counterfeit money, but tiny banknotes hand-drawn in coloured pencil by a child. 'I don't,' he muttered, 'like this kind of poetry.' As his own poems proved, he favoured personal feeling, in the range between depression and desperation. Playfulness was the enemy. The typical poem that he thought legitimate, whether written by himself or by the handful of other poets for whom he felt respect (often, in the Pillars of Hercules, there was a quorum of them, looking like a morticians' convention), was no more playful than running blindfold across a busy highway.

He particularly loathed my poems when they tried to be funny and serious at the same time. He himself could be a ferociously funny parodist, but he kept his parodies in a separate category, and published them under a separate name. The name was Edward Pygge. Established poets lay awake in fear at the thought of being parodied by Pygge. Generously, Ian offered me the use of Pygge's name if I wanted to try the same trick. Immediately I saw the possibilities, and in the course of a month turned out Pygge versions of several different poets whom I thought were being denied the denigration due to them. When I showed Ian the manuscripts his reaction was gratifying. At the supposedly personal lyric poems written under my own name, he had sneered. At my Pygge poems he sneered again, but with the occasional baring of the teeth, a revelation which I had learned to recognize as a sign of uncontrollable mirth. Sparsely scattered in the jaws of a heavy drinker and smoker with an aversion to dental appointments, Ian's teeth were at odds with his otherwise darkly handsome face. They were dark enough, but they didn't fit the picture, so he usually kept them under wraps. If they were on show, he was either going to bite somebody or else he was amused. In this context, it had to be the latter.

Suddenly we were getting on at a new level. We had always got on, but often against the odds. In personality he was naturally dominant and I was naturally submissive. But I didn't like myself for being submissive, and I would like still less whoever made me feel so; and I would always eventually rebel, usually choosing the most unsuitable moment to declare independence. These quirks from both of us had led to several clashes already, with bad blood slow to drain away on either side; and the clash arising from our respective views of poetry was worse than all the others put together, because it never subsided below the level of threatening to break out all over again. As so often happens with boon companions, we were very unlikely friends. When two male friends both write poetry, the sensitivities go even deeper than sexual rivalry.

In that department, rivalry with Ian was pointless anyway. Other men, when running after women, found that they had to run faster because the women were

running towards him. Though a star footballer in his daydreams, in his personal appearance he was one of those rare poets who actually look the part. He looked doomed. He didn't look unhealthy, which was unfair considering his habits of nourishment. These have been described by better hands than mine, and none of them needed to exaggerate. He really did order complete meals and do nothing with them except rearrange the food on his plate with a fork. He really did remove the lighted cigarette from his mouth only to replace it with the rim of a glass of Scotch, maintaining that steady rhythm throughout the day and far into the night. But he looked as fit as a welterweight contender, an impression added to by his broken nose. In the eyes of women, his nose was broken at exactly the right angle to indicate many a gallant fist-fight against their oppressors, and his thick black hair begged for their soothing fingers. His hair was a particular affront to those of us who were losing ours. Many years later, at a moment when his permanent financial crisis had reached the catastrophic point where he was being sued by the solicitor he had hired to help him out of it, his hair turned white and fell out in clumps; but typically, and unforgivably, it grew back again, and just as black. No, until the very end he never looked sick, or even frail. But he did look condemned. He had the knack of embodying self-destruction in an alluring form. He looked as if he needed to be saved, like Venice. Women keen to save him arrived from all over the place. They would give him their front-door keys, which he put on a key ring that shook the floor if he dropped it.

There can occasionally be some point in taking a moral stance about a man's sexual behaviour, especially if the man is oneself. But there is no point in taking a moral stance about a man's sexual attractiveness. If he's got it, he sure as hell didn't steal any of it from the rest of us. Ian lost several friends because women they desired fell for him instead, but those friends were foolish. It wasn't his fault: which, of course, made the fact more infuriating still. At the height of his pulling power, he never had to do anything to get a woman he wanted except fight off the ones he didn't, so as to give her a free run to the target. Her rate of acceleration could be disconcerting if you thought she was with you. I can honestly say, however, that if I bore any grudges against him in that area, they didn't go any deeper than generalized envy. One got used to it. There was an occasion when we both did a reading in Oxford. I did my usual thing of entertaining the audience between poems. Ian just read his poems, saying nothing directly to the audience except, 'Can't you shut up in the back?' When it was over, a beautiful young blonde graduate student came up to us and hung gracefully on my every word about Auden and MacNeice while Ian sat impatiently glowering. I suggested to the poetry-mad young vision that she should drop into the Pillars of Hercules next time she was up in London. When she did, I looked forward to meeting her at the door. I was all set in my mind to

she did, I turned forward to greet her at the door. I was all set, in my role as guide to the lower depths, to answer any questions she might have. She had only one. 'Is he here?'

I wasn't even surprised. In the area of poetry, however, there was a gulf between us that could easily have remained unbridged. I only partly believed that what he was doing in poetry was as necessary as what he was doing in prose, and he didn't at all believe the same thing about me. If your friend takes your woman off you, he merely doesn't care about your feelings; but if he makes it clear that he thinks you are wasting your time with poetry, he doesn't care if you live or die. There had been a dozen occasions when our friendship might have been over, if we hadn't made each other laugh. It worked like a marriage, which can survive anything except lack of good will. But even the good will had been often under stress, and we would have called it quits sooner if the Edward Pygge connection had not intervened. As we stood there at the bar of the Pillars, we were joined by Pygge, the phantom impresario, in the spirit of a new enterprise. The scurrilous Pygge papers, an untidy array of typescript hedged about with pints of beer and glasses of Scotch, clearly had theatrical possibilities. We could do some of these voices ourselves. The rest could be done by Russell Davies, who could do anything. He could also write parodies to a high standard. Yet more Pygge products were in prospect! The very consonant 'p' became a provocation. At that moment, Davies himself walked in out of the gathering dusk, picked up my Pygge parody of the Welsh bard R. S. Thomas, and read it out with the appropriate accent. All within earshot fell about. The barman looked puzzled, but he probably wouldn't be coming to the show anyway. We already had a name for it: the *Edward Pygge Revue*.

I always loved that stage direction in one of Ring Lardner's little surrealist plays: 'The curtain comes down for seven days to denote the passing of a week.' To denote the several weeks it took to prepare the *Edward Pygge Revue* for its one-night run, let me make a slapdash collage of some of the other stuff I was busy with at the time. The more slap the dash, the greater the fidelity to a period of confusion. Looking back on it, I can see that this was a formative moment. In most of our formative moments, we do nothing much except lie around in a daydream, like a snake measuring itself for a change of suit, and we find our future purpose through discarding the false purposes of the past. But there are other formative moments when so much happens at once that there is no order to it, or even a chronology: opportunities arrive like a hail of bullets, and a circus performer who had previously to catch only one bullet at a time in his teeth finds himself snapping desperately at a fusillade. One of the bullets he swallows, and it turns out to have transforming properties, even though it tastes at first just like

another mouthful of lead. Full of metaphors no less extravagant than that, my book *The Metropolitan Critic* finally came out. For stylistic brashness it invited the pillory, and its exterior appearance might have been designed as a provocation. Almost full size, my self-approving face, enriched with untrimmed sideburns, appeared on both front and back, as if appearing once were not more than enough. But some of the reviews were good, and one of them was better than good.

It was written by Philip Toynbee for the *Observer*. Before it was published, Miriam Gross kindly showed it to me in galley proof when I came into the office to write my TV column. Toynbee had praised me in sumptuous terms. His piece was the literary equivalent of 'Roll Over, Beethoven'. The new boy from the Australian bush, according to Toynbee, was a prodigious combination of style and exuberance: the ant's pants had met the bee's knees. George Orwell, look to your laurels. Dr Johnson, the jig is up. Montaigne, *rien à faire*. It went on like that. After memorizing the piece like a poem, I spent Friday night getting smashed in the Pillars, striving to share my secret with no more than one person at a time. As I explained to Ian that I was finding it a struggle to reconcile literary integrity with blazing success, was there an element of respect in his usual sneer? 'You're a very complicated character.' No, it was an element of contempt. But he would have to live with that. Lying on the floor of the last train to Cambridge, I rehearsed the speech that would prepare my wife for the life-changing impact of the *Observer* on Sunday.

11. WELCOME TO THE COLOSSEUM

The impact was all on me. As published, Toynbee's review of my book was only about half the length of the proof. Almost instantly I realized that Terry had been at it with his half-glasses, blue pencil, scissors, and axe. All superlatives had been excised. There was practically nothing left except a brief description of the book's size and weight. The previous day, the Saturday, in between my usual household tasks of lifting weights and searching for the goldfish behind the bookcase, I had toured Cambridge to tell our acquaintances that they might care to catch the *Observer* books pages tomorrow, after they had read my column. But now they would merely be puzzled. In London, there were dozens of my colleagues who would now, at this very moment, be rolling around with aching sides. My own sides ached for a different reason. I could hardly breathe for my sense of injustice. Screwed by my own editor! Kicked into the pit by my own Virgil! My wife, who had to live with injustice every day of the week (like any other female don, she was surrounded by suavely indolent male dons who sincerely thought they were doing her a favour by loading her with extra duties just because they knew she would carry them out), was faced once again with a husband's peculiar capacity to treat a setback as an international crisis, instead of as a petty local condition. In later years I tried to correct that discrepancy, but even today, when I have a cold, it is the worst cold in the history of the house. On that day, cruelly deprived of what I thought my due, I addressed long speeches of protest to the wall I was supposed to be painting white. I could see the words flaming back at me, as if admonishing a DIY Nebuchadnezzar: You have Been Weighed in the Balance and Found Ridiculous. Early in the following week I found some moral courage for once and called in on Terry to have the matter out, instead of letting it simmer for a few years as I would normally have done. I thought I had the moral high ground: Toynbee, after all, had actually written such and such, and to cut out his true meaning was an act of censorship. But Terry, staring at me over the top rims of his half-glasses, soon reduced my high ground to a molehill. Using far fewer ahs and ums than usual, he informed

me that a regular contributor to the *Observer* must not be seen to be puffed by his own paper. That would, ah, do the paper no good. The molehill became a foxhole when he added that it would, um, do me no good either. He said I was no longer the oldest living student, but well established as an indecently productive and successful young critic, and that I should avoid being seen as seeking more of the validation that I had already achieved: it was as counterproductive as to go on talking the girl into bed when she was already, ah, lying in it. The trench I was now standing in deepened, and my eyes were level with the earth, when he added that Toynbee was an eternal enthusiast, had once glorified Communism in the same terms, and that his rapturous praise of a new saviour was a well-known equivalent for the kiss of, um, death. The ground finished swallowing me up when he said if he hadn't cut the piece he would have had to kill it altogether. He was the literary editor, and ah, making decisions like that was what the literary editor, um, did. From my subterranean position, I tunnelled out under the foundations of the building and headed for the Pillars of Hercules. Already dead, I had no fear of being killed by Ian's laughter.

But he wasn't laughing, and he had a fate worse than death in store for me. John Carey, an Oxford don already established as the most deadly of the academic critics moonlighting in Grub Street, had reviewed *The Metropolitan Critic* for the *New Review*. Ian showed me Carey's typescript. With memories of my unfortunate preview of Toynbee's *Observer* piece still fresh in my lacerated mind, I would have been smart to leave Carey's manuscript unread. But the chance to do the stupid thing was irresistible as usual. Besides, Ian was insisting that I should know what was in store for me, so as not to feel double-crossed when the piece was published. I didn't quite see the logic of that. Does someone who has mailed you a dead cat exonerate himself by telling you that it's in the post? Not that Carey's piece was a dead cat. It was a living cheetah. My opinions that I had thought so bold were chased down, bitten through the back of the neck, and dined off for their tender parts, with the bulk of the corpse contemptuously left for the hyenas and the vultures. What made this treatment worse, I reflected bitterly, was that Carey could write. The bits of my prose that he quoted did indeed look overwrought when put beside his. (As a general rule, a review that doesn't quote you can never hurt you, and a dullard will never quote you unless he is so stupid that he doesn't realize how his own prose fails to shine.) As I read on in deepening despair, Ian manfully forbore to smile, and even nodded in sympathy, but there was a gleam in his hooded eyes that I had learned to interpret. In the name of editorial integrity, he not only didn't mind making enemies, he didn't mind hurting his friends either. As I handed the typescript back – the hand failing to tremble only because rigor mortis had

already set in – he told me that I could look forward to seeing the piece in the next issue. I nodded, feebly voicing my observation that although it was not the done thing for a newspaper to praise a regular contributor, it apparently was the done thing for a magazine to make a monkey of him. ‘Yeah. It’s tough.’ That evening I got an early train.

When in Cambridge, I still spent a lot of time in the Copper Kettle, which had previously been my office when I was a skiving graduate student. Directly opposite King’s College, it was a good place to go to ground. One of Carey’s less devastating points was that the virtues I claimed for the metropolitan critic as a recurring type throughout modern literary history were rather undermined in my case by my continued attendance at the university. It would have been more devastating had it been fully true. But it was only half true. I had no attachment to Cambridge University beyond living in the middle of it. Even today, the family base is still in the centre of the city. I suppose that by now we could afford a bigger house out in the country, with a pond and a couple of ducks. But I like the way the learned buildings wall me in with their reassurance that there is really nothing wrong with sitting down for half the day to read and write. At the time *The Metropolitan Critic* was published, I did the reading and writing in the Copper Kettle. When I lifted my eyes from the page, there was none of the meretricious argument London always offers that the sole real purpose in life is to hustle for a buck. Through the window, I could see the crippled physicist from Caius who had recently handed in his crutches for a motorized wheelchair. Now he took less time to go past the window. There were rumours that even his colleagues were puzzled by his explanation of the universe. Later on he would lay out the explanation in a book that puzzled people by the million, but even at that stage he was clearly occupied with thought in its pure form. It was a useful reminder that the mental life must be pursued for its own sake. The reminder came in handy when *The Metropolitan Critic*, after selling only a few hundred copies, turned over and sank.

But the heartening truth was that my very first book had done me good. Apart from Carey’s *stroncatura* – my wife, while pressing cold towels to my forehead, had kindly supplied me with the useful Italian word for the review that kicks the shit out of you – the press had been tolerant at the very least. Some of the critics had been kind enough to identify a new, peculiarly Australian style that approached European culture the way Rod Laver approached Wimbledon, as if what mattered wasn’t the cut of your shorts or the angle at which you bowed to the royal box, but whether you could hit a cross-court running forehand. I liked the sound of that emphasis. It had an echo of what Nick Tomalin had once said about how the resident aesthete scores nothing for cultivation, whereas the

barbarian invader scores double. Really he was saying that it didn't matter if you talked with your mouth full as long as you were quoting Rilke in the original German. It was an insult to my country, but I took it as a compliment to me, and now I started to see the possibilities. Instead of narrowing my range of allusion to appease my critics, I would widen it to flatter my readers, who, I had guessed, quite liked the idea of someone treating the whole world of the arts as if it belonged not to any special caste or class, but to anyone with the interest and the energy, and who could possess the whole thing even though plainly having no background except the outback. (Actually, like the vast majority of Australians, I had been born and raised in a city, but in the British imagination at that time the whole of Australia was still the outback, which was somehow equipped with a beach. Later on, this outback beach acquired an Opera House and row of brick bungalows, one of them occupied by Kylie Minogue.) I resolved, however, to exploit the image only by countering its negative expectations, and never by reinforcing them. Suddenly the opportunities to take this course had increased. Now ranking as an author instead of a mere journalist – it was the journalists, not I, who thought in those terms – I had a whole new swathe of prominent outlets available to me.

Some of them were the wrong ones. I should never have tried to write for *Punch*, because *Punch* was a funny magazine and nothing but, and for me it was fatal to work in a funny context. The only way I can find a point in what the Americans depressingly call 'humor writing' is to be funny in a serious context. I had already formulated this rule after learning in the Cambridge Union that I should never, on any account, accept an invitation to participate in the Humorous Debate. (In the gales of forced laughter generated by an avowedly Humorous Debate, anything genuinely amusing you happen to say will be lost like a fart in a tornado.) But I was so engaged by the company of *Punch's* then editor, Alan Coren, that I broke my own rule, and suffered the consequences. Come to think of it, Coren might not have been the editor. The editor could have been William Davis, a man with the same Teutonic origins as Wernher von Braun, although not as funny. Either way, Coren was the master spirit. I could check up and make sure of who was nominally in charge, but the whole episode is a patch in my memory that I would rather leave vague. The pieces I choked out for *Punch* are among those I never later reprinted in book form, and even at the time I had the rare experience of wondering why I had written them at all. I record this sad fact in the hope of passing on a useful lesson. If it feels like a mistake before you go in, don't go in. Even when working with a whole heart, you are bound to have the occasional failure, and sometimes the whole heart will be the reason: caring too much can make you try too hard, and what should have sung will merely

simper. But to work with half a heart means failure every time, and the results will scream the place down. I got away with the *Punch* misalliance, however; not just because I got out early, but because nobody you were going to meet read *Punch* even under Coren's editorship; the magazine was destined for dentists' waiting rooms, where it played its traditional role of making what happened next seem comparatively amusing. Having got out, though, I never got away from the enigma of Coren's personality. For me he remains the most enigmatic man of his generation, because the sprawling palace of his attainments has so many rooms he has scarcely bothered to look into. He can fly planes, drive fast cars, dance accomplished jive, speak perfect German. But who is he? His writing never tells you, because its humour is a shield. He understood exactly why I could never settle in at *Punch*. With that kind of writing, you keep yourself to yourself. Not my thing at all.

Other outlets were an unequivocal plus. Those who had wanted book reviews from me now wanted features as well, including the *Observer* itself. To conduct their side of the annual salary round for my TV column, three of the *Observer's* top-echelon corridor-stalkers were waiting for me in a conference room off the main open-plan office. On a glass-topped table, three pairs of Turnbull and Asser cufflinks gleamed in concert. Wearing a new brown corduroy velvet jacket carefully chosen to look as wrong as possible in combination with my chocolate chinos, I shambled into their presence. Usually their faces would have conveyed the strained politeness of Roman senators receiving a Hun plenipotentiary whose army was parked outside the city gates, but I detected a new warmth. Things went well from the start. They would up the fee for the next year's column by a healthy percentage if I agreed to throw in four features during the year for either the paper proper or its new colour magazine. Since I would have thrown them in for free, just for the kudos, this seemed like a good deal. But it got better while it was still being negotiated. The *Observer* now seemed prey to the flattering belief that as the author of a book I must be in demand from other sources. Would I care to suggest an additional figure to ensure exclusivity? A decent response would have been to say that I would be flat out writing just the stuff they had stipulated, with no time left over for a postcard to my mother. But the challenge of picking my own figure for the sweetener ruled out any response at all. I hadn't a clue. This turned out to be an advantage. Being forced to think has the effect of temporarily shutting my mouth, while my tiny eyes are too deep-set to transmit panic, and even, I am told, can make me look quite shrewd, as if weighing the odds instead of looking for the exit. Faced with a Mississippi gambler daunting in his taciturn immobility, the *Observer* suits reached further into the bag. Exclusivity, they explained, meant only that I could not do comparable work for

any other Sunday newspaper. (Effectively, this meant the *Sunday Times*, the *Observer*'s only real rival for the liberal audience in those years.) I could write for any periodicals I wanted to. Somewhere about this point they named a figure themselves, at which my mouth began to say 'Wow!' but got no further than the first consonant, for lack of breath. It must have looked as if I were pursing my lips thoughtfully. Far inside my head, my eyes bulged, but the effect was to lower my eyelids and seal them shut. Having finished adjusting the exclusivity downwards, the suits went on adjusting the fee upwards. There was a lesson here: in life as in love, it rarely hurts to say nothing. By the time I summoned up the strength to nod, I was on a stipend that any unattached freelance would have recognized as top whack, and certainly no staff writer would be doing better. The staff writers, of course, had guarantees if they got into trouble, and if they croaked on the job the paper would pay for the funeral. But that was OK, because I was going to live forever. We Mississippi gamblers know how to look after ourselves: that silver derringer isn't just for decoration. I glided away down the corridor, mentally adjusting a black Stetson.

With dependable affluence in prospect – dependable as long as I stayed healthy – I thus passed into the second stage of the freelance writer's life. In the first stage, any job you can get looks good, so there are no choices to be made. In the second stage, you can choose between good and bad. There is a third stage, the really tricky one, where you must choose between good and good, but I hadn't reached that yet. For now, the choices between good and bad were quite tricky enough. I wrote a three-thousand-word piece about the current state of British television for *TV Week*, the American equivalent of *Radio Times*. The piece took several days to write, nobody could read it in Britain, and in America, where it could be read, nobody wanted to. The money was good, but the piece was a dead loss. Ergo, the money was bad. There was a clicking of the tumblers. The door opened on a revelation: earning for the sake of it was a waste of time. At the opposite pole, *Encounter*, an outlet I had once courted in vain, now asked me for a long article about Tom Stoppard. It was hard work, and the magazine paid mainly in prestige, but I could reprint the piece. So there was more than a cheque to show for the effort. Making such decisions was no doddle but they would have been a lot harder without an assured income to back them up. To the feature articles I wrote in this new phase, I brought a determination to get the ebullience under control. The sneer of Ian Hamilton hovered before me. I could see Terry Kilmartin's blue pencil floating like a dagger in *Macbeth*. Karl Miller was *Macbeth*, and the spirit of Professor Carey was reading over my shoulder, all set to expel a snort of sulphur. The joint was jumping with ghosts, but like all ghosts they were the expressions of a mind in search of equilibrium. As any

Grand Prix driver will tell you, the car's straight-line speed is only part of what matters: everything else depends on control. For a writer, the control is tone control. Without that, your force of expression will pull your prose to bits, leaving it wrecked by its own impetus. Writing all day and every day, I got a lot better at keeping the extravagance within bounds.

Eventually this new capacity fed back into my TV column, where I developed a useful trick of undercutting a showy sentence by following it with a plain statement, alternating the inebriation and the sobriety throughout the paragraph, as a man in his cups might stride with heroic certitude for several yards before once again bouncing off a wall. This strategy made it even easier for an enemy to quote me accurately to my detriment – all he had to do was leave out the context – but an ordinary reader, who wasn't looking for ammunition, was able to see that I was throwing in the hoopla only as an illustration to an argument. Each week I varied the pace within the column, sometimes writing four-fifths of it as a straight, serious review of a couple of programmes about, say, WWII, before winding up with a high-speed dissection of the latest failed courtroom drama, or with a miniature quote-fest from the latest verbal accidents of the sports presenters. ('Harry Commentator is your carpenter.') If the main subject brooked no levity even as an appendage – a series on Auschwitz, say, or an interview with Solzhenitsyn – I would sometimes put off the vaudeville stuff altogether until the following column, timing the effects within the month rather than within the week. I was alarmed as well as pleased to discover that there were readers who would object if their favourite routines were absent too long. The mailbag increased to the point where I could no longer deal with it by my usual method of stuffing it all into the bottom drawer of my office desk and hoping that it would go away. I was supplied with a temp secretary to transmit dictated answers. Dictating them, which I did after wavering back to the office after lunch with the Modish London Literary World, often took longer than typing out the column had done in the first place. This was solid evidence that I was earning the money. It still wasn't a fortune, but it felt like one, and all the more so because I had never expected it to happen.

Meanwhile it became steadily clearer that the fortune I had expected wasn't going to show up. Pete had made a couple more albums of our songs. They had been, on the whole, well received, and they had also, on the whole, dropped dead. I could see a lot of reasons why we weren't a commercial hit. One of the reasons was a circumstance I wouldn't have changed anyway. Pete didn't sound in the least American. It was a sad but seldom mentioned truth that most of the British singers who sold in big numbers sang 'yeah, yeah, yeah' instead of 'yes, yes, yes'. Pete did not believe that the opposite of 'no' was 'yeah', or that 'ah'

was the way to pronounce 'I'. But the excellent Ray Davis of the Kinks didn't sound like an American either. Although he was an exception to the rule, if there was one exception to the rule then there could have been another. Here a better reason for our continued poverty came in, which I might have pointed out if I had more guts. Though the first album had been made for peanuts, the subsequent albums – *Driving Through Mythical America* and *A King at Nightfall*, to name the two that did best – were recorded on a budget big enough to allow more lavish arrangements and some production time to spare. The big-enough budget was still tiny by the prevailing standards: in the lounging area at Morgan Studios we saw maned and booted groups with names like Yes being provided with plates of mixed sandwiches that would have cost more than what Pete spent on a whole day of recording. But even more than with the first album, I still couldn't dodge the uneasy suspicion that the words were being mixed too far forward. One sign that this might be true was that the demo tapes often sounded better to me than the finished album tracks. The demos, done on a single track, sounded more integrated to my uninstructed ear, and an uninstructed ear is what I shared with the public. After the instructed ears had got through with mixing the multiple tracks of the studio sessions, the words always seemed to get in front of the music. I should have feigned humility, said that my lyrics were of secondary importance, and pleaded stridently for more reticent vocals. But timidity, which is always a force in itself, won out: with so many musical experts on the case, I thought I must be wrong.

There was another reason that Pete and I could agree on. The record companies, whether Philips in our initial phase or the mighty RCA later on, had no idea how to market the stuff. We never had the A&R man who might have exploited the fact that we didn't fit. Actually this was no surprise: the truly imaginative record executives, such as John Hammond and David Geffen, are very few even in a music industry as big as America's. Pete's manager, Simon Crocker, was a naturally wise young man, but he was hampered by lack of power: had he been working within one of the record companies instead of just knocking politely on their bronze doors, things might have been different with the marketing, although I doubt if some of the handicaps I have already outlined could have been overcome, in the absence of a firm hand to take hold of our throats and choke out the hit single on which everything depended.

There was one more factor, however, that outweighed all the others, although I was painfully slow to admit it at the time. The insoluble problem was so close to home that I couldn't see it. It was me. My assumption that popular music could be dragged towards literature was fundamentally wrong-headed. It was a sure-fire formula for creating unpopular music. What we were doing, even if it

had been done with large resources, was strictly for a minority. The popular-music business dealt with majorities, a fact with which I never had a quarrel: I would have been glad enough, after all, to take the rewards if they had come. But I was killing us with every clever lyric that I wrote. I was even killing our chance to get cover versions, which had been the whole idea of Pete's making an album in the first place: to attract other artists who might sing our stuff. (Bob Dylan, whose first album sold barely one copy each for every record store in America, made his first money from having his songs performed by other people.) A few cover versions might have at least given us a plastic bucket of small change to start compensating for the big canvas bags of banknotes that never came. But largely through my choice of words, our work was too quirky to be borrowed.

In addition to a few critics who wrote the kind of notices you end up quoting to yourself when the cold night gets in through the cracks around the window, there were fans who loved our stuff, and thirty years later, when our work was rediscovered against all expectation, their children, who had grown up with our music in the house, were to form the core of a whole new audience big enough to make theatre tours by me and Pete viable in both Britain and Australia, and even in Hong Kong. But part of our appeal to that original group of thoughtful loyalists was that our songs made them feel like members of an elite, and elites are death for the popular arts. Indeed elites are death for the arts in general. Everything created should be composed on the assumption that it can be enjoyed by anybody, even if not by everybody. Verdi, my pick for the greatest creative genius of the late nineteenth century, did not compose for a special class of opera lover, and from the moment when composers began to assume that only an instructed few could possibly understand what they were up to, the art they presumed to serve was a gone goose. This aesthetic belief, which is at the head of my political beliefs as they stand today, was in the forefront of my mind from the very start, although it has taken me a lifetime to make it clear even to myself. My early lyrics were an attempt to act on that belief while it was still in the birth canal, heading in the right direction but upside down.

As so often in my life, an interior suspicion that I might be on the wrong course expressed itself by a transference of energy to another area. Gradually I began to write fewer lyrics, and to put that kind of effort into verse letters, nominally written to friends. Actually they were meant to have a bigger audience than that; they were public poetry. Written in what were meant to be strict forms, they were ideal vehicles for all the literary allusions and linguistic razzmatazz that had previously been clogging my lyrics. I wrote the first of them, a letter to Russell Davies, when I was on location in Wales for the second Bazza movie,

subtly entitled *Barry McKenzie Holds His Own*, in which I had indeed been given the promised bigger part. Upright and conscious this time, I was cast as Paddy, an aspiring Aussie film critic attached for some reason to Bazza's entourage as he battled Dracula in Transylvania, whose sinister castles were being doubled by the Burges castles of Cardiff, kitsch replicas that had been put up in the nineteenth century like film sets for an industry that did not yet exist. (Today, no visitor to that city should fail to avoid them.) Barry Humphries had no great love for aspiring Aussie film critics and that lack of enthusiasm was expressed in the script. Paddy had few lines and they all conveyed his amiable stupidity. With Bruce's encouragement I tarted the lines up as I went, making Paddy's obtuseness even more salient. Some of these improvements I found quite clever – clever expressions of stupidity, that is – but later on, in the editing room, they all vanished, leaving Paddy not much more articulate than the corpse I had played in the first movie. Little knowing that my featured role was fated for the gurgler, I threw myself into the task.

My first big chance to throw myself was in a fight scene, in which I would be one of a dozen victims of Meiji Suzuki, a karate champion playing the evil oriental cook in Dracula's castle. Dracula was played by Donald Pleasence: my first close look at an important actor actually at work, instead of just being interviewed. Beyond the standard set by the spray-on cobwebs and the prop bats, Pleasence had a haunted look, probably having guessed that this project would not add to his lustre. The humour of the first film had depended on Bazza's being out of context in contemporary Britain: a fruitful sociological proposition that led to all kinds of speculative press coverage in both Britain and Australia, with learned articles being written about whether the arrival of Bazza on the big screen signalled, for the perennial vexed question of Australia's conception of itself, an advance through self-mockery or a regression through self-abasement. This time he was merely out of context in a Gothic fantasy. There would be no point in trying to explain the plot now, because the script had trouble explaining it then. When the film was released, even Humphries, who had worked hard on its preparation, quickly realized that it belonged somewhere in the lower half of his illustrious CV, although I should hasten to say that it still made money. But for all concerned, realism came later. For the moment, enthusiasm ruled. Nobody sets out to make a dud movie. Humphries, still in the difficult early stages of saying goodbye to alcohol, had a tendency, when he dressed up as Dame Edna, to repair to his or her trailer and refuse to come out, having temporarily forgotten that any putative maltreatment could only have been at the instigation of a company he entirely owned. 'Barry, come out!' I once heard Bruce shouting, '*You own the movie!*' But it wasn't as if Barry didn't care: quite

the opposite. And we were all fired up by the incendiary energy of Bruce, who reacted as if everything he could see through the eyepiece was funnier than *Mr Hulot's Holiday*.

Nobody's commitment exceeded mine. According to the storyboard, Suzuki would sock me in the jaw with his flying foot, and I had to fly backwards some distance before going over in a backward roll. Determined to raise my backward roll to Olympic standard, I practised on the bare earth. Armed with distant memories of my star performance in the Sydney Technical High School gymnastics squad that won the coveted Pepsi Cola Shield, I threw myself backwards and carried out the opening phase of a backward roll. It was there, some time later, that the film's stuntman, Alf Joint, found me. Famous in his trade, Alf was tall, handsome, brave, and magnificently athletic, a combination of characteristics that had attracted the attention of Grace Kelly during the filming of *Green Fire* on location in Africa. By day, Alf had doubled for Stewart Granger in the embrace of the killer ape. By night, Alf was in the embrace of Grace Kelly. He didn't boast about it, but the news, propelled by gusts of bitter envy, ran all around the industry. It was hard not to hero-worship such a man. In *Where Eagles Dare*, Alf had been one of the stuntmen fighting on top of the cable-car high above the star-lit valley full of Nazis while Richard Burton and Clint Eastwood sat on the terrace of the hotel far below, sinking drinks as they laid bets on which of their doubles would fall off first. For the most successful ever Cadbury's chocolate commercial ('And all because the lady loves Milk Tray'), Alf had dived a full 180 feet out of a helicopter into the sea off Malta. The camera messed up the first take so he had to do it again. He toppled out of the dive and smashed his spine into a string of broken beads, so he knew exactly what a back injury felt like. Looking up from where I was lying flat, I could see his handsome head outlined against the weak Welsh sunlight. 'Can you move?' he asked.

In the attempt to convince him that my prostration had been planned, I tried leaping to my feet, but succeeded only on rolling onto my side. He probed with a thumb. 'I don't think you've broken anything, but you're going to be feeling the bruise for about ten years.' He was thirty years short in his estimate: I can still feel it now. I can also still remember exactly what he said next. 'Bruce tells me you've got two university degrees. Do you think I'd be doing this stuff if I had two university degrees?' Arising, as so often, out of hubris and humiliation, this was one of the moments that resonated throughout my later life. From then on, I was more willing to let the tennis champions play the tennis and the racing drivers drive the cars. In my daydreams I still believe that I could have done all those wonderful things if I had set my mind to it. But daydreaming is mindless;

it works on wishes, not on thoughts; and in my thoughts, prompted by my aching back, I gradually came to accept that my capacity to reflect verbally on the achievements of the danger men was exactly what had ruled out the possibility of my ever being one of them. Since it had also excused me from the danger, there was more reason to be grateful than resentful. 'When we do the number,' Alf said as I hobbled away leaning on his arm, 'for shit's sake do exactly what I say and don't do anything extra.' Much taken with Alf's delightful professional term for the trick, I did 'the number' the next day. Taking Alf's advice, Bruce captured my tiny part of the fight sequence in separate shots. There was a close-up of Meiji's horny naked foot apparently impacting on my jaw just before I exited frame to the left, drawn in that direction by Alf yanking on the back of my pants. There was another shot of me executing the kindergarten version of a backward roll, with my face registering authentic agony. In the editing room, the second shot was cut out, no doubt because it looked too feeble.

Otherwise, most of my time on set was spent waiting. The natural condition of the film actor, at whatever level, is to sit around for hours doing nothing while the practical aspects are arranged for the next few seconds of work. Wasting as much of their lives waiting as they do in sleep, the big stars are compensated with huge amounts of money, but never enough to offset the nagging impression that they are being robbed of life. The only possible cure is to do something else. Dumb stars play practical jokes, conduct love affairs, or complain about the inadequate facilities of their trailer. Some stars meditate, perfect themselves in the mysteries of the Kabbalah, fulfil the daily mental exercises incumbent on members of the Church of Scientology who have attained the status of Transcendental All-Clear Super-Brain Grade Nine, or occupy themselves with some other method of being exclusively concerned with the continuing miracle of their own personalities. Not being a star, and lacking the wherewithal for a sustained contemplation of the self, I wrote verse letters. Having wrapped up the one to Russell Davies, I began, when we changed location to Paris, another one for Pete Atkin. In Paris there was even more waiting around to do than there had been in Wales. A two-minute scene on the upper level of the Eiffel Tower took a whole day because the wrong official had signed the permission, or because the right official had signed it at the wrong angle: stuff like that. Apart from a wonderful nighttime expedition, led by Barry Humphries, to the Alcazar cabaret – the dizzy standard of the stage effects had a big influence on Dame Edna's later career – there was almost nothing to do but wait. I spent a lot of time sitting in cafes, hunched over my open notebook while I chiselled away at stanzas in ottava rima, rhyme royal, or Spenserian measure. I fancied myself as a meticulous craftsman.

The brutal truth was that I was still measuring lines by eye and fudging the syllable count with the slovenly insouciance of a Soviet plasterer, but at least I was learning to recognize the sweet click a line of verse transmits when all its stresses are in the right spot. What I couldn't yet do was make it happen with every line. At about the same time as we were approaching the end of our shooting schedule, Gough Whitlam, back there in Australia, was approaching the end of his government. (With typical generosity, and perhaps with typical recklessness, he appeared briefly as himself in the final, Australian scene of the movie where Bazza comes home in triumph after the defeat of Dracula.) Whitlam, when a schoolboy, wrote far more accurate formal verse measures than I did in maturity. I wish I had known that at the time, and had been able to ponder the implication, which is that exuberance, for that kind of verse, is indispensable, but not enough. Accuracy should be part of the inventiveness. But I was carried away by my flood of ideas, which is always the first desirable condition. Into my stanzaic boxes of tricks I poured all my learned irrelevancies and interdisciplinary gags. It was, I thought, a way of airing my knowledge while heading off the standard accusation, often levelled at my prose, that I was putting everything I had in the shop window. I had never thought that jibe to be fully accurate, but there must have been something to it, because while my verse letters filled up with bricolage, my TV column emptied of it at the same rate.

The TV column was still a pretty flashy number, but I got better at cleaving to a straight argument, gradually learning to trim and guide a rococo tendency to make architecture out of decoration. If my song lyrics were only partly a success in dragging the popular towards the literary, the TV column, if only because the reader response kept growing, could be thought of as making a better fist of dragging the literary towards the popular. Later on, there was a whole new generation of journalists doing the same thing. The new emphasis was given a fancy name: postmodernism. Actually it had been going on for so long that you could trace it back through time all the way to wax tablets. T. S. Eliot wrote about Marie Lloyd and the music hall; Mallarmé edited women's fashion magazines; *Love's Labour's Lost* is a pseudo-pedantic pop concert from start to finish; and Catullus sang a syncopated blues for the dead sparrow of his mistress. But to me this carnival of the qualities felt like a big and complex event, and the symbolic centre of it was the *Edward Pygge Revue*.

12. PYGGE TO THE RESCUE

We left the cast rehearsing in the Pillars of Hercules. The rehearsal facilities were out of scale with the scheduled venue. In keeping with his tendency to think big and worry about the consequences later, Ian had picked the Institute of Contemporary Arts in the Mall for Edward Pygge's one-night stand.

Resplendently situated in Carlton House Terrace, the ICA had a huge hall available for performances, brought in from all over the world, of the sort of avant-garde semi-theatrical events that nobody wanted to see in their countries of origin. There was no doubt that Ian's menacing voice on the telephone would get the whole of literary London to fill the auditorium, but would we, we few, we precious few, be able to fill the stage? Stuck in one corner of the Pillars of Hercules, we already felt short of resources. What would it be like on the night? Ian solved the problem by recruiting one of his entourage, a bright and well-connected bluestocking called Amanda Radice, as the show's glamour girl. No longer among the living, Amanda won't mind my saying that she couldn't act for nuts. But she was so beautiful that it scarcely mattered. I wrote little bits for her all over the continuity script, so as to get her on stage as often as possible, thus to cash in on her appeal, and off stage as soon as possible, thus to minimize the effect of her limitations. But the main thrust of the show was the string of parodies, variously presented by Ian, myself (each of us always sounding the same), and Russell Davies, always sounding different.

I should say at this point that Russell Davies had a real first name, Dai, that had been stolen from him by Actors' Equity because they already had a Dai Davies on their books. But everyone who knew him called him Dai in private – they still do – and from that evening literary London rang with his name in whatever version he found it expedient to use. He stole the show, as we all expected him to: but he stole it on the scale of the Brinks Mat bullion robbery. His costume helped. He wore a black suit, black shirt, white tie with a Windsor knot, and a black wide-brimmed fedora. He carried a violin case that looked exactly as if it had a tommy gun inside it. The visual image of ruthless

gangsterdom was a key element, but the killer blow was provided by his variety of voices, as if the spirit of Peter Sellers had entered the body of Lucky Luciano. His best bit, and the hit number of the night, was his reading of my three Robert Lowell sonnets. If I can be permitted a cross-reference to myself, these pseudo-Lowell sonnets are still available in my book of collected poems, *The Book of My Enemy*, and I am still proud of the way they capture Lowell's knack of presenting his own personality as the focal point of all human history. But they needed Dai's voice to bring out the full flow of Lowell's self-obsession. There were people in the audience who had real-life experience of the great man's vaulting solipsism and they yelled with recognition. More important, people who had never met him now felt that they had.

I might be getting things a little bit out of chronological order, but perhaps this is a good place to record my general impression of Lowell's impact on London, whither he had already, or would shortly, divert his full attention, on the correct assumption that the worshipping natives would crash to their knees with their bottoms in the air as the ground shook to the weight of his Olympian tread. They weren't entirely wrong. I should say in haste that his early poetry gave him the right to think of himself as a giant. But he was also a nutter, one of the manic-depressive type who, when in a downhill phase, accuse themselves loudly of being Hitler. (They never accuse themselves of being the seventh anonymous stormtrooper from the right at a dedication ceremony for the new blood banner in a provincial town twenty miles from Dortmund: they always accuse themselves of being Hitler, just as the people who had previous lives in ancient Egypt always turn out to have been pharaohs or chief priests, and never night-shift workers on the crew that put up the third tallest obelisk in one of the satellite temples at Karnak.) Eventually I saw Lowell giving a live appearance, as it were, at a memorial evening for John Berryman, held at that very same ICA. Berryman had committed suicide, probably because, as an even bigger egomaniac than Lowell, he was feeling the effects of having a smaller reputation. The memorial evening was organized by Alvarez. Before the event there was a gathering of all those of us who were going to read from Berryman's poetry or deliver short valedictory speeches.

The gathering took place in a pub only a couple of blocks from the ICA. Alvarez explained to us all that there was a strict fifteen-minute limit on how long each of us could speak. Alvarez explained this very carefully, on the correct assumption that some of those present would have trouble understanding it. Lowell's lack of protest at the restriction was taken as a sign of assent. Everyone tiptoed around him as if the mere fact that he had been told there was a time limit might be enough to put him over the edge. I was already finding all this

pretty weird, but then the funny stuff really started, when Lowell had to be initiated into the concept that the ICA, although only about two hundred yards away, was not in plain sight, owing to an intervening corner. Though Alvarez and several others volunteered to ensure that Lowell would reach the destination successfully, Lowell made it as clear as he could make anything that he looked on the proposed journey as the equivalent of being asked to cross the Andes on his own, with condors circling above the valley and snakes waiting in the bare rocks to bite the ankles of his mule. On the epic journey through the open air, we surrounded him as if Gandhi were transferring his radiant humility from one village to the next. Blessed to be in his company, we reached the venue to be greeted by the crowd as if our individual status had been raised merely because we had walked with the mahatma.

What happened during the event was so predictable that it was scarcely to be believed. In praise of the departed Berryman, we all did our fifteen minutes each. When Alvarez introduced Lowell in roughly those terms with which John the Baptist might have introduced Christ, I particularly admired the way Lowell didn't reach into the inside pocket of his tweed jacket until Alvarez had finished. Then Lowell produced a fatly folded manuscript that unfolded into something that would clearly take an eternity to read out even if there was only a single sentence on each page. He read the whole thing. It was about the Condition of the Poet in an Age of Nuclear Confrontation. You had to give him credit, though. Berryman was mentioned several times. As Lowell murmured endlessly on, I saw people in the audience fighting sleep as if they were being mugged by it in an alley. Then as now, however, this effect was taken as a sure sign that something truly serious was taking place. Never, at a literary event, have I ever seen even one person rise from the audience and say, 'This is too boring to bear.' The loudest rebellion I have ever heard was from Karl Miller at a *TLS* mass rally somewhere around the year 2000. A heavily laurelled Irish bard – no, not the one you're thinking of: another one, with less talent – was reading a purportedly humorous poem to the usual sporadic titters, and I heard a recognizable Scots voice in the crowd near me growl, 'I don't think that's funny. Why does anyone think that's funny? I don't think that's funny.' I looked across in time to see the people around him looking at the floor, as if the secret name of God had been mentioned and they hoped to stave off a vengeful lightning bolt by pretending that it hadn't. If the cherubic Irish poet could generate that degree of respect, it was no wonder that Lowell, while he still lived and bestrode the Atlantic, was a figure of awe, as if Napoleon, dressed for his coronation, had assumed the proportions of the Colossus of Rhodes.

As I remember it, at the time of the *Edward Pygge Revue*, Lowell was not yet

regularly on the scene, but the word was out, so there was an element of recognition. We got some of our biggest laughs, though, from pure fantasy. I had written a version of *The Waste Land* as if London's wartime Indian poetry editor Tambimuttu had written something called *The Wasted Land* under the impression that he was being original. This was an abstruse enough connection but Dai gave it extra life in two ways. He did a terrific Indian accent of which the Indians in the audience were the loudest in their appreciation. The beautiful Gita Mehta was always a good giggler but it was rare to hear Sonny Mehta laugh aloud. I could see him rocking. The piece got practically a laugh a line and I was already seeing a new future of writing poetry for performance by the time Dai got to the punchline, whose effect on the audience would have completed my spasm of self-satisfaction if I had actually written it. Unfortunately (or, rather, fortunately) it was Dai's. He had improvised it during rehearsals in the pub and I had incorporated it into the poem instantly, with a premonition that I would have to go on pointing out for the rest of my life that one of my best lines was borrowed. A writer should always be careful to own up on that point, in my view: on a practical level, he will be known as a plagiarist if he gets rumbled, and on the spiritual level there is a penalty of guilt to be paid even if he gets away with it. Or there should be a penalty. I know several writers who steal anything that is not nailed down, and it doesn't seem to bother them at all. Anyway, at least I had created the pinchbeck crown in which Dai could place his jewel. 'Shantih shantih shantih,' he intoned. Gita was already doubled up. 'It's only a shantih in old shantih town.' He took a bow while she howled. I could only tell by the way her teeth shone. There was too much noise.

The *Edward Pygge Revue* wasn't all as good as that but it sent them home happy, and it sent me home even happier. From that night until this day, I have always worked on the principle that a poem, whether comic or serious, should pay its way as a theatrical event. There are always plenty of poets – Ian was one of them, in fact – who prefer to believe that poetry, when recited, should merely be overheard. They might have a point. (They certainly have a point if they are seriously gifted, but it should be remembered that most poets are writing poetry only because they can't write prose, have no more sense of structure than the director of a porno movie, and will escape being forgotten only in the sense that they have never been remembered.) If a poet writes something sufficiently charged with meaning, it should be enough to be present while he or she reads it out. But the degree of self-effacement required would not suit my temperament. Though I like to think that I would go on writing poetry even if it had nobody to appreciate it beyond the four walls of my cell, the evidence suggests that I can't function without an audience, and that even my periods of solitude – which get

longer as I grow older – are always a preparation for the next public appearance. On Pygge’s big night, I had made a public appearance in which poetry had been accepted unquestioned as an item of entertainment. It was a sweet moment, and like so many sweet moments it had powers of deception, as the sirens did when they sang. Immediately I began to dream of bigger things. The gift of foresight might have told me that the success of the event had a lot to do with its having been small. But foresight has never been among my attributes, and indeed I wonder if anybody with the necessary capacity to get carried away is ever truly wise before the event. In those years, I was scarcely capable of being wise after the event. Nowadays I am better at assessing the implications of what has already happened, but that’s about the extent of the improvement. A depressing thought, and not an appropriate one in relation to how I felt at the time.

I felt on top of the heap. The TV column was going well enough for me to contemplate collecting the best of its first four years into a book. Once again I pasted a manuscript together out of clippings, ruthlessly discarding gags that had gone phut or straight statements that had started to generate the unmistakable odour of the platitude. Rather than rewrite to save an idea, I cut it out to profit from the added speed. There were whole columns begging to be put out of their misery. But there was still plenty of stuff left. This time I took the title from a line by Sir Thomas Browne, ‘Dreams out of the ivory gate, and visions before midnight.’ I had first read the line while pretending to study in my college library at Cambridge, and had always thought that those last three words would make a good title for a book. Here was a book to fit the title. I was disappointed that Charles Monteith at Faber didn’t seem to think that *Visions Before Midnight* was a publishing proposition. Regretfully he assured me that books of collected journalism didn’t sell, and that the column’s regular audience, of which I was so proud, would not buy the book, for the precise reason that they had already read everything in it. But Tom Maschler at Jonathan Cape heard about the manuscript, asked to see it, and said that it might be worth the chance. It was flattering to think that he might be trying to poach me from Monteith, less flattering to notice that Monteith didn’t seem to mind. Though it would take time before Cape brought the book out, for now I could warm myself with the notion that I had two publishers squabbling for my favours. In modern terms, I was in the position of Brad Pitt, torn between the attractions of Jennifer Aniston and Angelina Jolie: maybe the one with tattoos knew something that the other one didn’t. My agent Christine told me to give my conscience a rest: since Cape, with the famously penny-pinching Maschler at the controls, were even more unforthcoming with money up front than Faber, there was no danger of getting a reputation for pulling a fast one. Later on, if there was a hit book in prospect, I

would have to choose, but for now I might as well play both ends against the middle. It sounded rather daring.

But what really thrilled me was the prospect of taking the poetry-revue enterprise to another level. It should be said in fairness that the idea of a performance-poetry show was in the air at the time. Such imported Americans as Allen Ginsberg would go on at the Albert Hall under the sponsorship of the British 'youth culture' impresario Michael Horovitz, with loud proclamations, in the preliminary press barrage, that the new poetry was now, the now poetry was new, and that poetry, to fit the historical moment, had to be experimental. Though Horovitz's own way of proving that poetry was for the moment was to write not a line that anyone could remember for five minutes, he had an undoubted gift for herding the more obstreperous poets together and turning the occasion into a news item. Either under his leadership or in emulation of it, performance-poetry events were everywhere. I could not help noticing, however, when it came to the lighter moments of the evening, that scarcely anyone involved was actually funny, unless they were trying to be serious. In the poetry world, as in the literary world taken as a whole, the notion always lingers that the only thing you have to do in order to be amusing is to lighten your tone. The notion is hard to kill because the audience itself, committed to a night out but already desperate with boredom, is ready to go along with any attempt at lightness. At any literary event, most of the people buying the tickets have no more idea of how comedy works than most of the people on stage. There is a big difference, though, between the laughter that an audience will politely grant to some dullard feebly signalling that he considers himself funny and the laughter that is forcibly wrenched from them when someone else actually is. You can't miss it: it is the difference between a genteel, effortful titter and an involuntary paroxysm. This second kind of laughter is the headiest wine a performer can drink, and now I saw a chance to drink it by the gallon. What about a long poem in rhyming couplets that would take an hour to read out by a bunch of carefully chosen reciters, would incorporate all the parodies I could dream up, and would go for real laughs instead of the tolerant smile and the well-bred snort? I even had a name for the hero: Peregrine Prykke. And I had already invented his area of operations: the London Literary World. To cash in on the Augustan flashback, and to convey the proposed scale of epic grandeur, I would call the poem *Peregrine Prykke's Pilgrimage Through the London Literary World*.

By that time the London Literary World's Friday lunch had moved from Mother Bunch's to the Bursa Kebab House, an obscure bistro near the new centre of the action. From the literary viewpoint, the *New Statesman*, still occupying its insanely valuable piece of real estate in Holborn, was in its most

glorious period. You could be indifferent, or even hostile, to the opinions expressed in 'the front end', but 'the back end' had an authority not to be ignored, entirely because the standard of its editing was so high. At one time or another, Anthony Thwaite, Francis Hope, John Gross, Claire Tomalin, Martin Amis, and Julian Barnes were all active at the command level of the magazine's cultural pages, with a direct line to all the best critics in the country. Contributors flocked and flourished. Christopher Hitchens and James Fenton came to write and stayed to lunch. Mark Boxer started turning up regularly. An erudite student of the dandy tradition, he proved by his mere presence that this was a fashionable event in the rarest sense: but his fastidiousness also had the salutary effect of discouraging the anecdote as a form – he wanted the flash of wit. James Fenton was also quick to spot the threat of boring self-indulgence and curl his lip at exactly the right angle to frighten it into silence. Nobody was allowed to take his time except Terry Kilmartin, who, applauded for every 'um' and 'ah', knew that he was being guyed and had the charm to make it funny.

The conversational results turned the Bursa Kebab House into a stock exchange for literary quotations. I have never heard better talk about the arts and don't expect to again, but I think all who participated would agree that the thing really took off when traditional fact gave way to current fantasy. Already becoming famous but still retaining enough anonymity to move among other people without their putting on an act, Martin Amis, in conversation, could translate the circumstances of ordinary life into the kind of phantasmagoria that didn't show up in his novels until later. When he got going, he was like one of those jazz stars, relaxing after hours, who are egged on by the other musicians into chorus after chorus. He had a favourite riff about the number of thieves in his area. (As I remember it, he was living in Notting Hill at the time, but it could just as well have been Belgravia: in his imagination, all of London turned into a single country, which I think I was the first to call Martinique.) On one occasion the riff developed into a symphony. According to him, he was one of the few non-thieves allowed to live in his district. The thieves did not emerge from their lairs until evening. Then you started seeing them on the skyline, moving, to the beat of tom-toms, in stooped silhouette across the rooftops, on their way to a previously determined destination. During the night, every residence of a non-thief would be visited, even if the non-thief was at home and awake. 'A pair of white eyeballs at the window,' Martin would explain, 'reluctantly absorbing the evidence that the place is inhabited. I look back casually, trying to convey with my lazy sprawl that I would only with reluctance reach for the .357 magnum in my desk drawer. I keep typing away at my article about Henry James. The eyeballs blink.' By this time the whole table would be helpless, and Martin

would be ready for his final evocation of the stooped thieves marching nose to tail along the skyline, ending up in each other's places, and taking the stuff that had already been stolen from someone else, perhaps even from them.

The key to Martin's style of talk, apart from his protean range of pinpoint mimicry, was the economical stroke of the whip that did just enough to keep the top spinning. Granted time to think by the massed laughter, he could make the next bit up. (It took him a while to get that good on the page, and there are great talkers who never make the jump, perhaps because they are too modest to be their own delighted audience when they sit alone.) Hitchens, on the other hand, did the reverse of economy, or seemed to. At that time his world fame as a political and cultural essayist still lay in the future, as it was bound to, because his style of conversation – the key to his penetrating sarcasm – was too extravagant to be absorbed into a normal paragraph of prose. If he had been leading the conversation, he could have done a ten-minute version of the chicken crossing the road. ('Blind drunk ... drunk as only a chicken with no head for alcohol can be ... headless chicken ... sobbing, *clucking* drunk ... not shedding the occasional feather as chickens are wont to do ... every feather *glued to its body* by wine-flavoured perspiration ... out of El Vino's with hanging beak ... the busy, roaring road looming before it ... the broad thoroughfare as an unbridgeable chasm, if I may quote Edith Wharton ... doomed from the egg onwards ... a fish out of water ... standing up to be counted ... helplessly victimized in a chicken-hostile environment ...') But he hardly ever led. His decorations and interruptions were applied not to his own monologue, but to someone else's. Thus, if someone was being straightforward he could make them funny, and if they were being funny he could make them funnier. Since the cause of wit in other men is always popular with the other men, his knack of saying the unforgivable thing was invariably forgiven. To ostracize him would have meant staying away, and nobody wanted to be absent when Martin and the Hitch were head to head.

Trying to keep up with either of those two, when they were flying, was the mark of a beginner. It was better to wait and let things die down. In similar circumstances, Oliver Goldsmith used to go home annoyed if he could not, as Boswell put it, 'get in and shine'. But to listen was sufficiently pleasant, and a lot of us looked forward to Friday as the best day of the week. I think Jonathan Raban, flying back from an assignment abroad, was the first participant ever to re-book his flight so that he would be in time for lunch, but later on a lot of us did the same. It was a very competitive scene, though, and therefore very male, and nowadays it would probably be against the law. Doubtless there were a few women in town who could have done what Dorothy Parker did at the Algonquin

before World War II, but they would have had to be ready to fail at it. Nor was it enough to be a good speaker. You had to be a good listener, which is a surprisingly rare quality, and one that I could have used a bit more of. Julian Barnes is still getting a lot of mileage out of my ability to turn the conversation back to my own concerns. Still, they used to accuse Scott Fitzgerald of the same thing. If the assembled company rags you for a failing, you can usually play up to it for comic effect: it's the failing they don't mention that you have to watch out for.

Exaggerated stories about my childhood, I noticed, went down well. On the other hand, my liberal democratic political opinions – situated in what Ian McEwan nowadays usefully calls the radical centre – were regarded with barely disguised impatience by almost all those present, and with open contempt and disbelief by both Fenton and Hitchens, who were still basing their positions on the belief that the Russian revolution, even if it had been betrayed, had started off as a good thing. Later on I would have been able to defend my views better, but at the time I was content to be steamrollered. When Kingsley Amis and Robert Conquest started showing up, the steamrollers rolled from the other direction as well, and there were some resonant collisions, especially between Conquest and Hitchens. The Hitch had the snappy rhetoric but Conkers had the right quotations in the original Russian. It isn't true, however, that they became fast friends later on. They always were. The spectacle of people with radically opposing views still managing to amuse each other is something that makes London different from New York, and very different from Sydney. Amusement was treated as a value – which, of course, as long as it doesn't attempt to erode sincerity, it is. If it does attempt to do that, it soon ceases to be valuable, and not much later it ceases even to be amusing. There are a lot of people who talk well enough but forfeit a hearing when it becomes clear that they will say anything for effect.

The Friday lunch was too enjoyable to waste. When I realized that I was wasting at least half of it through getting smashed too quickly, I finally resolved to temper my drinking by the only method that I knew would be effective: i.e., to quit altogether. To my later remorse, I could have gone on bearing the shame of passing out on the train while bringing a hangover home to my family. Also I had managed to live with the knowledge that I had been cruelly rude to a keen young Indian who had seen my face on television and concluded that this feat of recognition entitled him to occupy my chair at the table in Mother Bunch's while I was away in the toilet dealing with the overflow of a largely liquid lunch – one of the last before the move to the Kebab House. Luckily I was the last one left of the assembly that day, so there was nobody there except my voluble victim to

see me in action when I came back from the bog and told him to take off. He was out of line, but I would have been more polite had I been less drunk. I might even have engaged him in conversation – or at any rate joined the conversation in which he was already engaged – and thereby learned something. As things were, I gained only the memory of having been arrogant. The young man's fallen face got into my dreams, haunting me as the imperialist policeman Merrick in *The Jewel in the Crown* might have been haunted if he had had a conscience. Congratulating myself on having one of those, I foresaw many an internal struggle when drunken idiocy would have to be paid for with mental anguish. Well, I could live with that, too. In other words, I could bear the prospect of carrying on as before. But I couldn't bear the thought of speaking with a furred tongue in eloquent company. So it was for the sake of ego that I gave up drink, and not out of virtue. These are sorry confessions to make and I feel doubly sorry that I feel bound to make them, but a book about growing wiser would be dangerously untrue if it suggested that there is always something charming about the attainment of self-knowledge. Sometimes it is exactly like meeting the wrong stranger in a dark alley.

Perhaps encouraged by recent theatrical success, I arranged the trappings of a show-business event for the occasion when I would forever abjure the demon rum. It never occurred to me that the best way to quit would be to quit sober. I was intent on going out with the receding wave of one last party. On the big Friday, I told everyone that the drinks were on me. Two hours later, quite a lot of them were. My sweater was soaked. After an initial half-hour during which I had the impression that I was talking brilliantly, I had to be warned against shouting. Well, another glass of wine would be a quick cure for that. But I kept on missing my mouth. Tipping a bottle over had always been an early sign that I was losing the plot, but trying to drink through my chin, instead of my mouth, was sure evidence that locomotia ataxia was setting in. I explained this to the few people left to listen. The trip to the toilet turned into a more epic search each time, until finally I came back and found that only Terry and Peter Porter were left. They were talking about Proust. I joined in, although for a while they did not realize it, because I seemed to be talking about someone called Bruce. Then Peter went off to do a broadcast, leaving only Terry, who kindly reminded me that I had to get back to the *Observer* and read proofs. ('Broofs,' I said knowingly.) Even more kindly, he let me share his cab, which must have been like offering house-room to someone wired up with a time bomb who sincerely wants to abandon his mission but has forgotten the code to cancel the explosion. With a wealth of experience from his own roaring days – which he had spent blessed with a far stronger stomach than mine – he was all too aware of what must eventually

happen. That it didn't happen in the cab was a stroke of luck, especially since it had the sort of driver who didn't hesitate to announce that if the geezer with the green face had not yet started vomiting – instead of, as Terry claimed, having already finished – there would be a fee to have the upholstery washed, or, if necessary, replaced. Terry exerted his natural authority and kept the driver driving. After that he kept me walking, all the way to the most out-of-the-way of the *Observer's* staff toilets.

He waited outside, an exercise of tact for which I was grateful, because a man doesn't want other men to see him supporting himself at the urinal by leaning his forehead on the wall while he attempts to shuffle backwards far enough to keep his shoes away from the erratic effusion of his bladder. (Shuffle back too far, and your forehead starts sliding downward, pulling the face upright until the upper lip comes in contact with the wall, by which time the momentum is hard to arrest as you go down sneering. Very few women know about any of this.) When I emerged, Terry saw me to my desk. 'Are you, um, going to be, ah, all right?' Not daring to speak, I nodded. Seeing that a word was called for, I searched for one, but could not find it. So I nodded again, as carefully as I could.

Thus reassured, he retired to his office and could not have seen me leaving for the toilet again. Once more I placed my forehead against the wall, but partly, this time, because the wall was cool, and I felt very hot. I had not felt quite so hot since the night of the killer joint. It might be a good idea to go into a cubicle. Not that I really wanted to vomit. I never do want to. Once again I was struck by that familiar fear, a fear bred not so much by the actual thing, as by the accumulated memories of the apprehension leading up to it. This reflex attempt to keep it in probably multiplies the force when it comes out. It certainly did in this case. First leaning over the bowl and then kneeling in front of it as if it were an altar, I repeatedly yelled repentance for a misspent life. Mixed liquids and insufficiently pureed solids gushed past my teeth. I heard the noise of an early post-war Italian two-stroke motorcycle giving birth. Things really got noisy when there was nothing in my stomach left to chuck. Through a throat already restricted by the intensity of its efforts, I went on vainly trying to hurl my personality – a hedgehog the size of a badger. When Terry came for me, I was lying on the floor of the cubicle, my body wrapped tightly around the pedestal of the bowl, as if the porcelain were my last source of warmth.

13. THE NAME'S PRYKKE: PEREGRINE PRYKKE

By the time I was well again, the story was all over London. Humiliation was complete, but it had one big advantage. It was very hard to go back on such a public promise, although even I would have been surprised to have been told that I would never touch alcohol again for another thirteen years. Not long afterwards, I quit smoking as well, and for just as long. Terry, who had a front-row seat for my transformation, said an interesting thing. Minus its ums and ahs, it went like this: 'You've always managed to get quite a lot done, but what are you going to be like now?' I was naive enough to take this as an unmixed compliment, but there might have been an element of apprehension in it. Although his regard for Proust suggested otherwise, Terry didn't much approve of anyone who missed out on life through being too assiduous in pursuit of its honours. He had seen too many promising young men deprived of its pleasures. There is something to that view, and I try to respect it, although from holding it I am debarred by nature.

No longer required as a receptacle for sixty cigarette butts a day, my Bedford hubcap was thrown into the skip parked in front of our house in Cambridge. The skip otherwise held the debris emerging from our new knock-through. We were expanding. I was slow to admit that cutting out the booze and fags had improved the financial position, because the admission would have suggested that I had been robbing my own household since the day of its foundation. I preferred to think that several ships were coming in at once. There was something to that interpretation. Donald Trelford, who had now taken over from David Astor in the editor's chair at the *Observer*, looked with favour on my work. Too much favour, initially. When the paper came up for a redesign, I was only just in time to stop the design team doubling the size of my photo at the top of my column and adding a bold subheading that promised yet another weekly dose of hilarity fit to cure all ills among the living and bring the dead up dancing out of their tombs. Never one to be hobbled by modesty, I nevertheless have a horror of

being overbilled. Above all I can't stand being introduced as some sort of cheery fellow in a floppy cap and long, pointed shoes. The error wasn't Trelford's but he had let the designers get too far along the road to setting it irrevocably in lead.

On the other hand, it was Trelford who had the excellent idea of sending me off all over the world to write feature articles about foreign cities. Although I always prepared as thoroughly as possible for these assignments I couldn't hope to equal the knowledge of the *Observer's* man on the spot: whether staff appointee or local stringer, he was likely to be jealous of his turf for a good reason – that he knew every inch of it. What was I to gain by dropping out of the sky for a few days of room service? Trelford was clever enough to spot the plus. I wouldn't be writing the informed letter of the man in residence, I would be recording the uninhibited first impressions of the flying visitor, which would be of value to the reader precisely because the man who lived there no longer thought them worth noting. It would suit my style. It was also Trelford who thought of the generic name for the pieces: Postcards. Thus one of my standby formats was born. Eventually I was to write enough Postcard pieces to furnish, in 1981, a book called *Flying Visits*, and in the next decade I transferred the idea to television, in which medium my Postcard programmes were always my main claim, if not to fame, then at least to work painstakingly done. The whole project, whose legs turned out to be a full twenty-five years long, arose out of a single conversation. I got a lot of glory out of it in the long run, so I owe it to Trelford to acknowledge his imaginative encouragement. He had to think like that on everybody's behalf every day of the week, with nobody noticing except when things went wrong. But that's what editors do. Thank God I was never one of them.

One of my first Postcard assignments was a two-part piece about my home town. It was my first trip back to Sydney in fifteen years. (I hadn't stayed away on principle: I just never had enough money for the flight.) Though the street where I was born and raised had barely altered, Kogarah's dinky little railway station had been buried under a massive reinforced-concrete bunker of the kind once built by the Organization Todt to guard the coast of Normandy. Todt, however, had never equipped his hulking masterpieces with restaurants and a shopping mall. There was even more culture shock available in the city's downtown area, which had gone scraping skyward like a miniature Manhattan. It even had a new name: CBD, for Central Business District. (Despite all the evidence to the contrary, Australian journalists have always been convinced that plenty of initials and acronyms make their prose more readable instead of less: 'NRMA officials against the GST quoted CSIRO statistics at their AGM in the CBD this morning ...') But there was a much bigger change going on than that.

Post-war immigration had civilized the place. I wasn't yet quite civilized enough myself to take in all the implications: I didn't quite realize that the new standards of eating and drinking weren't just good, but the best on Earth. But I got some of the story into my notebooks, and wrote it up on the plane back to England. I couldn't help, however, thinking of it as the plane home. That was the real subject, but I wasn't ready for it, and probably I'm still not. Though nowadays I am back and forth to Australia half a dozen times a year, I still don't know where I live. But I tried to address the serious issues along with the other stuff, so I was miffed to discover, from the proof pages, that the *Observer's* illustrator had decked me out as a comedian. I made a quick and correct decision to lay down the law. My stuff, I told everyone concerned and several bystanders who weren't, depended on being presented as a serious argument. If it picked up any laughs along the way, that would be a plus. But if it was presented as vaudeville, anything serious it contained would count as a minus. So nix the funny hats. One of the artists got a bit shirty but the message went home. Trelford backed me up, although it couldn't have been easy. The artist really had put in a lot of work. But that's an argument you always have to be wary of: we've put all this effort into doing the wrong thing for you, so you have to use it. Sympathize with that viewpoint often enough and you'll find yourself being crowded into oblivion, helped in that direction by people whose undoubted pride in their own craft is unaccompanied by any insight into yours.

Another early Postcard trip was to Moscow. I had already been teaching myself Russian for a couple of years and it paid off in a big way, because I could actually read the resolutions of the XXVI Party Congress mounted hugely on every building. LET US IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF CONSUMER GOODS. It was all too apparent, however, that resolutions wouldn't work the trick. Anybody who might have been able to improve the quality of consumer goods had been murdered long ago. My wife, who was along for the ride, was amazed by the range of soaps and oils that were not available for our bathroom in the Metropole Hotel. Still equipped with its original chandeliers and a sub-Benny Goodman quintet noodling assiduously in the dining room, the Metropole had once been the NKVD's favoured point of concentration for those refugee officials of foreign Communist Parties who would need to be dealt with. All too aware that there had been a time when some of the previous occupants of our room had been called to the door at two o'clock in the morning, I was less amazed but even more depressed. I had thought things might have come on a bit, but they hadn't. Our key moment of revelation, which I put in my article, was a window display mounted by the GUM department store in Red Square. There was nothing in the window except a chipped and rusting chromium stand draped

with a pair of tights proudly billed as coming from East Berlin. That was the pitiable condition that the resolutions were resolving to transform: a cultural hegemony in which East Berlin was regarded as a fashion centre. My wife looked at the pair of tights for a long time. Inside the store, in the women's department, she sat down at the standard-issue, one-size-fits-all makeup table – a super-luxury item – and duly noted that it was impossible to get the knees in underneath it. She didn't need to be told by me that her hard-working and dedicated life in the West would have been heartbreakingly worse here, where even the things you had to save up for weren't worth having. At our first dinner in the Metropole she enjoyed the blinis but spotted before I did that our plain but sweet Intourist guide was putting any blinis we didn't eat into her purse. At an evening of folk-dancing held at the Palace of Congresses in the Kremlin we were three-quarters of the way through the interminable bill – the flirtatious peasant girl with the knee-length knickers was once again pretending to run away from the boy with the big shoulders and small head, although this time he was dressed as a factory worker rather than a tank commander – when my wife conceded that I might be allowed to regard these assignments as work rather than a family outing. Paris and Rome might be another thing, but no more folk-dancing. Please.

On future voyages I overcame my guilt for going it alone by setting myself a crowded schedule, throwing in a lot of stuff that nobody I was trying to keep happy would conceivably have wanted to see. Already, when I came back from Moscow, I was faced with the proof that to write a solid piece, with a factual basis for every paragraph, you needed a notebook with enough detailed entries to write a book from. From then on, I kept that rule: come back with enough notes for a book and you could get a decent piece. Get enough decent pieces and you might eventually make a book. But don't try to take a short cut just by stating what you fancied to be your common-sense view and tarding it up with local colour. A few loose observations linked by opinions wouldn't do, whether the opinions were standard, so as to flatter the reader's store of ordinary wisdom, or perverse, so as to stir protest. The concrete detail not only told the story, it gave the interpretation. When I saw our Intourist guide quietly snaffling the blinis, I was seeing the ineradicable truth about how the requirements of life were distributed in the Soviet Union. The reason why she had hopes of being allowed to join the Communist Party was that she would be allowed access to the special stores and so wouldn't have to steal. At the very dinner in the Metropole when she made the blinis disappear, one of our party, a sociology lecturer from the LSE, was explaining to the assembled company that the discrepancies in standard of living between the well-off and the poor in the Soviet Union were

not so marked as in the West. Even as our guide was saying, 'Of course,' in her excellent English, the blinis were on their way into her purse.

I couldn't write that part of the story because it might have got her into trouble. When she took us to what was meant to be a performance of classical ballet, she broke down in tears when it turned out that the performance had been cancelled and replaced by a new allegorical ballet about the triumph of Communism over Fascism. Trying not to be delighted by the extra opportunity for sarcasm, I reported faithfully what happened on stage – the dancer representing Fascism had a particularly threatening bottom – but I left out her tears, which she dabbed at in the darkness under the pretence that she had a cold. She had so wanted us to see her beloved country's heritage at its beautiful best. Had I mentioned that, however, she might have ended up somewhere in the Gulag system, whose psychiatric correctional facilities, under Brezhnev, were still fully functional. And lest you think that I overrate my importance, let me tell you that the Soviet authorities read my piece with great care when it was published. A page and a half in the *Observer* earned two and a half columns in the *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, whose resident satirist cleverly identified me as an agent of Western propaganda. But I wasn't. I was an agent of all the Intourist guides who were dreaming of a pair of tights that could simply be bought without being worshipped, of a makeup table that you could fit your legs under instead of sitting sideways like the Queen at the Trooping the Colour, of not having to pretend that bad art was more bearable because it carried the correct message, and above all of not having to steal food from tourists. Her tears, her tears. I can mention her name now. It was Valentina. I wonder how she is. There has been a new, unofficial, and therefore even less predictable kind of gangsterism in Russia since the Soviet Union collapsed, and no doubt her life has not been easy. She certainly didn't seem to have the makings of a crook, and her fundamental honesty has probably not helped her. But I can remember when the country she loved was breaking her heart a little bit every day.

When our sociology lecturer asked Valentina whether she had a place of her own, she said, 'Of course: everybody has.' It didn't seem very likely. It had never seemed very likely to me that I might one day have my name on two places of my own, but suddenly I did. Rivalling the splendour of the new knock-through in Cambridge, there was now a London apartment, situated below podium level in the Barbican, down beside the famous artificial lake around which, on the brick patio, ducks gathered from all over the world for their annual shitting competition, for which the qualifying rounds took most of the year. I was no longer sharing my London base with the rest of the boys. I was sharing my London base with my family. Since no member of my family except my wife

was there very often, this in effect gave me an opportunity to produce the ideal conditions for the essential requirement of a writer's life: the freedom to do nothing. At last I was free of any distractions that might dissuade me from my course of sweating with frustrated effort and feeling guilty because nothing had been achieved. From then on, with each move, upgrading of property, and extra acquisition, I merely elaborated the surroundings in which this essential condition could be achieved. Today my redoubt is somewhere south of the Thames and only I have the keys. A planned retreat from extremophile media notoriety has not yet entirely rid me of the sort of snoops who would dearly like to know what goes on behind my closed doors, but on the whole, apart from the occasional visit by the chorus line of the Crazy Horse Saloon, the answer would bore them to death if they could see in. They would have to watch a man shambling from desk to couch; pointlessly alternating coffee with tea throughout the morning until the time comes for the choice between the sardines and the over-boiled eggs for lunch; having an early afternoon sleep; writing half a sentence in longhand and crossing it out; having a supplementary, later afternoon sleep; and then finally, as dusk fills the study window, deciding that it has been a day of *getting ready* to write.

Just so was my average day alone after I moved into the Barbican. There I would sit in the felt-covered sponge-rubber-filled couch-cum-chair beside the giant window looking out onto the lake. The bottom of the window was an inverted semicircle designed so that it could not be equipped with a sill. Like every object in the Barbican, big or small, it had been designed so that something normal could not happen. The walls were designed so that you couldn't hang a picture without borrowing a heavy-duty drill with a diamond-tipped bit so as to sink the shallow hole in which to place the blasting powder. The wiring was placed deep within the bomb-proof walls along with the plumbing, so that an electrical failure would interact with a broken pipe to produce an effect that could not be corrected until after the flood put out the fire. There was a garbage-disposal system that connected your sink with every other sink in the building, so that a blockage a mile away sent its gas to you along the complete network of pipes before it came up reeking into your face while you tried vainly to deal with the empty milk carton caught in the jaws of the gunge-plunger. The garbage-disposal system was thus designed so that garbage could not readily be disposed of. But nothing epitomized the whole Le Corbusier-style grandiloquence of the Barbican – its truly monumental combination of misguided social engineering and vaulting incompetence – like the lake. The lake, lined with bricks and floored with concrete, had been precisely calculated so that it was too shallow to keep fish alive and just deep enough to drown a

child. The mere presence of the lake meant that the original dream of village family life in the heart of the city could never be fulfilled. Any family that let its children out to play alone would have had to be crazy. One of the side effects was a heavy traffic of prams pushed by au-pair girls, emanating from the flats big enough to have a spare room. The traffic ceased at nightfall and I could look through the window without any guilt except about another working day that had come to nothing. To underline this conclusion, a duck ambling languidly on the bricks would turn its behind towards me and fart a plug of lime-tinged *panna cotta*.

But after an evening spent drinking orange juice while watching television, and a night spent dreaming my standard dreams of being unable to get something done – in most of my dreams of failure, there is a document that needs to be prepared but I can't write it, or else I need to learn it but I can't remember it – I would wake next morning feeling enough remorse to bring results. Wherein lies the whole rationale of making sure you are undisturbed while you do nothing: so as to build up the anguish that will make you do something. Not that there was all that much spare time to be thus squandered on the luxury of waiting for sentences to form. Quite often something had to be written no matter what. There were still deadlines to hit. The Postcard pieces went down with the readers well enough for the *Observer* to want more of them than the four features a year stipulated in the contract. So I was often away, and, when at home, had to work at writing up the results. And a published book, I now found, could have a demanding life of its own, like a baby. *Visions Before Midnight* came out and did surprisingly well. The glamorous young women in charge of Cape's marketing department wanted me to spend time discussing how I might promote it. This seemed time well spent, but the actual fag of trotting around the radio studios was less thrilling. As the years went by I learned not to begrudge that necessary effort, but early on I would easily get into a panic if my do-nothing time was eaten away. It was the wrong attitude. The trick, with the chores, is to turn them into events. Do your best every time you go out, and never go on radio or television without bringing something to the party. The best way to deal with a bad question is with a good answer.

One of the chores relating to *Visions Before Midnight* was all my idea, so I couldn't complain. It occurred to me that if any *Observer* readers were going to defy expectation and buy the book they might like to buy it direct from the paper, signed by the author. There was a recently formed *Observer* promotions department that liked the idea. A little notice was put at the foot of my column saying that a signed copy could be sent postage-free. Enough people responded to help propel the book briefly onto the bestseller list; and even after it fell off, it

stayed gratifyingly high among the also-rans. I had to do quite a lot of signing, a process made more demanding – as it still is today – by my ineradicable, grandstanding urge to make my signature look like an actual name. Apart from being a clear invitation to cheque-forgers, this habit is a gluttonous consumer of energy. The signature to have is one like Pavarotti's, that starts with a tiny squiggle and then turns into a straight line about three inches long. The full story of Pavarotti's glorious ego will have to wait for the next volume, when we move firmly into television heaven and fame hell. At the time we are talking about, I hadn't met him, and it didn't occur to me that I ever would. Sufficient to say now that if he hadn't developed his instantaneous signature he would have lost an arm. Even as things were, when his ghosted autobiography came out he risked carpal-tunnel syndrome just from the number of times he had to draw his little line sideways. People forgave him, as they forgave him everything. In the signing queue, after he made his mark, they would examine the results and always express their gratitude, instead of hitting him over the head with the book. If he had been less fat, of course, they would have loved him less, because he would have been too close to looking the way he sounded. People don't love the darlings of the gods.

There were also my first American reviewing commissions, from *Commentary* and the *New York Review of Books*. It's a useful rule of thumb that anything the Americans ask you to do takes twice as long, because they want everything explained. (Quite often they are right, but it can be very wearing.) Also, when I arrived in New York to make personal contact with my two new editors, I had no clue as to the implications of their having been political enemies for years. In London they could have still been friends. In New York each looked at me with deep suspicion for having breathed the same air as the other. Pussyfooting around their respective sensitivities took tact, tact took time, and there was no email in those days to speed up the process of transmitting copy across the Atlantic. But there was still enough waiting time left over for some good, long, solid sessions of doing nothing. This time the thing I was waiting for while I did nothing was the next bit of *Peregrine Prykke's Pilgrimage*. The big advantage of a project cast in rhyming couplets is that if you get one decent couplet a day, it counts as a day's work, and it will give you a good idea of how to add to it tomorrow. Hemingway, who typed standing up, always kept the rule of quitting for the day when he knew where the narrative was going next. Having written the sentence about the charging rhino, and being fairly sure that next day he would write the sentence in which the hero shot it, he would finally sit down and give his current wife the signal to bring in a daiquiri the size of a bird-bath. The rule is good in the sense that to do the opposite

almost always results in barrenness next morning. But I had a fair idea of where the clueless Peregrine was going anyway. A good, simple lad, he would seek literary success. He would find it. It would destroy him. Along the path to destruction he would meet everybody. I had a list drawn up, and I could always work on an individual character if I got jammed on the narrative. Thus Seamus Feamus was born, and F. R. Looseleaf, Ian Hammerhead, Stephen Spindle, and Doc Stein. Partly assembled out of components already machined and polished, the thing pieced itself together at almost alarming speed, but I won't say that it did so with ease. It's never wise to say that something which sounds effortless actually was, and anyway, this one really was hard work. I would wake up at night when I had an idea, and dawn would find me sitting beside the picture window, still drafting, crossing out, drawing arrows, and looking up only occasionally to be faced with a duck's arse poised to dump. Although the first, unimproved version of the poem looks embarrassingly clumsy to me now, I fancied at the time that I was performing technical miracles, much of the evidence for this dizzy level of competence being provided by clenched teeth, cold sweat, chronic sleeplessness, and voodoo mutterings as I tested rhymes while walking along. Baudelaire once claimed he could tell that Victor Hugo was composing couplets in his head by the way he walked. I probably looked as if I was failing to compose them. Often I failed to walk. I would have to get out my notebook, sit down suddenly, and write. Eventually the poem was in a condition where I could hand it to Dai, who agreed to play all the parts except two. I would be the narrator. The role of Peregrine Prykke himself I offered to Martin Amis.

How I persuaded Martin to say yes to this proposition remains a mystery to me and, I dare say, to him. In the normal course of events, Martin, rather than step into the spotlight, would prefer to die in an unarmed attack on the power station supplying its electric current. His genuine modesty is the main reason for the fateful discrepancy between him and the journalistic literary sexton beetles who make copy out of him: they would like to receive the degree of attention that he would like to avoid, and the clearer it becomes that he would like to avoid it, the more they resent him for failing to appreciate their generosity. But he said yes to being cast as my doomed young hero. I can only conclude that he saw truth in the role, although Perry's odyssey, like the personal history of any character in anything I have ever written, is drawn almost exclusively from my own experience. (Whence my thanks to fate that I went travelling so much in the next twenty years: otherwise I would have written endlessly about a man staring through a window at a lake dotted with the white floating bellies of dead carp.) Warning me that he must not be expected to do any acting, Martin settled down

to study the part. I assured him, truthfully, that most of the acting would be done by Dai.

And so it happened. The literati packed into the hall at the ICA heard their own voices coming back at them out of Dai's mouth. There was no scenery, just the three of us with a lectern and a microphone each, but one of the microphones was a cornucopia. Characters in the poem who weren't present to hear themselves speak heard about it soon enough. (It was on the evidence of the reception for Bob Lull's featured role in *Peregrine Prykke's Pilgrimage*, and not the attention given to Edward Pygge's *Three Sonnets by Robert Lowell*, that Elizabeth Hardwick was able to inform her ex-husband, 'They're laughing at you in London, Cal.') Martin had no trouble indicating the diffidence of the young Perry taking his first steps on the path to glory. As the hubristic, slightly less young Perry on the road to perdition he was less convincing, but he got away with it. More amazingly, in the face of Dai's virtuosity, I got away with it. The audience was riveted even when not howling. Nobody went to sleep except Charles Monteith of Faber, and a few days later he sent me a note pleading jet lag. What might have seemed like a colonial's act of retributive arrogance was saved by the laughs and by a central truth: the destruction of Perry's innocence was bound to happen, because destroying innocence is what literature does. Since any group feels flattered when told that it lives by jungle law, the audience afterwards queued to pat my head. Most of the compliments felt genuine, although there was one from Michael Frayn that bothered me momentarily. 'It was the *scale* of the thing that amazed me.' Since he could equally have meant the scale of the disaster, this noncommittal encomium can be recommended for use among all the other anodyne stand-by effusions for when you 'go around' after the performance. 'What can I say?' 'Well, you did it again!' 'Only you could have given us an evening like that.' And: 'It was the *scale* of the thing that amazed me.'

But paranoia soon proved to be inappropriate. Apart from the gratifying hubbub on the night, there were a couple of immediate reactions next day that would have yielded a double thrill if they had not so neatly cancelled each other out. Ian Hamilton, who obviously hadn't at all minded being renamed Ian Hammerhead, asked me for the whole 1,400-line text so that he could print it as a limited-edition booklet in soft covers, and then, in full, in the *New Review*. I was so chuffed at his reacting with unequivocal approval to one of my poems that I said yes before realizing other editors might have similar ideas. Anthony Thwaite, then the literary editor of the globe-girdling *Encounter*, asked if he could print the whole thing. If *Encounter* had carried the poem, I would have been unarguably established as a poet from that day forth, no ifs, no buts. There

were excellent reasons for double-crossing Ian. But they didn't seem quite as excellent as the reasons for keeping my word. And as Dai put it, over a pint at the Pillars, *Encounter* would have paid me folding money, and we couldn't have that.

Cape paid folding money up front to both of us when it commissioned a booklet of the Improved Version of the poem illustrated throughout by the omniscient Dai, whose graphic constructions were as inventive as his verbal ones. To jump forward a bit, I undertook an Improved Version when I realized that the versification of the original was intolerably clumsy. James Fenton helped me realize it. Never hesitant with criticism, he told me that I had glaringly failed to count my syllables. I didn't like him for saying so, but when I started counting I could see that he was right. So I rewrote the whole thing. There is always a danger, when you start watching your technique too closely, that you will develop the kind of *mani`ere aigre* that crippled Renoir after Degas scared him back to school. But a form like rhyming couplets – like, indeed, all the set verse forms – gets a lot of its propulsion from its precision. So I think I sped the poem up, and I'm sure I sped up the companion piece that followed it. The following year's epic was *The Fate of Felicity Fark in the Land of the Media*, with illustrations by Mark Boxer, who hated the title. More than twenty years later I decided he had been right, and I scrapped the poem along with two more mock epics that followed in the same track. For the second poem, the modest performance in the ICA had once more gone well, and this time a long extract from the text was run by the *Sunday Times*, much to the *Observer's* disapproval. Another year on, the next epic venture, *Britannia Bright's Bewilderment in the Wilderness of Westminster*, once again with drawings by 'Marc', was front-paged by the *Observer* in retaliation. Or I might have got those two serializations in reverse: it doesn't matter now. But it all mattered like mad to me then. Though personally I still feel that my four mock epics got technically and dramatically more adroit as they succeeded one another, there might have been something to the prevalent critical idea that *Peregrine Prykke's Pilgrimage* was the best of them because the literary world was the ambience I knew most about. It was an idea I resisted might and main, because I was having too much fun to quit. If I couldn't have a reputation as a serious poet, this alternative means of expressing myself in verse made a much bigger splash. The poems were written to real contracts, were performed like plays, were showcased on the front of the review sections: more buzz than the average British movie. Even better, they spoke directly to the audience, without intermediaries. 'At least I can tell, with your stuff,' John Cleese once told me, 'why it's written that way. With most poetry I can't do that.' Such off-trail

encouragement wasn't the same as official endorsement, but maybe different was better. And anyway, how much attention could I ask for? My life in the literary world looked more stable than poor Perry's. I had the column, the commissions for features, some solid reviewing connections, I was the author of a couple of books of bits and pieces, and now, running alongside, there was this mini-industry of the mock epic. I didn't see how anything could stop me.

14. TYNAN STEPS IN

The regular critics tried to when Faber brought out a collection of my verse letters under the title *Fan-Mail*. The hyphen was my mistake and so was the book, which was reviewed like the plague. People scarcely capable of writing a sentence that could be read were accusing me of being unable to write a stanza that could be scanned. For a long time I agreed with the reviewers, although the fact that those poems still appear among my collected verse in *The Book of My Enemy* (2003) is an indication that my opinion has reverted to what it was when I was writing them, in a trance of concentration every time. (The letter to Michael Frayn, composed in Pushkin's cruelly demanding *Onegin* stanza, and the letter to Tom Stoppard, composed in the almost equally tricky Burnsian measure, both sent me to the brink of oxygen starvation: I would forget to breathe as I pieced the phrases into the intricate set schemes.) The verse letter as a genre, however, I now saw as only a small part in my total global output of comic verse. Everything for the stage, for instance, should be in comic verse. If only Shakespeare had followed Chaucer's example! Kenneth Tynan pulled a face when I explained this to him, but by that time he looked as if he was pulling a face anyway: his habits were catching up with him, there had never been much flesh between skin and skull, and now he looked like a skeleton trying to escape. Tynan had called me to his house in Thurloe Square to discuss a project. It was our second meeting. The first had been at a Garrick Club reception not long after I joined the *Observer*. Tynan had been wearing a tailored green shantung Dr No jacket and I had worn one of my usual polyester paisley ensembles from the Nightmare Alley boutique on the Planet of the Drapes. Much to Terry Kilmartin's amusement, David Astor looked at me as if I were a German paratrooper. Tynan, however, chose to address me, grandly telling me how I wrote TV criticism with such verve that I should consider 'moving up' into drama criticism. Our subsequent exchange is no less true for my having told the tale a thousand times. When I asked him if he could really, truly, still stand the theatre, he said, 'I get a thrill every time the curtain goes up.' And I said: 'I get a

thrill every time it goes down.’

Or something like that. In reality, dialogue is never as crisp. But theatre isn't reality and I didn't want it to be: I wanted it to be verbally electrifying. Most theatre, in my experience, was the opposite. One of the reasons I admired Stoppard so much – later on I admired Michael Frayn and Peter Nichols for the same reason – was that his plays, despite the room they made for an exalted level of visual hoopla, were so full of lines begging to be spoken. Tynan pointed out that even Stoppard had needed help in pulling *Jumpers* together. Since the help, in that case, had been provided by him, Tynan was speaking with authority. When we met again in Thurloe Square, however, he soon found me more opinionated than ever. In his capacity as the dramaturge who had beaten back sexual constrictions by giving the world the designedly scurrilous revue *O, Calcutta*, Tynan now wanted to make a similarly liberating play out of a book by the prankster, brothel-keeper, and strolling philosopher Willy Donaldson. Tynan wanted me to write the script, which being done, he would take over and supply all the other requirements. After reading the book I suggested that the play should be done in verse.

Tynan had looked pretty ill at the previous meeting, but at this meeting, when he heard my suggestion, his face moved even nearer death. Actually, that aspect was no joke. Tynan had emphysema, and it would eventually do for him, but at that stage he could still tell himself that he only had to quit smoking. There were a lot of people who loved him and wanted to believe the same thing. I was one of them: if only for his gift of phrase, I admired Tynan to the point of worship. I just didn't think that he made any sense politically. He was one of the British theatre's permanent supply of licensed radicals – Harold Pinter and David Hare are other prominent examples – who are allowed, and even encouraged, to rain scorn on the beliefs of the very people who come to see their plays. How this reciprocating system of *gauchiste* rhetoric subsidized by bourgeois self-flagellation actually works is a subject for sociological analysis that need not detain us here. Sufficient to say that Tynan was far too nice ever to realize that the sincerity of his Brechtian revolutionary principles would have stunned Brecht, who had manufactured them to please a state-sponsored market and had banked his foreign royalties in Switzerland. But at least Brecht, whose didactic plays had bored the world for decades, was safely out of the picture. Unfortunately Tynan thought that Willy Donaldson was yet another social revolutionary: perhaps not precisely of the Brechtian stamp, but promising a usefully subversive libertarian critique of the institutionalized inhibitions of Western society.

I went to meet Willy off-campus, as it were, and we soon had each other sized

up. His dim little flat in Chelsea was clearly the model for the exciting brothel in the book. All he had done was build up its crumbling face with a few layers of pancake makeup. The same could be said for his girlfriend, whose patterns of speech and behaviour soon revealed themselves to have been souped up and distributed between all the exotic houris, demi-mondaines and grisettes that populated his story. Willy had the knack for the prose that floods mundane reality with a radiance it could never generate by itself. In his pages, the hypnotic hookers came swaying towards you in couture underwear, drunk on the perfume of their own armpits, their eyes alight with your reflected dreams, hungry to blend their burning need with yours. The money didn't really matter to them. They were driven by desire. In reality, Willy's girlfriend had a sour face painted on the surface of a veteran grapefruit, and the Band-Aids on the back of her calves where the last shave had gone wrong were curling at the edges. Her bloodshot eyes, never very large, were focused on something bad happening a few inches in front of them, perhaps the tiny pall of heat coming up from the cigarette she smoked no hands. Tynan had told me that Willy, once a tycoon of upmarket sexual commerce, had fallen on hard times. I hadn't talked to him for half an hour before I realized that there had never been any soft times. This was it. He had been making everything up since the days when the *Beyond the Fringe* boys – he was their first impresario – had twigged that he was a bull artist and eased him out. He and I talked the same language. He was a fabulist. It takes one to know one.

I wrote the play anyway, and I wrote it the way Tynan wanted it: in prose. The manuscript must be somewhere among my junk. It never got any further than script stage, thank God. My main problem with the material, as they say in Hollywood, was that I have never been able to believe in self-fulfilment through sexual liberation. I believe in sexual desire as a transfigurative force all right, but I don't think that it contributes to intelligence any more than salmonella contributes to digestion. Even now, on the threshold of the departure lounge, I still fall in love instantly with every beautiful and brilliant woman I meet; and I am still likely, if the woman is sufficiently beautiful, to think that she must be brilliant anyway, even as the evidence to the contrary becomes mountainous. I could write a book on the subject of sex, and one day, if there is a sufficient pause after it's all over, I probably will. The book's principal conclusion, I imagine, will be that a man whose romantic folly is infinite had better try to find himself the kind of woman who values the realism in him and knows how to bring it out, or he will end up dead, or bankrupt, or surrounded, like Willy, by the kind of faded decor into which the flannel dressing gown decorated with cigarette burns blends like camouflage. If he finds more than one woman like

that then he will still be in trouble, but at least he will know what kind of trouble he is in. The idea that the rules for controlling a force could be derived from the force itself was one that only a man like Tynan could sincerely believe. Willy didn't believe it any more than I did. He hoped the project would dig him out of a hole. I was truly sorry I couldn't help. (Later on I was glad when he had a money-spinning hit with his 'Henry Root' caper.) I liked him. He forgave me for being as square as a brick under my air of exuberance, and I forgave him for peddling fake petrol. We had to forgive each other because we both pulled our cons using the same device: the spellbinder sentence, that little castle in the air.

Tynan was probably relieved when I pulled out of the project without needing to be pushed. I told him the truth: that the kind of theatre I wanted to do was a lot smaller, more like a cabaret; that it was almost all talk; and that it was mainly mine, so that I couldn't screw anybody else up. I didn't need to tell him that I wasn't sure yet of how to do it. My mock epics ran for only one night and nobody could pursue a show-business venture on that basis. (The answer to that one is to go touring, but for that you need fame, either your own or borrowed: thus the British touring circuit is replete with acts calling themselves the Platters, the Drifters, Elvis Presley, and Buddy Holly – itinerant bodysnatchers who sign their real names only on the contract.) So I just looked vague on the subject. It was an expression Tynan was used to, having worked with so many actors; and he let me go without rancour. Several years would go by before I saw him again, and for the last time. (I jump forward to the scene now, out of sequence, because his greatness has been wilfully neglected and no signs of enthusiasm should be held back that might help to restore its lustre.) It was in Los Angeles. On an afternoon off from an *Observer* assignment I went out by cab to see him in the house he and Kathleen had taken in one of the canyons. Coldwater Canyon, I think; or maybe Stone Canyon; anyway, one of those names out of Raymond Chandler. If I had the biography here I could check up, but I hated the biography, even though Kathleen wrote it, and with a loving, forgiving hand. The biography, and the letters, helped to sink what was left of his reputation, so that now, when he is out of print, he is patronized, without a blush, by the sort of people he could write rings around. But he was the stylist of his time: the true star critic. One of the things that made him so, apart from his turn of phrase, was what he called his limitless capacity for admiration. When I said that Hemingway's style had fallen apart in the end, Tynan read aloud from that marvellous passage where Hemingway, towards the close of his life, talked about the Gulf Stream's ability to take in any amount of junk and still run clean again after a few miles. I could tell that Tynan was talking about his lungs; and Hemingway was wrong, of course; but the prose sounded like holy writ in

Tynan's strained voice as the hot sunlight inexorably ate its way into the absurdly green lawn. Tynan was giving me a final lesson in what lasts: the style impelled by the rhythm of the soul, breadth of feeling with a narrow focus. Any youngster who wants to get into this business should find a copy of Tynan's first book, *He That Plays the King*, and do what I did – sit down and read it aloud, paragraph by paragraph. It will soon be seen that his sometimes pedestrian radical opinions were far outstripped by his perceptions, which moved like lightning to energize almost every sentence. Tynan had drama in his prose: drama far beyond anything he could do as a dramaturge. It was only fitting that his death should be a drama too. It was a fight between him and the oxygen machine. He looked at it with hatred because he knew that when he sucked on it, it would taste nothing like a cigarette.

But when he showed me out of his elegant front door in Thurloe Square he wasn't dead yet: he just looked like it. Back in the Barbican I once more had enough spare time to wonder what my writing life would be like if I had all the time in the world. The column still provided a must-do for the end of every week. In answer to the must-do, phrases popped into my head. Would they still do that if there were no compulsion? Phrase-making is something I don't much like to talk about because I don't know how it happens. When I build a stanza in ottava rima, I know exactly how it works; how the fifth and sixth lines move at a different speed from the first four, how a pre-echo in the middle of the sixth line will multiply the clinching effect of the final couplet; and though there will always be surprise discoveries while I build it, the surprises will always be recognizable. But I don't know how a phrase works in terms of its origin: I just know how to neaten it up when it arrives, how to make sure that its order of events doesn't injure its internal economy. Somewhere about then – to put this argument on a suitably elevated plane – I described Arnold Schwarzenegger as a brown condom full of walnuts. The idea must have been a registration of his bulges and skin texture, but I still don't know how the visual perception translated itself into a verbal creation. As far as I can tell, looking inwards from within, the gift of phrase is the semantic equivalent of something mathematical, but I don't know whether the mechanism is clever, like the chess master's ability to see the whole board with all its possible combinations, or stupid, like the idiot savant's capacity for following the line of prime numbers all the way to eternity. All I know for sure is that the knack is in my life's blood, and that if it ever failed me it would be time to turn my face to the wall.

The Schwarzenegger phrase (which wasn't in my TV column: it must have been in an article) was an immediate hit, especially with other journalists. They didn't try to steal it, but they often quoted it, with a generous attribution. Nearly

always it was a misquote (the most common mistake was to leave out the word 'brown', thereby fatally depleting the visual information), but I learned, over time, to take the acknowledged echo of a phrase, even in maimed form, as a kind of sideways compliment, even if the context was hostile. The compliment became too sideways to be borne only when a journalist would attribute to me something I had never said. Some hack pasting together a profile of Kenny Everett ventured to describe him as I might have done. 'As Clive James might say, Everett looks like a drowned rat peering through a loo brush.' Or some such lazy mish-mash. Somehow this uninspired comparison got itself attached to my name, and I found it cropping up in unofficial profiles about me for years ahead, particularly when the author of the profile was the kind of journeyman who found it usefully contemptuous to call me by my first name and who thought that 'Antipodean' was a long, hard, funny word. ('The portly Clive, the same Antipodean who called Arnold Schwarzenegger a walnut in a condom and Kenny Everett a rat hiding behind a loo brush, is sensitive about his own personal appearance ...') In the course of time, but not in that decade or even in the one after, I learned to be grateful for any quotation of any kind, however distorted. The journalist was, after all, boosting the value of my stock in trade. On the evidence of the TV column's buzz-making prominence from week to week, my putative knack for saying smart things was undoubtedly the motor of what I did for a living, even if I found it hard to smother the conviction that there must be something more to life. With due allowance for the difference in stature and earning power, Björn Borg, forever smacking the ball with the sweet spot of the racket, probably felt the same nagging doubt every day, until finally he rediscovered himself as the master spirit of a line of designer sporting apparel, and got married in a pink tracksuit to demonstrate artistic abilities too long suppressed.

And so, with most of the hard initial work already done, the second half of that decade played itself out: writing in the ascendant, television never quite going away, and the urge to tread the boards hard to quell. This last urge got yet another small chance to flourish when I went out on tour with Pete to help him preside over the demise of our first career as songwriters. As things have turned out, there was to be a second career, but we didn't know that at the time. We were looking total defeat right in the face. Nevertheless the fans turned out to fill the halls at most of the dates. In places like Macclesfield, people wanted us to sign their copies of *The Road of Silk* and *Secret Drinker*. At Hull, where we went on in the Students' Union, Philip Larkin turned up at the back of the audience. He was stone deaf by then but he said later that he wanted to see what we were up to, even if he couldn't hear it. The people in the auditoriums were notably

civilized and unfailingly attentive. It wasn't a bad result for some pretty uncompromising writing. But it had nothing to do with a viable result in the music business. We were all too aware that the total of all these audiences was only a tiny fraction of the number of album buyers we would have needed to keep going. The last album, a patchy collection of spoofs and parodies called *Live Libel* (I sang one of the numbers on it: it was as dodgy as that), was half meant as a deal-breaker and fully did the job. Its cover illustration by the greatly gifted Trog was one of the best things that ever happened to us, but in the popular arts you need a mass audience, not classy trophies. Prescience would have told me that the stage routine we worked out for the tour – a song from Pete alternating with a reading or a short autobiographical extravaganza from me – would come in handy about a quarter of a century down the line, but prescience I didn't have, and still don't. If you know where they sell it, tell me.

Nervously convinced that I had been instrumental in leading Pete down the garden path for the last ten years, I felt guilty that things hadn't worked out, as I always feel guilty after the collapse of a group venture – even, strangely, when I am not in it. Once again, we are less likely to be talking about humility here than about a kind of all-embracing conceit. Deep down, I am always convinced that everything depends on me. I feel the same way about the United Nations. What might I have done to help Kofi Annan this week? Cut up his son's credit card, for example? And how did I ever let Africa get into such a mess? My credentials as an economist are at least as good as Bono's, yet I have done almost nothing about sub-Saharan debt relief. But perhaps nothing is the thing to do. When it comes to a group enterprise in show business, nothing is almost always the thing to do. The surest way of dealing with an oncoming collective catastrophe is to opt out in advance. You can't take anyone down with you if you don't let the project happen in the first place. When the handsome, voluble, original, and erratic Tony Wilson kindly asked me to contribute a two-minute spot to each episode of his new show for Granada, I could accept without a qualm because nothing depended on me and I could go as easily as I came. I wouldn't have had time to hold myself guilty anyway, because the whole show was clearly headed down the drain from its first night on the air.

Tony Wilson was brilliant. Unfortunately there was no other word for him. Much loved and admired on the Manchester club scene, which he pretty well invented, he was a local hero who would have been made a national figure by television if the mass audience had been as clever and well informed as he was. But it couldn't be; and if it had been, he wouldn't have been remarkable. Tony Wilson's whole persona depended on his being perceived as more brilliant than anybody else; and brilliance, like virtuosity, has only a limited appeal for the

audience, which doesn't want to admire what is beyond its imagination; it wants to admire what it already has within its imagination, but doesn't know how to do. When it comes to words, it wants to hear recognizable opinions originally expressed. If it wanted to hear undiluted originality, it would sit at home reading Mallarmé aloud. Tony Wilson was continuously astonishing, but a viewing public that wanted continuous astonishment would have a season ticket to Chinese opera. The same stricture would later haunt *24 Hour Party People*, the film based on Wilson's memoirs. The brilliant Steve Coogan brilliantly incarnated the brilliant Wilson, and the film was a hit with an audience of the brilliant: roughly enough people to fill the first two rows of the average cinema anywhere except Manchester, where everyone turned up along with their pets. It was the least the Mancunians could do for him, because Wilson's other mental aberration, apart from the one by which he thought that the punters would cry out with delighted recognition at quotations from W. B. Yeats, was his faith in the romantic magic of Manchester. I don't think his faith has ever died. Not long ago we bumped into each other one night in Paris, and while we were both talking simultaneously about how much we loved the Left Bank I floated the subversive contention that there were probably very few people born in the area who felt the same way about Manchester. I don't think he got it, and when I ventured to translate 'I love the Bull Ring' into French his smile definitely died. Perhaps I got the grammar wrong.

I suppose he might have seemed right about Manchester if you lived there. Off and on, I was there a lot in those years, but I always put the return half of my train ticket just behind the banknotes in my wallet, where I could find it by feel in the dark. As well as for Tony's show – which lasted only for a short season before the network chiefs declared that they couldn't understand even the bits they didn't hate – I would come to Manchester to do *What the Papers Say* fairly regularly. A taxing format, it provided invaluable practice at getting the words in exactly the right spot, so it was no wonder that very few journalists – Richard Ingrams and Russell Davies were always a long way ahead of the pack – could get it right. I also did the odd film-clip special when someone like Alfred Hitchcock rolled over dead. But I never became a Granada stand-by. Bill Grundy had been one of those for too long. Granada's veteran star front-man and resident drunk, Grundy had one of those faces where the bags under the eyes acquire bags under the bags, until finally you are looking at the terraced paddy fields of a Chinese hillside. Gravel-voiced and ready to quarrel even with inanimate objects, he had an indiscriminate hostility that must have cried out to be avoided even before alcohol let it loose. We only ever had one conversation. On a train trip south to London, during one of the rare periods when he had not

been banned from the bar car, he approached me, teetered for a while in what looked like a summoning of strength, and fell towards me while shouting, 'Fuck off!' The first word occurred in front of my face and the second behind my back. Miraculously, he did not hit the floor, but swung back into the vertical position, from which he continued to fix me with a glare made incandescent by hate and blame. But he was sober on the famous day at the studios in Manchester when he hosted the Sex Pistols for their very first television show. The Sex Pistols had been dug out from under a wet rock by Tony Wilson. Grundy, along with the rest of the world, had no idea of who they were.

Grundy's encounter with this new cultural phenomenon became instantly famous, on the assumption that an uptight tradition had come face to face with a new anarchy. The fact that Grundy, in his lifetime, had done far more damage to his body with chemicals than even Sid Vicious would achieve before his early death was not apparent on screen, where Grundy continued to look like a model of established poise even as the Sex Pistols demonstrated their prototype version of the collective psychosis which, while it may well have given a salutary jolt to popular music, also did so much to make Britain a nastier, uglier, and more unsettling place. All I can add now is that their behaviour on screen was nothing to what they got up to backstage. The little shits were genuine, you could say that for them: they weren't putting it on. Cooling my heels while waiting for a gig of my own, I was in the green room before they went on. I was there while they were digesting the information that Lord Bernstein would not let them on the air unless their girl mascot discarded her swastika armband.

Though it was obvious that the boys had little idea of who the Nazis had been, and equally obvious that the girl had no ideas at all about anything, nevertheless there could be no doubt that the whole bunch fully understood the moral choice before them. Either they must accede to this irrational demand from the ruling toff or else they must forgo their television appearance. As rebels, they resented the coercion. But as professional rebels, they wanted the telly exposure. A band of revolutionaries who blamed the authorities for their own compromises (they were exactly like the previous generation of dissenting young thinkers in that respect) they had, in their anger at being forced to submit, no way of reasserting themselves except to attack something. Luckily they must have decided that I was even less interesting than the furniture. So they attacked themselves. The one calling himself Johnny Rotten snarled at one of his lieutenants – I think it was Ken Putrid – and informed him that he was a wanker and a tosser. Ken Putrid told the girl Nazi that she was a slag and a cow. Sid Vicious spat vengefully into the biscuit bowl. They jabbed their bunched knuckles towards each other's mouths, head-butted the air between them, lashed out in all

directions with improbably large boots. 'What are you looking at?' Sid Vicious asked me, his lips flecked with foam. It was the first time I had ever heard this deliberately terrifying question, and I didn't have an answer ready. (The only advisable course of action, I have since found, is never to have an answer ready. Replies such as 'I thought I was looking at the model for Michelangelo's *David*, but it turns out that I was mistaken' are not to be recommended.) The volume of their acrimony was ear-splitting, the monotonous filth of their language soul-destroying, the intensity of their randomized galvanic aggression all the more unnerving because they directed it at themselves. But they all went slouching into the studio when their moment came. And later on I was told that they had merely been discussing the matter. Apparently they were always like that. Well, at least they had each other.

15. ALL DAY SUNDAY

Being a solo act was lonely but there was a lot of aggro that it got you out of. It was as a solo act that I joined the line-up of a BBC2 no-budget late-night show called *Up Sunday*. A few journalists I knew said with an *Observer* column before lunch and a TV show after dinner I was there all day like the Archbishop of Canterbury, but only media people ever take in the whole of the media: the public never noticed. One of the nice things about the show was that hardly anybody watched it, so it wasn't really like being on television at all. *New Faces*, a much bigger show mounted by ATV in Birmingham, had been too much like being on television. I was invited to do the first two of the three pilot programmes and I had a big in-house success as the hard critic telling the pitiless truth to the hopeless aspirants who wanted to be stars. One of the acts I had seen before: he was a bloke who blew up a hot-water bottle until it burst and then sang 'Mule Train' while hitting himself on the head with a tin tray. The studio audience, which included the mandatory number of women in knitted hats, appreciated my saying, while he was being carried out, that I hoped the following contestants would be able to match the standard he had set. Laughs along those lines were not difficult to obtain. In the hospitality room afterwards, the ATV executives painted pictures of big things to come, mentioned improbably large sums of money, and promised to introduce me to Noele Gordon, star of *Crossroads*, an epically tedious soap opera which rated on such a scale that it kept ATV afloat, and thus conferred on Miss Gordon the same status as a queen termite.

I, too, quite liked myself in the hard critic's role. It consisted mainly of thinking up smart lines during the hapless punter's number and then delivering them when it was over: an easy gig. But I didn't like the role itself. If I took the job, I would have endless opportunities to crack wise, but I would also have endless opportunities to look like a witch-finder personally operating the joystick of a ducking stool. I thought the aspirants were touching even when untalented, and if they were talented then they had a better right to hog the screen than the

judges. (When the show finally went to air with somebody else sitting in the hanging judge's seat, Victoria Wood turned up as one of the contestants, won in a walk, and went on to help revolutionize light entertainment so that such a format, though it would never cease to flourish, would also have to live with a general awareness that the real joke figures were the judges.) I also didn't like a clear suggestion from the second in command of the studio that we, the judges, might like to consider the handsome young male tenor among our slate of contestants as the only possible winner. The handsome young male tenor was contracted to Lew Grade's agency, and Lew Grade owned the studio. Not that Lew Grade could be accused of a conflict of interest. As he would have been the first to point out, he just liked it when his interests as an impresario, agent, and broadcaster all coincided: no conflict there. In my first year as a TV critic I had received a bottle of champagne from Lew Grade and I sent it back to him without acknowledgment. When I met him after the first *New Faces* pilot he was ready to forgive my rudeness, although not until after he had mentioned it. I could see that the forgiveness would continue on a large scale if I stuck around. I can't deny that I had visions of a white Rolls-Royce convertible with a blonde in the passenger seat, like the one driven by the show's producer, who charmingly referred to the audience as 'the nellys', and to the genre of spectacle into which *New Faces* fell as 'nelly-vision'. But I was already heading for the door before my departure was accelerated by the promised encounter with Noele Gordon, fresh from recording the latest episode of *Crossroads* and on her way, apparently, to tea at Sandringham, if not to cocktails with the Shah of Persia. It was clear that the Queen, if she indeed proved to be the target, would be outpointed for grooming and hauteur. Employees of ATV moved just ahead of their greatest star, removing obstacles from her path, waxing the woodwork, and repapering the walls. Burt Lancaster would have found the scene familiar. He and Noele were rather similar personalities, actually, although Burt was perhaps a touch more feminine in his manner: he snarled, but he didn't bark. Not that Noele didn't possess a certain glacial beauty, but so does a Norwegian fjord anywhere north of Trondheim between October and early March.

Getting typecast as a heavy who beat up the helpless punters would have been a mistake, and the scale of the publicity would have made my position at the *Observer* untenable. There was neither typecasting nor publicity to be feared from *Up Sunday*. That was the whole idea. It was an off-trail variety show run by Will Wyatt, then an up-and-coming producer, and always my pick for the budding executive who would one day run the whole BBC. If only that prediction had come true. As things happened, he went all the way to second spot, which meant that he had the responsibility of carrying out every demented

notion the latest bad-choice big-wig had, but never enough power to straighten out the madhouse. But all that lay in the far future. *Up Sunday* involved only a very small part of the corporation's resources. Indeed it was put together in Television Centre's very smallest studio, Presentation B, which was about the size of a squash court. On a single day of rehearsing and taping, the contributors did their various things while watching each other from the control gallery, because there was no space left to stand around in the studio: three cameras left barely enough room for the performer. Such *Private Eye* stalwarts as John Wells and William Rushton appeared in various personae while they bashed away at the Establishment of which they were transparently vintage products. The veteran journalist James Cameron held in his false teeth with his lips while he irascibly pitched the line that nowadays would be associated with John Pilger or Robert Fisk. It was subversive stuff from all concerned, but it was still all very British. My contribution to the supposedly iconoclastic concept was a series of impersonations, of which I suppose the best was my Henry Kissinger, and the worst my Lord Litchfield. (I could get Kissinger just by changing a few consonants, but to get Litchfield I would have had to change my entire past, repopulating it with pheasants, fallow deer, and Joanna Lumley, with whom Litchfield was at that time friendly: a sufficient motive for revenge.) It didn't make much difference what I did, because whether on form or off I was hugely outclassed by Viv Stanshall, an alumnus of the Bonzo Dog Doo-Dah Band who did stuff that was from another planet. Clad in tie-dyed overalls a couple of sizes too short, wearing pop-eyed joke glasses that proved, on closer examination, to be his actual eyes, Stanshall, I suspected, was the kind of next-century anomaly that Will was really after. Living at his rate, Stanshall could last only so long, and I think that he eventually vanished in a sheet of flame after his breath caught fire while he was meditating in the lotus position, or it could have been when he was meditating in a Lotus sports car: I'm a bit hazy about the details, and so, I think was he. But I learned a lot from watching him. He did a thing where he misinterpreted bits of film. Most of the film was weird, so that he was only making something weird more weird; but it occurred to me that there might be some mileage in misinterpreting ordinary news footage. Over the next twenty-five years I would do a lot of that. Nowadays everybody does it, but I can honestly put my hand up and say that if I didn't invent the idea, I was the first to steal it, and that I stole it from Viv Stanshall. That was the great thing about *Up Sunday*. You could stand around and watch the workings of each other's box of tricks. And finally everyone watched Spike Milligan.

Spike didn't do the show very often, but he left everybody breathless when he did. As a manic depressive, he came through with the goods only when he was

up, but when he was up he was never off, so some of his best stuff happened in rehearsal, and I often moaned aloud if the tape wasn't running to catch it. (In those days nobody could afford to run the tape all the time.) I remember him pretending to be a hotel reception desk in Scotland, complete with ringing bell. The number got started when he found the bell left over from somebody else's sketch. By the time it finished he was the whole hotel. In the control gallery we were falling about to the full extent that space permitted. When the tape rolled Will asked him to do the number again but he had forgotten it. That was the way he was. You have to imagine an illuminated manuscript propagating itself at the speed of a ticker tape. You could hear the ideas bumping into each other, blending, rebounding, starting a new comic universe. Though he thought me timid, square, and uptight compared to himself – he was right on all counts – Spike took a shine to me and asked me out to dinner in South Kensington.

His Australian wife told me, on the way into the deeply fashionable restaurant, that Spike was currently on a plane of psychological equilibrium, held there by various carefully matched antidepressant pills. She thought she could promise me a relatively uneventful evening. 'Just tell him your stories about Australia. He loves that.' So I did my numbers about the snakes and spiders, and the great man did indeed seem to enjoy himself, effortlessly topping my yarns with his vivid memories of Woy Woy. But he tempered his laughter to the dignified ambience of the restaurant, and when he told stories of his own they were accompanied by only a small range of gesture, even when he was evoking a Messerschmitt 109 that had strafed him in North Africa. ('Today, that pilot is one of Germany's leading surrealist comedians.') He drank water and made no fuss. Only the famous Italian actress, surrounded by her protective retinue at a corner table, needed to be told who he was. Everyone else including the Foreign Secretary knew that a giant was present, and behaving beautifully. It was only during the coffee that the subject of conversation turned to jazz. In answer to his question about who was my favourite trumpeter, I was in the middle of explaining why Bix Beiderbecke's lyricism moved me whereas Dizzy Gillespie's virtuosity did not. 'Finally,' I said, 'feeling comes first.' 'Yes,' said Spike intensely, 'but there must be excitement first and foremost.' And at that point he reached into a hold-all under the table, produced a trumpet, and began to play an ear-splitting chorus of 'A Night in Tunisia'. The noise was shattering, and, it gradually emerged, continuous. People looked first worried, then indignant, then desperate. In the corner, the Italian actress clutched her pearls to her throat. Spike's wife was talking into his ear but I don't think he could hear a word.

He calmed down after a long while, put the trumpet away, and didn't mention

it again. Not for the first time, I wondered if I was making enough demands on the world. My family would probably have said that I was quite unreasonable enough, but even they would have had to admit that I was responsive to the opinion of others, even cravenly so. It mattered to me how I went over. When it seemed not to matter, it was only because I had made a mistake. Even my poetry is predicated, even at its most hermetic, on pleasing an audience of some kind. I have never been able just to pick a course of action and keep going with it whatever people think. This might be the secret of sanity but I feel it as a loss. My night out with Spike Milligan was a daunting reminder of my fundamental predictability. I began to be depressed about not being quite depressed enough. Melancholy was a useful thing to have, but mania, obviously an even more desirable condition, seemed tantalizingly out of reach. Still, there was obviously latitude available for bad behaviour from anyone who could be relied on to write the words coming out of his mouth while he was looking plausible on screen. What he did off-screen was likely to be forgiven, as long as it didn't frighten any under-age horses.

I tried out some of that latitude when *Up Sunday* finally folded and noises were made about giving me a show of my own. Will Wyatt having moved up a notch, the project was deputed to a second team of producers whose judgement I didn't trust. For one thing, they laughed at anything – always a fatal sign in a comedy producer. Also they had trouble getting organized, and the job of a producer is to organize people with that very characteristic. I had been here before: a bunch of people was assembling on the assumption that I would know where to lead them. How had I let that happen? We spent a lot of time having meetings to discuss when the next meeting would be, rather like the French Resistance cell that counted Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir among its members, and which never had time to do any resisting, because it was too busy having meetings. One of my proposed fellow cast members was the young actress Madeline Smith. Previously I had thought that the word 'orchidaceous' had been invented for orchids. Now I realized that it had been invented for Madeline. She was so beautiful that men otherwise ebullient would, after they had seen her, go away, lean against something, and look sad. But she was still an unknown. The show was thought to need a female headliner. Marianne Faithfull was supposed to be the one, but dithering months went by without them being able to get her signed. Eventually I remembered that they had not signed me either. So I walked away. There was no contract. But I was walking away from a verbal agreement, and although Sam Goldwyn's classic formulation has its validity ('A verbal agreement isn't worth the paper it's printed on'), there is such a thing as honour, which I had violated. I felt bad about that, and when *Private*

Eye got the story I was invited to feel even worse. But what really tore me up, after I had learned a lot more about the harsh realities of show business, was how I had helped to waste several precious months of the saintly Madeline's time. The beautiful young actresses measure their careers against the lifespan of a butterfly, and to keep one of them waiting is the act of a vandal. Eventually the world was saved from yet another underpowered variety show, but I should have been more decisive at the start, and from then on I always tried to be, if only by being more careful to make clear that the word 'maybe' meant what it said. I can offer that as a valid general tip: be very careful that your hesitations are not construed by hopeful people as a licence to proceed. Among the clever young performers in the generation after mine, the one who got himself and others into most trouble was the cleverest of them all: but he kept saying 'yes' just to make people go away, so they went away to prepare some huge event for which he would fail to show up. Thus his brilliance and his sensitivity were at war, a paradox arising from that deadly characteristic I described earlier, by which one lacks the moral courage to tell people early enough what they don't want to hear.

Up Sunday didn't pay big money. No white Rolls-Royce with inbuilt blonde was in prospect. By that time my family was working its way through a succession of small cars that all shared the gift of breaking down on the way to Italy. Since I had no licence, they weren't my concern and the white Roller wouldn't have been either, although I suppose I could have sat beside the blonde while she drove it. But the show paid something, and we were now enjoying what it would be hypocritical not to call prosperity. The children were taken on a trip to Australia so that their grandmothers could go crazy about them in the open air. Their mother had already gone crazy on the flight, after they used up their colouring books before the aircraft had reached cruising altitude. In those days there was almost no entertainment available in economy class except to watch the break-dancing displays put on by people who had made the mistake of waiting until they wanted to go to the toilet before they started queuing for it. For those sitting down, there was scarcely room to have thrombosis. It was like the First Fleet in there. After that, it was held more feasible to take vacations less far-flung. Italy being short of the kind of beach life that doesn't leave children crying because there isn't enough sand to dig a hole, the choice fell on Biarritz, where our friend Michael Blakemore had a house. Though it rained often, a sunny day on the Côte des Basques could be lyrical, especially towards evening, when the water turned a soft silver to match the sheen of gold dust on the tamarisks that clothed the cliffs. Enviously watching Blakemore – a magnificent surfer – catching the last wave of the day from about half a mile out, I tried to copy his knack of putting aside the insanely complex problems of his

professional life while he soaked up the shimmer of the sweet surroundings. I almost relaxed. Among the rocks when the tide was out, I built driftwood houses for the children. Typically I overdid it, so that the results could have been published in *Architectural Digest*. The point is still sore, so I won't pursue it. Sufficient to say that when the rain released me from the obligation to lie idle I would sit at my favourite cafe with its instantly memorable Basque name – the Bar du Huahuahu, next to the Café Xerox – and I would start writing a new book. One of the new books I started writing was an autobiography.

The only general idea I had for an autobiography was that it would be the story of someone who hadn't really done anything yet. There was truth to that. I had such a knack for avoiding the big time that it was starting to look wilful. In New York I wrote an *Observer* Postcard at the same time as the serial killer Son of Sam was on the loose. As far as I know I never met him, but I had an encounter in the same league for being hard on the nerves. William Shawn of the *New Yorker* had been reading my stuff and sent a message that he hoped I could spare him some time. I didn't need telling that he rarely had to make such a formal request. He could safely assume that most people read his thoughts. Since I was staying at the Algonquin, there was no problem about a meeting place. All he had to do was cross the street from his office and occupy his regular table. The intermediary who told me this – I think it was the deputy editor's deputy assistant secretary's deputy – told me that Mr Shawn would be waiting for me after he had finished his lunch. Everybody I knew in New York told me that Shawn was so shy and polite that it would be impossible to tell when the meeting was over, so the best thing to do would be to assume, as with royalty, that an exit could not be made too early. Plead a heart attack if necessary, but leave. I was also told by everyone that Shawn would never raise the subject he wanted to talk about, so I should go on raising subjects myself until the one came up that he wanted to pursue. This last bit proved not to be true. Everything else was: he was so quiet and self-effacing that he was hard to detect against the red-plush banquette even though he was wearing a black suit. He was also quite small, so that he tended to disappear behind a salt cellar if you shifted position. He himself never moved. But after we had both quoted to each other our favourite bits from S. J. Perelman, Shawn raised the subject almost straight away. Or rather, he raised two subjects. Could American television be thought of as a fruitful object of criticism? And had I ever thought of coming to write regularly in New York for, say, a weekly magazine? Tentatively but inexorably, the two subjects grew closer together, until finally they were joined by an arc of light whose blinding significance not even I could miss. He was asking me if I would like to become the *New Yorker's* TV critic. If I had said yes, my life

would have changed right there. But I said no without having to think about it. My wife's work was in Cambridge and London, my heart was with the old Empire, and America appealed too much to my sweet tooth.

Like the first, this last factor would have been decisive even without the others. In America I was too much at home. As Milos Forman once said, there are only two places in the world where we are truly at home: home, and in America. In Los Angeles, I had only to lie down beside the hotel pool and in half an hour I was dreaming of a screenplay. In Biarritz, a Hollywood producer called David Giler (the first *Alien* movie was among his credits) turned up to ask me if I would adapt Michael Frayn's play *Clouds* into a screenplay for Twentieth Century Fox. Frayn's play was set in Cuba, but the plot entirely depended, for its wit and point, on Cuba's being represented theatrically by a few chairs and a table. Giler, a suave and knowledgeable Ivy League type, said quietly that Fox had secured permission for location shooting in the actual Cuba. This coup had removed the play's raison d'être at a stroke, but I said yes because Giler had Camilla Sparv on his arm. In *Downhill Racer* her silk, suede, and cashmere appearance had induced in me the terrible suspicion that if America could take over the class and gloss of a Euro beauty like her then it would take over the world. I saw myself in Hollywood, growing young twice as fast as I grew old while I rescued troubled movies with a quick dialogue polish at a million dollars a pop. For a blessing, the *Clouds* screenplay got no further than the first draft before Sherry Lansing took over the studio and cancelled the project, leaving me with (a) a lot more money than I had ever earned in such a short time, and (b) a lasting realization that the merest taste of that way of life would turn my brains to blancmange. Nor was all the nonsense confined to Los Angeles. New York was different but not different enough. In America, there would still be no way out of the life measured by success. I had, and still have, the instincts of someone born for that life. But I could never lead it any better than it would lead me. America would suck me in so thoroughly there would be nothing left to spit out. By the second week, I would have the third wife and the fourth car. Hear that whining sound? My Gulfstream IV, waiting on the tarmac. See you in Aspen.

Shawn gradually absorbed the evidence that his offer was being turned down. It probably hadn't happened to him since WWII, but he was a polite man, and ready to whisper of other things. Remembering all the advice I had received as to the desirability of an early exit, I made noises about leaving, but Shawn made noises – very quiet ones, as of a mouse on the rack – about how it would pain him if I deprived him of my company so soon. Thus it went on until the air out there in 44th Street grew dark. For years ahead I went on being astonished by

how much time Shawn had lavished on me, but it could have been that Lillian Ross, his great secret love, was out of town for the day and had left him with an afternoon to fill. Or he might have just been hungry for a conversation that didn't matter. He was a powerful man, but perhaps he had been lonely. Almost everybody you have ever heard of spends a lot of time being that. Finally he left to meet J. D. Salinger or Mary McCarthy or John Updike, or whoever was first on his evening roster. I sat there alone, faced with the long task of finding reasons for what I had done by instinct. Even today the best reason I can think of is that I didn't want to exchange my life for an illusion that so exactly fitted my desires. Reality was meant to feel like the conquest of the self, not of the world.

So there was my subject: an ordinary life. I was quite aware that I could do things only a few people can do. But I was equally aware that in most aspects of character I scarcely attained the average of the common run: I was a very ordinary person. That was the principle I stuck to while I was writing the first volume of my autobiography, and I have stuck to it ever since, as the project stretches into this fourth volume and now looks like heading towards a fifth. The self-deprecation is still sincerely meant. Back at the beginning, it seemed like the least I could do, so as to start paying back the luck that had given me the means to earn a living when I had no other qualifications. By then, my first agent, Christine, had left the literary business to go into television, a move that I myself still regarded as drastic. My new agent was the equally glamorous Pat Kavanagh, who was quite accustomed to being admired by her male clients. Blessed with a direct manner, she made it clear that she didn't necessarily salute the idea of my writing an autobiography. 'You haven't *done* anything.' That, I tried to explain, was the point. The very idea was ridiculous, and therefore automatically comic: as long as I could make my memories of an Australian childhood and adolescence amusing in themselves, the book would stand a chance through being the opposite of serious. She looked dubious but thought that Tom Maschler of Cape might go for it. To Charles Monteith of Faber, he who had gone to sleep during *Peregrine Prykke's Pilgrimage*, it would probably sound like the boy from the bush pulling another fast one. As things happened, Monteith wasn't asked for his opinion. The project got no further than Maschler, who called me in and did a routine by which he proved, with statistics, that publishing such a book would be, for him, the same as throwing money on the fire, but he would do so because occasionally a man has to risk all in the defence of his integrity. The print run would be small, he warned me, and the advance would be small to match. I said with some confidence that Pat Kavanagh would be interested to hear all this. Nothing daunted, Maschler went on to say that I would be risking my future but he would be risking everything. His spiel

practically had soundtrack music by Elmer Bernstein. It was him and me against the world. He would clear the path ahead, placate the board of directors, drug the sales representatives. But this unique idea of an autobiography by someone who had done nothing must go through. All I had to do was write the thing. He even offered me a free cup of coffee – a spendthrift gesture he usually made only for John Fowles. But it was his enthusiasm that clinched the deal. Between author and publisher, the relationship works awfully like sex: there is no substitute for being keen on each other. There was also a biscuit.

After a build-up like that I expected that the actual writing process would be agonizing, but it came easily when I could find the time. Some of the time found itself. My television appearances, dotted irregularly through the decade, had attracted the attention of one of the smartest executives at LWT, Barry Cox. If he had been less smart he might have ended up running a TV channel, but like Will Wyatt he was doomed by his sanity and competence to making sense of the chaos created by managerial zanies. I owe him a lot. In fact – it just occurred to me – I owe him a thousand quid. The year before last I bumped into him on Waterloo Bridge and he made the mistake of asking me what I had been up to since my retirement. I told him that my new idea for a multimedia personal web site was going to revolutionize television. No doubt sick of hearing about new concepts that would revolutionize television, he handed over a grand to help www.clivejames.com stay on the air for a few more days so that it could burn his money along with mine. He's that kind of man, although, since hardly any men are that kind of man, you might not recognize him when I say so. At the time, I had met very few people like him. The show he was cooking up for LWT at its new citadel on the South Bank was called *Saturday Night People*. It would feature Russell Harty, Janet Street-Porter, and one other in yet another survey of the week, but this time based on solid journalism. Harty, whose life was to be cut sadly short, was a very sophisticated man with a knack for looking shocked on air. Since Janet Street-Porter specialized in the outrageous, they worked naturally as a double act, although off screen Janet privately, but sometimes very audibly, denounced Harty as a patronizing git. There was something to it: gay men, still fighting their own battles, weren't yet very attuned to feminism.

But once the cameras were on those two, they were the ideal couple. Harty looked and sounded like an aesthete who knew Alan Bennett quite well, and Janet looked and sounded like a cockney female assassin who had been trained to kill with her voice, which was not only raucous but seemed permanently surprised, like a macaw taking off repeatedly from a steam catapult. They were the two sides of the class war, temporarily seated behind dodgem-shaped desks. The question was about who would occupy the third desk. How would the Third

Person fit in? Barry's rationale for picking me was that I didn't fit in at all. The more that I played the visiting Aussie with the unexpectedly confident perspective on disintegrating Britain, the better he liked it. All three front-people were fed with proper news stories. These had been put together by a team of journalists commanded by Peter Hillmore, an able young editor whose career was to be cut short by illness. But he was still going full blast when we started off, so we weren't short of material. The question was how to comment on it. Each in his or her own way, all three of us worked it out. There was plenty of time because the show was only local in its first season. At first I was the slowest to get going. I took the stories handed to me by Hillmore's research team, switched the words just enough so that I could read them out, and saved my comment for the end. Things were a bit dull. Then I learned to interlace my commentary all the way through, and things brightened up. Finally, with Barry's encouragement, I learned to get outdoors, find a suitably grotesque showbiz story, and bring it back for dissection.

By an accident that helped to change the course of my career, I found myself sitting through the first screening of a movie called *The Swarm*, starring Michael Caine as a scientist saving the world from the killer bees. In the dark of the Leicester Square Odeon, as the killer bees swarmed all over Richard Chamberlain and reduced Olivia de Havilland to a hive, I wrote down Michael Caine's dialogue in my notebook. 'Everyone inside! The killer bees are coming!' (Tip for writing in the dark: write big. The worst you can do is waste paper, whereas if you can't read what you wrote you will have wasted the whole assignment.) In the next edition of the show I gave an account of the movie's plot, with a recital of Michael Caine's best lines. Since everybody can do Michael Caine's voice – the only question is whether he can – my deficient powers of mimicry were no handicap. As I evoked the splendours of the screenplay – while being careful not to underrate the threat to civilization posed by killer bees – I could feel my story going over with the studio audience. There was a lady in a knitted hat who could take no more. Better than that, there was evidence next day that it had gone over with the audience at home. People came up to me in the street and talked about killer bees. Some of them imitated killer bees. On the other side of the street, people would wave their arms rapidly and do a buzzing thing with their mouths. It was my first experience of starting a craze on TV and I could feel it working exactly the same way as the first drink I ever had. I tried to remember the effect of my last drink, and how the first drink had led to it by an inexorable process. But there seemed just as great a danger of getting addicted to Puritanism. Here, surely, was a harmless pleasure. The following week I spoke again of *The Swarm*, and found that the audience

couldn't hear enough about it. For the last show of the season, the studio crew, in cahoots with the art department, rigged up a huge killer bee so that it could be lowered to attack me at the appropriate moment. Usually surprises don't work in studio, but I managed to keep my head as I struggled, summoning my Michael Caine voice to cry: 'Everyone outside! The killer bees are attacking the franchise!' Janet hit the bee with a rolled-up script. Or something like that. There is no tape to say any different.

Saturday Night People was off to the races, but it never raced on the network. Lew Grade would not have Russell Harty on the air in the ATV area, which was too large a chunk of the network for the other stations to ignore. If Lew Grade's prejudice against Harty was based, as seemed likely, on Harty's homosexuality, then we were out of business until such time as the victim could prove he had gone straight, perhaps by marrying Janet. Otherwise there was nothing we could do about it. Luckily for me, there was nothing LWT could do about it either. The show was too expensive to keep running without a network slot. On the other hand, we had contracts that had to be honoured. So we all got paid top whack for a whole season of not making a television programme for LWT. Since the contract said that we couldn't make television programmes for anyone else either, there was time to burn.

16. BEYOND THE ATTACK OF THE KILLER BEES

I burned it writing my autobiography. In Cambridge I would sit in the Copper Kettle, writing down my memories of being a failure at high-school mathematics while Stephen Hawking hummed past outside with equations for the birth of the universe spinning in his head. In the Barbican I would sit in the sill-free window and conjure the kookaburras of childhood while ducks came in to land on the lake for the next round of their world crapping championship. It would have been slower work if I had delved deeper into my psychological condition, but a cautionary instinct, which might well have been part of the condition, kept me safely on the surface. Nevertheless I could spot the occasional stain of grief soaking through. Quickly I would cover it with the moon-dust of tall stories, some of which I had been telling for years. Veterans of the Footlights club room or the Kebab House literary lunch would have been able to recite some of them along with me. It was not the first outing for my routines about Australia's deadly snakes and spiders. But it was the first time they had been put to paper, and it was soon clear to me that the structure of the narrative had benefited from long rehearsal. There was an episode about billycarts which had once actually been written down, when I was doing my year as a junior literary editor on the *Sydney Morning Herald* in the late 1950s. On that first flight, the episode had been called 'They Fell Among Flowers'. This time it was incorporated seamlessly into a larger narrative, but there could be no doubt that the hurtling, booming, disastrously crashing billycarts had set the tone for the book long before the book occurred.

The book was an animated cartoon. Although I liked to think that the story being told was roughly in line with the emotional facts – all the confessions about awkwardness and inadequacy were untrue only in the sense of being understated – it couldn't be denied that some of the details sounded a bit exaggerated. As when I spoke, these embellishments, when I was writing, tended to arrive out of the blue. Suddenly they were there, and too good to leave out.

The secret (as always, it was a matter of tone control) was to trim and time the extravagance of an embellishment so that it would be congruent to its setting, lest the readers withdraw their consent to being had. But being had they unquestionably were. It seemed best to come clean that I knew this was happening. So I called the book *Unreliable Memoirs*. Since this initiative was tantamount to calling my own sworn testimony a pack of lies, there was no automatic professional acceptance for the finished manuscript. Pat Kavanagh, still wary about the idea of someone who had done nothing writing a book about how he had prepared himself for not doing it, now had another reason for suggesting that I shelve the manuscript for ten years. Tom Maschler ominously assured me that the small print run he had envisaged could be made smaller yet: five thousand copies should be plenty. But I noticed that they had both laughed, even against their better judgement. There is no more precious laughter than that, and even today I am still out to write the kind of book I most like to read: the book I despise myself for being unable to stop reading.

So I wasn't completely devastated, only almost, when Penelope Mortimer jumped the gun by about a month and posted an early review denouncing *Unreliable Memoirs* as a crime against humanity. She didn't precisely dance on my grave, but she did march up and down on it while declaring herself insulted by my self-proclaimed satisfaction at excusing conscious falsehood with would-be drollery. The insult, apparently, was not to her alone, but to all serious writers. It was an insult to literature itself. Whether literature itself was an activity that Penelope Mortimer could plausibly be thought of as representing was open to question. (As an admirer of her novel *The Pumpkin Eater* I rather thought she could.) But the month that followed would have felt like a year if the unofficial buzz had not been building up. The publicity lovelies at Cape told me that the pre-production copies had all been stolen instantly. Apparently this was a good sign. Then the broadsheet reviews started to come out, and most of the reviewers quoted so much of my stuff that there was scarcely room for theirs: an even better sign. John Carey, who had once buried *The Metropolitan Critic*, hailed *Unreliable Memoirs* as the written equivalent of sliced bread. Instantly I revised my opinion of his critical prowess upwards. To my delight – for once I managed to enjoy the moment – the book went straight into the bestseller list and took only three weeks to reach the top spot. But what kept it there for months on end was undoubtedly a guest appearance on *Parkinson*.

Parky, at whose expense I had made far too many unreasonable remarks in my TV column when I was starting off, would have had ample reason, after I sat down opposite him on the set, to pull the lever that dropped me through the trapdoor to the waiting crocodiles. But he took Chinese revenge. He told me, and

the watching millions, that my book had made him laugh. He said he particularly liked the episode about the dunnyman. Visited by my guardian angel, I suddenly acquired the sense not just to agree that it was a nifty stretch of writing but also to quote a few bits from memory, climaxing the act with the bit about the dunnyman tripping over my bicycle and engulfing himself with the contents of the full pan. In the studio audience, the ladies in the knitted hats had the choice between dying of shock or howling in approbation. They did the latter, and out there, in millions of living rooms I couldn't see, other people were doing the same. I could hear them. They made my feet vibrate. On television, a successful gag doesn't just click, it thumps. From that moment, I was made. In future years, the irony did not escape me that the delicate little boat of my literary fortunes had been launched on a wave of liquid shit.

The commercial success of *Unreliable Memoirs* ensured that those future years could never become financially desperate, although it was never true that I could have lived on the royalties of that book alone, or of all my books put together. You have to sell on the scale of Jeffrey Archer or J. K. Rowling to get rich as a writer. I try not to tell journalists what *Unreliable Memoirs* sold because they would be unimpressed by the figure. People assume that any book they have heard of sells a million. In cold fact, it is a lucky book that sells a thousand, and I know of one literary memoir – in my review of it I called it a classic, and still think I was right – that sold fifteen copies. *Unreliable Memoirs* did eventually sell a million copies, but it took about twenty years to do so. The nice thing is that it is still going, as if it doesn't know how to switch itself off: it's like a broken washing machine that goes on with its spin cycle until the house falls down. Why it should have attained such longevity is a nice question. My own guess is that the British readers simply like to hear stories about a warm country, but the book is a steady seller in Australia too, where evocations of sunlight are like coal to Newcastle. Perhaps I succeeded in one of the things I consciously tried to do: evoke what it was like to be young in the free countries after World War II, when all the adults could still remember their lesson in the value of liberty. It was a story of simplicity, and as time goes by there is nostalgia for that simplicity, so the hankering for a clear account of it doesn't fade. Counting the initial hardbacks along with the later paperbacks, there have been about a hundred printings so far, but that word 'printing' is the tip-off. All those books were never anywhere all at once, not even at the warehouse. Supplies get renewed according to demand, and over time the figure alters upward to denote a quantity that nobody has ever actually seen. You can just count yourself lucky that the number advances. It would have advanced more quickly if Sonny Mehta, who was chief editor at Pan Macmillan's highbrow

label Picador when the Cape hardback took off, had not persuaded me that the paperback should be in the Picador 'B' format rather than the Pan pocket-book size. A pocket-book would go on the rack and sell faster. A Picador would go in the spinner and sell more slowly; but it would, he assured me, sell forever. So far he has been right. The number continues to advance. Sometimes I visualize it going in the other direction as people start to hand their books back. They can, if they wish, but I can't return the money. It all got spent. Only in television did I make enough to keep something. I suppose I could have gone on with regular journalism and kept raising my price, but there might have been a limit to what the market would stand, and would certainly have been a limit to my satisfaction. Much as I respected journalism as a form, I was starting to fancy myself as an Author. Not even I, however, was conceited enough to believe that I could always expect a hit. After all, I hadn't expected this one.

On the television front, the prospects were now looking good enough to raise the question of whether I could plausibly continue to be a TV critic much longer, lest I be faced with the awkward likelihood of having to review my own programmes. For LWT, Barry Cox asked me to write and present a documentary about Sydney. I didn't do my part of it all that well. There was a lot of clunky walking around my childhood haunts while I droned on about the past. A sequence set in Luna Park had me pointing out that it was a funfair while the camera was showing it to be a funfair. I said that it was falling apart while the camera closed in to show that it was falling apart. But I quickly saw that I could have done better if I had talked about something else while the pictures were talking about themselves. Unfortunately Barry, when we got back to London with the footage, made the mistake of telling me that he thought me hopeless when talking to camera. I thought I was just bad, which is not quite the same thing. Another LWT executive producer, Richard Drewett, thought I was even worse than Barry said. But Drewett also thought that ways could be found to ensure that I would improve. I should hasten to say that Barry had probably taken the more responsible view. It is an expensive business, pouring in the resources while someone improves on air: a company can bankrupt itself while it waits for a few new presenters to come good. But Drewett was running an outfit called Special Programmes that was actually briefed to do the irresponsible thing. He had been given the job because he was a miracle man with the practicalities and a reliable inventor of high-yield formats: the first Parkinson series and the *Audience With* specials had both been his idea. If the unpredictable was required, he was the man to call on. A racing-car nut who had been put out of competition by a smashed foot, Drewett now slaked his craving for danger by building programmes around me. I sometimes had to be hosed out of the studio

when things went sideways, but he got me into the salutary habit of sitting down with him after the programme and analysing exactly what had gone right or wrong. For quite a while the wrong outweighed the right. A meticulous producer called Nick Barratt was assigned to me for a short series of little clip-shows about television. I almost drove him nuts with my new and purely nervous habit of stopping dead in rehearsal when I fluffed a word. I chewed up time as if I was paying for it myself. In my defence I can say that the set might have been designed to make me as nervous as a trainee human cannonball. I had an egg-cup plastic chair into which I fitted like Humpty Dumpty, an impression added to by my excessive weight and the new, tailored three-piece suit that had been chosen to suit the set rather than my figure. But the show got better despite these drawbacks, and there was talk of a future one-hour version of the format, perhaps to be called *Clive James on Television*. I liked the sound of that.

Even in its short version, though, the show about television did something to offset the debacle of a series called *A Question of Sex*, which I fronted with Anna Raeburn, Fleet Street's all-time most-presentable agony aunt. The two of us sat around – or, even worse, stood around, or, even worse than that, walked around – pontificating about the differences between the sexes, as established by various scientists, some of whom came walking on in white coats, threading their way along complicated paths between large styrofoam models of chromosomes marked X and Y. Various animals were wheeled on in cages, supposedly to demonstrate their different approaches, according to gender, to such tasks as ramming their heads against a rubber button in order to earn the peanut. Unfortunately some of the animals were apes and the only task they had in mind was screwing each other. Denied the opportunity to do this, they retired to the back corners of their cages and would not come forward even when threatened. Anna and I coped stoically, I thought, especially when compared with the senior executive, whose name I have finally succeeded in forgetting after years of hypnosis. He went berserk, shouting into the floor manager's earphones and finally appearing in the studio so that he could shout at everybody. He did everything that the apes were supposed to do when excited. Finally the studio crew declined to go on. Since the apes had decided the same thing already, there was nothing left to do except wrap up the episode. Eventually, after much editing, a truncated version of the series got to air, where it was universally ignored. But I actually learned a lot from it. Apart from gaining confirmation for the basic principle of never working with a senior executive who has a more volatile artistic temperament than you, I started getting the measure of how to be an asset on studio day, rather than a liability. The show had a studio audience, and during the frequent pauses while the apes were being unsuccessfully

persuaded out of their corners, or the scientists were being taught to walk and talk simultaneously without knocking the chromosomes over, or the senior executive was being put under sedation, I had an opportunity, indeed an obligation, to keep the people in the bleachers happy. In the course of time I got good enough at doing it to dispense with the services of a warm-up man. Although I hadn't formulated it as a rule yet, here was an example of the importance of turning a disaster into a training ground. It's only a variation of the Czech philosopher Martina Navratilova's great central maxim that applies to all creative activities and not just to her own sport: What matters is not how well you play when you're playing well, it's how well you play when you're playing badly. With those early shows for LWT, I got my average up.

The television shows were only in an embryo stage but they had the useful effect of getting me away from the *Observer* often enough so that I didn't get bored with what was becoming, after ten years, a predictable weekly task. Perhaps the effect was deleterious: with fewer distractions I might have faced facts sooner. As things were, the nimbus granted me by *Unreliable Memoirs* made it easier to follow up any prospect that took my fancy, thus conferring a feeling of invulnerability which was potentially dangerous, had I but known it. Exactly the same feeling led Napoleon to invade Russia. He was pursuing one of his own sound principles – the army that never leaves its defences is bound to be defeated – but he pursued it too far. I was still well short of doing anything conspicuously crazy, but the descent to hell is easy. Not that it felt like hell when I teamed up with David Bailey to produce a series of illustrated profiles for *Ritz* magazine. *Ritz* proved to be short lived, partly because its owner and editor was a Willy Donaldson type who was always moving on, and who is now probably somewhere in the Andes, running an export agency for condor eggs. But the magazine's quick demise was a pity, because it was the most convincing British example ever of a glossy magazine on newsprint – a form that otherwise only the French have ever mastered. Newsprint makes female glamour look more human and therefore, to my mind, even more glamorous. Bailey understood that – he is a very sharp character, behind his thuggish persona – and did some of his best photo shoots. One of them was of the young Meryl Streep, then in the early stage of her career.

Having spotted her on her way up and persuaded her to sit for her portrait, I ushered her into Bailey's house in Chalk Farm and he asked, well within her hearing, 'Ooze iss?' Usually he could be depended on to be kidding when he said stuff like that but this time he wasn't. Luckily she loved the idea of posing for someone who had never heard of her. The following week she received me for lunch at Claridge's so that she could fulfil the written part of the portrait. For

any actress, no matter how intelligent – and they don't come any smarter than Meryl Streep – the pictures are always more important than the words. The last thing any actress needs is some hack speculating about her inner life. But this actress couldn't have been more gracious. Highly literate as well as funny, she talked easily of modern English and Irish poets as well as of American ones. Well aware that I was dippy about her, she told lots of stories about her wonderful husband after she had ordered the sole, asking for it to be boned. Forever green about the finer points of life, I thought 'boned' meant with the bones left in, so I neglected to ask for the same thing, because I wanted them taken out. Still determined to play an indispensable part in the life of this angelically lovely and lyrically gifted person, I began an anecdote designed to illustrate my poetically sensitive nature, an aesthetic responsiveness enhanced, rather than injured, by my easy familiarity with the literary world. By then I had discovered the bones in the sole, but I was operating on the assumption that I would be able to tease out enough of the flesh between them to provide a few bone-free mouthfuls so that I could talk safely while I ate. 'And then,' I said, 'Lowell hauled this enormous manuscript out of his pocket and began to *ark!* Ark! Ngggh!' A trident of needle-hard small bones had gone vertically into my palate. I had to reach in and pull them out individually. The next twenty minutes were agony until she insisted that I order something else and quit trying to be suave. I liked the way she did that.

I liked her too much, of course. As ever, the combination of beauty and talent reduced me to an idiot. Bailey, who was surrounded by celestially lovely women at all times, used to get a big bang out of seeing me bite the back of my hand. One evening I walked into Langan's Brasserie for a business dinner and without warning I was confronted by the spectacle of Bailey lolling on a velvet banquette with Catherine Deneuve on one side of him and Marie Helvin on the other. It was such an assault on elementary justice that I closed my eyes with the pain. When I opened them again, Bailey was laughing his head off, a rusticated cherub with a bad shave. But it was another cockney photographer, Terence Donovan, who dug deeper into my psychology. Donovan was physically very big: six feet plus of judo-trained muscle packed into a Dougie Hayward grey suit, he made his drop-head dark-blue Rolls-Royce Corniche look like a pedal car. It was his delight to take me for rides around London while he wised me up on the realities of life in the spotlight. 'Them upmarket birds are going to go on doing your head in,' he announced, 'until you realize that they're just human. I mean, they do a poo every morning, don't they? What you need is Paris.' Donovan, a married man himself, was by no means impervious to the allure of a bright female. Not all of the models were dumb. There were several famous ones who were as

bright as he was, and Donovan, though he had quit school early, was fully as clever as Bailey. But Donovan clearly had life in perspective, otherwise he would have turned into King Kong's dangerous younger brother the first time he saw Tatiana Patitz with her clothes off. So I respected his opinion.

Donovan had directed a movie in Japan that had crashed in flames. Now he was eager to get started again by directing a television documentary. Drewett thought it would be a good idea if I should make a programme about the Paris cat-walk shows, because the material would be so attractive that I could spend most of my time in voice over, with no need of the dreaded 'piece to camera', a clumsy technique that he and I were agreed should be avoided by anyone, let alone me. Drewett took a punt when he assigned me to the job, but he took an even bigger punt when he hired Donovan to direct. Donovan had the entrée into the Paris fashion world, but he was easily bored, which is a dangerous characteristic in a film director, because there is a lot of humdrum detail that can't be skimmed. For the *Clive James Paris Fashion Show*, the first mainstream television programme ever devoted to the subject, Donovan invented a new kind of shot by which the camera was positioned at the end of the catwalk and the models were filmed walking towards a long lens. A long lens slows things down, so the models appear to float. The shot later became a staple and is now seen in every film or TV show about the catwalk ever made anywhere in the world, but I was there on the day Donovan thought of it. He was that original. Unfortunately he was also very impatient, and didn't want to do the standard bread-and-butter shots of me arriving at the shows and leaving, or ringing the doorbell of Sonya Rykiel's apartment and walking away afterwards, or, as he put it, 'any of that'. In other words, he was out to make a film that couldn't be edited. I was still too green to realize the importance of what Donovan was leaving out. But when Drewett heard about it he was on the next plane to Paris, where he revealed an unsuspected but impressive command of French. He needed only English, however, to tell Donovan what was what. I saw straight away that Drewett could do what I couldn't. His hands were trembling; he didn't actually enjoy speaking uncomfortable truths; but he did it. I decided right then that he was the man for me, and I hope it is not giving too much away if I say that he was the executive producer on every television programme I did for the next twenty years.

Donovan took his knackerings well. He grumbled a bit but he got on with the business of doubling back to secure the dull stuff we couldn't do without. And he was still unbeatable on the exciting stuff: the backstage sequence at the Lagerfeld show (now a legend in the television industry, because it was never allowed to happen again) was made possible by Donovan's physical strength. He held off the security men while I sat there being filmed as the models went

skidding by half naked. But Donovan still never managed to get a clapperboard on anything, so the van-load of unsynchronized film and audio tape that we sent back to London took about a year to sort out, leading directly to a senior editor's death from a heart attack. I persisted, however, in thinking of Donovan as the model of sanity and good will. A few quirks aside, he walked and talked as if he had the secret of happiness. The day would come when he would take his own life, and I still can't believe he did it. Dear man, he was so funny: one of the funniest talkers I have ever heard. And like all genuinely funny people, he was funny because he was perceptive. He had seen the look of longing in my eyes and he was right about the cure. In Paris I was bombarded by so much beauty that I finally learned to listen. Gradually it became apparent, from the flow of prattle, that a young woman of heavenly appearance was not necessarily Mary Cassatt or Berthe Morrisot just because she could paint her nails successfully. The great beauties are certainly works of art, but that doesn't make them artists. The lovelier the woman, the less likely it is that she created herself: the genius belongs to nature, not to her. But it was still very satisfying when Donovan and I, taking a casual break for lunch between the chaos at Yves Saint Laurent and the riot at Thierry Mugler, strolled into the Coupole and sat down at the best table in the place: satisfactory because we had walked in arm in arm with Marie Helvin and Jerry Hall. There were a couple of British male gossip columnists at the next table and I saw one of them die. His body still ate, drank, talked, and eventually walked, but his soul was gone. I knew just how he felt, but I was over it. Well, almost.

While the Paris programme was in its long agony of being made ready for editing, I had so much going on that I might have forgotten it existed. But when all the miles of film and tape were finally synched up, a process began that I couldn't, once I had tasted it, get enough of. Richard encouraged my presence in the editing room, which was still no more advanced than the one I had grown familiar with in my days at Granada. Younger readers will find it hard to realize that the footage could not be digitized and edited electronically. All the film and sound still had to be cut and spliced physically. But this time it wasn't bits and pieces of a Hollywood movie: it was our movie, in its raw form. With alternative takes for almost every shot, there was an infinity of choice at war with a paucity of means. So it took hours in the editing room to put even the shortest sequence together. 'If we can get that shot of me shambling down the boulevard to echo that shot of Jerry swaying down the catwalk at the Kenzo show, the audience might like the contrast.' 'Then we'll have to get out of her shot a few frames earlier, before she starts to turn.' Today, you could try the effect in thirty seconds. Then, you had to place the order and come back tomorrow. But when

every tweak took so long to do, it had to be thought about hard. It was like the difference between handwriting and a word processor: there was more initial resistance from the medium, so you had to be definite. I got a lot of free tuition in the business of choosing which frame of film should go where and when. Thus I knew every foot of the rough cut when the time came to record the first draft of a commentary. It was a long, intricate, and enthralling business and it should have kept me sufficiently busy. Perhaps fatefully, however, there was enough time left over for another project.

The news media had been banging on for a year about the pending royal marriage. Most of the coverage was absurd but I was sufficiently in favour of constitutional monarchy as a political institution to contemplate a fourth mock epic, which would express, I hoped lightly, my views on the subject, while exploiting the comic potential as people lined up to bow, scrape, cluck and sniff. Still far too fond of giving my mock epics alliterative titles, I called the project *Charles Charming's Challenges on the Pathway to the Throne*. I had, of course, no idea that the marriage itself would be one of the challenges. The piece seemed harmless enough as it grew, but it rapidly began growing too fast, like a pet baby crocodile. With illustrations once again by Mark Boxer, the poem became a newspaper serial, a book in Britain, a book in America, and then – the step into the unknown – a West End stage show. If the show had been on the small scale of the Pygge and Prykke pantomimes, danger might have been averted. Though radical acquaintances such as Christopher Hitchens would have given me the bird, the bird would have flown inside a charmed circle. But a team of impresarios moved in, and several backers, among them the erratically generous Naim Attalah, put up the money for a month's run in a proper Shaftesbury Avenue theatre. The West End! Here was something to write home about. When I did write home about it, I assured my mother that her little boy still had his head screwed on. I had, but if I had shaken it I might have heard a rattle where the screw was working loose.

Once again, I was the narrator, and Dai kindly stepped forward to play all the male parts including the Prince of Wales, for which role he developed a tone so strangled that he put his vocal cords in jeopardy: he would practise whole speeches with his teeth locked together, the words emerging only from his sinuses. So far, so normal. The innovation lay in asking Pamela Stephenson to join the cast. Pamela had become famous for the improbable combination of elfin prettiness and comic skill she brought to the BBC TV show *Not the Nine O'Clock News*. She liked my script, and from the minute she came on stage at the first dress rehearsal in her Bruce Oldfield silver dress, everyone involved on the finance side liked her. It was one huge love affair all round right into the

previews, which were smash hits. The audience howled and raved every night. I started regretting not having invested a few grand. Say, ten. Maybe twenty? I gave cocky interviews, in which I counted chickens by the squadron. Australian correspondents interviewed me in my black tie on the afternoon of opening night. Television cameras, after they had finished circling around Pamela like sharks, waited for me down corridors. Out in the street, they pointed their lenses upwards to capture my name. It was up there on the front of the theatre: my name in lights.

Well, you guessed it, but you can't possibly guess the details. As Count Ugolino tells Dante in the *Divine Comedy*, yes, my death was terrible, but let me tell you how terrible it was. The preview audiences had been a cross-section of the general public, and their manifest delight had led me to believe that the press-night audience would react in the same way. But the press-night audience was a cross-section of the press, plus a cross-section of the backers' families and friends. Naim Attalah, in particular, seemed to know almost nobody except platoons of well-bred English young ladies who said 'Oh, really?' as a sign of enthusiasm. The relatives of other backers seemed to consist mainly of people whose command of English had been only recently acquired. From the moment we started to recite, you could hear a discreet rattle of knuckles cracking from the number of people sitting on their hands. Lines that had earned a gale of laughter on the preview nights now were lucky to get a titter. The first time that I paused for a laugh that didn't come, a violent attack of flop sweat came instead. Under my jacket, the sides of my white shirt were suddenly soaked, and by the end of the first half even my shoes were full of water. During the interval I needed a complete change of kit, and I was already thinking that I might need a complete change of address, not to mention of personality. How had I got myself into this, and other people along with me? It wasn't as if I hadn't learned this lesson long ago. But I had lulled myself into forgetting it, and now, suddenly, there was an even harder lesson to be learned. Pamela and Dai taught it to me. They gave me a lesson in keeping my nerve, and on the whole we got through the evening with a show of confidence. Indeed I thought we had done better than get away with it. There was solid applause at the end, and people 'came around' afterwards to say they thought it was something new under the sun. Rowan Atkinson said that he had been roped in by the impresarios and hadn't expected to enjoy it at all, but he really had. Alas, none of these people were writing the reviews. The press were writing them instead, and the press killed me. The worst review came from James Fenton, who said it was the most embarrassing evening he had ever spent in his life. What made it the worst review was that it was also the best written. I tried to believe that I would have put it more kindly had I been

reviewing him, but I had signed up to take my chances in a theatrical event, not group therapy.

The press decided the matter. The word of mouth from the previews was good enough to keep the thing going, but from the second night the audiences started getting smaller. It was a big theatre, so if you had watched a speeded-up film of the auditorium from night to night you would have seen an increasing emptiness seeping down from the gallery to the back of the stalls, and then rolling forward until finally, on the last few nights, only a few of the front rows were occupied. Every night of the run my two brave cast members, when they took up their beginners' positions, would find me looking through the peephole in the front curtain as I counted the house like the quartermaster at Rorke's Drift counting cartridges. To keep the thing running for the promised number of nights, I had started putting my own money into it, chasing bad money with good in the full knowledge I was doing so – and in the full knowledge, also, that the money belonged to my family. Dai was uncomplaining as always, and Pamela was saintly. At the shining start of her career, the last thing she needed was to be imprisoned in a flop. But she went on every night and gave me a continuous lesson in how to lavish everything you have on the people who attend, and to forget those who don't. After all, the fewer tickets you sell, the smaller the number of people who know or care that anything has gone wrong. Among those who did attend were some very intelligent people who told me afterwards, either personally or by letter, that they thought the venture original. These paragons, however, were just a few voices in a mighty show of indifference.

The catastrophe would have been complete if it had not also been the making of me. Had it happened sooner in my life, I would almost certainly have cut and run. But I stayed with it, all the way to the end, even though I accepted quite quickly that the critics had been right. Mark Boxer had warned me even during the triumphant previews that the show was too big to be attractively small but too small to be big: for a ticket costing that much, the West End audience wants to see something that fills the stage. Words alone, no matter how cleverly written, won't do the business. Those critics who had found my political opinions absurd I still thought narrow-minded, but their objections would have been only incidental if I had swept them off their feet. I hadn't done so, and now I was off my own feet – flat on my back, in fact. I retired to Cambridge and made myself useful around the house: always a tacit confession that I was severely wounded. Those in residence did their best not to look accusingly at the man who had robbed them.

Luckily I had other irons in the fire. By their combined glow I could dimly see the way ahead. When the *Paris Fashion Show* went to air, it was watched by an

audience that would have packed my West End theatre every night of the week for fifty years. Drewett said we could do a lot more stuff like that, but it would be a full-time job. William Shawn wrote asking me to review Robert Hughes's new book *The Fatal Shore* for the *New Yorker*. If I myself need convincing – and for a while I did – here was evidence that there were things I knew how to do. Surely people would not be asking me to do these splendid things if I really was as incompetent as I felt. Even more encouraging, for the long run, was the growing evidence that there were things I knew how to avoid. The impresario Michael White wanted me to write a screenplay based on *Unreliable Memoirs*. I said I would if I could direct the film. Such a degree of hubris was not unfamiliar to him, but he agreed, and there was a token fee of five thousand pounds to seal the deal. Educated by my West End fiasco, however, I thought again about a project that I wasn't sure I could deliver on, and I gave the money back. White told me that it was the first time anyone had given him back the money. That felt like progress.

But I still felt that the time had come for more demanding pursuits than regular journalism, even if they were less certain. Helping to cut film in the editing room had given me the taste for composition on a larger scale, in more than one dimension. My TV column had got to the point where I was feeling the lack of room when a serious subject came up. When I wrote about the much-derided American series *Holocaust*, and predicted – correctly, as it happened – that its soap-opera qualities might be the very element that would ensure its beneficial effect in Germany, Conor Cruise O'Brien kindly said that I should be writing that kind of thing more often. The implication was that I wasn't writing that kind of thing often enough. Journalism had me trapped with its money. Each year Harry Evans of the *Sunday Times* called a meeting to make a bid for my television column. With rare acumen I always got him to stage the meeting over lunch at the Garrick Club, a notorious stock exchange for Fleet Street gossip. The news that Harry was talking to me was back in Donald Trelford's office before we had finished our dessert. Only after that did I enter into a new salary round with the *Observer's* corridor-stalkers. I could still convince myself that I was worth what they paid me, but surely the day would come when I would give short weight. My time in Fleet Street reached an unmistakable peak with a brace of Postcard essays I sent back from China. I joined the press corps for Margaret Thatcher's visit to Beijing, where she talked with the Chinese leaders about the upcoming handover of Hong Kong. The two Postcard pieces, one written in Beijing and the other on the flight back to England from Hong Kong, were, from the technical angle, the most taxing efforts I ever pulled off as a journalist. The first one, in its entirety, I phoned back to the *Observer* from the Beijing post

office, which had equipment with Alexander Graham Bell's name still on it. Perhaps benefiting from the pressure, the two pieces, which collectively carried the title 'Mrs T in China', were the best writing I could do. I knew as I wrote them that I would never do better in the genre. On the RAF VC-10 from Kai Tak to Heathrow, I put the draft of the second piece aside for half an hour to write a little play about the tour. Mrs Thatcher and the Downing Street personnel were riding at the front of the aircraft, with the press in the zoo section at the back. The Downing Street people, the Prime Minister included, came back to watch the play. Anne Robinson, in those days still a mere journalist, played Mrs Thatcher. It was a stunning performance, although perhaps not quite as amazing as her current imitation, on *The Weakest Link*, of a woman nothing like as nice as her real self – and, let it be said, more than a touch younger. As Anne's talented voice made the lines I had written swoop, howl, and whine through an authentically Thatcherite *tessitura*, I knew that I would always go back to the theatre, but also that I would never again forget to keep it small, like this: like a cabaret. You have to get the expectations down, not up. Then the words become a plus, a wealthy return on a cheap ticket, and nobody notices that nothing has been spent on costumes and sets. Mrs Thatcher quite enjoyed being sent up, incidentally. She was already at forty thousand feet, and anyway she never minded satire, as long as it was accompanied by abject worship and total agreement.

But the thing about the China trip that would eventually have the most drastic effect on my life was working too deep inside my soul for its implications to be considered yet. The mainland schedule had been crushing, and in Hong Kong we were granted a couple of days to recover the use of our credit cards. ('We're back on plastic,' said one of the female journalists. I wish I could remember her name: she was a poet.) While the tireless Mrs Thatcher bustled around visiting military bases and reassuring the locals that the Communists would behave when they took over or else she would get her friends the Americans to drop atomic bombs on them, we of the press caught up with our real lives. It was my first time in Hong Kong, and after an hour in a foam bath at the Hilton there could be no doubt about what had to be my first destination. I caught a cab out to the Australian Military Cemetery at Sai Wan Bay and visited my father's grave. I have visited that quiet place many times since then, and after my mother died two years ago I have even felt able to write about it, but the memory of that first visit is still clear in my mind. Down the hill between the terraces of headstones, the long lawn that tilts down to the sea, I walked to find his name and number. When I did, I fell to my knees and cried. I cried to heaven, which never listens, but has the excuse that it never causes anything either. There is only chance. I

cried as I had never cried since I was very young. It was the dates that did it. Already I was ten years older than he had been when he was killed. Time to get something done.

17. NICE BIKE, CAPTAIN STARLIGHT

You will have noticed, during the preceding book, that I was more than once jolted by harsh reality into the feeling that I had not yet achieved anything substantial. But that doesn't mean I skimmed what I previously did. I have done my best to give this book a beginning, middle, and end, and now here are a few paragraphs by way of a coda. Clearly another volume will be necessary: more than half my working life was still ahead of me, and it would turn out to be full of stories about the stars, whom I met in great profusion, and not always when they were at their best. If I can't keep the reader interested while I tell stories like those, I won't need anyone else to turn me off at the wall: I'll pull the plugs myself. But the previous chapters contain the story that matters most about the author. These were the years in which I really learned my stuff. Later on I just got a bit better at avoiding the big mistakes. But, as I have tried to show, without those big mistakes I would never have learned anything in the first place. The graph of your increasing profit from your own errors is the only authentic measure of progress.

Everything else is just time passing on the way to death, which has since overtaken quite a lot of people mentioned in this book. Some of them I met only briefly: Lord Bernstein, Lew Grade, Maurice Richardson, Edward Crankshaw, John Weightman, Richard Boston, Bill Grundy, Noele Gordon, Johnny Mercer, William Shawn, Burt Lancaster, Robert Mitchum, Peter Sellers, Richard Burton. Some I worked beside long enough to know their character, and almost always to be grateful for it: Russell Harty, Ken Tynan, Donald Pleasence, Barry Took, Willy Donaldson, Richard Findlater, Helen Dawson, Charles Monteith, John Wells, William Rushton, Viv Stanshall, Spike Milligan. Others were close to my heart: Jonathan James-Moore, Alan Sizer, Kingsley Amis, Philip Larkin, Terry Kilmartin, Ian Hamilton, Amanda Radice, Mark Boxer, Terence Donovan. In all categories and in every case, I was surprised that any of them should leave without my permission, but I rarely railed at fate. Although I was so annoyed with Donovan that I boycotted his funeral, I still thought that he had had a fair spin. Unless they die young, I hardly notice. Probably I just got too used, too

spin. Unless they are young, I hardly notice. Probably I just got too used, too early on, to the idea that living a reasonable span was a luxury, and that the thing to do, as Montaigne once insisted, was to live every day as if you would die tomorrow. I grew up with the Grim Reaper as a house guest. Every night he sat down with us to dinner in the glassed-in back veranda, the stave of his scythe bumping against the plasterboard ceiling. He stank a bit, but he was part of the furniture. I felt old when I was young, and feel young now I am old. I have never had a very well-developed sense of chronology. I just know that the dice roll and the river flows. I didn't know, while the period recorded in this book was going by, that some of the best things in it were already on their way out, never to return.

In Fleet Street, the age of hot metal was coming to an end. I loved the old technology, but there was never any doubt that the new technology would take over, although it took a futurologist to predict that a newspaper office, of all places, would become as silent as an aquarium. Since the spanking new equipment was not only a lot quieter than the clattering junk it superseded but also much lighter and far less demanding of total space, here was a neat example of how an economy, as it expands, actually gets smaller. When the print unions tried to keep the change under their control, Rupert Murdoch saw his chance. He broke the unions and saved the diversity of the newspaper business. If he hadn't done so, London would now be essentially a one-paper town, like New York. But when he broke the unions he broke Fleet Street as well. Freed from their shackles to the obsolete investment in the Linotype machines and the heavy presses, the newspapers took their offices wherever the rent was cheap, and within a year Fleet Street was no longer a real place. By now it is just a memory.

Roughly the same thing happened to my other great romance, the Modish London Literary World. The hard-core personnel of the Friday lunch became first busy, then successful, then celebrated, then world famous. Just as the venue had moved uptown from Mother Bunch's to the Bursa Kebab House, it moved upmarket from the Kebab House to Bertorelli's in Charlotte Street, and finally it moved from Bertorelli's into limbo, and from there into legend. Like a star that grows more brilliant in its dying days, the Friday lunch had gone nova. Some of the remnants still get together once a year, to make promises, never fulfilled, about meeting more often. But it should be said that the centrifugal forces that eventually pulled the thing apart had nothing to do with ill will. It was lack of spare time that did the trick. Quarrels were always repaired, and still are. The intelligent and the talented always look like a mafia for the simple reason that they value each other's friendship. That was the point that the bunch who came up next had trouble grasping. The *Modern Review* crew thought that our lot had

smoothed the way for each other. It was never true. We cared too much about our own integrity, and I, for one, could always count on receiving my fiercest criticism from among my friends. (After he read a serialized instalment of my royal epic, Christopher Hitchens was actually being quite restrained when he said, ‘You don’t really *believe* all this shit, do you?’) In time, the new guard learned that the only road to the top was the one on which the goods are delivered. We could have told them, but they weren’t listening. Youth rarely does listen, although the most gifted among the young are invariably those who have the capacity to take a lesson in when it hits them over the head. I suppose this book is meant to prove that I was once like that. I must have had something, or why would I have so often been brought whimpering to my knees?

There is a false equation there, of course. Not everyone who gets knocked out comes back, and some who fail deserve to. But for those who learn in the hardest way that they are not cut out to do the thing they love, there is always the opportunity to do it some service. And for those who can do the thing they love, but who encounter a disheartening setback, there is the chance to rediscover the solid discipline that should always underlie bravura, and which is sometimes eroded by the photon stream of the spotlight. Success can weaken anyone if it goes too long uninterrupted. The muscles go, like an astronaut’s in space. The experienced practitioner knows this, and gets more interested in both himself and his craft when the going gets rough. A big crash is just a concentrated version of what is happening all the time as he learns his business. He learns by falling short, and finding out why. Anyone who can write can write better. But he can do so only if he realizes his mistakes. The most common and most destructive mistake is to neglect the simple for the sake of the spectacular. Some of my favourite works of art are stunning for the wealth of their technique. In the garden of the Nymphenburg Palace, the dwarf architect Cuvilliés built a little pavilion called the Amalienburg that is almost too beautiful to look at even in the detail of its decoration, and in its totality almost makes you believe in the inherent virtue of the human race. But the first thing it was designed to do was to keep out the rain. When the writer is licking his wounds after a public disaster, he has been given time to remember what he was put on earth to do. He might one day make history and might even make a million pounds, but the first thing he must do is make sense. Sometimes it helps to write nothing at all for a while, rather than even one more sentence that tries too hard to impress. Let the field lie fallow. After my defeat in the West End, I drifted around the house in Cambridge looking exactly like a zombie. For a while my dead eyes saved me from being asked to carry heavy objects upstairs: what wife wants her new chest of drawers covered with scraps of decaying flesh? But somewhere in the

throbbing haematoma that had once been my brain, calculations were being made. It was at this time that I had the first glimmer of the plan, finally carried out twenty years later, to include my own enthusiasm among potential threats to the family finances, and to build in a protection barrier so that I could not get at my own money when hit with yet another idea that would duplicate the effects of the Italian Renaissance while helping to save the baby seals in the rain forest. This train of thought had the merit of putting the family first: a reliable way of getting the emphasis away from myself, and thus partly nullifying the characteristic that had got me into trouble in the first place. People who dress up as Superman don't always jump off buildings under the impression that they can fly, but the costume and the air of superiority are powerful hints that they might. The advantage of having a couple of children scooting around the place is the reminder they offer that you used to be one of them. You used to be a lot closer to your instinct. Whatever creativity you might have developed since, your instinct was where it came from.

The little people in the pixie caps were big enough to have bicycles by that stage. The bikes were second hand and needed a coat of paint. I did the painting. I gave each bike a basic colour – one shade of red for the larger and another shade for the smaller – and then started to embellish this basic coat with little painted stars of silver and gold. There were four-pointed stars, six-pointed stars, and the very rare eight-pointed stars with the peripheral dots. I couldn't stop adding stars until each bike was a candy constellation prettier than a wizard's wagon and the owner was crying with impatience to get on it and ride away. But the owners brought their friends home with more bikes for me to paint. As I kept painting compulsively onward, frosting the spokes with silver and making the seat-post a barber's pole for leprechauns, the anguish of defeat melted. A wrecked project can hurt worse than heartbreak, so it is no wonder that some people give up altogether, even though their talents would have merited another chance. Noel Coward was right when he said that the secret of success is the capacity to survive failure. The failure can hurt so much. But unlike heartbreak, which really is a dead loss, failure has a function. It asks you whether you really want to go on making things. And I wanted to go on making beautiful bicycles. Finally I had made enough of them, and knew it from the moment when, applying silver dots to the perimeter of an eight-pointed gold star, I found myself thinking: I'll write about this one day.



CLIVE JAMES

The Blaze of Obscurity

THE TV YEARS

CLIVE JAMES

The Blaze of Obscurity

PICADOR

To the memory of
Richard Drewett

All my clever dealings, he said to himself, have not made me happy. I remain a
broken, restless man.

– Stefan Zweig, *Ungeduld des Herzens*

Fool, of thyself speak well.

– *Richard II*, V, 5

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Introduction

With this fifth volume of my memoirs I begin the story of what happened to me when I left Fleet Street in 1982 and went into television as the main way of earning my bread. The effect on my literary reputation was immediate. It was thoroughly compromised, and even now, after a quarter of a century, it has only just begun to recover. After the calamitous reception of my *Charles Charming* show in the West End – the disaster is only partly evoked in the final chapters of my previous volume, because so many of the details remain too humiliating to write down – I regained the will to live by painting bicycles for my children. This creative upsurge extended itself to the construction of a novel, *Brilliant Creatures*. Overly decorated with flash, filigree and would-be-satirical pseudo-scholarship, the book nevertheless achieved the approval of the public. It even hung up there near the top of the bestseller list for a little while, like a parachute flare with delusions of stardom. I had to admit that the change of title might have helped. My original title had been *Tactical Voting in the Eurovision Song Contest*.

The book even got some favourable reviews, but the unfavourable ones were a clear indication of which way the wind would blow. My Sunday night television show about television – an early instance of the medium consuming itself – was pulling about ten million viewers, and my hostile literary critics drew the conclusion that to them seemed necessary. Nobody getting so famous for being so frivolous could possibly be serious. I wasn't *that* famous – Britain, after all, was no longer the whole world – but it was true that I had got into a different area of experience. It must have seemed obvious, therefore, that I had yielded up my claims to the area in which I had begun. Useless to protest that I thought all the different media were the one field. For one thing, I had not yet thought it. But I had always felt it, and indeed my *Observer* television column, which had been the real backbone of my career as a writer, was based on just that feeling.

Much later on, the next generation of savage young critics would

embarrassingly confer on me the title of Premature Postmodernist, a title that they meant as praise, even when they bestowed it with the back of the hand. But in the early eighties and for some time forward, the savage young critics that I had to deal with were of my own generation, steadily getting less young and therefore even more critical of any of their number who showed signs of selling out. Though it was no fun to be told that I had sacrificed my gravitas on the altar of popular success, I tried not to let it bother me. The kind of television entertainment that I wanted to do could not be done without seriousness for bedrock, and I had large plans for pursuing my literary career in any spare time that I might happen to get. There was also a potential plus. Writing during my weeks off – they soon turned out to be days off, and then hours – I would have something extra to write about: personal experience of how the big-budget mass entertainment gets done. Going in, I had already guessed that it could never be done in solitude. Thus I would be safe from the ivory tower, an ambience to which I was suited by a reclusive, nose-picking nature, but in which my writing was always fated not to flourish. Left to myself, I would have no direct experience to report on except my own interior workings, which consisted of not much more than a couple of cog wheels, a few rusty springs and some loose screws. In broadcasting, a more richly populated territory beckoned. Really there was no choice, and not just because the work would be well rewarded. The dough was a factor, but not decisive. What mattered was the adventure.

To go on being a writer in solitude would have felt like defeat, because it would have too well served a sense of superiority that I knew to be fatal. Having dedicated my television column to the principle that mass entertainment would be a bad thing only if such a thing as a mass existed, I was now in a position to prove that I could get into mass entertainment myself, and play a full part as one of those countless individual people. They might well be viewed by political theorists as an abstract conglomerate, but they would never do any viewing themselves except one at a time. To hold their attention, you had to be one of them. It was equality; the new equality; the only real equality that there had ever been. When Tocqueville, visiting America in the early nineteenth century, said that the new democracy was imaginary, he didn't mean that it was illusory: he meant that for the first time in history the haves and the have-nots could share the same condition, even if only in their minds. Since then, the imaginary democracy had spread to the whole Western world, and in Britain it was a continuing tendency that not even Mrs Thatcher could put into reverse. How could she? She was a product of it. Though I was still trying to get all this straight in my head as a prelude to getting it down on paper, here is the story of how I made a beginning on the second stage of my long voyage, to a destination

which would yield nothing more than a view of the world, though nothing less either. I had my trepidations on setting out, but I was confident enough, although even I wondered if I were wise to navigate by limelight.

In the long run, the limelight gave me a whole new subject: the celebrity culture. During my television career I was able to take my first crack at analysing it, with an ambitious but sadly doomed series called *Fame in the Twentieth Century*, and after I retired at the turn of the millennium I had time to explore it in greater depth as part of the basket-work of themes that formed my books *The Meaning of Recognition* and *Cultural Amnesia*. But neither early nor late would I have been able to write with any force on the subject if I had not known something about what it was like to inhabit the strange world where everybody knows your face while you hardly ever know theirs. Since there are no deep instincts for coping with it, this condition is fundamentally unsettling, as I shall try to describe. Scrambled brains heat your forehead. In *Cat Ballou*, somebody says to the permanently hung-over gunfighter played by Lee Marvin: 'Your eyes are so *red*.' Marvin replies: 'You ought to see them from my side.' Marvin got a Best Actor Oscar for saying that, but there should have been a trophy for the writer, because it was a profound insight.

There is no substitute for actually visiting the foreign country. In the course of twenty years I visited dozens of foreign countries, but the most foreign was, and was increasingly, the realm of celebrity. I discovered it to be a floating world all by itself, like the Yoshiwara district of old Tokyo, or Swift's Laputa. One of its driving forces was the desire to create envy, and the subservient readiness to be envious. I can give myself credit for staying out of all that from the jump. I never lived high, and even today I have few toys apart from my website www.clivejames.com, which I can recommend as an example of how an otherwise ungovernable ego can possibly be put to lasting use.

In the real, non-virtual world, of course, the ego is subject to the rules of time: hence the hair-transplants and the facelifts, which admit the inevitable by the blatancy with which they deny it. I never did any of that stuff either, but I certainly had the urge to save something from the wreck. These later books of memoirs arise from that same impulse, and I suppose the earlier ones did too. I just didn't know it yet. Not knowing things yet, and finding them out after reflecting on experience, has been the continuing story of my life, and will probably go on being so right to the end, or as near to the end as I can get with my memory still in some kind of working order. In my last volume, which will probably be the one after this, I will undoubtedly be tempted to try summing up a lifetime of reflections on my own existence. Socrates, after all, said that the unexamined life was not worth living. He might have added, however, that continual self-examination would leave us no time to live. The moribund, who

Continual self-examination would leave us no time to live. The moribund, who don't get out much, have the privilege of preparing each of their few remaining actions with due thought. In the period I recount here, I was as busy as a fundamentally slothful man can ever be, and scarcely thought at all. Readers who find it a strange spectacle ought to see it from my side.

1. OUT OF THE FRYING PAN

As you grow older, you are forcibly reminded of your essential personality more and more often, and especially when you are lost in reverie. When I am living alone with my work at my flat in London, I breakfast off a pot of coffee and two slices of unadorned toast. The aim is to control my weight, and it works: my weight remains controlled at about fifty pounds above the level that my doctor recommends as the maximum for continued life. But even though the plan goes reasonably well on the whole, it goes wrong enough in detail to remind me that there is a defective mind doing the planning. Somewhere between every fourth and fifth breakfast, on average, I leave the toast toasting in the toaster while I go to my desk in the next room for a quick fiddle with that paragraph that got stuck in a tangle at three o'clock in the morning. After a few hours' sleep my mind is now clear enough to make further fiddling look beneficial. How about making a regular sentence out of that bit in brackets? And then what about putting this bit before that bit instead of after . . .

I am still fiddling when I notice that there is something strange about the air around me. It has turned bluish grey, as if it had been piped in from the Battle of Jutland. Back in the kitchen, I lever two jet-black slices of carbon out of the toaster while noticing that my whole apartment is full of a strangely delicate pastel mist, like a film set dressed by Ridley Scott in his *Blade Runner* period. Still in my ratty dressing gown, I start a process of opening windows and waving the smoke through them with a wet tea towel. With any luck the place will look less like the aftermath of a powder-cloud avalanche by the time my assistant Cecile Menon shows up and realizes all over again that she has been hired to help a man beyond help. You will ask why I don't buy an automatic toaster, and the answer is that I have, several times, but they all broke. I have a cupboard full of their corpses, each preserved in case the plug should come in handy. Here is yet more proof that I remain, as I approach the last lap of my life, someone who, left to himself, would die of exposure even on a warm day. On the tropical island

with everything, I would choke on a coconut. There was once a terrible song that started 'People who need people'. Barbra Streisand used to sing it. As far as I remember, the next line wasn't 'Are to be avoided'. It should have been. In the concourse of the great railway stations you can pick us out by the way we stand in front of the automatic ticket machines and look around for advice. All too often we take it from each other, with predictable results.

Even as a freelance journalist I had depended on editorial supervision, lest my unrestrained enthusiasm lead me into the law courts and the publication I was attached to into bankruptcy. For my last year at the *Observer* I had the excellent John Lucas available to oversee my latest thousand-word effort on a Friday morning. Indeed he wasn't just available, he was unavoidable: Terence Kilmartin, the revered arts editor who figured so prominently as my reliable mentor in the previous volume of these unreliable memoirs, insisted that my copy was always to be combed for time-bombs as well as booby traps. Terry's caution might have been inspired by pressure from the management floor, where it had not been forgotten that I had cost the paper £10,000 by using a single wrong word about a TV director. Such is the long shadow of a British libel case that I can't say what that wrong word was even now.

Now, in 1982, I was saying goodbye to Fleet Street and going into television full time. In Fleet Street I had been a freelance, all right, but there was always backup within reach, only a few desks away. In television, the backup is right there in the room with you. As I completed the transfer of my main effort from the old *Observer* building at the north end of Blackfriars Bridge to LWT's stubby skyscraper across the river on the South Bank, I entered the experience of the previously freebooting Rudolph Rasendyll when he was sworn in to fulfil the duties of King of Ruritania, while the real king, his look-alike, began a new career as the Prisoner of Zenda. Suddenly I was surrounded. I had been absolutely alone when writing in my Barbican flat, and pretty well alone even when writing in the *Observer's* open-plan office. When writing at home in Cambridge I could lock myself away until some member of my family turned up to ask why a pair of my used socks had been found in the refrigerator. Now I was never alone except in the toilet, where I soon found that locking myself into a cubicle was not much protection from hearing myself talked about by young men standing at the urinals. ('Jesus, he's looking rough.' 'And it's only Monday.') The *Clive James on Television* half-hour show was not only still running, it was about to be up-gunned to the status of a full hour Sunday night prime-time spectacular, starring myself seriously positioned behind a desk instead of perched in a white plastic egg-cup chair.

I rapidly discovered the television rule of thumb by which twice as long on

screen computes to four times as long in the office. If you're on screen for an hour a week and writing your own stuff, you can kiss your home life goodbye for four days out of any seven. Richard Drewett, in charge of my support personnel, told me to get used to the idea that it wouldn't be only four days, it would be five: four days to accomplish what we were currently doing, and another day to prepare for what we would do next. The emphasis was on the 'we', not the 'I'. There was a whole open-plan office full of beavering producers, assistant producers and researchers. There was another open-plan office next door full of clerical staff. All these people were dedicated to making me look clever. All of them expected, as part of their reward, that I would be on the case even if I had nothing to contribute except my opinion that we would need to see a shorter version of the Bavarian Folk-dance National Championship finals before we decided whether it would hold the screen. At twenty minutes, there was just no judging, except to say that the sad-looking youth in the felt cap who kept hopping forward with hands on hips was potentially funny. 'Hoi!' his companions cried lustily, and then they cried 'Hoi!' again. But he said nothing. He just hopped. He couldn't hop and 'Hoi!' at the same time. I could always say that he hadn't had time to memorize the script.

Thus I was inducted early into a principle about television that was to affect my life for the next two decades: you have to be there. As Talleyrand once said, he who is absent is wrong. At this point, if I were still writing a television script every week, I would say that I don't mean Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord, master diplomat: I mean Frank Talleyrand, who shared my desk in class 2B at Kogarah Infants' School, and who was frequently hauled up in front of the class for playing truant. You may recognize the layout of the joke. Yes, I had my standard patterns ready. But they still needed a new variation every time. Though I was proud of every sentence that did the trick, after twenty years of it I was eventually to grow exhausted.

Exhaustion, however, will be a subject for later on. For now, you have to imagine me being relatively young – in my merest early forties – and entirely keen. It was, after all, the madly glamorous medium of television. Intelligent, civilized people were willing to give their lives to it, instead of to some more respectable activity, such as running the country. Richard, for example, could have been an Establishment figure had he so wished. He had the well-schooled background. He had the perfect manners. He was elegant from top to toe. Except, perhaps, for his feet. When he was in the army, an accident to one of them had necessitated an operation, which was botched, and therefore had to be repeated several times over the course of years, with a new bungle each time. The resulting bad foot put paid to his legitimate hopes as a driver of fast cars in

competition, although he still owned a stable of them and didn't seem to drive very slowly to anyone in the passenger seat of his road car, a silver 6-Series BMW. Somehow, while thus crippled, he even managed to set the record in his class in the Shelsley Walsh hill climb, driving a Lotus-Ford V8 that could be heard in the next county. Few people in television knew that he was a driver, and few people in motor-sport knew that he was in television. He could also play several musical instruments to a high standard, but only other musicians knew it.

Richard was one of those few people who can do almost everything, and one of the even fewer who don't tell you. He made a point of not drawing attention to himself, but there could be no doubt that the bad foot might have been designed to frustrate such an aim. The bad foot could not tolerate any downward pressure for more than twenty minutes, so he wore white plimsolls with the top of one of them cut away. Since he was otherwise impeccably dapper from his pale, tightly drawn features on downwards – pain accounted for the pallor – the anomalous footwear was an attention-getter. A gentleman of the old school, he neither apologized nor explained, and, England being England, various bigwigs and mandarins would have dealings with him for years on end without ever enquiring as to why a man who could have modelled for Savile Row was wearing joke shoes. The same bigwigs and mandarins, if someone had fallen naked past the window of their top-floor boardroom while they were taking tea together, would have done nothing to change the topic of their conversation. Still the Kid from Kogarah, I blundered straight in and asked him for the details. To the extent that he could, he opened up. Underneath, however, he remained uptight. The old country was still the old country and its gentry were still unforthcoming. As an Aussie who forthcame without being asked, I had found that there was a small but interesting percentage of the local upper orders who rather enjoyed being jolted out of their reticence. But reticence was still the rule. This especially applied to the gentry's immediate cousins, the executive upper middle class. Richard was one of these. In an earlier incarnation he would have helped to administer India, taken his holidays at Simla and acquired a bad reputation among his contemporaries for giving the time of day to that fellow Kipling. But here he was, in television. Blighty was continuing to loosen up.

The 1960s, a brief historical period to which the media had almost instantly attributed its own zeitgeist, had been only partly responsible for this transformation. A deep urge to rattle the furniture could be traced all the way back to the fin de siècle, when Lord Alfred Douglas had got off with the leading playwright of the day and, even less forgivably, had contracted a fatal urge to write poetry of his own. Before World War I, the absurdly well-bred young Lady Diana Manners was shooting heroin in quantities that would have impressed

KEITH RICHARDS, and later on, in her next incarnation as Lady Diana Cooper, she could be seen on stage and in the movies, even if she never did very much beyond looking aristocratic. In the 1920s the poisonously snobbish young genius Evelyn Waugh, whose dearest wish was to rub waistcoats with the armigerous, did not rule out Fleet Street as a road to his desires. It had never been a clear case of the jobs taking over. There had always been an element of the nobs lusting for the lowlife buzz. But there was a limit to how far they would agree to be ridiculous.

The limit was passed in the rock music of the late 1970s, when even such a wonderfully lyrical band as Led Zeppelin had looked so silly in action that only the blind could stop laughing. Though I had never seen them live, I remembered them well, because late one night I had tuned in to a television pop show in the hope of seeing Pan's People letting their hair down and I had been confronted with Robert Plant instead. He was a bit of a comedown after Dee Dee Wilde. If Dee Dee had been so scantily clad there would have been cause for celebration. But Robert Plant had only a thin chest to bare and seemed, at first, to be doing most of the celebrating all by himself. Brushing his locks impatiently out of his eyes like Janis Joplin in full frenzy, he flounced, stamped and pouted in an ecstasy of self-adoration, for which the bulge in his tight trousers might possibly have been the focus, if a focus can be something so flagrant. He looked as if he was smuggling a gun. Also he was doing an advanced version of that terrible thing where the singer keeps snatching his face away from the microphone after each short phrase, as if in fear of divine punishment for having created so much beauty. Thirty years later he would make one of the most enchanting rock albums ever, but at the time I had no means of knowing that, clairvoyance definitely not being among my gifts. I could tell he had a voice, but I could hardly hear for looking.

I thought that I had never seen anything quite so preposterously soaked in the rancid oil of self-regard. But then there came a shot of the audience and it turned out there were thousands of young people present who thought the world of him. My first rational conclusion, after the paroxysm of revulsion, was that the musical component of popular culture was beginning to forget its own history as fast as it was made. Surely such a cruel caricature of Mick Jagger was based on the misapprehension that Mick Jagger had not already been a caricature when he pioneered this mad business of kissing the air as if it were full of imaginary mirrors? Jagger had done a good job of synthesizing the whole pouncing, pouting, sexually ambiguous tradition since Piers Gaveston cocked his bottom for Edward II, but wasn't all that sort of, well, over? Now I realize that the foundations were being laid for what the eighties, the decade on which I was embarked, would call either glam rock or heavy metal or perhaps something

embarked, would call either glam rock or heavy metal or perhaps something else. Something called post-punk was in there too, still finding new forms of nastiness that would push the boundaries beyond those set by the distance to which Johnny Rotten could project a gobbet of phlegm. Glam post-punk heavy metal. Punk metal post-heavy glam. I forget the terminology now, because I hated everything about it that I could not manage to avoid seeing. If my memory serves me at all, the fundamental signs of glam rock were platform boots, lipstick for men and guitars with two tails, like scorpions. Heavy metal was mainly signified by leather pants and a level of noise that left Operation Rolling Thunder sounding like the adagio of the Schubert C-sharp minor quintet. The uproar hammered to death any music that might happen to be trapped inside it. To be in on glam rock, heavy metal or any of their noxious hybrids, you had to be interested primarily in money. The toffs, on the whole, had other things in mind.

As an ideal of true creative glamour, television better fitted their specifications. It was bohemian, but not very. The ambitious young among the gentler classes could find a home in it without, as it were, leaving home. From somewhere in that direction, Richard Drewett had arrived early among the camera cables and the lighting gantries. He was looking for something. Already he had found some of it – he produced all the first *Parkinson* programmes – but he remained trapped by his skill at meeting the elevated requirements of BBC2's *Late Night Line-Up*, a respectable minority enterprise that took the arts seriously. Richard was more interested in taking mainstream entertainment seriously, but he needed a front-man. Eventually he decided that I might fill the bill. As I recounted near the end of *North Face of Soho*, we made our first documentary special together, about the Paris fashion shows, while still getting acquainted. His diligence during the editing of the footage had convinced me that he wasn't kidding when he said that I would have to give up my lofty ideas about just pasting a voice-over on the finished product. If I wanted to take a proper part in getting all this stuff into shape, I would first have to climb into it up to my neck. Although the prospect of adding such a commitment to the full week I would have to put into the studio show was worse than daunting, I didn't offer much resistance. After all, it was television, the new rock and roll, the in thing. It wouldn't be like shovelling wet cow dung on a windswept hillside.

2. FERRETS TO THE RESCUE

Is a hillside where the cows are? I still, by reflex action, look around for a spare researcher to send in search of the answer, which in those days you couldn't get by Google. Somebody had to pick up a phone, or even pick up a book. The people who did this were called the ferrets. The term was invented by Richard. Only a very few of the ferrets were ever humourless enough to resent being called that. The rest of them were capable of seeing the respect that their boss held for them under the banter. (Contrary to the received wisdom which holds that men have the sense of humour and women merely play along, it has been my experience that almost all women enjoy banter as long as it respects their dignity, whereas there are men who think you are saying they can't drive.) Most of the ferrets were young, a good half of them were female, and some of those were pretty. I did my best not to notice, aware from the start that nobody had been hired for their looks, only for their ability.

I might say at this point, so as to get my rebuttal in early, that I am very proud of my part in ensuring that the women in our office, over the next twenty years, could always depend on equal treatment. Quite a few of them have high positions in the industry now, and would probably be ready to say, if questioned on the point, that they were never held back. They might also say, alas, that I was heavy-handed with the gallantry and far too free with the waggling eyebrow of admiration. In that respect, I had had a bad education, and was slow to get over it. Marriage had done a good deal to civilize my libidinous urge, but there continued to be a lot more of it that needed convincing. Surrounded by personable young women working hard on my behalf, I had trouble wiping the grin off my face, and there were certainly occasions when beauty turned my head. But it seldom affected my judgement, and never for long. Richard made sure of that. He was hard to fault in that matter, and since I wanted his approval, I tried hard to copy him. But more of that later. The story will go on. It was one of the stories of our generation of men, and I often wonder if the next generation

ever realized how lucky it was, whatever its gender, to grow up and work in an atmosphere where equality was taken for granted, and a man who allowed lust to warp his sense of justice would be shamed in his own eyes. I'm talking about Australia and America, of course: in Britain things remained as bad as ever, although television has always been a fairer place to work in than Fleet Street, which in turn is nothing like as bad as the House of Commons, where the women MPs are still forced to suffer routine abuse from the kind of men who, even when nominally heterosexual, are at ease only with each other, and polite to nobody.

Overnight, as our department expanded in anticipation of the new format, we moved out of the main LWT skyscraper into an annex called Sea Containers House beside the southern approach to Blackfriars Bridge. It was here – as Richard was fond of saying portentously at production meetings, especially if the meeting was taking place in some glorified corridor decorated with cardboard cut-outs of comedians no longer exactly current – it was here, in the romantically named Sea Containers House, that we edited and assembled our first syndicated footage of the Japanese game show *Endurance*. Our Japanese-speaking stringer in Tokyo had been watching the show in growing disbelief, and when he finally ceased spitting noodles he sent us a compilation several hours long. In those days it was a huge task to send a sample of a TV show across the world. Today the stringer could have swiped it straight off air and squirted it halfway around the globe at the speed of light. In the next generation, when the satellites up there are touching each other, he will be able to get any channel in the world at the touch of a button and download the images by saying, 'Shazam!' But we're talking about a time when he had to ask permission, get his physical hands on the actual stuff, wrap it up and pay for the stamps. Just the first step in this sequence, the business of asking permission, took weeks of effort even though he spoke the language. But he never gave up. His determination was a measure of how sure he was that he was on to something rivetingly weird. Our own editors trimmed the several hours of footage back to an hour, so that we could taste it.

It was like tasting an electric light socket. Young Japanese people had volunteered for tests in order to advance towards a grand prize – some kind of holiday – which seemed petty indeed when seen in the light of their sufferings. One of the milder images I made notes on was of young men hanging near-naked upside down over a well-populated snake-pit while their plastic underpants were shovelled full of live cockroaches. Instantly my narrative line started to form on the page. There had been a day when young men like these would have been taking off in planes they barely knew how to fly and heading

for a sky full of flak, all in the hope of a different kind of grand prize – the chance to crash into an Allied warship. The producers, on the other hand, would have been preparing some memorable evil for the citizens of Nanking. The yammering front-man would have been an interrogator for the Kempei Tai, or leading a banzai charge on Iwo Jima. Times had changed, and all the most frightening characteristics of an alien culture were in the process of transferring themselves out of the real world and on to television. For anyone such as myself, who had always found the real world unreal in its insanities, here was evidence that television might become a new real world where homicidal tendencies were palliated by the histrionic. The Japanese students confirmed this possibility by plainly enjoying the chance to act out being afraid. There was a lot to be afraid of, by our standards. But they still relished the opportunity to emote. You could tell they were acting because they acted so badly. The one advantage of the Japanese acting style is that you can always tell when someone is acting. The young lady at the front desk of your hotel who apologizes for having given you the wrong key carries on like Toshiro Mifune in *Seven Samurai*.

As the next batch of young student contestants shivered and mugged with feigned fear while the previous batch went through their protracted martyrdom, you were seeing the deadly pseudo-Samurai code of bushido transformed into kabuki. It was kabuki with the accelerator pressed to the floor, but it was recognizably drawn from the same wellspring of inspiration as the average afternoon double bill at the great playhouse in the Ginza district of Tokyo, where the actors, year upon year forever, zealously preserve their ancient tradition of conveying anger by raising their eyebrows, snorting fiercely and stamping out imaginary cigarette butts. This was theatre, and it was formed on the ruins of a sadistic militarist tradition that had richly merited being ruined. As I made my first notes, I was forming something too: the beginnings of a theme that I would pursue for the rest of my career, even into the present day. Civilization doesn't eliminate human impulses: it tames them, through changing their means of expression. That, I decided straight away, would have to be the serious story under the paragraphs that tied the clips together: otherwise the commentary would be doomed never to rise above the level of condescension.

With all of us in the editing room simultaneously lost in thought and yelling with disbelief, we watched through to the end of the reel, after which we decided that there was about five minutes of sure-fire material distributed amongst the chaos. Even then, what we chose had to be further edited so as to make sense as separate clips. It would be a large, long, finicky task to bring a few shaped moments out of the mayhem, but our producers immediately sent the orders to Tokyo to keep the stuff coming. Back in his office, Richard asked how I would

handle the commentary. He was understandably worried about the racism angle. I said what I still believe today, that there was no question of racism. It was a question of culture, and what we were seeing was a cultural nightmare being turned into a playground before our eyes. Japan, after all, was a successful nation – rather more successful than Britain, if the truth be told – and to overdo the respect for the supposed unfortunates would be to belittle them. Besides (this was my clincher), if the Japanese themselves thought they were being funny, why couldn't we agree?

So I got the green light. It was a crucial decision on Richard's part, and it sharply demonstrated the weight of the heaviest can any executive producer has to carry, because with this new kind of programme the moral issue would never go away. To condense my account of how we treated a dilemma that would extend into the years to come, let me say now that our biggest problem was Africa. Egypt was tough enough. Egyptian soap operas were so awful that you looked as if you were calling into question the intelligence of an entire population simply by screening them. There was one Egyptian light-entertainment programme based on practical jokes, in which the capering and winking star turn would plant a ticking suitcase in a railway station and they would film the panic when the commuters thought it might be a bomb. At the time this seemed too ridiculous to be harmful, so we screened it. But the real problems started further south. In the sub-Saharan countries, local television featured some wonderfully clumsy commercials. Quiz contestants competed for a packet of biscuits. The current-affairs programmes consisted almost entirely of politicians sitting facing each other in armchairs, doing nothing except getting filmed. We decided that it would look patronizing to screen this stuff, so we didn't. Underdeveloped television was no fun if it came from underdeveloped countries. For as long as I headlined the programme, that was the principle we stuck to. Critics never ceased to sum up my attitude as knowingly parochial, but that was because most critics, like most journalists of any kind, would rather change gender than change a story. To anyone capable of objective judgement, it was obvious that we were bending over backwards to be fair. When in doubt, we left it out, and we didn't need theories of imperialism to tell us to do so: a sense of common humanity was enough to do the trick.

But the constant awareness that we were on the lip of an ethical precipice proved nerve-racking, and eventually racked nerves wear you out more thoroughly than taxed muscles. The constant work of editing for impact was comparatively less tiresome. It had to be done, though, and with unrelenting concentration. You couldn't just shove stuff on the air because it was generally funny. The footage you screened had to be specifically so. A good example was

the cinematic oeuvre of the renowned American director Ed Wood, who had spent a dedicated career fighting the closely connected handicaps of insufficient finance and a total absence of gift. We were the first to screen Ed Wood's movies for a television audience, and no other programme but ours ever managed to screen them successfully, because the awkward truth about Wood's justly celebrated lack of talent was that it peaked only intermittently. His masterpiece *Plan 9 from Outer Space* was merely boring if you looked at the whole thing, or even at any long sequence. He had never, in his whole career, got anything right, but the bits that were hilariously wrong were heavily wrapped in mere tedium, and had to be picked out and mounted lovingly for inspection, like treasure from a dump. I liked to think that my intervening commentary gave Ed Wood some of the brio which he had mistakenly assumed was his hallmark.

What was true for Ed Wood was true for almost everything else we screened. Editing is an essentially poetic process akin to compressing carbon until you get diamonds. In our case we were compressing dross to get zircons, but that made the job even more difficult. It was nothing, though, compared to the effort of watching fifty hopeless African current-affairs programmes and deciding you couldn't screen anything. The waste of time was so pure that it ached. With the Japanese game shows, however, we were in heaven, and precisely because all the participants were having such a ball being in hell.

When our first programme to feature excerpts from *Endurance* went to air in the new Sunday night prime-time format, the audience consolidated immediately at ten million plus. In my previous volume of memoirs I recounted how I had a local-area cult hit with my riffs about the South American killer bees in the disastrous disaster movie *The Swarm*, but the Japanese cockroaches were a success of a different order. This time the notoriety was on a national scale – I got an offer of marriage from a man in the Shetlands – and I had very little time to learn how it might be handled. The first thing I learned was that it can't: not beyond a certain point, which is placed very low down on the rising scale to insanity. If everyone in the country recognizes your face, your only hope of normality is to find another country where they don't, but you might be too late. When Elton John first stood on the Great Wall of China, he told the attendant British press pack – trailing him around the earth as if he were a more tractable version of royalty – that it was a relief to be somewhere where a thousand million people didn't know him from Adam. But he was almost certainly bluffing. Poor sap, he had already got to where it felt strange when someone didn't know who he was. I already had a mild sense of that before I left on my next foreign assignment. Kenya was bigger than Britain but blessedly had slightly fewer people in it, and very few of those had seen me explicating on

screen the motivation of a bunch of Japanese adolescents as they roasted each other over a bed of embers while their testicles were being colonized by starving maggots.

3. WHITE KNUCKLES OF AFRICA

The Kenya show was to be a documentary special called *Clive James on Safari*. From now on, in this book, I will try to leave my name out of the title of the shows, thus to circumvent the twin fears of wasting space and sounding more than necessarily like a self-glorifying pantaloon. But you can take it for granted that every programme I made for the next couple of decades, whether in the studio or on location, had my name in the title somewhere. Neither I nor my agent ever pressed for this. My agent, Norman North at A. D. Peters, looked very young in those days and remarkably he retains his keen, lean appearance to this day. Some people have access to the fountain of youth. Norman also had access to the fountain of wisdom, and would have scotched the use of my name in the title if he had thought it would be counterproductive. But Richard had no trouble convincing him, and indeed me, that we might as well use what cachet my name had already built up, and try to increase it. 'Never trust anybody with two first names' was a maxim of mine that I tried to make current until I realized it applied to me. (If you start a list in your own mind, don't forget Bruce Willis and Victor Hugo.) But if the public does trust someone's name for something, the name becomes what the PR people call a Brand. The only drawback is that its possessor has to live up to it. My Postcard travel articles for the *Observer* had established a reputation for a certain kind of eager curiosity that started out clueless but came back with what at least sounded like a reasonable set of opinions. This threatened to be harder to achieve on film, where the temptation to clown it up could easily make the cluelessness look like a pose.

Nevertheless, though still devoted to the ideal of evoking a picture with a few words, I was attracted by the prospect of combining a real picture with even fewer. In an *Observer* Postcard about Jerusalem, I had given a faithful report of what it was like for an overweight man to take a running dive into the Dead Sea and find himself lying on top of it, having failed to submerge or even scratch the surface. But at the time I wrote the paragraph I was already thinking that to

actually show this happening would have left a chance to say something extra and more interesting at the very moment when the audience was absorbing the mixed signals about the state of my body. I could have been talking about the state of Israel. There would be opportunities to get more said, with a blend of expression like the texture of a song, in which the words and the music reinforce each other. I was thinking this again when we landed in Nairobi and ran full tilt into the comfortable remnants of the old white empire as they clung on to the last of their privileges among the poverty-stricken shambles of the new black state. The slums teemed. Presumably the natives out in the hinterland were leading more dignified lives. Meanwhile the whites in or near town were still taking tea, hitting the bottle and betting on the horses. The British upper crust are never more dauntingly self-assured than when presiding over the wreckage of the superseded order. This lot looked as if they had all once regarded Princess Margaret as a dangerous radical. The worst I can say about my young producer, Helen Fraser, is that she looked as if she would fit right in. When she stepped off the plane, it was as if the Baroness Blixen had returned. Pretty, elegant and well spoken, she immediately had the local beau monde eating out of her finely manicured hand. They loved her.

She found it harder to love them. Partly it was a generation thing: nice girls like her nowadays had real jobs, whereas the old colonial set-up would have condemned them to come out to places like this and help their husbands lord it over the benighted. But largely it was a difference in behavioural evolution: she wasn't a snob, and this lot were. All the great names of the White Mischief era still drew their expected plenitude of mutual respect. The men, especially, seemed to like each other better than ever, just because their immediate ancestors had led the life in which there was nothing to do with the day except screw each other's wives when not hanging around the clubs that had been built to keep the natives out. Let me hasten to say that there had once been something to admire about British rule in Kenya, even though the Mau Mau might not have agreed. Compared to, say, Belgian rule in the Congo, British rule had been benevolent, and precisely because the landowners and the administrative class put more time into living well than into belting the locals. Certainly there are plenty of locals today who wouldn't mind having their erstwhile oppressors back on the case, at least to the extent of running the courts of justice. When I arrived, the white pecking order was still in full swing even though the system it had once imposed was long gone. It seemed to occur to few of its drawling members that the privileged life they still possessed was an historical anomaly, tainted as it was by the misery leaking in from all around them. Again, the misery could have been worse, but the slums were hard to ignore even if you drove around

them in a Land Rover. Helen's principal weapon against the plummy accents was a raised eyebrow. They didn't notice. Tomorrow the horses would be racing and the gentry looked forward to meeting us there.

Waiting for that big day, we took the camera to dinner at a restaurant serving nothing but African game of every type and stripe. Hugely heaped plates of grilled and roasted meat were served. Everything was uniformly inedible, and not just because the original animal had never been designed to be eaten by humans in the first place. The topkapi, or whatever it was called, probably tasted like a whoopee cushion no matter what you did with it, but this bunch couldn't even bring a tender touch to some form of gazelle that they billed as the most succulent dish south of the Sahara. You would have been better off chewing an anorak. The probable cause was that the cooks had no means of preparing anything except to leave it in the fire until its last drop of moisture evaporated. Over more than a quarter of a century of world travel I was eventually to formulate the rule that in any country blessed with an abundance of prime-quality meat roaming around in unprocessed form, nobody knows how to cook it. To make anything taste good, you have to freeze it, load it on to a ship and send it to France. While Helen laughed at my increasingly desperate expression – she had the rare gift of laughing at your face without laughing *in* your face, I was glad to note – our camera caught the scene, which was densely populated by the younger generation of the local whites out for their idea of a dangerously exotic night. Surely the racing horses of tomorrow would be more interesting. At least they would not be cooked.

A day at the races unfolded like a message from God that we had better get out of Nairobi pronto or we would never get to Kenya. Unless you film it from space, a horse race in Africa looks exactly like a horse race at Ascot, especially when the white women present are dressed for the Queen's Garden Party. The white male elders stood around in tight groups, still discussing whether it had really been Jock Delves Broughton who had shot the Earl of Erroll. It was a wonder that they hadn't shot each other, if a day like this had been the principal alternative to peeling the silk knickers off the expatriate vamps.

Next day, before we took off for the wilds, I had another message from on high. Out on my own wandering in the slums, I found a tiny street stall selling exactly one miniature rhinoceros carved out of wood. I presumed from its singularity that it was a rare artefact, and certainly it was accurately carved: nothing about it was not like a rhinoceros except its size. The stall owner, whose refined Nilotic features suggested that he might be a connoisseur dealing only in palace-quality bibelots with which he himself could hardly bear to part, assured me it was 'Rare, very rare.' It would be welcomed in my family home, where my

daughters were still young enough to look on miniature animals with favour, and my wife had an eye for sculpture. So I bought the thing from the impassive vendor. He remained impassive at the sheaf of notes I proffered, so I doubled it into a bundle. Eventually he smiled, while shaking his head, presumably taking pity on the condition of a world in which a true work of art could be valued in terms of mere money. Michelangelo probably felt the same when he handed over his finished statue of David.

You can guess what happened next. A hundred yards further on, I wandered into a kind of indoor bazaar – half souk, half swamp – which in turn opened up into a long, low factory. Lining the walls of the factory was shelf upon shelf stacked with thousands of copies of my carved rhinoceros. Shaking and roaring on the floor of the factory, a machine the size of a Fleet Street printing press was turning out carved rhinoceroses which were touched by human hand only when a team of women loaders and stackers lifted them off the belt and found a place for them on the groaning shelves. I thought of running back to the hotel to tell the crew that I had stumbled on a great story about the Kenyan economy, but the deeper message had already hit me. The real rhinoceroses, or rhinoceri, were out there waiting.

Our light aircraft dropped out of the sky in the Mara country, where we were met at the grass-strip airport by Denis Zaphiro, our guide for the safari. Denis, last of the Great White Hunters, was now a Great White Guide, a condition he preferred, because he had never really liked killing animals. He especially hadn't liked the kind of people who do like killing them. I presumed that he had made an exception in the case of Ernest Hemingway, whom he had accompanied on his last safari, the one that had culminated in the plane crash that had finally reduced Papa's lethal urge to a glimmer. Until then, the Great White Writer had put a lot of time, effort and overblown prose into seeking out at least one of every animal that breathed and making sure that its head ended up on a wall of his house in Cuba. That had to have been interesting and I looked forward to getting the story, but meanwhile we were faced with the challenge of getting Denis to act.

When it comes to documentary television, 'challenge' is a bad word, just as 'time was running out' is a bad sentence. ('We had not yet met our challenge and time was running out' is an even worse sentence.) But this really was a challenge, and time really was running out, because soon the sun would be in the wrong part of the sky and we would have to reposition the aircraft in order to do the whole thing again. The thing we had to do seemed simple at first blush. Though Denis was old enough to be my father, he was still in good shape: flat stomach, loping stride, hawk-like features, the works. He even had the

mandatory cut-glass voice, ideal for making polite suggestions in either English or Swahili. He was also very clever. In his lightweight khaki safari outfit and bush hat, he looked and sounded better qualified than Stewart Granger playing roughly the same role in *King Solomon's Mines*. But Denis was no actor. Hardly anybody with an authentic personality is, but Denis was an extreme case of not being an actor. His challenge, after I got back alone into the passenger compartment of the aircraft, was to stride towards it while our crew, who had all got out of it, filmed him coming up to me as I stepped down.

He wasn't too bad at the walking bit. He got it right on about the tenth take, after the standard nine different takes of the non-actor's walk. Suddenly rendered self-conscious, the non-actor, when asked to walk for the camera, fatally starts to think about how walking is done, so he has to go through every variation of moving the legs and arms in the wrong combination. Since there are many more than nine combinations, Denis had done that part quite well. But he also had a line to say. 'Well, Clive, you're finally here. Welcome to the real Africa.' He had to do this in a medium close-up while the rifle microphone was aimed from off-camera at his tanned and distinguished face. A rifle microphone will throw anyone who hasn't seen one before, even when he has been carrying a real rifle all his life. 'Well, James, you . . .' Cut. Helen moved in to explain to Denis how we were taking for granted that he and I had already become acquainted on the telephone, and that he would therefore address me by my first name. Denis apologized profusely, saying that he had already known that but he had forgotten. Take two. 'Well, Clive James, you . . .' Cut. 'Sorry, sorry. But I got the "Clive" in that time. Let's do it again. I'm ready. Sorry.' Denis did it again. 'Well, Clive, we're really in Africa. Welcome to here, finally. Oh God.' The sun was charging across the sky. Time was running out. Soon we would have to reposition the aircraft and not just the camera. But Denis finally met the challenge. He was that kind of guy, and I already knew that I could bet on him not to abandon me when the rhino charged: the real rhino, very large and definitely not carved from wood.

In a convoy of Toyota Land Cruisers, we all drove off to camp, where Denis, out from under the camera's looming threat, proved delightful company. We sat at tables between the tent-line and the campfire while Kungu, Denis's personal driver and servant, got busy proving that there were better ways of preparing a dish of local meat than toasting it with a flamethrower, as they did back in town. Much of Denis's talk on that first evening consisted of instructions about what not to do. Above all, nobody must go out walking alone, even by daylight and for the shortest distance. Denis, by sure instinct, aimed most of these homilies at our cameraman Mike, who looked like the adventurous type. Mike was about my

age and equally bald, but there wasn't an ounce of fat on him. Superbly muscled, he was afraid of nothing. Denis politely emphasized that in this part of Africa it was better to be afraid of everything. By implication, there were other parts that were different, but I had no real urge to pack up and go to one of those. This was the place to be. In the flickering half light, the beautiful Helen was doing a convincing Grace Kelly impersonation as she gazed at the masterful Denis. I'm bound to say I was doing the same. Father figures still affect me that way even now.

Next day at breakfast we were informed that a herd of about a dozen elephant had been through the camp during the night, so it would be a good day for filming elephant. I liked this use of 'elephant' in the singular: it made you wonder how many of them there had to be before they got into the plural. The problem of referring to more than one rhinoceros was thus solved: I had been in a warehouse stuffed with thousands of miniature wooden rhinoceros. But I kept all that for later and simply asked the obvious question. Why hadn't at least one of the many elephant stepped on a tent? Dennis changed my life on the spot. 'The elephant thinks that the tent is a solid object.' You have to be there to find that kind of stuff out. I never forgot what he said. I never forgot anything he said. Usually we should distrust any memoir that features a lot of quoted speech, because nobody's memory is that good. But there are some people to whom you pay extraordinary attention. When Denis spoke, I was all ears, like an elephant. Even at the time, however, I was silently wondering what would have happened if my tent had not been pointed on top, but flat, like a big box. If one of the elephant had harboured ambitions of being a circus star, it might have hopped up.

Within an hour I was finding out how big elephant are. Kungu trailed the herd and suddenly there they all were, pulling down small trees and feeding them to their young. Mike and the crew set up the gear in a tearing hurry, got the wide shots, and suddenly Mike was off with the camera on his shoulder, heading for a huge old tusker with one tusk: he was a one-tusk tusker. The one-tusk tusker seemed to have one task: to vent his anger. He spread his ears and bellowed. I raced off to include myself in a possible two-shot while Denis, no doubt feeling his age, raced after me. Denis was yelling something. I was not as deaf then as I am now, so I could understand the word he was yelling. The word was 'no'. 'No, no. Come back! When he spreads his ears like that it means . . .' But I could already see what it meant. The one-task, one-tusk tusker was thundering towards us flat out. As we ran, Denis fell down a hole up to the waist, but luckily the elephant went steaming past him, heading for where I had been the last time he (the elephant, not Denis) had opened his eyes. I was already back in the car.

Having run out of putt, the elephant returned from the horizon, gave one last bronchitic bellow and, accompanied by all the other elephant, moved on out of sight. Kungu was shaking his head. Denis showed up limping. He said, 'For fuck's sake don't do anything like that again.' We all registered deep shame, an effect Mike rather spoiled by asking Denis to fall down the hole again for a close-up. But surely we already had the footage that counted: the elephant charges and I run. Couldn't be neater. I could already see it on screen.

Many days later, after the whole safari was over, it turned out that Denis had cracked a rib when he fell down the hole. We had thus come very close to ending the career of the last of the Great White Hunters on our first day out. As yet unaware of the full extent of his injury, Denis typically offered apologies when he should have been demanding them. He made no objection to going on. He even started to get the hang of the acting thing when we did a dung-spotting sequence. With a line of trees in the distance, we walked together on the open ground. Mike circled around us with the camera on his shoulder, getting the angles. Behind Mike walked Nobby the sound man, laden with the huge Nagra tape-recorder which in those days was the last word in technology. Nobby himself, however, was slightly deaf, which you might have thought was a bit of a drawback for a sound man. You, your mother and everyone else except the union shop steward, who was rewarding Nobby for long service by sending him on this luxury expedition, with plenty of overtime and an enhanced life insurance payout if, as seemed quite likely, he was trampled from behind by a buffalo he hadn't heard approaching. Luckily this spoor-sniffing sequence was an easy one for him. He just had to keep rolling and pick up anything Denis and I said about the piles of crap we found. 'Now this one is very interesting, James. Sorry, Clive. Can I start again? Sorry. Now this one is very interesting, Clive. This is the product of a giraffe, and you can see there by those flies that the giraffe was here quite recently, probably this morning. How was that?' Already mentally rehearsing, for my commentary, a couple of giraffe-related gags about being shat on from a great height, I told him that it was fine, and that he should just keep it coming, not worrying about any mistakes because we could always edit them out later.

'Sorry. And over here we've got some Thomson gazelle dung. Quite delicate, isn't it? A refined beast, the Tommy. And these bones here are Thomson gazelle bones. Lion kill, I should think. Quite recent. Probably last night.' He was looking at the trees. 'I think we should go back to the car now.' Mike, having sensed that Denis had seen something at the edge of the tree-line, wanted to go closer, but had to content himself with a bunch of giraffes who came drifting through with scarcely credible grace. All they needed was music by Tchaikovsky

and they could have been ballerinas auditioning for Balanchine. Mike then set about getting individual close-ups of the various piles of poop until Denis pointed out that what he had seen in the shadow of the trees was a pride of lions and that any of them could get to us before we could get to the car, so it was time to go. Mike lingered over the heap of bones. Imagining my own bones lying in the same position, I kept sneaking glances at the tree-line, but I could see nothing except trees and shadows. Denis, I concluded, must have eyesight like a fighter pilot.

When we got back to the camp and the waiting Helen, I climbed down from the Toyota as if I were the sort of Battle of Britain hero who would climb down from his Spitfire or Hurricane and smile shyly as he walked in, holding up a number of fingers to indicate his kills. Actually, if I had done so, I would have been indicating only the number of dung piles I had seen, but the mere hint of lions had been enough to set my heart racing. Hippopotamus kill more people, and buffalo are more likely to rub you out from sheer spite, but there's something about the big cats that connects directly to your reservoir of primal fear. The fear is well justified in the case of lions. The previous month, an old male lion had come into the suburbs of Nairobi and killed a man who had stopped to check one of the back wheels of his Volkswagen. In the previous safari season, out here where we were now, an Italian banker, in the back of a Land Cruiser with his whole family, was caught short by the squirts. The driver told him to do it in the car but the Italian banker was too fastidious for that. My sentiments exactly, except that I had already guessed, as you have, the next part of the story. He got out of the car to squat behind a bush and his whole family had to listen while the lions ate him. Although the old-man lion, like myself and most of the men I know, has no real ambition left beyond lying around impressively while the women shop for lunch, he nevertheless can live up to his billing with shattering suddenness when he is in the mood.

In theory, there is less reason to be wary of cheetahs. They probably won't go for you. But they do look, even when in repose, as if they could go right through you. Next morning we were in the car trailing a brat pack of young cheetahs taking hunting lessons from their mother. There was a bunch of impala in the distance and mummy took off in that direction, accelerating like a drag racer. There is a beautiful poem by Amy Clampitt in which a cheetah's petalled coat suddenly turns into a sandstorm as she starts to run. I scarcely saw the transition, but Mike said he had got the shot. He was sitting strapped to the bonnet of the Land Cruiser with the camera on his shoulder. (I might be making that sound easy: the camera was a hefty object in those days.) Kungu put the pedal to the metal as we raced towards the point from which the impala had dispersed in all directions. The impala, if I may pontificate for a moment, have been given their

directions. The impala, if it may communicate for a moment, have been given men beauty only as a reward for being the unluckiest animals in Africa. There are a lot of them, they can run like mad and they might have safety in numbers, but the cats can run even faster over a short distance, and if you're the one impala in a hundred that a cat catches up with, to have been as cute as Natalie Portman is no recompense when the lights go out. When we found the cheetah she was already tearing her victim to shreds. As her young trainees turned up to join her, the gorgeous killer turned to look at the camera. She was divine, but she had blood on her silky cheeks.

For the cheetahs, Denis had allowed Mike to stay outside on the bonnet, but for lions he had to come inside. A few hours later we found a whole pride of lions inhabiting an upmarket clump of bushes and immediately I wished the car had been a tank. Even Mike looked impressed, and he was the one who asked if a lion had ever tried to jump in through the big hole in the roof of a car like ours. 'No,' said Denis, 'but you never know.' Apparently the bunch we were filming were all males, so there wouldn't be any violence, because the females were off somewhere doing all the hard graft, like researchers. A bit further on, we saw the women at work. One of them ran down a junior warthog and killed it with a bite to the neck. There was only a brief pause before the males arrived for lunch. A big male who looked like the one that had the contract for the MGM logo swallowed the dinky little warthog whole. 'Usually,' said Denis, 'lions do most of their hunting at night. So you're in luck.' Mike zoomed in as the last of the warthog disappeared down the lion's gullet, leaving nothing outside but its tail, as if the lion had ingested one of those old field radios with a whip aerial. All the other lions looked around glumly but they couldn't have been less interested in us. Nevertheless the scene was scary enough and we had some good stories for the campfire that night. High on adrenalin, I sat up late with Kungu as he taught me my first words of Swahili. *Simba* I already knew from reading Hemingway. *Simba* meant lion. Kungu told me the word for 'big': *kubwa*. So a big lion was *simba kubwa*. The language was delicious to pronounce, with full syllables like Italian, and no awkward clusters of consonants, as in English. Denis spoke it fluently and he was also a good teacher (the two things don't always go together), but Kungu was the teacher of my dreams, infinitely patient and very flattered that *bwana* should take the trouble. *Bwana* – that was me – resolved to study hard. *Bwana* had visions of himself as an old Africa hand, saving Ava Gardner from the charging *simba kubwa*.

Part of the plan, while we were in the Masai Mara, was to visit the Masai themselves. This took quite a chunk out of our budget, because the Masai were good at business. They still sent their teenage boys out alone to kill a lion with a

spear; they still drank cow's blood as a source of protein; but they also, by repute, owned half the taxis in Nairobi, running them on a franchise basis so that lesser tribes like the Kikuyu did all the driving. At home in their huts, the Masai charged serious money even to be looked at, let alone photographed. Recently a German tourist had snapped a Masai warrior without making a deal first. The tourist went home with a hole in his shoulder, made by a spear. He had a good story to tell in Wilmersdorf, but we didn't want any of that, so all the right palms had been well greased before we showed up among the huts for the mandatory scene of me spontaneously joining a circle of warriors as they jumped to impress the women. Propelled by exactly the same impulse from which I wrote lyric poetry, the warriors ascended vertically to a startling height, simply by flexing their feet. Spontaneously I joined in, and after about half an hour we had the makings of a nice sequence about the visitor making an idiot of himself while the surrounding crowd of giggling women failed to be impressed. Some of the younger ones could have been models for Claude Montana's latest collection, so I was really trying. I felt I understood the men. As a consequence I found the animals more interesting, because they were less predictable. When being watched by a cheer squad of young women who look like David Bowie's wife Iman at the height of her beauty in *No Way Out*, a male human being of any age or colour will immediately start auditioning. But you can never tell which way a leopard will jump.

4. ELEPHANT WALK

There was plenty of animal unpredictability on hand when we relocated deeper into the Mara triangle, where a bend of the muddy river was meant to be full of hippopotamus. We were all facing towards this as we filmed, but Denis was continually sneaking a peek in the other direction. When I asked him why, he said: 'The most dangerous thing you can do out here is get between a hippo and the water.' I was still shivering at the thought when a hippo surfaced just in front of the camera and opened its mouth to the full stretch. It looked like the entrance to a candy-floss parlour. Then a whole flotilla of them started surfacing all over the place. They must have been at a meeting down there. The river was palpitating with hippopotamus. Their numbers never grow thin, because nobody wants any part of them. The same would be true for rhinos if there wasn't one part that everybody wants: the horn. Converted to powder, rhino horn is in demand all over East Asia as an aphrodisiac. If rhinos needed the powdered skull of an East Asian bank clerk in order to get their rocks off there would be complaints, but as things are, the rhino is doomed. We filmed a couple of them from our speeding car as they ran, and when one of them turned towards us to indicate that the fun was over for the day, his horn looked awfully big. In today's terms, it would have provided enough aphrodisiac powder to meet the requirements of a whole cinema full of Chinese wage-slaves for whom watching a Gong Li movie had failed to do the trick.

Since it was well known that most of the poaching of ivory, horn and crocodile skin was organized by elements close to the government, the animals concerned were living on borrowed time, but when you saw them in the flesh they looked a lot more threatening than threatened. This particularly applied to the crocodiles, well-armed examples of a primitively savage life form that had flourished for a long time until it ran into us. We did a night shoot on how to feed the crocodiles, who are skilled natural predators but too dumb to realize that any extra food provided by human beings might come with a price tag.

Clandestine representatives of handbag manufacturers feed crocodiles on the sly, but we were at an officially sanctioned spot, with floodlights provided. There was a kind of ramp leading down to the water where regular feedings took place so that tourists could get a snap, if that's the word we're looking for. The pampered crocs who hung out near the ramp were reputedly too spoiled to be aggressive. When one of them emerged to collect its free meal, we were told, it would be a model of ambling bonhomie. With Mike and the camera parked off to one side, I hoisted a large lump of raw antelope and edged down the ramp, with a local character at my shoulder to tell me what to do. A croc a block long came boiling up the ramp and I asked the local character – famously wise in the ways of these beasts – what I should do next. But the local character was no longer there. Taking this as a message, I dropped the meat and ran. Back in the car, I needed a nip of Scotch from Denis's hip flask. Mike turned up to say that he had a great shot of the croc eating but needed one of me running. So I went back down the ramp for the minimum necessary distance and ran again, cleverly feigning fear by delving, method style, into my memories of being caned by the Deputy Head Master of Sydney Technical High School. No doubt the finished sequence would make it all worthwhile. When the camera is with you, you have to do the necessary.

The camera was not always with me. There were rest days. Though some of its rules added up to a frustrating curb on flexibility, the union was very right to insist on resting the crew at regular intervals. The programme maker always has reasons for working the crew continuously, and the crew, if left without protection against those reasons, would soon be worked to exhaustion. So you got the odd blissful day when no filming happened, but you had to pray that nothing worth filming would happen either. On just such a day, Denis, with Kungu at the wheel – I sat beside him so he could continue teaching me Swahili while Denis, sitting in the back, explained the finer points of grammar – took us out to get a broader view of the surrounding country, in which the meandering muddy river seemed always to be in view no matter where you went. Equally ubiquitous were the Volkswagen Kombi buses of commercial safaris. In any area of Kenya there were half a dozen safaris going on at once, and most of them travelled in Kombis. As a result, herds of Kombis were almost as common as herds of animals. If a clump of trees was thought to contain a leopard, a cluster of Kombis would form around the clump. We stopped near one of these Kombi gatherings while I watched the tourists do their thing. As so often, the Japanese provided the richest material for a possible commentary. Photographing everything to prove that they had seen it, they photographed the Kombi they had just got out of, photographed each other, and photographed the clump of trees in

which the putative leopard resolutely declined to make itself visible. In those days even the most up-to-date cameras made noises. The multiple Nikons crackled like a firefight.

You couldn't blame the Japanese for being mad about their cameras, most of which, after all, were manufactured in Japan, like the Land Cruiser we were sitting in. I made a note that we would have to get this kind of scene on film, because it was part of the truth. We would have to film the photographers as they took photographs. But it was a depressing spectacle. One felt for the leopard, whose instincts were geared up for hunting, not for being hunted. '*Kwenda*,' said Denis to Kungu. He meant, 'Let's go.' So we went, driving off to a stretch of river where no Kombi vans were in evidence. 'You sometimes see one or two elephant crossing here,' said Denis. As if on cue, a whole family of elephant showed up, moving out of the trees on our side of the river and plainly bent on fording it. As the family waded in, a few more elephant started arriving behind them. Then there were many more. Finally there were about fifty of them wading across or queuing up to take their turn. Among the adults there were infants, almost fully submerged and poking their little trunks up like snorkels. Some of the old males were yelling with impatience, as old males will in a traffic jam. Denis told me I was in luck: he had never seen anything as good as this in all his time in Africa. Kungu said he hadn't seen anything like it since he was a boy. I had never seen anything like it in my wildest dreams. I didn't need telling I was lucky, but I was feeling exactly the opposite, because we weren't getting it on film. I didn't say that, however: for once the adjective 'breathtaking' had a literal sense. The muddy water was being whipped to a froth. On the far bank, two clumps of Kombis were rapidly assembling to flank the path that the emerging animals would take. A hundred cameras crackled. The storm of photoflash put the herd into a panic. The leading tuskers trumpeted. The whole herd sped up. The ones getting out of the water slipped on the mud. To either side of the beaten path, mothers boosted their babies out of the water with their foreheads. I saw one of the mothers, while she was still hip deep in the water, wrap her trunk around her squealing tot, lift it and deposit it on the bank, where it trotted around in small circles of bewilderment. 'I suppose you're sorry you're not filming this,' said Denis, master of understatement to the last. But I had already decided that I would never mention what we had missed getting on film, and until now I never have. It might have sounded like bitterness.

The film camera is an instrument for creating rain. In Kenya we got lucky with the weather and I did not have to learn this lesson, but it had already become apparent to me that time was expensive. If you did not have a plan B ready for when plan A went wrong, you would be wasting money at a rate that the people supplying it would be bound to notice. A grasp of this fact is the

the people supplying it would be bound to notice. A grasp of this fact is the beginning of realism. There are other artistic fields in which you can be creative without being realistic. In poetry there will always be a Dylan Thomas, and he will often do great things, even while borrowing more money than he earns, breaking his bargains, drinking the pub dry, pissing in your fireplace and wrecking every life with which he comes into close contact. But when film or television cameras are involved, you can't lead a bohemian existence even for a week. Flaubert's rule – live like a bourgeois, think like a demigod – applies rigidly. Against my own profligate nature, I was already learning to be parsimonious with my energy. It's half the secret.

The other half, of course, is to seize an opportunity. I was getting better at that too. It was a firm part of our plan that all my commentary would be done later in voice-over, with no 'pieces to camera' on the spot. This principle had been hatched mainly at my initiative, and sprang from my belief that the walk-and-talk was not only something that I was no good at, but something that no normal human being looked sane doing. David Attenborough got away with it when he was walking towards you out of the desert while explaining that the erosion of the topsoil was due to the agricultural policies of the Roman Empire and then a 150,000-ton oil tanker crossed the screen behind him in the same shot, thereby encouraging the viewer to suspect the hidden presence of the Suez Canal. But without the oil tanker he would have looked exactly like a man walking for no reason except to prove that he could. I wanted to do most of my talking over the finished film, which could be cut together far more tightly in the absence of long filmed speeches that had to be preserved no matter what. But this future flexibility entailed a strict discipline of getting plenty of coverage at the top and tail of each sequence, so that there would be space to add the links. These bread-and-butter shots can be boring for young directors, most of whom fancy themselves as Federico Fellini's natural heir. Such journeywork can even be boring to the cameraman, so you have to get him on side, employing gifts of diplomacy that did not come naturally to me. I learned them because I had to. Many a film has been ruined by lack of coverage. Luckily Mike was a workhorse as well as a daredevil. His only real drawback was that he spoke Cockney rhyming slang as if he assumed that I would understand what he was saying.

'Can you,' he asked, 'just hold it there while we get some light on your boat?' The time I took to figure out that 'boat' was short for 'boat race', which rhymed with 'face', could prove important if the other face in the shot belonged to a buffalo sticking its head out three feet away as we toiled uphill in the Land Cruiser on a bumpy track cut through thick bush. The shock of suddenly seeing the buffalo's foaming nostrils and mad red eyes from so very close is with me

the buffalo's roaring nostrils and mad red eyes from so very close is with me still. It was like turning over a Sunday colour supplement and finding, on its cover, Donatella Versace after her latest encounter with the collagen. I yelped as if stung. Denis reassured me by saying that the buffalo needed room to run before it did any damage. 'Give him a bit of space and he could take the engine out of this car.' My boat turned white, like a yacht.

Onward to Kilimanjaro, where we camped out in the open with the mountain for a backdrop: a cyclorama three miles high. The mountain had Hemingway's legend stamped all over it. It might as well have featured a giant sculpture of his head, like Mount Rushmore. Possibly as an elegiac closing scene for the film, we did a campfire interview in which Denis evoked the departed spirit of the Great White Writer. Denis did the old boy proud, but while the magazines were being changed he let slip a few things that would have been dynamite on film. 'He couldn't shoot straight to save his life, so he had to wait until the animal was practically on him. Quite daunting if you were standing next to him.' Also it turned out that the master of language had never learned nearly as much Swahili as he liked to pretend. Since *Green Hills of Africa* is peppered with Swahili words, this was hot news. Why hadn't he learned it? 'He wasn't a very good listener. Not like you.' This was the only time that I had been called a good listener and I took it as one of the biggest compliments of my life. From that moment I redoubled my efforts as Kungu's star pupil, and the time soon came when we spoke together in his language as a matter of course. Our conversations were a bit elementary from my side, but they were good for my brain tissue. An awful pity that Swahili is so short of literature, or it would be with me still.

There is a lot more that I could say about my safari but at this rate I would need ten more volumes just to recount my memories of filming in twenty years' worth of foreign places. I have gone into detail about the Kenya film because it provided a foundation course in which I had to learn an awful lot in a hurry. One of the things I learned was the importance of leaving your prejudices at home. The story of the connection between the Europeans and the native Africans had seemed cut and dried in Nairobi: it had looked like no connection at all. But when Denis and Kungu were together you saw something else. It wasn't a master-servant relationship. They were colleagues, working by agreement. Denis taught me a wonderful Swahili expression which had been much employed by the white masters of the old days. It could be translated as 'Why? Because *bwana* says so.' But he also said that it was an expression he himself had never used in earnest, and that it would have been all over for him in Africa if he had ever felt the need.

Near the end of the shoot, there was a day when I climbed out of the old Dakota that had brought us from Kichwa Tembo and I got the news from

someone on the ground that the BBC had just announced the death of Philip Larkin. That prince of poets had always been very kind to me and I found the sense of loss hard to take. Kungu asked me what was wrong. Running out of words, I told him that a wise old man, a man who spoke beautifully, was dead. Kungu taught me the phrase for when you miss someone. When I left Denis and Kungu to lead the rest of their honest lives under a succession of corrupt governments, I often missed them both. But I never got in touch. Filming is like that: you get to know people well, and then you don't see them again. And I'm afraid I'm like that: I get busy somewhere else, and nothing connects or continues except in my work, where I put the care and patience that I should have given to real life. It's a character flaw, and filming gave it a licence. Already, back there at the beginning, I was wondering how long I could keep at it before everything else fell apart. I would have liked to have been in England when Larkin died. On the plane back to London I began a poem about him. In fact I wrote it to him, as an address to his ghost, and I included a lot of detail about Africa, which he had never seen. When you have a vision as powerful as his, of course, you can see the world without leaving home, but some of us are lesser spirits.

5. PAUSE TO REGROUP

Back in Cambridge with my family, I strove to atone for my recent absence by telling stories of Africa at the dinner table. To my disappointment, my rare carved wooden rhinoceros aroused only a mild interest, although it is still there today, looming in a small way on the shelf under one of the windows to the back garden. But I scored a hit with my evocations of the charging elephant and the narrow escape from the killer crocodile. People under a certain age go for that kind of thing. Phrases that I planned to use in my commentary were duly tested. I also learned, to my surprise, that a family holiday was due. But first I had to edit the film. I took my tested phrases with me into the editing room and soon found that very few of them fitted. Since electronic editing was still in the process of being invented, all the footage was hanging there in the form of strips of celluloid, a forest of potential. But after the relevant bits had been loaded into the editing table it soon became apparent that several scenes I had thought were in the bag barely existed. The elephant charged and I ran, but we were in different shots, so I might as well have been running on Dartmoor. The crocodile charged and I ran again, but again there was nothing to prove that these things were happening on the same day or even the same continent. It was nobody's fault except mine. I should have realized the necessity of staying close to the camera and keeping it behind me, so that it could pan easily with the animal while keeping me in the frame. Off to the side, the camera would miss the connection. Richard was in charge of the editing and tried hard to convince me that kicking myself was useless.

Eventually I cooled down and started to earn my money by writing a narrative that would tie the fragments together. Most of the raw material was impressive, even beautiful, but I had been counting on the moments of action that made me look all set to take off at high speed when danger threatened. When jumping with the Masai I looked sufficiently silly, but I had always thought that the real story lay in the moments when I was included in the picture along with the

prospect of death, so that the viewers would share my impulse to hit the ground running. Those moments weren't there. Richard was very good at getting me beyond what I had always thought and into the realm of fact. He had a phrase, 'Let's see if we miss it,' which made it easier to take the disappointment when a sequence that had required a lot of hard work to shoot had to be cut out. All the scenes set in Nairobi hit the floor. I didn't mind losing those, but when I said that I was sorry we had ever shot them in the first place Richard had the right reply: they would have come in handy if the animals had been rained off. It was a long, hard edit but the results were pretty good. Next time they would be better. There had to be a next time because already I was convinced that writing words to pictures was the most fun that a writer could have when not being handed an Academy Award by Sophia Loren.

One principle I had already grasped was that the words could punctuate the pictures and vice versa. Measuring sentences to fit a sequence or even a single shot, I relished the freedom of not having to say that a charging rhino was a charging rhino. I could say that its horn would end up in an aphrodisiac cocktail glass in Hong Kong if it didn't end up in me first. Windows of opportunity opened up one after the other. It was an interplay. This principle came in handy when we started planning a weekly variety show composed of interviews, with a top section reviewing the news. To go with some footage we had of the Soviet leaders reviewing the May Day parade in Red Square, I wrote a sample fantasy and Richard went for it.

This frivolous approach to world affairs would not have impressed my fellow regulars at the Friday lunch. At various locations, the Friday lunch was still going on and would do so for some years yet, but increasingly the demands of our respective careers were pulling it apart. When the up and coming are still in the early stages of their ascent, they cling together for warmth, but higher up the mountain, even though it gets colder, they start going their separate ways to the top. They just get too busy. It was our timetables, and not our different views, that put the first cracks in the old camaraderie. Different views there had always been. Kingsley Amis regarded James Fenton as an agent of the Viet Cong, an impression that Kingsley had perhaps gained from the fact that Fenton had arrived in Saigon riding on a North Vietnamese tank. Their contrary opinions did not stop them making each other laugh, and even when they weren't laughing they had the common background of a deep knowledge of English poetry throughout its history. Martin Amis was of the opinion that the mere existence of nuclear weapons was enough to rot our minds with subconscious dread. I agreed with Robert Conquest that nothing except nuclear weapons could have stopped the US and the USSR from going to war. Ian McEwan and Mark Boxer also

thought that atomic bombs were bad things and that peace was a principle. I believed that peace was just a desirable state of affairs. Christopher Hitchens thought I was a propagandist for global nuclear war. I gave chapter and verse to prove that I had got my concept of an armed truce from Raymond Aron. Terry Kilmartin, who had known Aron personally and translated some of his major works into English, said that I was overdoing my admiration for a philosopher who had after all, um, ah, ended up 'a bit right wing'. I said I was still a leftie. Peter Porter said I was certainly to the right of him. Russell Davies, speaking in the voice of Sir John Betjeman, said that only the Queen's opinion counted. The clashes of opinion were mighty, but the rule of the table was that you couldn't fight your corner without making it amusing. The ability to quote helped there. Allusions flew like paper bullets. Craig Raine, modelling a hairstyle based on an explosion in an armchair, was so hard to interrupt that I wanted to stab him with a fork. To judge from the way he was waving his own fork, the feeling was mutual. Piers Paul Reid, secure in his Catholic faith, got cooler as the quarrels heated up. He was a Jesuit at a conference of evolutionary scientists, relishing the shades of folly. Julian Barnes, as has always been his wont, said just enough, and it was always good. Otherwise he sat stonily amused, like an Easter Island statue watching a restaurant scene in *Mr Hulot's Holiday*. With the talk as the main dish of the feast, nobody noticed what they ate, and Ian Hamilton, as usual, never even ate it. He just smoked and drank simultaneously. Smoke was part of the landscape, as on a misty moor haunted by voices.

Having realized that some of my best friends were still slow to abandon the notion that the totalitarian regimes in the East, despite their impeccable record of victimizing the common people they were notionally in business to protect, had somehow questioned the validity of liberal democracy in the West, I found myself writing with more urgency on the subject of the totalitarian mentality and its implications. My thesis was that true intellectuals in the West, or indeed anywhere, would have to attain a clear view of the past if they were to work beneficially in the present. My own view of the past was expanded considerably by a recently acquired ability to read Russian. Helped along by the sheer beauty of the language, I had gradually elevated my level of reading somewhat beyond the level of cat-sat-on-the-mat. A big help in coping with the initial stage was that the one thing the Soviet Union was really good at was publishing cardboard-covered teaching aids full of pictures of cats sitting on mats. Since Russian is the kind of language where there is a different verb for cats sitting down slowly, cats sitting down suddenly and cats just sitting there, it is very easy to have your heart broken before you get to the far edge of square one, so I had some reason to bless the Kremlin. But now that I could read the dissident and exile texts in

their full range, other reasons for admiring the regime were looking thin on the ground.

Christopher Hitchens, whose sense of humour was of such a quality that he could quote from P. G. Wodehouse and make him a lot funnier than he was on the page, was less cheerful when I quoted Lenin's written opinion that the party must rule by terror. Reacting sharply to the suggestion that the foundations of state terror were already well laid before Stalin took over, the Hitch still saw merit in the revolutionary tradition. Later in his coruscating life as a commentator he modified that view, but at the time he had no trouble in making me feel like an incipient Tory for placing my faith in historical institutions: it was not, after all, as if I, with my relatively poor memory, could easily quote Edmund Burke in my defence, whereas the Hitch, who had a memory like a library, could quote Tom Paine until the cows came home and turned the milking shed into a commune. But I think I was rather better at remembering the words of the dissident Russian sociologist Alexandr Zinoviev, who said that any society which placed collective rights above individual rights was a lawless society, and that was that. The words, in the original language, had cost me almost as much trouble to read as they had cost him to write, so I was unlikely to forget them. (When I met him one day in Geneva shortly after he had been expelled from his homeland, he complimented me on how I had quoted him in an article but asked me why I had found it necessary to make the point. 'Does not everyone think that here?' Bad guess, *tovarisch*.) Thus armoured, I could persist in believing that a naivety based in reality was better than a sophistication based on a fantasy, and I pressed on with my intention of expressing what I felt in the form of connected thought.

As one essay succeeded another, I found I was getting better at it. In the field of discursive, expository writing, practice helps. Time brings fluency, or at least the appearance of it. With experience and accumulated knowledge – I was still reading a great deal, a habit I retain today, although my always unreliable memory has begun to weaken – the actual practice of writing got more difficult, but that was a good sign. (Thomas Mann defined the writer as someone for whom writing is harder than it is for other people.) As a reward for persistence, the finished product became less clotted, more transparent, and therefore easier for the reader to remember from paragraph to paragraph, the unit on which I based my style. (Writers who compose only in sentences, even if the sentences are vivid, soon strain the reader's patience: sensible people are not long amused if they are flicked repeatedly with a wet towel.) The relative success of my first novel *Brilliant Creatures* didn't distract me from my ambition as a factual writer. Some of its reviewers thought that a television performer had no business

writing a novel of any kind, but there were others who approved, even if they had to do it through gritted teeth: always the best kind of approval to have. In both Britain and Australia, the blessedly literate educated reading public made up their own minds, and the book, after its honeymoon period as a bestseller in both hardback and paperback, went on to sell more than a quarter of a million copies in the course of its life.

But if I could publish *Brilliant Creatures* again now, I would have to annotate its contemporary references. It was a commentary on the times. Even in the first flush of its vogue I never thought of myself as a career novelist. I sat down every week with people who could do that better. I knew that the best use of fantasy in my writing was to make factual statement entertaining. What changed for me, in those years, was my notion of the range of fact over which entertainment was possible. It could go wider, if not deeper. My first two books of essays, *The Metropolitan Critic* and *At the Pillars of Hercules*, had got me somewhere. The essays I was writing now got me further. A few years later I collected them in my third volume of essays, *From the Land of Shadows*, the first of my books to make my political position explicit. There were many people, some of them uncomfortably close to me, who were ready to insist that my political position was somewhat compromised by the physical position of Japanese game-show contestants staked out on a beach for the crabs, but I was determined to keep going with my balancing act.

It was a balancing act performed on the run. The weekly studio show consumed a lot of energy even before it got to air. It was hard enough just to sell the thing. Jeremy Isaacs, not yet equipped with a knighthood, was at that time still in charge of Channel 4, which he had created from scratch. He agreed to meet me and Richard at the Garrick Club. It was a club rule that you weren't allowed to do business at the dining table. You weren't even allowed to take a piece of paper out of your pocket. When I got elected to the Garrick after the usual wait of several years in the queue, I cravenly allowed its prestige to impress me, and for a long time the place came in useful if I wanted to hire a room for an anniversary party or something like that, but eventually I had enough sense to ask myself what the hell I, of all people, was doing in a club that did not admit women unless they were on a leash. I saw a bunch of sozzled old men camped under the grand staircase, boring the daylight out of each other, and I had a sudden urge never to be one of their number. So I resigned. Hardly anyone ever resigns from the Garrick. I know that my friend Tom Stoppard did after he figured out that he was going there only once a year and therefore paying several hundred pounds in membership fees for a single lunch, but hardly anybody else has ever been on the exit list. Most luminaries are on the entry list,

and once they get in they stay there until they have to be carried out in a black plastic bag. But that's exactly what's wrong with the place. It's essentially a well-decorated nursing home.

At the time of this meeting, however, I was still susceptible to the aura of an inner sanctum. Isaacs, whom I now count as a friend and neighbour, fitted right into the Garrick's trad decor. He did quite a lot of quoting in the original Latin. But he listened, and he bought the show. It was still a paper project and we couldn't even show him the paper, but he had imagination. This was the man who gave Verity Lambert the green light to make *The Naked Civil Servant*, which remains, to this day, the single most adventurous television programme I have ever seen. Like Sir Michael Balcon at Ealing or Lord Bernstein at Granada, Jeremy was one of that great line of British Establishment Jews who had been cultivating the nation's artistic garden since the heyday of Benjamin Disraeli. It was not yet apparent that the line would soon lose its confidence and finally die out. What Jeremy said, went. He gave us his word and we knew it was as good as gold. Many years later, when he was in charge of the Royal Opera House at Covent Garden, he took the word of a BBC producer on the assumption that it was as trustworthy as his, and the new boys stitched him up a treat: *o tempora*, he no doubt said echoing Cicero, *o mores*. What times, and what customs. But on the day he met with us the times had not yet changed: the grandee had spoken, and we were in like Flynn. There was still a lot of work coming up, however, so the family holiday would be a welcome break.

6. ALPINE IDYLL

I was lucky it didn't break my neck. For several years the family had gone skiing in Italy, mainly at Bormio and Madonna di Campiglio. At Madonna there was a ski instructor called Italo who was much loved by our daughters and who taught me a lot about life, if never enough about skiing. Taking me out for a solo lesson, he carved a turn on a slope covered with fresh snow and explained the resulting sculpture using a ski-pole as a pointer, like an art critic decoding a doodle by Brancusi. The tiny amount of displaced snow at the start of the curve showed how the weight had been applied in a smooth progression as the knees were gradually bent to push the skis down. But then there was a symmetrically equivalent crescent indicating how the knees had been straightened with similar gradualness to complete the turn, thus maintaining the curve instead of its degenerating into a skid. Done this way, a completed turn would prepare for the next as the unweighted skis floated naturally into the fall line. Though my own turns continued to look like a demonstration of elementary ditch-digging, what he had shown me served as an ideal in my memory of how the application of effort should always be exactly measured: nothing by force, everything by logical progression. Too much disturbance in the medium was a sign of strain. The lesson is still with me today. It serves me like the passage in Johnny Weissmuller's autobiography about how the essence of swimming the crawl is to relax the arm when it's out of the water, so that it wastes no energy. Fully relaxed, it will fall into the water under its own weight, without a splash. The secret of composition in any form is the appropriate application of effort. The result is an aesthetic effect that should never be aimed at directly, but only reaped as the harvest of correct preparation. If skiing in Italy had always been like that, I could have gone home and written a sequel to Byron's *Don Juan* or a companion volume to *War and Peace*. But at Bormio the whole family traumatized itself by following a less judicious instructor across the slope that had been prepared for the World Downhill Championship.

Trekking cross-country, we came to the edge of the championship slope about halfway up its initial precipice, where the competitors would be riding their hissing skis at full clip in the tuck. If the high-speed *pista* had been covered only with snow the view downward would still have been enough to chill the blood, but it had rained the previous night and the whole thing was a sheet of ice. We were about a mile up the mountain and we had this highway of frozen water diving past us. Everyone else edged their way across successfully to where the soft snow started again on the far side, but I was the one who lost his edges and started down like a crate of pig iron. As I approached the speed of sound, I could only just hear my instructor's voice as he came streaking down after me crying 'Joe! Joe! No, Joe!' He called me Joe because he couldn't manage the name Clive (no Italian can: it comes out as 'Cleevey' if you're lucky), and he was yelling 'Joe, stop! Stop, Joe!' He had the English word for 'stop', but if I had known how to stop I wouldn't have been on my way through the sound barrier on the road to certain death, would I, you dumb bastard? His next shouted imprecation was even more useless. 'Too fast, Joe! Too fast!' Luckily, when he got below me, he managed to get his skis in parallel under mine and bring us both to a halt only about a kilometre below where my family, with varying degrees of compassion, were watching the nominal head of the house revealing his fragility on the path to oblivion. Trembling all over in the nearest I have ever come to liquid fear, I vowed to shake the ice crystals from my heels and never ski in Italy again. Too many people knew me. As I started the long slog of chipping my way back up the glacier there were groups of people on either side of it taking photographs. One of them had a little film camera.

So we went to Davos, which is a bit more swish, and has many slopes kinder to the average skier, as part of the Swiss plan to send every visitor home happy. Even the black runs are less likely to get you killed, and on the red runs I fancied my style. My wife, naturally elegant in everything she does, was a neat skier, but she knew she was no Ann-Marie Moser-Pröll. With her sensible nature, she could take it when our elder daughter, thriving on the advantage of having started as an infant, turned into a notably graceful expert who could slalom down a mogul field like a gull through waves, and even our younger daughter collected a medal for going downhill faster than the other tots in her class, many of them wearing designer crash helmets bought by doting mothers in mink hats. I couldn't take it at all. If you make your start, as I had, by doing stem turns, it is frustratingly hard to persist with a parallel turn when things get sticky: you revert to the stem, as a badly trained singer in a panic will revert to singing from the throat instead of the diaphragm. Still relying too often on brute force – always the main reason why men learn more slowly than women – I bullocked

my way down a tight gully when I should have linked carved turns together. Instead of winding a silent, snaky trail down the fall line, I hauled myself noisily through a rough and unlovely zigzag. But there was a long, empty, straight and inviting slope ahead, ending about half a mile down with a set of apparently gentle bumps. With the rest of the family behind me, I went into full Franz Klammer mode and dived down hill with my speed building up all the time, like a P-47 leaving behind a flock of Me 109s. For almost a minute I just kept on going faster until there was no faster I could go. My velocity was far beyond the point where I could contemplate any kind of turn at all. But I didn't have to turn. I just had to negotiate the first bump. I did, but I went airborne, nosed over and, after long enough in the air to mentally rewrite my will, hit the speeding snow with the full length of my body from nose to toe. The quick-reaction bindings worked all right and my skis came off in the advertised manner, but there was no such automatic mechanism to prevent the loops of my ski-poles from practically pulling my thumbs off even before I had come to a sobbing halt halfway up the next bump.

After what seemed an age the family accumulated around my crucified form, kindly asking if anything was broken. Judging from the pain, almost nothing wasn't. After I reassembled myself I was ready to pretend that it had all been planned as a comic routine, but the agony in my thumbs prompted involuntary cries that rather spoiled the effect. Advised to turn myself in at the clinic and have my thumbs put in plaster, I typically preferred to wait until the piercing throb went away by itself. Decades later it still hasn't.

This disinclination to get my medical problems attended to has been with me throughout my life. I would like to think that it sprang from a magnificent detachment from material concerns, but I can't deny that there might be an element of fear. The doctor, like the dentist, is a judge of behaviour, and I quailed at the thought of being sentenced. Even if I had been blessed with moral courage, however, I would probably always have been inclined to just let things go. I lack the time. I have things to do. To the objection that procrastination is bound to cost me more time in the end than prompt attention would have cost me at the start, and that I would have got more done if I had been sensible, I can only answer: don't you try reasoning with me. To be aware of the doomed struggles going on within my soul, however, gives me an edge as a commentator on politics and culture: I know from internal evidence that the capacity of the human mind to fool itself can be infinite. Turpitude, even when it looks energetic, almost always springs from mental sloth. When the real Berlin was burning all around him, Hitler went back to tinkering with the scale model of his dream Berlin which would never now be built. Rather than face facts, he took

refuge in his art. Greater artists than him have done the same. Think of Charlie Parker, who must have known that drugs would kill him. He even knew that they made him play worse. In fact he said so. But he went on reaching for the needle anyway. You can see the whole picture and still miss its point.

For the last two days of the holiday I sat alone in the bar of our hotel, working on the opening chapters of a second novel, for which my provisional title was *The Remake*. Perhaps the spasms in my torn thumb muscles had gone to my brain, because I found myself planning a book which was bound to fail. It was going to be a novel comprising all the modernist narrative techniques that I most hated. Thus I would demonstrate that I cared nothing for my reputation. Looking back on the self-immolating folly of this intention, I can't counsel firmly enough against the inadvisability of deliberately flouting elementary propriety, especially for anyone whose reputation is already under threat. Inviting your critics to come and get you is a very bad way of proving that you don't care what they say. But I already knew all that, and planned to put it in the book. It would be a book about the centrifugal multiplicity of a personality. It would even be a book about the monumentality of its author's stupidity. It would be a book with everything, which is rarely a good aim with which to start out, because it courts the employment of overloaded prose. Luckily there was a compelling reason to dictate that the opening lines of my suicide note would at least be carefully composed. With my right thumb useless, I had to hold my pen between the next two fingers. As a result, the dangers inherent in fluency were staved off, at the rate of about one paragraph per hour.

On the plane home to England, with my thumbs held erect, I distinguished myself by transferring the food on my plastic tray directly into my lap. It is always a bring-down when the people to whom you are most closely related can't bear to watch you eat. When I went to the toilet I had a lot of trouble with the zip and what happened next was a farce, as if I was trying to aim an unlit cigar. In cold weather it still happens. Laugh, Pagliaccio. But the new studio show was waiting for me to join it, and the pain in my thumbs was soon sidelined by the pressure in my head. There was a lot to think about.

7. THE WEEKLY STINT

The bulk of the weekly show would consist of interviews, and there would be only two ways of doing those, well or badly. But the top of the show offered multiple ways to go wrong. I had seen too many talk-show hosts struggling in vain with an unpunctuated opening solo spot. Theoretically it should have been interrupted by the spontaneous laughter of the studio audience but all too often it had to be interrupted by enforced hysteria that sounded even more embarrassing than silence, as if Stalin was doing a stand-up routine for the Politburo and the penalty of not splitting one's sides was to get it in the neck. What I wanted was an illustrated solo spot. Such a device had been a feature of American television talk shows since the earliest days. In my time as a TV critic I had mugged up on what the Americans did. Mugging up was harder then than now, because there were no discs or tapes, but when I was in New York on other business I would spend every spare hour surfing the channels on the TV set in my hotel room, looking for re-runs.

Partly I had wanted to confirm my suspicion that the British front-men were getting nowhere, but I would have done it anyway out of sheer admiration. The famous Johnny Carson always had plenty of props he could react to. In a later day, even Dick Cavett, the best solo talker of the bunch, always had other stuff on screen so that he could snatch a few minutes being a voice without a face, and his face was a lot nicer than mine. Such ploys were already in a high state of development before British critics, who often had only a slight knowledge of American broadcasting history, credited David Letterman with inventing them. Invention almost always has a tradition behind it. As with poetry, all the revolutions are palace revolutions. Totally original innovators – Ernie Kovacs in the US, Spike Milligan and Kenny Everett in the UK – are very rare. I had no ambitions as a revolutionary. But there were new things I had seen done that I thought could be further developed.

Fake news was the first. The editing process was getting fast enough to yield

usefully short clips. A few of them – only a few, the percentage was vanishingly small – could be given a misleading voice-over that might have a high yield. And perhaps a quick story could be told through a succession of misleadingly explained stills. Reciting the wrong words over the right still: today it is such a standard technique in television comedy that a long-running show such as *Have I Got News For You* will use it as a closing number, but the idea began with us, and like most new ideas it had to evolve from something more primitive. We called stills ‘cards’ and sometimes we used a dozen cards to tell a single story. During the first series of the weekly show the number of cards got down to three or four, and in the next series it got down to one. Looking back from now, it seems obvious that we should have started that way. Similarly, most of the bits of fake-news footage were far too long, so that I was writing a whole paragraph when a single sentence would have done. To put it briefly, the secret is to put it briefly. But you always think that’s what you’re doing, until experience teaches you that you aren’t being brief enough.

It took a while to get all these gimmicks up to speed. With the interviews there was less to learn. Richard already knew that there had to be a pre-interview, conducted by a researcher. Without that, I would not have been able to go on prepared. More importantly, the pre-interview ensured that the guest would go on prepared. Try to skip that preliminary stage and there was a distinct chance of the whole thing going haywire. Nobody, for example, can answer a question like ‘What’s the most embarrassing thing that ever happened to you?’ if you ask it cold. The guest has to know that you’re after the story about the time he forgot his glasses before dinner at Sandringham and stubbed out a cigarette in the Queen Mother’s crème brûlée, or the story about how he broke wind during an audience with the Pope. Otherwise the answer will be waffle at best, dead air at worst. Admittedly there can be cases of a thoroughly prepared guest pulling a deliberate double cross, but it hardly ever happens. Unfortunately I think it happened to me quite early on, with results that came close to spooking me for keeps.

One of our earliest guests was the politician Michael Heseltine, by then well embarked on the voyage to glory that would eventually convince him he might successfully challenge Margaret Thatcher for the leadership of the Conservative Party. Still handsome today, in those days he was gorgeous, with a head of hair borrowed from Veronica Lake and the sculpted face of a Viking diplomat. Our researcher came back from the pre-interview clutching her heaving bosom while she breathed in short gasps, like a nymph reviving from the embrace of Pan. *Yes, Minister* was in the first flush of its well-deserved renown and naturally she had asked him if he had seen it. He told her that he had watched every episode. He

could quote the dialogue. He thought it was brilliant. So I had my first question all set to go, and half a dozen follow-up questions on the same subject. This was going to be a breeze.

On studio night Heseltine arrived in a succession of fast cars and swept into the building through corridors of throbbing female hearts. The make-up girls had drawn straws to get the job and the winner found that she had nothing to do except tone down his radiance with a light dusting of talcum powder. After I had finished my opening spiel, Heseltine loped into position while the studio audience drew its collective breath in vain, his charisma having instantly burned all the oxygen out of the air. The press, imprecise as always, had taken to calling him Tarzan, but surely this was Siegfried emerging from a quick dip in the Rhine, or Achilles on furlough from the battlefields of Troy. After a few routine compliments I levered my first softball into the launching tube and let him have it.

‘I know you’re fond of *Yes, Minister* . . .’

‘Never watch it.’

‘Oh, come on, surely, as a politician, you . . .’

‘Never seen it. Too busy.’

I could see myself on the monitor, looking exactly like someone caught in a fusillade of flying shit. Somehow I got through the next twenty minutes but I was a whole week getting my brains back. Luckily there was soon plenty of evidence to prove that preparation was useful, and often crucial. I risk skipping forward in the chronology here, because when you interview hundreds of people over the course of years the order of memories gets shuffled in your mind, and I never kept a file of the tapes. Someone, somewhere, will have a list of all the names and times, but I rather hope that I’m never told. I remember the stand-outs because they taught me lessons. Basically they divided into three categories: self-starters, normal human beings and walking disasters.

A self-starter is someone who could have done the whole interview on his own. Neither Ruby Wax nor Mel Brooks has ever really needed to be asked a question, and if they were on screen together they would probably explode, like matter meeting antimatter. While he lived, and arguably for a considerable time after, Peter Ustinov was the supreme example, closely followed by the young version of Billy Connolly, the one whose goatee had not yet been dyed purple. (Nowadays Stephen Fry would be high on the list, but we are talking about a previous epoch, when the new kids were on their way up but had not yet taken over.) I met Ustinov quite early on and he was even more bounteous with his gifts than I had expected, like a Father Christmas who arrives with a sack full of toys and immediately sets about manufacturing new ones in case you don’t like

the ones he's given you already. As he settled back into his chair with his cherubic face rising like the sun over the global curve of his paunch, I only had to press the ignition switch and he was off and away with a stream of memories, impressions, illustrated short stories and sound effects. Russian ballet dancers met German generals. Hollywood producers hob-nobbed with the clientele of a hamburger joint in Nepal. Jet airliners took off. Marlene Dietrich recited Milton. This guy was a universe.

All these miracles were conjured into being while scarcely anything moved except various components of his face. He knew everything about what his features looked like on camera and could control each one of them individually. So you saw the whole history of his film career being reprised: the petulant sneer of Nero, the wearily arched eyebrow of the Devil's Island convict in *We're No Angels*, the infinitely thoughtful pout of Hercule Poirot. Even his nose could act, as when his separately flared nostrils evoked the favourite racehorse of the Maharajah of Cooch Behar. The only drawback with someone who can ask all his own questions is that you don't get much of a chance to ask him anything hard. Ustinov was a frequent guest in the Soviet Union and there were some of us who thought that his cosiness with the Kremlin was a pretty dubious form of détente at a time when dissidents were still getting shrink-wrapped in blankets, but he only had to launch into his imitation of the late Comrade Brezhnev and you saw that it would have been in bad taste to slow him down. He was the most variously gifted man I ever met in my life, but he would have been the first to admit that versatility can be a kind of limitation. Indeed he would admit it unprompted. Prompting of any kind was something he had never needed.

With Billy Connolly you got the same torrentially original effect except that he couldn't stay in his chair. Years later, when I interviewed him again in a satellite link-up from London to Los Angeles, it was the same deal: the material was different but he did the identical imitation of St Vitus winning a break-dancing competition. He was supposed to be standing upright in a tight head and shoulders shot but he kept disappearing sideways and suddenly returning as a mad British officer, or sinking through the bottom of the screen before surfacing in the role of Esther Williams being goosed by a dolphin. In the studio for the first of his several interviews with me, he used his chair as the merest reference point while he darted about. A camera on its pedestal was still a heavy item in those years and the men who operated them needed muscle. The bloke behind Billy's camera had to do a lot of abrupt hauling and he put his back out, which must have hurt worse because he was already convulsed with laughter like everybody else. The important thing to note here is that Billy wasn't doing a set routine. It was all coming off the top of his head, accompanied by a wild stare

which suggested that if he hadn't been doing this for a living he would have been beating people up at random. One of his best performances in the movies was as a psychopath hiring himself out as a debt-collector: he was so frighteningly believable that the film was almost immediately forgotten. It was called *The Debt Collector* and those of us who saw it are still having bad dreams. There are famous actors who can't act anything like as well as that, a fact which tells you a lot about acting. To a great extent it's for people who can't do much else, and Billy could do everything. The self-starter, simply by his nature, can give you an idea of the reservoirs of the human mind, because everything he remembers is at the service of his powers of fantasy. In more than twenty years I met a bare half-dozen of them. It was a revelation every time. All I had to do was whip the top occasionally and I soon learned to confine my intervention to a single flick. There was only one of them who made me wish for a supply of tranquillizer darts instead, and that was Freddie Starr, of whom more later. He popped up near the end of my television career and belongs in the last chapter, or perhaps in a separate book, made available in a plain wrapper to the kind of customer who watches television with his Rottweiler.

Ordinary human beings could be no less brilliant – some of them were even more so – but they would stop to think. Joanna Lumley was such a good actress that she could imitate a self-starter, but as her host I had to think of what to ask next, which wasn't always easy as I sat there in the extra light of her beauty. She was full of interesting opinions and perfectly fluent in expressing them, but she wouldn't just run on. She had been too well brought up for that, and didn't want to speak out of turn. Charlotte Rampling suffered from the same well-bred politeness but was shy as well, so I had to dig, making a constructive response every time instead of just grunting with approval. Peter Cook, who could give you a whole show for an answer, still needed a question. Tom Stoppard was another human being, despite the contrary evidence provided by a creative mind from outer space. I had known him for years and was well aware that I would never meet anyone quite so clever. But he was one of those rare clients who made me wonder whether a pre-interview was any use. He had given the ferret a set of shapely answers but when I reproduced the same questions in the studio he steered clear of giving the same answers again. He looked for different words, which took time, so the hair-trigger effect he gave in real life was slowed down to mere articulacy. He changed the stories because he was too original a speaker to use the same words twice. There was a lesson there. Preparation can be inhibiting.

But its absence could be crippling. The enchanting young actress Emily Lloyd was still a long way short of getting used to all the attention. She became

available at the last minute and there was no time to prep her. Richard, always the king of the bookers, booked her anyway, but I could tell he was worried, and the worries proved well-founded. She lost the plot after the first question and took mental refuge in the nursery, doing the on-screen equivalent of hiding behind the doll's house. From her eyes, I could tell what was going on in her mind. 'I'm supposed to be saying wonderful things but I'm being boring.' From my eyes she could tell what was going on in my mind. 'This girl is drowning and it's my fault.' It was agony for both of us, because if I ever had one virtue as a host it was a determination to make the guest look good. What I should have done was take my cigarette lighter out of my pocket, set fire to my finger, and ask her to comment. But I was no longer a smoker. So, as one tends to do in a crisis, I reverted to a bad habit, and started giving the answer along with the question. 'And now that you're established as a star of the big screen I suppose the offers are coming in and you have to choose between them and that must be difficult because some of them are challenging roles but they wouldn't be a commercial success while others wouldn't really extend your range but they could be useful in consolidating your career as star of the big screen who . . .'

Nightmare.

In the editing room the wizards saved her life, cutting the interview down to a few minutes in which almost nothing happened except a pretty girl looking bewildered while a desperate man babbled on. Even when she smiled, she looked as if she were trying to conciliate a burglar. I could have shot myself, because she got some of the blame that should have gone to me in its entirety. It couldn't have been as bad as I remember it, but it was bad enough to instil in my bruised mind a deep resolve to be ready, always, for the guest to freeze. When the guest is in command, he can yes-no you and he will still look good. In the old days of *Late Night Line-Up* there was a notorious live interview when the irascible playwright John Osborne answered all of Sheridan Morley's questions within two minutes, saying 'Yes' or 'No' and nothing else. When Sherry had run through the list of questions written on his sheet of paper he had to start thinking of new ones. 'Read any good books lately?' was the first. (Osborne's answer was 'No'.) Sherry, by now no longer with us, was normally a pretty relaxed customer. Later on, in the twilight of his career, he operated as a drama critic and was famous for falling asleep in the first act a few seconds after the lights went down. But I'll bet the memory of that evening was among his death-bed flashbacks. Osborne, on the other hand, undoubtedly never gave it another thought. Bastards have no remorse.

When the guest is not in command, the host has to get in and help or he will have blood on his hands. Determined to avoid that, I gradually extended my

range of techniques for helping the guest to be no less interesting than he would have been in normal circumstances. The prepped anecdote helps because if the guest forgets it, or any essential part of it, you can supply it for him. The moment you do that, of course, the audience knows that you already know. So you have to admit it, and make a joke of it. If that sounds artificial, remember that the whole deal is artificial anyway, and trust the audience to enjoy your discomfort. As long as the audience isn't enjoying the guest's discomfort instead, you're in the clear. The first essential for the interviewer is to realize that the conditions in a television studio have about the same relation to everyday life as mechanized warfare. For ordinary human beings it's as freaky as hell and you have to guide them through it, even at the risk of your own skin.

And then there are the walking disasters, most of whom must remain nameless. On radio, the walking disaster is usually the pundit – sometimes of professorial rank – who starts making hand signals to illustrate a point. On television the contrary applies: he is the celebrity who is all words, and can't cut a story short to save his life or yours. Some of the older and more laurelled British actors could be very dangerous that way. There was one patriarch of his profession who, in the standard patois of upper Thespia, insisted on referring to Laurence Olivier as 'Larry' and John Mills as 'Johnny', so that you and the audience had to figure out who he meant. But there was worse in store. When it came at long last to the climax of one of his protracted anecdotes, he would start saying 'Johnny' instead of 'Larry' and vice versa, so that you couldn't figure out anything. As he droned on, the screen filled up with warm, pink fluff, but you could say he had a kind of charm. There was a Welsh white-collar trade-union leader called Clive Jenkins who couldn't have been credited with any charm at all.

Clive Jenkins is dead now, a fact which moves me to only the minimum of grief, because the memory of his sneering whine and self-satisfied grin is still with me. I promise that I tried, but the jig was already up before I had finished asking my first question, because he was fishing out of the inner top pocket of his suit a document folded thickly as a cosh. After straightening it out he began to read aloud a list of prepared objections to something I had once said about him in print when I was television columnist. Since he would have needed several hours to get right through it, this was an example of his lack of realism, but let's not leave out the piercingly unpleasant nature of his voice, which might have been designed to provoke the English to subdue Wales all over again and put its every last male citizen to the sword. There are varieties of the Welsh accent that can bind you with a spell – Lloyd George was the great example, and I always love listening to Terry Griffith's snooker commentaries – but the

version spoken by Clive Jenkins wasn't one of them, largely because it so successfully expressed his personality. In all my adult life, the human character trait that I have been least able to understand is a misplaced sense of superiority, and for some reason it always shows up in the voice first. 'You see' is a tip-off phrase, meaning 'You don't see but I'm here to help you.' But there is an intonation that means the same thing, and some people are never free of it. The mere existence of Clive Jenkins was enough to prove that the voice, when it comes to broadcasting on television, is even more important than the face. The face of Clive Jenkins made you want to hit him. But his voice made you want to shoot him. He was on the air for ten minutes and we lost a quarter of a million viewers.

It took a few weeks to get them back again, but on the whole the studio show was a ratings success, and some of its features were quickly copied, especially the fake news. The trick of identifying full-face photographs of Yasser Arafat as being glamour portraits of Yasmin Arafat, the Palestinian beauty queen, was instantly popular. I would still pull the same stunt today, although I probably wouldn't be allowed to, because political sensitivity has not only distorted taste, it has become a substitute for it. But I regarded Arafat not just as a terrorist, which he admitted, but as an enemy of his own nominal cause, which I myself believed in. In common with every liberal in Israel, many of them in that country's armed forces, I thought that the Palestinians should have their own state, and that Yasser Arafat was not a good choice of leader to help them get it. Saying that he had an unpleasant face seemed a valid shorthand for saying that he played an equally unpleasant political role. So the trick was more or less true. My views about the legitimate use of fake news centred on that principle. The fake news had to reflect the reality of the real news. Nowadays, the material presented as real news is often in itself fake news. The consensus of perception dictates the supposed facts. President George W. Bush, of whose acumen no opinion could be lower than mine, never did serve his troops a plastic Thanksgiving turkey in Iraq. The *New York Times*, professedly a journal of record, ran that story on page one. When they found out the story was false they ran their correction on an inside page. The correction probably wouldn't have worked even if they had printed it as a screaming headline. The image of Bush and the plastic turkey proved unstoppable.

Neither did President Bush ever say 'Mission accomplished' aboard an aircraft carrier after the quick defeat of Saddam Hussein's armed forces. The captain of the aircraft carrier hung up a banner with those words on it, and Bush was photographed in front of it while saying something to the contrary, namely that there was a hard road ahead. Similarly with the general perception that Bush said Nelson Mandela was dead when Mandela was still alive. Bush never said it

said NELSON MANDELA was dead when MANDELA was still alive. BUSH never said it. He was saying that any Nelson Mandela figure in Iraq was already dead because Saddam Hussein had killed him: a reasonable statement. Yet even after it was established that Bush had meant the reasonable thing and not the erroneous one, Jon Stewart, one of the sharpest US television front-men, kept the joke in because it was too good to leave out. This erosion of the concept of objective truth grows more disturbing all the time, but I don't think that our first tentative experiments in deliberate distortion back in the 1980s were the cause. Fake news was for entertainment, real news was for information, and the first thing wouldn't even have been effective unless the viewing public had a firm grasp of the second. Our viewers got the point and we were duly rewarded with their attention. They switched the show on again to get more. Buoyed up by this response, I got better at unifying the show's written material with a consistent style, but it was a hard task to fulfil all on my own. I might have faltered under the load had I not been so convinced that my whole multiform enterprise depended on it.

The studio show's overheads were covered in-house, so it was a cost-effective prospect for the channel as long as enough people watched it. That being so, the studio show paid for the special documentaries like the Postcard programmes, which would have been impossibly non-profitable had they been the only thing I did. The relationship between these two main kinds of production was to hold true wherever we went in the next two decades, from ITV and Channel 4 onward to BBC2 and BBC1, and finally into independent production, by which we made programmes principally for ITV, where we had started off. We would never have had the opportunity to navigate the full circle – or, to put it more crudely, to play both ends against the middle – if the studio shows had not been there to fund the adventure. It wasn't a case of robbing Peter to pay Paul. It was a case of keeping Peter healthy so that he could pay for Paul, his more refined but less employable elder brother.

8. ECONOMY OF EFFORT

This capacity to finance a fragile element by building up a bank with a more robust element was equally crucial in my continuing career as a writer. Jonathan Cape, in the person of its senior editor Tom Maschler, was ready to publish my books of essays, which didn't really make any money, just as long as I went on writing autobiographies that did. My second book of memoirs, *Falling Towards England*, risked queering the pitch: it was set in the 1960s, which everyone supposed to have been a fun time, but the way I told it I wasn't whooping it up at the party, I was shivering outside in the cold with my nose pressed to the glass. Luckily the public went for my story anyway, and Cape had renewed reason to go on publishing my less profitable essay collections just to keep me happy. Maschler was no profligate, but he was canny enough to know that a happy writer might write more books of memoirs and even a couple of novels that would get on the bestseller lists as *Brilliant Creatures* had done. That second hope was duly screwed when *The Remake* came out to be greeted by universal execration. One of the London reviewers kindly said that it wasn't a real novel but it was more enjoyable than most novels. I would have settled for that, but he was the only critic in the country who said anything like it. The critic who said that *The Remake* was a boundary-busting excursion into the ironic formal possibilities of the post-modern novel was working for the *Jerusalem Post*.

None of this would have mattered if the public's reaction hadn't so exactly echoed the critical reception. The book tanked. Later on I was to learn that it had taken away some of the readership I had already acquired for my first novel, so that my third and fourth novels had to start out in a smaller market, populated by those who were not afraid of experimental novels. Most people, very sensibly, were. I remain proud of all four of my novels – indeed *The Remake*, the infectious catastrophe, has some stretches of writing in it that I would have to pedal hard to equal now – but there can be no doubt that as a total effort they barely featured in the black ink of Cape's account books. Still, enough of my

titles had been commercially successful to convince Maschler that it would be worthwhile publishing anything more marginal that I might come up with. Both to me and Cape, however, it was important that my books of essays would earn prestige even if they earned no money, because the publisher himself is always engaged in a balancing act: he wants some of his writers to be news stories in the heavy papers, so as to protect the house against the charge that its other writers are only there to please the crowd.

From that angle I was a reasonable prospect. I couldn't complain about the critical reception of my non-fiction books. In the heavyweight journals they were usually given to the best-qualified reviewers and almost always taken seriously, to the extent that there were polite sighs of regret that I should be wasting my time on television. But exactly there lay the problem: a serious man wasting his time can easily find himself regarded as a timewaster trying to be serious. Most of the adult papers had already grown the arts equivalent of a gossip column by that stage and in these new message boards any coverage of my work always began with the assumption that a would-be Hamlet had been stripped of his paint to reveal the clown. Obviously I would be running this risk for as long as I tried to circle the ring with one foot on each horse. But there was no quick way out of it, because the relationship which applied in television between the studio show and the filmed specials, and which applied again, in the literary field, between popular writing and serious criticism, also applied, in my total working economy, between broadcasting and literature.

I was no economist, but even I could do the sums. Taken for all in all, my books did well enough, but if I had done nothing else then they would all have had to do well, and even better. Failing that, I would have been up against it, and my family along with me. My wife was a respected academic who would always be in demand from the leading universities, but an academic salary weighs only so much on the property market. The same is true for books, even when successful: getting overcommitted to property is one of the standard financial mistakes those writers make who get an early hit, and then discover, when the tax bills come in, that they are under fatal pressure to write another. It was television that made a civilized life possible for my family, and made it possible for me to write only from inner compulsion, and never to a market imperative. As a clincher, it was television that made it possible for me to go on writing poetry, ever and always at the heart of my desire. If I had done nothing except write books, there would have been no time for poems, because any poem pays less than nothing even when it earns you a cheque. In 1982, with the kind encouragement of Karl Miller, I had serialized a long ottava rima poem in the *London Review of Books*, of which he was then the editor; and Cape later

published the poem as a slim hardback under the title of *Poem of the Year*; but the advance for the book would barely have bought me a sack of apples, and the royalties added up to a resounding zero. I still rate it as my best long poem and have never begrudged the months it took to compose, but financially it was less than a dead loss. Money and time are forms of each other, and there is no poem that does not cost the poet a hundred times what he gets paid for it. Poetry, the centre of my life, has always been the enemy of my material existence, and even now, after fifty years of writing it, it is still trying to put me out of business.

The foregoing disquisition might make it seem that I had everything weighed up. The opposite was true. I was working from instinct. Nowadays I sometimes get the credit, and often the condemnation, for having invented the idea of a multiple career, but I had no such idea in my mind, or even the time to think about it. Empire-building was the last thing I aspired to. For an empire you need a central stream of royalties and residuals, like Dolly Parton, who could never have built Dollywood if she had not already sold millions of records, and would not now be giving gazillions of dollars away to charity if she had not first built Dollywood. Television paid well, but the era when programmes would go on selling forever on tape and disc had not yet arrived, and we were all paid upfront in what amounted to a permanent buy-out of our rights. (Benny Hill got rich from foreign sales because some condescending executive decided there would never be any, and tossed him the rights as a sweetener.) So it was a good deal but a limited one, and anyway, there was never any question of my having got into television by calculation. I got into it because I loved it, and I was well aware that I had been lucky to be given the opportunity. After all, I didn't look the part.

Despite a rigorous programme of pounding myself into the floor at the gymnasium three times a week, I was permanently overweight by at least a stone. I was never really overweight enough for the journalists to call me 'fat', but when they called me 'portly' I had no comeback. The kind of journalists who think a word like 'portly' has a sprightly, irreverent ring to it haven't really got any opinions worth bothering about, but I did my best not to give them an easy target. Also I thought I owed it to younger viewers not to scare them to death by the way I looked. I was working, however, with intractable physical material. Even had I slimmed to the proportions of Clint Eastwood, nothing would have coaxed my eyes out of their deep cavities: when I smiled on screen, it was the silent agony of a man facing a sandstorm. My hair, thin on top, had to be cut close if my head were not to look like a hard-boiled egg being squeezed in an astrakhan glove. Thus shorn and shaved, my features had the general air of belonging to a bureaucrat whose idea of a thrill might be to install a new

accounting system in a regional office. This appearance was reinforced by the blue suit that was introduced for *Clive James on Television* and continued into the studio show. Not through inertia, but from inspiration on Richard's part, it was decided to retain the blue-suit look for the Postcard programmes. Later I coined a term for them – 'blue-suit documentaries' – but as usual there was no defining plan going in, only a descriptive term that we applied later. Wearing the blue suit on location simply made sense. If I wore it in every scene, any shot could be cut into any sequence, thereby providing a useful reservoir of coverage. In hot locations, when I had to abandon the jacket and roll up the sleeves of my blue shirt, we maintained that look in as many scenes as possible, for the same reason. Wittgenstein once told his new landlady that he didn't mind what he ate as long as it was always the same. For the presenter of filmed documentaries, the same rule applies: it doesn't matter what you wear as long as you don't change it. Two identical copies of the blue suit went with me to Dallas.

Of the several American cities we made films in during our first decade, Dallas undoubtedly was the least interesting, but it was a hot prospect for the network, because the executives had not forgotten that I had made a running gag out of the American television soap opera of the same name when I was a critic, and the time was not far in the past when even the BBC made a news story out of J. R. Ewing getting shot. By the time we got to the real Dallas, however, it had left the television *Dallas* looking like a hick town. There weren't many men wearing cowboy boots like J.R. and there were absolutely no women staggering around sloshed like Sue Ellen with her lipglossed mouth working away as if she were giving oral sex to the atmosphere. Instead there was business efficiency on all sides. Here was a sunbelt city as a new model for globalized America. Clusters of tall glass buildings hummed with computers processing electronic money. Everything was highly organized except us, partly because Terence Donovan was in charge.

Richard had forgiven Donovan for his slapdash approach to our film about the Paris catwalks because the results had been so wonderfully glossy. For Dallas, Donovan, shuffling hugely on Richard's carpet, promised that he would put a clapperboard on every shot, so that the editor would not be once again reduced to dementia as he tried to synch up sound and picture. Donovan remembered that promise but he forgot all the others. He wasn't dishonest, he was simply inspired, but you don't want a director to be inspired until after he has done the housekeeping, and this elementary requirement was one that Donovan could rarely bring himself to meet, because he was so easily bored. About fifty floors up in a glass skyscraper freshly built by the magnate Trammel Crowe, we interviewed one of the sons of Trammel Crowe in his office, which looked out

on a panorama of other skyscrapers, many of them also built by Trammel Crowe. The skyline thus provided the perfect backdrop for interviewing the favoured heir of a man who was building a city, but when I looked back to see what Donovan was up to I could tell by the angle of the camera that it wasn't pointing at the buildings. After the first change of magazines, I took a squint through the eyepiece and found out that it was pointing at a bare stretch of Arkansas. While the son of Trammel Crowe took the kind of phone call in which phrases like 'Meet you in Geneva' crop up with no artificiality at all, I whispered to Donovan that we needed the buildings.

'Nar, we don't want that.'

I tried to tell him that we did want that.

'Nar, everybody does that.'

Thus was the problem laid bare, loud and clear. Donovan didn't like shooting anything ordinary. When the footage of the son of Trammel Crowe interview got back to England, Richard took a look at it after it came out of the bath and he went off his head. Donovan got the news down the phone and behaved better after that, but he was always better at capturing the look of the thing than at getting the story. Luckily the look of the thing was a local form of hard currency. The fine women of Dallas spent much of their lives being 'best dressed' for charity events, which took place at the rate of three or four per week. Some of these best-dressed women, notably the beautiful Nancy Brinker, who was married to the inventor of the Chili's chain, had started out as models anyway. But they were all classy numbers and their frocks were beyond belief: Chanel, Givenchy and Dior couture originals were their equivalent of combat fatigues. (Armed with my experience of the Paris catwalks, I got a lot of traction with the women by being able to name the designers without asking, but any advantage was offset by the effect on the men listening in, who automatically assumed that I was a faggot.) The preposterous intensity of it all made for terrific pictures, and satire could not have improved on the endless speeches, in which everyone at the event was thanked individually for her donations to charity, as if people with billions giving away thousands were running Jesus Christ a close second in the magnitude of their sacrifice. I have always tried to be suitably respectful of the way the elite in any American big city centres the whole of social life on charity. A great deal of money flows towards good causes. But those involved, when they are not attending the fund-raising events in the evening, do nothing else with the day except get ready to attend, and there is little energy left over for what you might call the life of the mind.

Most of the conversations were about hair. Radiantly well-groomed women talked strident balderdash about what was happening on top of their heads.

Being American instead of English, they talked it louder when the camera was on them. Donovan got the shots. But at a society party held in the hospitality room of the hotel where we were staying – which just happened to be Dallas’s number-one boutique hotel, the Mansion on Turtle Creek – he forgot to get the shot which would tie me together with the visiting film star, who just happened to be Sophia Loren. She was in town to help the Crystal Ball Committee judge their best-dressed competition. Her advice could have been obtained in no other way except in return for an astronomical fee, and now here she was at the Mansion doing the social bit that always goes with the paid appearance and helps to make the fee seem smaller by taxing it with tedium. All the women present were dressed at least as well as she was but none of them were making any sense whatsoever as they yelled into her face, updating her on the latest news about hair. We got a few hundred feet of Sophia looking alarmed, as well she might have done. What we didn’t get was a single shot to prove that I was at the same party as she was.

The Mansion on Turtle Creek had a hex on us. We were staying there at a discount, but the discount was the only thing that went right. It wasn’t Donovan’s fault. It was the fault of whoever had decided that Dallas needed a single-storey Hollywood-style hotel of unbelievable luxury. Unbelievable luxury, even when tasteful, is for Arab princes, Russian racketeers and other people with more money than sense. Normal human beings are uncomfortable when the en suite bathroom has enough towels for a symphony orchestra. The hotel was owned by the daughter of Caroline Hunt Schoelkopf, the richest woman on earth. The daughter, who was in town for precisely one day before she flew on to open a new hotel in Bogota, was the one responsible for making the Mansion’s dining room the top spot for the best-dressed women to get together for Sunday brunch and eat half a strawberry each while the harpist played ‘Stardust’ and they discussed whether Trammel should buy Lichtenstein. But it was my idea to interview the daughter beside the hotel’s swimming pool. I couldn’t blame Donovan for that.

For reasons unknown, I had failed to notice that the hotel was directly under the flight path for the final approach into one of the main runways of Dallas Fort Worth Airport. Perhaps the wind had prevailed in another direction for the previous week, bringing other runways into use and leaving this one out. Perhaps the hotel itself had soundproofing to match its air-conditioning, which maintained the guests at such a delicately judged temperature that it was the outside air, when you emerged into it, that seemed to have been produced by a machine, possibly a blast furnace. Anyway, the swimming pool was out there under the sky. The daughter, looking very fetching in one of Jil Sander’s first

drusneg-cotton trouser suits, sat neatly relaxed in a cane chair, showing the kind of confidence that comes to you when, having been born into a family of enormous financial power, you are encouraged to prove yourself by managing every hotel the family owns, up to and including the Mansion on Cobra Swamp in Kandahar, and, having successfully managed them, you are given them for your birthday.

She also showed patience, which was very good of her, because the planes, with all their flaps out and howling in low gear, were going over every couple of minutes. ‘So when did you realize that your family was . . .’ Pause for whine of approaching jet, howl of jet going over, whistle of jet sinking very gradually into the distance. ‘Well, I guess it was when my father bought the Dallas Cowboys and . . .’ Pause for whine of another approaching jet, etc. If we had been filming with two cameras the noise would have mattered less: we could have written it into the story or even made a joke of it. But when you have only one camera, you have to shoot the reverses on to the interviewer afterwards, and unless the background noise of the questions matches the background noise on the answers, you can’t edit the results. Hence the advisability of finding somewhere soundproof for the shoot if you can’t get into a studio. It was a lesson that I was pleased to learn, but learning it was expensive. A few more stuff-ups like that and we would have lost the movie.

We made just such another snafu when we interviewed Nancy Brinker *chez elle*. She lived in the size of house that you would expect the wife of the founder of Brinker International to own, but you wouldn’t have expected the standard of interior decoration to be quite so high. Were there any Gobelins tapestries left in France? There were also cases full of real books, an item of property often absent from the decor of the American rich. The only tip-off was that it was all too clean. As for the chatelaine, she was a dream come true: cultivated, articulate, poised, funny. Donovan was so enchanted he had the idea of linking together the shots of her with suitably ethereal fades and mixes, leaving out the predictable reverses on me. We were short of time so I went along with it.

By the time we got back to London, Richard had already discovered that there was something strange about the Nancy Brinker interview. A beautiful woman was being interviewed by a ghost. On the other hand, the daughter of the richest woman on earth was being interviewed in the middle of an air-raid. But what had really wound him up was the society party where Sophia Loren was present but I had somehow failed to get myself into the same shot. About that he was, in his quiet way, apoplectic. To repair all this damage, we had to park the film for a year until the weather was right and then go back to Dallas, with Donovan conspicuously not in our company. With the same sunlight, and with me wearing the same infinitely valuable cheap blue suit, we got all these tedious but

the same minutely valuable cheap blue suit, we got all those tedious but necessary covering shots – arriving at the hotel, leaving the hotel, arriving at the Chili's franchise, leaving the Chili's franchise – which Donovan had so sedulously dodged. We also went back to the Brinker palace, where we discovered that Nancy's pet decorator had repapered the walls of the room where we had interviewed her, so that when we shot the reverses that we needed, the wall behind me would look different from the wall we had already filmed behind her the previous year. It would have been a lot simpler just to ask her to do the interview again, and I'm sure the future United States Chief of Protocol and Ambassador to Hungary would have said yes: gracious diplomacy was among her countless virtues. But she had just been diagnosed with breast cancer and was confined to quarters. So we would have to make do with what we had. Doubtless it would cut together somehow: I could always say that she made a point of decorating each end of a room differently.

But what really counted was that we got back into that hospitality room in the Mansion on Turtle Creek. Richard talked a few of the society people from last year's bunch into dressing up again. Since they rarely dressed down, they found it no trouble to comply. In America, everybody loves being in the movie. They crowded around me while we got a shot of me staring synthetically at exactly the right angle to meet Sophia Loren's haunted glance as it had been captured the year before in the same room. I did a little smile to match a little smile from her that we already had in the bank. Actually she had been smiling in fear at some crazed woman raving about the beneficial effects of having split ends sealed shut by laser surgery and sprayed with ionized platinum, but the viewers wouldn't suspect that, especially after I wrote a suitably wistful line about intimate eye contact. If all this ducking and weaving had been taking place today, the tabloids would have loved to have a story about how I faked a close encounter with Sophia Loren, but in fact we weren't making up the shot, we were just getting the shot we should have got first time around. Much of the final work in a movie shoot always consists of getting the shot you should have got. You have to keep the ethics in mind – rescuing a sequence is one thing, telling a lie is another – but you always have to keep the ethics in mind anyway. To work in any art form requires an ethical decision every five minutes.

When we took the repair kit back to London all the patches fitted and Donovan's name as a director was saved, but Richard refused to use him again. I agreed, but couldn't help thinking it was a pity. I loved Donovan. He was so sweet and funny. But he was a star director, and in a presenter-led documentary special the man with his face on the screen had better be the only one with the artistic temperament, otherwise you will all be very soon be sharing an extended stay at the Mansion on Shit Creek

stay at the mansion on Salt Creek.

9. WE'LL ALWAYS HAVE PARIS

The American cities should have been easy, if only because every American is in show business, so that there is no chance encounter that does not turn immediately into a scene: all you have to do is tone down the volume. But it was a European city that gave us the measure of what the Postcard format could do if it was approached in an orderly manner, instead of as an exercise in what Donovan himself had the grace to call 'kick, bollock and scramble'. Once again it was Paris, but this time there was no question of concentrating on the catwalks. We were out to do the whole thing. There was a lot of planning before we went, and we were better protected against caprice when we got there, because we had both a producer, Beatrice Ballard, and a director, Laurence Rees. Each would go on to a glittering career, but the important thing to note here was that both of them were naturally thorough and quick-witted – two qualities that often get in each other's road. They certainly needed the quick wits, because one of the first sequences on the roster starred Françoise Sagan, once a teenage novelist, now the first lady of the French literary world, and always and forever an *enfant as terrible* as they come.

The Renault company had given her a new car for her personal use, presumably on the understanding that they would benefit from the publicity even if she killed herself in it. When she was young she had insisted on driving her brand-new Aston Martin barefoot, thereby to demonstrate her carefree spirit. 'I shall live badly if I do not write, and I shall write badly if I do not live.' Bouncing alternately on its nose and its tail, the car, when it finally came to a halt, was in even worse shape than she was, which was saying something, because very few of her bones were left intact. Luckily her clever head survived to dream up more novels. When we met her, she wasn't so young any more but she still lived hard. Perhaps unwisely, our sequence with her had been planned to take place while she drove. The camera and the sound were in the back seat and I was in the front beside her, asking her questions while she kept on proving that

the only way she knew how to drive was to go flat out. It must have been some kind of muscle disease, or perhaps the consequences of her first crash: her rigid leg jammed the accelerator against the firewall. My questions tended to fragment as we switched with yelping tyres from one boulevard to another, threading our way between cars driven by normal people and taking every red light as a sign to speed up. ‘So when you first met Sartre what AAAGH! did he say?’

Uncannily she responded with coherent answers, possibly because she knew that the imminent crash wasn’t going to happen even though it looked to me as if it had already commenced. It looked the same to the cameraman, who could see the road ahead through his eyepiece and got a lot of footage that trembled all the time even when she was driving on smooth asphalt. ‘He say to me, you are so *yong*. He say, when you *leave* a little longer then you will have the *droit*, the *droit*, what is it?’

‘You will have the AAAGH! the right.’

‘Yes, yes, of course. Stupid of me. Then you will have the right to your despair. You want me to go more fast?’

‘No, this is AAAGH! fine like this.’

The man we hit was carrying a briefcase. He was crossing the road, we heard a thump and suddenly there he was behind us, spinning like a weathervane in a storm. We must have hit the briefcase. ‘We heat someone?’ she asked me. The camera missed the spinning guy but it caught her face asking the question, and I knew that I would be able to put a narrative on it that would be funnier than seeing the bloke spinning on the spot. It was a wonderfully surreal sequence, all the mad speed made even funnier by the sudden stops every few blocks so that the great lady of French literature could scoot into a bar and powder her nose. Her powder of choice was an open secret. Everybody knew, including her friend François Mitterrand, then President of France. She knew all his secrets too. The Parisian elite were a tight crew, somehow made more so because they spoke their own language.

It was a language that I had been learning for years and am still learning now. My assistant Cecile Menon politely puts me through my pronunciation drills but I will never get to speak French well. I love to read it, though, and when we were filming *Postcard from Paris* I spent all my downtime trawling for books in the green boxes of the second-hand booksellers along the Seine. On a rest day for our crew I was bent over the treasure trove of a *bouquiniste* when a stocky figure in a well-cut dark blue suit showed up beside me. The discreet presence in the background of a couple of young men with earpieces tipped me off. It was Mitterrand. Instantly I remembered a river full of elephants, but I remembered also how I had not mentioned them, so that the crew would never know what

they missed. We wouldn't have been able to sneak a shot of Mitterrand anyway. The *gendarmes* (the real *gendarmes*, not the ordinary *flics*) would have moved in and thrown us all into a van. Besides, I liked being alone with the books. When waiting in the car with my driver, I would read to him from Simenon or Maupassant while he winced at every second word before making me read the sentence again. A glutton for punishment, that boy. He taught me the French translation of a short speech that I dictated to him in English. 'The day when I am able to converse freely in French I will be very happy. Unfortunately, that day is still distant.' When I at last managed to memorize the French version in roughly the right accent it was highly effective in convincing any English-speaking people present that I was quite good at French: as long, of course, as they themselves were not.

In the future I was to make a point of learning an equivalent construction in any other language we ran into. Your friends are impressed and the locals applaud you for your eagerness. That, however, is as generous in the matter as the French commonly get. In Paris especially, they don't like to hear their beautiful language spoken in any way except to perfection. Beatrice, being a properly brought-up English girl, had French among her attainments. It came in handy when we were snatching a scene outside the cafe Deux Magots in the Boulevard Saint-Germain, because to turn the passing pedestrians into walk-on players took a bit of explaining. It took little persuasion: even more so than the Americans, the people of Paris want to be in the movie, because they think they might be helping the next François Truffaut, a national treasure, or Jean-Luc Godard, a national idiot but they love him.

But it wasn't enough to talk them into participating. We had to say what we wanted done. I liked the way Laurence Rees attacked himself when he couldn't make himself clear. He would dance on the spot, beat his breast, forget how to breathe. These were good signs, betokening an urge towards self-improvement. Beatrice was summoned from her hotel room full of paperwork, told what I was after, and set about roping in the punters. We were filming the passing parade for a sequence in which I would say that the women of Paris – not just the *grandes dames* but the office workers, the sales girls, everybody – gave a lot of time and thought to looking chic. Half an hour of filming had revealed that a general shot of the passing pedestrian traffic wouldn't do the job, because somewhere in the frame among the scores of glowing visions there was always at least one woman who looked like the captain of a tugboat. The only solution was to get upstream and do a bit of casting. Beatrice came with me while I singled out half a dozen impeccably qualified knockouts. On my behalf, she explained to them that they should each walk towards the camera at a given signal. See the camera along

there at the cafe? Don't look at it while you walk. Just let it look at you. I would have sounded very foolish trying to explain all that and might well have been arrested by the car full of *flics* who were taking a close interest, even though Beatrice was armed with all the appropriate permissions. She was very good looking, so they wanted to check her papers.

While they did so, I went back to the cafe, sat down in the right spot, gave the signal and the first woman came swaying along as if she had been making movies all her life. All the others were equally good. In this way we secured a series of clean shots for which I could write a narrative at the rate of one line per shot. It was a lesson learned. If the scene has to make a particular point, assemble it out of particular shots: a general shot won't do the job. What made this sequence a breakthrough for me, however, was that I had spotted the problem beforehand and not afterwards, and had managed to convince the people working with me. There was a hidden requirement in that: they had to be smart enough to see the point. These two were, so we were in business. There were no prizes for spotting that young Beatrice was a class act but with Laurence it took a bit of imagination, because he carried on as talented young men often do, reminding himself of what he had to do next by sticking Post-it notes on everything including people, referring to himself loudly in the third person, dashing his ginger head against the nearest brick wall when he made a mistake. He would have been unbearable if he were not so clearly demonstrating an eternal truth about the arts: talent rarely looks poised early on. The naturally cool customer is seldom going anywhere. As it happened, Laurence Rees was going on to become one of the most significant writer-producers of factual television series in recent times. But he would not have been so effective in that valuable role if he had not known a lot about how to direct, because it meant that directors couldn't fool him. Television is a producer's medium, but the best producers know everything about direction, and a lot of what Laurence Rees knows about it he learned on *Postcard from Paris*, so I feel quite proud.

Laurence's speed on the uptake proved vital when we filmed an interview with Inés de la Fressange at the madly fashionable Café Costes. Inés, newly retired as a model for the couture salons but still the official face of Chanel, was so famous that her mere presence could reduce a whole city block to silence, as if she had just stepped out of a spaceship. (The French don't mob their celebrities but they have a way of revering them from a distance that can stop the traffic anyway.) The Café Costes was the latest creation of the designer Philippe Starck, always in the feature pages for his ability to take some everyday object and reinterpret it, or deconstruct it, or generally futz about with it in ways possible only to genius. Now he had done this to a whole cafe. The conjunction

of the celestial gloss of Inés de la Fressange and the cutting-edge modernity of the Café Costes was a sure-fire prospect. All we had to do was bring them together. When it transpired that the conjunction could not be brought about until after lunch, we spent the morning filming in the cafe's downstairs toilet *pour les hommes*. What the toilet *pour les dames* was like I don't care to imagine, but you can take it for granted that the men's room had been reinterpreted to within an inch of its life. Locks on the cubicle doors either didn't lock at all or locked you in forever, thus reinterpreting the function of a lock. Concealed in chromium fairings that echoed each other's formal properties with a conscious play of irony, the reinterpreted soap dispenser dried your hands while the reinterpreted hand-dryer dispensed soap.

But above all, Starck had reinterpreted the relationship between the urinal and the hand basin. He had played with daring semi-otic irreverence upon their essential similarity. Those of us who believed in their essential difference were in for a shock, as we found ourselves washing our hands in the urinal after taking a piss in the sink. It was at this point that I decided Philippe Starck was *un ouaqueur* – a French word of my own invention which has somehow never caught on in France – but I was also grateful, as if all my Noëls had come at once. You couldn't dream this stuff up. You had to get some fantasist like him to dream it up for you. Laurence was already exhausted after the two hours of hard work it had taken to light the place – it is always much harder to film anything when there are reflective surfaces around – so I had no trouble convincing him that we wouldn't need to stage any action. All he had to do was get clean shots of all the naff gear and I could do the whole story with the commentary. Even with the hand basin and urinal combo, we wouldn't need any shots of me pretending to use them. I could just look at them, visibly abandon any intention of using either and walk out looking puzzled. Laurence's vital contribution was to make sure that I didn't overdo the looking puzzled. That much you can learn from your cameramen and directors, if you aren't afraid to ask. Most presenters overdo the facial expression because they haven't been often enough told that the camera can see what you think, so you don't have to act it out. When the adrenalin's pumping, however, hamming it up is difficult to avoid.

You are never more likely to ham it up than when you are registering surprise. In real life, surprise merely makes your face look puzzled for as long as it takes your brain to process the unexpected information. On screen, if you adopt a 'wow' face to convey your shock, it looks hopelessly over the top: better to do nothing. All this, of course, presumes that you are coping with the task of conveying appropriate facial reactions to a surprise you know is coming. Sometimes you get a real surprise, whereupon the problem solves itself, and you

will remain nicely dead-pan unless you get the fatal urge to do a ‘wow’ face after you scrape off the custard pie. When we relocated the camera and the lights upstairs to the bar for the interview with Inés, I didn’t immediately see the vaudeville possibilities inherent in Philippe Starck’s idea of what constituted suitable furniture for a place where fashionable people might like to meet in order to drink, snack and talk about structuralism. The tables, though tiny, nevertheless had flat surfaces on which such things as drinks, cups of coffee and plates of pastries might conceivably be placed without falling instantly to the floor. The chairs, however, all turned out, on closer inspection, to have three legs. This was Starck’s breakthrough concept. Chairs had had four legs each, one in each corner, since civilization had first emerged among the Ashurai people of Mesopotamia thousands of years before Christ, but now a genius was on the case. Still waiting for Inés to show up, I sat down on my allotted chair so that we could get my portion of the establishing sequence. Pretending to be reacting to Inés’s shattering glamour – I had a standard stunned-mullet expression to fit that – I lowered my behind carefully into the hard laminated plywood seat of the three-legged chair.

I wasn’t pretending at all when I fell sideways out of shot, the chair still magically attached to my behind as if it has been glued into position. On my way down, I was already aware that we would somehow have to capture my transition to the floor. This is where the experience of filming that I had already acquired came in handy. A wide shot that panned with me as I dived would have taken a lot of setting up and would have looked contrived anyway. All we needed was a tight shot of my face as I lay on the floor. In the editing room we could tack that shot on to the first one, in which I fell sideways out of frame. As long as I did a good enough job of looking stunned while I was lying down, it would all click. I remembered the way Oliver Hardy had always made a point of looking merely resigned after the house fell on him. Helping me to cut my performance back – as the stage actors say when they act for the screen – was my apprehension that the beautiful Inés might take a dive too. But when she came wafting in I could see straight away why she wouldn’t be falling out of any chairs. She didn’t weigh anything. She was six feet tall but she was made of light. This ethereal apparition was famous for never wearing the same kit twice, all the way down to her lucky underwear. For this appearance she had chosen a sort of sailor suit ensemble which would have been appropriate for Captain Nemo’s social secretary on the *Nautilus*. During the interview she told me that she always chose her outfit for the day on the basis that it must tell a little *storee*. Today her *storee* was of the sea.

She could have told me anything and I would still have nodded with

agreement, although every nod set me tottering on my triangular base. Since we had asked the management to let other people use the bar so that we could have some authentic background, almost every answer from Inés was punctuated by the sound of a new arrival sitting down on a three-legged chair and hitting the floor with his face immediately afterwards. But I could easily narrate all that. I didn't think that what either of us said made a lot of sense even at the time, but she was such a spellbinder that it didn't matter. Correctly guessing, however, that the ambience would be at least as entertaining as the interview, I asked the crew for a lot of extra coverage as we arrived and left, so as to leave room for my comments on the advanced designer's success in ironically dramatizing the previously unexamined connection between chair and occupant. Inés, as advanced a design as a human being could be, sailed serenely away after assuring me that my blue suit told a *storee* of – how could she put this? – of a man in a blue suit. 'You are not *chic*, yes? And that is your *storee*.'

We filmed for two entire days down in les égouts, the sewage tunnels under the city, and after painstaking work we got a lot of highly atmospheric footage which never made it past the first fortnight of editing, because, in the end, people trump spectacle. One of the people was completely unplanned for. The plan was to track with me as I visited the cemetery of Père Lachaise, did a tour of the gravestones and ended up at Proust's black slab, but when we got to Edith Piaf there was already a fan watching over her who might have been cast by the wraith of Jean Renoir and sent down to me for just this moment. The fan was probably in his seventies but might have looked younger if he had not overdone the black hair dye, the mascara, the rouge and the lipstick. He had loved her, however, and knew how to say so. He said so in French, but one phrase at a time, so I could translate it aloud as he spoke. The antiphonal effect was elegiac beyond anything that could have been written and acted. In the trade you call it a 'snatched' moment and there can be no doubt that the snatched moments are often the best thing in the movie, but if you have to depend on them you are in trouble. They reward the diligent, as is proved by how they are always withheld from the careless.

10. KEEPING THE BALANCE

Like a tour of duty as entertainments officer in a nuclear submarine, filming got me away from home, but home was waiting for me when I got back. Leading a balanced life got harder all the time. The first hazard was the fame factor, which seemed to consist entirely of drawbacks even when they were construed, by others, as privileges. Straightforward irritations were relatively easy to handle. In the streets, large tattooed artisans whom one would not ordinarily have wanted to meet shouted, ‘Ere! Ain’t you that Clive Jenkins?’ The temptation to say, ‘Go screw yourself, my good man,’ had to be resisted. Even the nicest version of this instant familiarity involved a lot of autograph-signing and dozens of involuntary conversations every day. It didn’t happen in Australia, where my programmes, because they had been made in Britain, were resolutely kept from the screen by an ABC executive who took pride in protecting the Australian public from my disloyal voice. As a result, Australia was a reality check: when I went there on literary business, I got the mildly enthusiastic reaction appropriate to someone whose books have been read, or at any rate heard about. These bursts of normality served to underline the sheer weirdness of what happened when I got back to Britain and found myself shouted at by a whole building site full of workmen if I failed to stop and answer their questions about ‘them Chinese’. (After several aborted interchanges I deduced that by ‘them Chinese’ they meant the Japanese game-show contestants.) Walking on, instead of stopping, was the only way to save something from the day, but the penalty was to be followed for half a block by loud shouts of ‘Aren’t we good enough for you any more, Clive?’ In Soho one afternoon, Martin Amis was walking beside me when that question came raining down from above and he was fascinated. He still tells the story now, and I remain convinced that the hellish atmosphere of his middle-period novels was partly generated by that momentary revelation of mediatized insanity. One of the most unsettling aspects of being public property on that scale is that you are always addressed by your first name even when the message

is abusive. 'Clive, you're a tosser.' At such moments I felt bound to agree, but if I had stopped to discuss the matter I would not have been able to call my life my own.

That Faustian feeling of having sold your life to the Devil is the real explanation behind the self-destructive behaviour of the younger celebrities. They got what they wanted, and it drove them nuts. As an older hand, I was better able to compute the odds, but staying clean wasn't easy. Sometimes wine, women and song look like the only place you can hide. (This can be especially true when you are out on the road, and stuck for the day in unfamiliar streets thronged by thousands of strangers all calling you aggressively by your first name. Any soft, kind voice sounds like a port in a storm, and artists on tour are often trailed by tabloid snoops in the hope that loneliness will lead to folly.) Since I would never have gone into show business in the first place if I had lacked the conviction that I was the natural centre of attention, to be a recognizable face fed a primal urge, but it could sap the very confidence it was meant to boost. 'Why are people suddenly so keen to ask me to dinner?' It must have been a question that nagged even Einstein.

Yet I quite liked being invited out into the beau monde. For one thing, in the border territory where gracious living meets the arts there are invariably more than a few women who are works of art in themselves, and I have always enjoyed the outlaw feelings that come with making a beautiful face laugh. For a heady instant you are Zorro, standing outlined in a window arch. A little less paunch under the cummerbund might have been appropriate, but for the moment I felt up to the part of making the great lady giggle. She didn't have to be a countess. She sometimes was, but the fun was just as intense when the woman on your left or right was, say, Alison Lurie. ('Write a *strange* novel,' she said to me, and I did. I wrote *The Remake*, thereby loading myself into a circus cannon after first having taken down the net.) At higher altitudes, where the British aristocracy hung out with the super-rich, the yield in verbal interest seldom matched the visual splendour. I didn't hear much said that I couldn't have made up after being injected with enough novocaine. On the other hand, there were pictorial aspects that I was glad to file away for future use. Some of the grand houses in London have stretches of garden behind them in which you could land a light aircraft, and you would never suspect the layout was even there just from looking at the front door. One night, in one of these game reserves for the privileged, I saw a vision crossing the moonlit lawn between two marquees.

She was the acknowledged supreme young beauty of the day. In that year her name was Charmian Scott, and her mere existence was a reminder that you can't make that sort of thing up. You have to see it. In fact you have to see it before

you can even imagine that there might be something you can't make up. She was wearing an off-the-shoulder ivory and white ball gown and when she turned into profile the length of her perfectly straight nose looked like an echo of her collarbone. Now was the time to quote Keats, but my throat was full of wood shavings. Clearly, radiantly, she had been sent to Earth to marry a duke. A few months later she did, which made me feel better about not having said anything. Not that anything I could have said would have made the slightest impression, which was the real trouble with the whole scene. It was like being in a masque written by Milton, but the level of conversation was usually even worse. There was always some drawling Adonis sitting opposite me who wanted to save me from talking to the women I sat between. 'I must say that the things you get those Chinese chappies doing are a bit ripe.' I could hear better things than that on a building site.

Educated in a hard school to appreciate the fragility of their advantages, the renegade East European aristos were far better value. Nothing could beat a multilingual high-born widow who was ready to show her kinship with artists and philosophers by inviting them regularly to dinner, usually for the only civilized conversation they would have that week. This was far preferable to hearing from the landed gentry about land, or from financiers about finance. The most glittering salon was run by Diana Phipps, whose original surname was recorded in the *Almanach de Gotha*. Tall, stately and uncannily charming, she had a gift for getting the bright sparks together and giving them a taste of the high life without cramping their style. At the same table as David Hockney, Philip Roth, Harold Pinter and Sir Isaiah Berlin, it was flattering to be treated like one of the boys. Lord Weidenfeld was the London host who was most famous for inviting everybody at once, but here he was a guest, and obviously glad to be keeping company with people who spoke his language, which was the cosmopolitan language of the old European cafes – not of cafe society, but of the cafes themselves, the places where the bohemian intellectuals once gathered before the two great waves of totalitarianism washed the brains out of the old cities. Eavesdropping while he compared notes with Alfred Brendel about the precious wreckage of the culture from which they came, I mentally composed a reading list as they talked, and a quarter of a century later I am still working through it. Brendel, who was just about to launch into his second recording cycle of the Beethoven piano sonatas, had strips of Elastoplast around his fingertips. I couldn't have envisioned that under hallucinogenic drugs. The most startling surrealism is always real. Brendel, whose knowledge of literature is on a level with his mastery of music, told me that I should read the essays of Alfred Polgar. I had never heard of Alfred Polgar, but it was at such moments that I knew I had

come a long way from Kogarah. When I was roaming the grounds of some stately home I had merely come a long way from the front door, and there was nothing but a general impression. Here, all the impressions were specific. The names had faces and their mouths were in action. Harold Pinter, an actor to the core, would present his profile even if you were sitting in front of him, but his voice was a thriller: deep, resonant, the rumble of a gravy train. When he found an excuse to quote from Philip Larkin's great, late poem 'Aubade', Pinter would invariably quote the whole thing, to riveting effect. A political tirade, however, would sometimes inspire less unanimous assent, and a discussion might ensue during which his wife, Lady Antonia, who could get that kind of thing at home, would gently go to sleep, right there at the table. Her narcolepsy was a genuine affliction but it came in handy to block out boredom. Philip Roth was wide awake, alert to Pinter's opinions, and hated every one of them. At one point, when Pinter was blaming America for the destruction of Carthage in the third Punic War, Roth stood up and stormed out, taking Claire Bloom with him. It was a spectacular case of 'Darling, we're going home,' and I was there to see it. Noticing everything, I made a conscious effort to remember it all. If I couldn't take out a notebook and jot it all down, at least I could pay attention. But I also noticed the number of writers present who had begun to grow less productive a generation ago, and I quickly figured out where they had been. They had been here, entertaining each other instead of the public. Social life was a trap. Either you had a social life or you got things done. But the woman who taught me that would never have been in a position to teach it if she hadn't known all there was to know about the *douceur de vivre*, and I was glad to be instructed, although sometimes the lessons were painful. 'People don't want to be charmed. They want to charm.' It was a way of telling me to shut up and listen. Learning to keep my mouth closed occasionally as an aid to keeping my ears open, I became more sensitive to nuance, perhaps the most important French word in the English language.

Nearly all the terms in the English language that cover the subject of social grace are French, strangely enough. The British have almost no native vocabulary for the guiding precepts of the sweet life. If you rate *comme il faut* above *savoir faire*, as indeed you should, you will find it hard to say so in everyday English. Luckily I understood the phrases, even if I couldn't pronounce them. At such moments in their careers, men who have risen in the world often consecrate their elevation by starting a second marriage, usually after contriving to demolish the first. As Cyril Connolly – important critic, repellent man – once put it, 'The woman with whom one shares one's early struggles is rarely the woman with whom one wishes to share one's later successes.' The frozen

symmetry of the expression is enough to show what's wrong with the idea. There is a certain realism to it – far too many of the marriages in my generation cracked up on that very rock – but the realism is bloodless. Nor was Connolly wise to neglect the possibility that the woman with whom one shares one's early struggles might decide that one is a twerp, and kick one out, being in possession of a mind of her own.

The advantage of having had a taste of the high life is that you are not thrown for a loop when you are offered a whole plateful. As a writer I thought that there were things I had to find out about how the world worked – one of the Devil's opening moves, when subverting the soul of an artist, is always to present the artist's thirst for privileges as a vocational duty – but I was too committed to my stock of common memories to trade it in for keeps. The family holidays continued to provide a steady stream of such treasure. The death dive at Bormio and the throbbing thumbs of Davos were regularly supplemented by the yield of stories from our annual fortnight in the sun at Biarritz. In the glory days of Biarritz, back in the nineteenth century, it probably rained less often. The Empress Eugénie would not have permitted more than a certain level of precipitation. In the early twentieth century, when Picasso was there, none of his paintings of prancing sea nymphs featured rain. For us, it rained almost all the time. The littoral of the Bay of Biscay is always a full ten degrees centigrade less hot than the Côte d'Azur anyway, but when you add rain to the cool, you can wonder why you came. Then the sun comes out again and you remember. On a sunny day the Côte des Basques was pretty without parallel: the *sable d'or* as soft as talcum, the sea like stretched shantung beyond the neatly foaming breakers, the tamarisks at evening glowing gold beside the pathways that led back up the cliff to dinner at Les Flots Bleus, a restaurant where everyone except me ate piles of *moules* six inches high. Our friend and landlord Michael Blake-more still invited, year after year, his actors and playwrights to join him at the beach. You would see Tim Pigott-Smith, still in character as Merrick from *The Jewel in the Crown*, snarling at a plate of *moules*. The lovely Nicola Pagett smiled at *moules* as if she hoped to charm them open. Robin Dalton, agent to John Osborne, negotiated with *moules*. Michael Frayn inspected a heap of *moules* as if the task was to deduce its molecular structure. My wife and Rhoisin Beresford could get through a hundred *moules* between them, the shells piling up like a midden. All these people were fascinated by *moules*. I could not stand *moules*. What else did the damned things do except lie there on the seabed imitating legless cockroaches while they ingested effluent?

But I loved everything else about Biarritz, and precisely because it was so predictable. Despite its grand name, resonant in cultural history, it was as small-

time as the pair of warped espadrilles that the pretty girl finds in her cupboard in *Mr Hulot's Holiday*, my nomination for the title of best film comedy ever made. I was Mr Hulot reborn, with the difference that I had got the girl, and right at the start of the movie. Sunning themselves almost naked on the sea wall, there were pretty odalisques to whom less time had happened, but the woman I had married could still remind me, when she stood in the shallows outlined in her floppy hat against the oncoming twilight, of our first day together on Bronte Beach in Sydney, back there when she was hearing some of my jokes for the first time. For all too many men, and I am one of them, the realization can be a long time dawning that you won't really get to meet that beautiful young woman you just saw in the art gallery, because you already met her many years ago, and now you are getting old. With enough power and money you might conceivably persuade the beautiful young woman to become yours, and it will all be new again, but only for a while. It's the oldest story in the world, and what makes it a mockery is that you have missed the point: in a marriage you can't constantly regain the sense of discovery, you can only learn to value what has already been discovered. If it all depends on novelty, a marriage is doomed anyway: it can only work if you both enjoy the subtle shades of the time-worn.

And there were our children, surprising every day, getting bigger each year but always finding new ways of doing the same old things. On the few days of sunshine they added to their collections of pebbles and shells. Where the rocks met the beach below the esplanade, I still built a driftwood house on the same spot every summer, perhaps out of the same bits of timber. The topping out of a driftwood house was always signalled by my stretching a big beach towel over its rafters, to protect its potential occupants from the sun. As if a field gun had been fired at the clouds, the rain would instantly begin to fall. But the children knew what they had to do. In the year that Uncle Martin was there, they could perch on high stools in a bar and watch him play Space Invaders. But in any other year they had to go to the Musée de la Mer and pretend all over again to be spellbound by the exhibits. While I sat alone under the awning of our favourite cafe on the Rue Gambetta and started on a new book, my wife was shopping in Bayonne along with the other wives, and the children were in the Musée de la Mer checking out the current living arrangements of the same old starfish. Even at home in England, the whole family still calls a threatening sky 'a potential Musée de la Mer situation'. At one point we skipped the Biarritz trip for about a decade, having succumbed to the vain illusion that happiness might lie elsewhere, in a climate more reliable. But eventually we went back, because the Biarritz climate was reliable: reliably variable. When a family holds together, its members will develop a language to enjoy even the boredom. When a family

breaks up, no amount of excitement will compensate. In my time, I have seen an awful lot of good men make the big decision, and I've heard an awful lot of small change hit the floor. But the small change is precious. Perhaps I'm a miser.

Staying married to one person is undoubtedly a lot less expensive than getting married to someone else, but it still has to be paid for, and although we were by then well off, it was never easy street. Nor, however, was the cash flow any longer the chief consideration. My price as a television face meant that I could go on publishing books with low financial yield, such as *Other Passports*, the book of my collected poems that Cape bought out in 1986, and that Picador turned into a paperback the year after. For a poetry book it did well, and the paperback even got into the spinners at the airport, which made me feel better about life as I passed through the terminal on the way to being filmed doing undignified things in some destination not notable for valuing the fruits of the intellect. When you're hauling yourself out of the mud after take six of failing to ride the yak, it helps if you can remind yourself that you have recently published your collected poems. ('His occasional flashes of sensitivity may be surprising to many who have seen him making an arsehole of himself on TV' – *Times Literary Supplement*.) But the satisfaction was all spiritual. Unusually for a book of its type, *Other Passports* went on selling steadily for seventeen years, but when it finally went out of print I did a few calculations and worked out that the total return for the book would have kept my family alive for about a week and a half.

The best thing about my rate of remuneration on television, however, was that it was transferable. On television, recognizability is hard currency, and by now I could think of swapping channels if the need arose. It seemed to arise when Michael Grade, chief executive at LWT, went to the BBC. As soon as Michael parked his dynamic form behind his new desk, where his scarlet braces were nicely set off by the shine of the mahogany, Richard was one of the first people that he called. We piled into Richard's BMW and headed for BBC Television Centre as if being simultaneously wooed by the Sirens and chased by the Furies: not, as it turned out, a bad analogy for our situation, because we were leaving a scene that could have turned bad and heading towards another that would prove to be fraught with danger. For the moment, though, and as always, impulse was what drove us. Michael was the man: near him, things happened. Wherever he was, he kept an open door, and if he liked your idea you could get it on the air. At LWT, though I had achieved such prominence that my face was hanging in the corridor to the canteen along with Reg Varney from *On the Buses*, my position had ceased to be secure from the moment that John Birt was given an executive post from which he could think of second-guessing Grade. On a

personal level I had always liked John Birt, and I like him still. I suspect that the man inside the Armani suit can remember what we both looked like back in the days of *Nice Time* in the 1960s. Writing a few not very successful sketches for that show, I had been impressed by how the young producer John Birt's sideboards were even plumper than mine: and mine looked like two squirrels taped to the side of my head. Birt had a pair of dead badgers. But now, time having happened, he was the man in control, and though his temperament was still disarming, his language was becoming incomprehensible. He had already gone a long way towards perfecting a version of management-speak that not even other managers could understand. Using some formula previously unknown to science, he calculated that there could be a more efficient utilization of fixed capital resource flow, or something, if my weekly main-channel show *Clive James on Television* were to be scrapped. The advertising department caught him with these computations still in his hand and told him that the show made more money, weight for weight, than anything else being produced on the South Bank, so he should leave his big idea alone. Richard wasn't supposed to be aware that the big idea had even been mooted, but somebody told him, he told me, and I immediately suggested that we should hit the silk. It's a good rule in show business to spot the moment when the suits upstairs no longer regard you as an asset, and move on straight away. Stick around to be merely put up with and your bargaining power is draining away even if you still look like a fixture. Just because that old coffee machine has always been in the reception area doesn't mean that it's part of the furniture. In fact the moment it becomes 'much loved' it's already doomed, because the guy who moves in at the top with a mandate for change will always change what he can if he can't change what he should.

In less time than it took to think all that, we had completed our transition to Television Centre and were sitting down with Michael for a meeting in his huge new office. Instantly the air was full of flying superlatives: little twittering ghosts of dreams and wishes, like Tinkerbell and all her tiny classmates running wild on sports day. Bred from the playpen to be full of jokes and pithy maxims of showbiz legend, Michael is the most marvellous company even though you can never be sure, while he is talking to you, that he still holds the same post he held when he walked into the room. But there he was, apparently nailed into position, and he wanted us. He wanted us so much, he said, that his BBC2 programme controller was ready with a proposition fit to revolutionize arts television. Enter the man in question, looking like the fashionably dressed proprietor of a luxury car showroom in Beirut. Needless to say, his fame preceded him, because the most PR-conscious media executive of recent times

had been preceded by his fame since the day of his birth, when he emerged from the womb into a light-storm of photoflash and an uproar of shouted questions about what he planned to do next. It was Alan Yentob.

11. DEALING WITH GENIUS

Over the course of the next ten years I accumulated overwhelming evidence to suggest that this moment, when Alan Yentob, on being announced, actually appeared, must have been one of the few instances of his ever being on time in his life, so it was a mark of the honour being done to us by both him and Michael. At this stage of his dazzling career, Yentob spent a lot of time with Stanley Kubrick, and at any succeeding stage there was always some comparably important international star who could not exist without Alan's companionship and advice. Undoubtedly these *prominenti* all derived spiritual benefit from their association with Britain's leading arts impresario. But the downside was that anyone else was cast into the role of walk-on, or, rather, wait-outside. As a truly gifted producer of programmes, Alan had never looked at his watch while getting things done, and therefore he'd had some excuse for behaving as if nobody else owned a watch either. Up until the moment of his elevation to executive prominence, which proved to be the beginning of a new era in BBC history – his hagiographers were dead right about that – manically inspired programme-makers like him always had sober-sided executives in charge of them. Actually to promote the manically inspired programme-maker to the status of executive marked a new phase in cultural administration. From the moment that Alan's reign as a decision-maker began, the producers who had to report to him found him difficult to reach. All they ever heard was rumours. He was off in the South Pacific, spear-fishing with Marlon Brando. He was on Sam Spiegel's yacht somewhere near Sardinia, doing a deal with Zeffirelli for an all-dwarf production of *La Forza del Destino*. Or he was in his office, but he wasn't opening the door. Waiting in the corridor, producers who had not previously had beards grew them. People died out there, and their bones bleached on the carpet. It was a tribute to Alan's PR skills that if any of these stories reached the press they only served to reinforce his image as a genius. Let me hasten to say that the image was close to the truth. That was just the trouble. As an executive, he was

more of an artist than the artists. There are intellectuals who dream of that arrangement as a desirable ideal, and that's what's wrong with them.

Such was the judgement that I formed over the course of time about the Beeb's leading creative mind, but even then, at this meeting where he and Michael were purportedly offering us the moon, Alan had a way of conveying that he could have been talking to Orson Welles instead. Richard, who actually knew Orson Welles, bristled. Richard could be quite scary when he bristled because he ditched the diplomacy. It wasn't that he had forgotten how to be diplomatic. It was more that he had deliberately chosen to be blunt. Between them, Michael and Alan were offering us the job of anchoring a brand-new nightly round-up to be called *The Late Show*, which would transmit live and review everything artistic going on in London that night. When Michael said that Outside Broadcast Units would be laid on so that the show could be there for the curtain calls at Covent Garden and interview the stars, Richard said that it was the kind of suggestion that could only be made by someone who had never actually produced a television programme. It was a measure of Michael's confidence that he was able to field this perfectly accurate assessment without bristling in his turn. And Alan, I had to admit, wasn't bad at taking the message that he wouldn't be getting what he wanted. I had spent some time building up a position, under Richard's protection, where I could make judicious plans and did not have to react to random events. I didn't want to give all that up just to meet the challenge – that bad word again – of improvising repartee in order to help a chancy programme sound coherent. The road ahead would roll indefinitely, with never time for rest, thought or proper writing. Kick, bollock and scramble in perpetuity? No thanks. We wanted to do more of what we already knew how to do, pushing it forward only on the basis of established achievement. Michael was ready to settle for that. Alan seemed not bothered at all. He was a hard man to disappoint. His day was too full of riches. It transpired that he had to leave because he had 'an appointment with Stanley'. In the car, Richard showed his age by guessing that Alan had meant Stanley Baxter. It was I who guessed that it had to be Stanley Kubrick. Baxter, after all, could be reached by telephone. To get anywhere near Kubrick, you had to be Alan Yentob.

So we had started off by not giving our new employers what they wanted. What we wanted was a developed version of our weekly studio show, spaced out, between seasons, with more Postcard specials, to be shot at the increased rate of two a year. Generously, Michael ensured that the BBC's contracts department would minimize the obstacles when my agent Norman North came to them with his price for the package. Michael's open-door policy paid off in our favour when we walked in to sign the papers, because within a week he

walked through the same door in the opposite direction. None other than John Birt had arrived at the BBC and Michael had decided that there wasn't enough oxygen for both of them, especially since he could understand scarcely a word of what John said. As twin chief executives, they would have been roped together on the north face of the Eiger while one of them mumbled something about facilitating ongoing contact with a variable interface and the other shouted, 'Bugger this!' So our protector was gone.

We flourished anyway, more or less. At this point I could start writing a whole volume of analysis about the sociology of the modern media, but the main reason why there is always room for a good book on that subject is that nobody sane would want to read it. The first and only thing to say about the BBC is that I managed to get some of my best work done while I was there. The same applies to ITV. So the executives couldn't have been as bad as I thought. On either side of the porous divide between commercial and public-service broadcasting, the administrative layer was composed mainly of clever people. When they got in each other's way on the bridge, the effects were felt by those of us down in the engine room, but the effects would have been far worse if the executives had been uniformly dumb. There's a crucial difference between a man like Alan Yentob and the executives in the television system of the kind of country he looks as if he might otherwise have been president of. The crucial difference is about fifty points of IQ. If you're making programmes for a man like that and he screws you around, he isn't doing it because he's stupid, he's doing it because he's at least as smart as you are, but in a way you don't like. Hence the vital importance of a free market, so that you can go and work for someone else who will screw you around in a different way, but closer to your desires. Throughout my television career I crossed from one side to the other and back again solely out of the imperative to get things done. If my price went up all the time, it was only because I had been around longer. But I wouldn't have been around at all if there had been only one system to choose from. As in every other aspect of liberal democracy, the freedom is what counts, and I have never ceased to be grateful for living out my life under no compulsions except those imposed from within my numb skull. Therefore, on the subject of the suits upstairs, I am short of invective, because I am insufficiently fuelled by recrimination. When I say that there were people I could have killed, I'm just saying it.

Though Richard took pride in running a cost-effective production unit, it could not manage the managers, so logistics almost always took too much time. But they only seemed endless: it took only a year to get our office running in the BBC's shiny new HQ in White City. Until then we had to make do with a

temporary office in the basement of a BBC annexe called Kensington House, on the wrong side of Shepherd's Bush. (Actually both sides of Shepherd's Bush were the wrong side in those days, but the area had been slowly colonized by young media types who could not yet afford to live in Notting Hill, and eventually, when one of these, Nigella Lawson, sprang to overnight fame, suddenly Shepherd's Bush was St Tropez.) Kensington House was a dump full of stuff that the world had forgotten, but the basement was a dump full of stuff that Kensington House had forgotten. After a week of unpacking files, shifting furniture about and failing to get the equipment we had ordered, our arrival was consecrated by a systems failure in the toilet on the ground floor. We were directly underneath and tried not to take it as symbolic when we had to watch the effluent seep down the walls. Anyway, there was no time to brood. The weekly show needed a rethink because by now there were just enough communications satellites up there to offer the prospect of bringing guests in through space instead of by taxi.

Satellite interviews would suit the look of the show, which had come on a bit since its early days. There had always been a stack of TV monitors on the set, each of them showing a different image to give the sense of busy multiplicity and global scope. Directors and designers wanted to jazz up this techno effect by adding bits of girder, but my own instinct was that if the message was about technology, then the technology should convey the message. Design, I announced, was just design, and British television had always suffered greatly from the notion that design could yield spectacle, so that if you had Elaine Paige singing 'Don't Cry for Me, Argentina' it would be more spectacular, instead of less, if she sang it while standing at the intersection of two enormous white polystyrene pathways to nowhere while dry ice fumes were being pumped up her skirt. Designers didn't like hearing any of this and they loathed me for even thinking it. When I at last learned to keep my mouth shut on the subject, they loathed me for the way my lip curled. They reacted in exactly the way directors did when I said I didn't like any shot that drew attention to itself. Occasionally the bad blood simmered for a while, but eventually I would get my way, although I would have soon been overruled if the results had been less convincing. A show is a collaborative venture; in a collaborative venture nobody's opinion should prevail except by the tacit consent of all; and that consent can be won only if the opinion's proponent makes the show the hero. If his motive is self-glorification, morale will soon collapse.

Season by season, however, the show did a more persuasive job of setting the style for television about television. The set was all television: a kind of television heaven. As the software got more comprehensive, it was possible to change the style of furniture not just with a different image on each desk, but with

charge the stack of monitors not just with a different image each, but with a different part of the same image, to get the effect of a churning cyclorama alive with information. In the middle of all this razzle-dazzle I sat in my blue suit: the human element. Other humans came on as guests, but I was the only human who was there all the time. Everything else was electronic, including the far-flung guest who magically appeared up there on the back wall. The effect was of technical know-how carried to its apogee, like a big rocket crackling upwards into orbit. The reality, however, could be dead dodgy, especially early on, when the window for getting a satellite interview was as short as twenty minutes. You had that much time to shoot enough clean stuff that could be edited into a five-minute spot. One to four was an almost unworkably small ratio. Even in the USA, where every big city had hundreds of spare technicians who could be hired ahead of time, it would still take five or ten of the precious minutes just to get the guest rigged for sound. Usually, on studio day, we had to tape a satellite interview in the afternoon, when the time was right for a guest on the east coast, where it was still morning. A guest on the west coast would have to be taped in our early evening, just before the audience came in for the show, which would be taped too, but shot as-for-live. There could be nothing as-for-live about the satellite interviews, which were bound to be full of stops and starts. The trick was to ensure that the stops didn't cancel all the starts until there was nothing left to edit. But at least there was no studio audience to worry about.

So I was free to worry about everything else. The satellite-interview system was a potential ace in the hole, because it was a pipeline to America, where all the best guests were, as they still are. But for just that reason, the system had to work, and it was so expensive that even a single crack-up could screw the budget. Making it harder was the fact that some of the American guests weren't just up-front, they were out to lunch. It occurred to me that I had never known real tension before the day I interviewed Tammy Faye Bakker by satellite. Tammy Faye was the wife of Jim Bakker, the gate-mouthed television evangelist ('Praise the Lord!') who had grown famous for the amount of money he could get out of his enormous congregation, but he had spoiled it all by spending some of it on a woman of easy virtue. The credibility of his ministry was irreversibly undermined. His wife, who had started off as a simple choir-girl spell-bound by the soaring spirituality of her pastor, was reluctant to accept that the dream was over. There was nothing easy about Tammy Faye's virtue, but she had forgiven Jim at the top of her voice, and was eager to do so again just for me and all the wonderful people of Great Britain. Unfortunately she was inaudible, because the clip-on microphone slid off the discreetly scooped neckline of her spangled top and fell between her ample breasts, where it reattached itself to the underwiring of her bra. The microphone needed a designated female member of the

of her via. The microphone needed a designated female member of the Teamsters Union to dig it out. When it was finally retrieved, covered in talcum, it turned out that she couldn't hear anything, because there was something wrong with her earpiece. The sound engineer at our end said that she must have talcum in her ears. Through my own earpiece came instructions from the gallery that I should suggest to the production staff at the other end that they should suggest to Tammy Faye that she might like to scrape her eardrum with a wodge of Kleenex or a Q-tip. You have to imagine that I was looking at Tammy Faye's face multiplied to the size of a squash court, and that she was a pretty daunting sight even from a distance. The conglomerate of false eyelashes and mascara both below and above each eye gave the combined effect of two extreme astronomical events occurring in close proximity, and the weight of the lipstick dragging her mouth downwards gave the impression of too many people clinging to one side of a rubber raft.

You will notice that I make no mention of the physical characteristics underlying her panoply of cosmetic effect. I would like to be able to say that I never broke that rule. Certainly I haven't broken it in recent years, but I have to confess that in my early days I sometimes did, although mostly inadvertently. I only once did it deliberately. A famous British novelist, after a visit to Australia, wrote a feature article for one of the British colour supplements in which she gave the impression that the Australian media had been not quite up to the task of assessing her sophistication. In particular, she described one of her Australian female interviewers as looking anorexic. The interviewer was a friend of mine and did have an eating disorder, so next time I was in Australia I took revenge by making a few disparaging remarks about the personal appearance of the novelist. I made the remarks to a journalist in full knowledge that what I said would soon get back to London: that, indeed, was my plan. My idea was to remind the novelist that it was a small world. The plan succeeded only too well. My remarks were quoted, accurately, in the British press the next day, and I realized very quickly that I was the one who had been taught a lesson, because in cold print they sounded mean and witless. Revenge was laid bare as a very bad reason for writing anything, so I tried not to do it again.

Nor was the lure of accurate evocation sufficient excuse for a cruel remark. I should never have compared Montserrat Caballé to the battleship *Missouri*. The soprano didn't have to look like that – she could have eaten less – but she still had feelings. The same applied to the young American tennis player Andrea Jaeger. When I said she had a smile like a car crash, I was referring to the braces on her teeth. I thought the observation permissible because one day the braces would be removed, so I wasn't really referring to anything permanent. She might

have felt, however, that they were there forever, and had invited the lightning. My general defence in such cases was that no journalist was ever quite as pitiless about my own physical appearance as I was myself. But it gradually became apparent to me that the defence would not quite do. If I didn't mind very much about cutting an awkward figure, other people might mind if I said they did, so I tried to rein in the personal remarks, except for those cases where there had been a flagrant display of wilful self-mutilation by someone who was proud of the result. I wasn't calling Barbara Cartland ugly when I said that the makeup so lavishly applied to the area of her eyes made them look like the corpses of two small crows that had flown into a chalk cliff. She chose to look like that. Nor was I calling Arnold Schwarzenegger innately deformed when I said that when stripped for action he looked like a brown condom full of walnuts. He chose to look like that. Both those remarks, however, have remained lastingly notorious as examples of how I am without mercy when pouring carbohic scorn on people's personal appearance. In fact I have always spent most of my time being careful to do no such thing, but a dog with a bad name finds it hard to outrun. Enough of that. Where was I? Oh yes. With Tammy Faye. She was up there on the wall, she was looking as off the wall as hell, and time was running out.

We were within seconds of having to call off the deal, but suddenly, as in all the best melodramas, the machinery repaired itself, and Tammy Faye was ready to do her thing. She did it surprisingly well. She expressed herself almost exclusively in quasi-biblical bromides but it didn't matter. Television gives a general impression. Nobody ever remembers what you said, but everybody remembers how you came over, and Tammy Faye was, well, kind of nice, even dainty. Hence the surprise, because if her personality had fitted her face it would have been like hearing from a candy store reaching critical mass. Instead she sounded like a good woman coping with bewilderment. The main thrust of her argument was that the embarrassments visited on her adorable Jim were unfair but they must all be part of God's plan. There could be no doubt that she genuinely loved the sanctimonious little creep. I refrained from asking her the question that would be on the lips of everyone in the audience: how could she have ever looked at that whimpering, wheedling face of his and imagined that he had a religious calling? The reason not to ask the question was that she was giving the answer with every word she said. Love is blind, even when its eyes aren't full of melting makeup. As the satellite image at last winked out, I didn't precisely have to choke back a sob, but I was sincerely moved. Plainly the satellite interview would be a powerful instrument. It was clumsy – there was a full second of delay that made it hard to keep question and answer from awkwardly overlapping – but it gave you a close-up. In Tammy Faye's case, it

was a close-up of a wedding cake that had been hit by a hurricane, but the soul shining through was good, and a useful reminder that there is a crucial difference between fundamentalism and extremism. Tammy Faye's beliefs were as fundamentalist as they come, but she wouldn't have killed you for not sharing them, except perhaps when she sang.

It took a couple of seasons to streamline the satellite-interview system and it was always touch and go. We almost lost a spot with Billy Connolly in Los Angeles because Billy had turned up in a silk shirt and we found out the hard way that clip-on microphones react badly to silk. He launched into his first answer and within half a minute the lurching and skirling image up there on the screen sounded as if it was being attacked by locusts. The crew at his end wrapped the microphone with insulation tape and he launched into his first answer again. This time the locusts had been joined by angry wasps. It took half a dozen false starts before somebody figured out that the thing to change wasn't the microphone, but the shirt. Billy swapped shirts with one of the American production staff and launched into his first answer yet again, just in time for his earpiece to start receiving police reports. So he started responding to those. In came the slate, chalked 'Take 16'. Being Billy, he got better all the time. He couldn't control his merriment at the accumulated cock-ups but he is one of those lucky few who are funnier still when fighting their own laughter. Time was running out, however, and I found the tension tough on my cool, although I was steadily getting better at maintaining continuity through the glitches.

Time ran all the way out with Willie Nelson. A beard in a hat, with plenty of hair hanging down from the back of the hat to make him look even more like Wyatt Earp's scapegrace brother, he was somewhere near the rim of the Grand Canyon, and our idea for the set-up was centred on his identity as a taciturn man of the West. He would ride toward the camera on a white horse, lithely dismount, and be interviewed. Willie Nelson is not just an accomplished singer-songwriter, he is a gifted natural actor – watch him stealing scenes in *Wag the Dog* – but the horse couldn't act for a bale of hay. Willie rode towards the camera and the horse screeched to a halt too late, so that the lithely dismounting rider filled the lens with his belt-buckle. Willie rode towards the camera and the horse screeched to a halt too early, so that the lithely dismounting rider had to trek forward into position from the middle distance. Willie rode towards the camera and the horse didn't screech to a halt at all. It just kept going past the camera and disappeared, leaving the lens with nothing to look at. Had the horse, with Willie on board, gone over the edge of the canyon? Where was our star? But wait a minute: there he was again, riding towards the camera. The horse screeched to a halt in exactly the right spot. Willie lithely dismounted and his

earpiece didn't work, so instead of answering my first question he merely smiled, a man of the West not just taciturn but mysteriously bereft of the power of speech. Time wasn't just running out, it ran out. We had to book an extra window, at painful cost, so as to get an interview that would marry up to the arrival shot. A regular actor would have had to be paid twice, which would have blown the budget right out. But Willie was a gentleman. He was also, I later discovered, broke to the wide, so he wasn't just a gentleman, he was a saint. As for the horse, I hope it is rotting in hell. We had some good footage of Willie giving it a serious talking-to, but there was no time to put together a sequence of everything going wrong. It would have been a lot more eloquent than the interview, which consisted largely of Willie saying 'Yep' and 'Nope', like Gary Cooper. Once again, however, the words mattered less than the mere presence. Faces from space! It looked fabulous.

12. DESTINATION TOKYO

With the weekly show raking in the ratings, we had earned our upgrade to the shimmering cliffs of White City, where we were given half an acre of the Beeb's unstained new floor-space in which to spread our staff, who revelled in the unfamiliar luxury of being able to sit down without touching each other. Much to my embarrassment, the whole operation was called the Clive James Unit. Feeling a bit overbilled, I resolved to redouble my efforts, but soon found that I was obliged to triple them. Having got our wish for a bumper ration of Postcard programmes, we now had to make them. It was soon clear to me that they would consume the last vestiges of my spare time. If I hadn't learned to write on board the aircraft, and during every hour of downtime on location, I would have got no literary work done at all. By now I was composing the last of the reviews and essays that went into my book *Snakecharmers in Texas*. I got better at writing them in snatched hours, and their range of reference benefited from the second-hand books I bought wherever I flew. On location, collecting books and stacking them up on the cafe table at which I wrote was a way of staying sane, or perhaps just a way of resting from one kind of hyperactivity by burying myself in another. The cafe table could be anywhere, and today I can't always remember which city came in which order, or even whether it was the BBC paying the hotel bills, or else that previous bunch. I never kept a logbook because it would have scared me to look at it. I could phone around all the old staff – half of them are tycoons by now, but they might still take my calls – and I could work out the actual order of events, but there would be no point: things didn't feel sequential even then. As in every other area of my life, simultaneity was the keynote. The places we filmed were all different, but filming itself was just one place on its own. I loved being there, but often felt that I didn't know where it was in the world. It had a hotel where you had breakfast, and there was a car that appeared on schedule, and then you appeared on schedule and climbed into the car, and then the car took you from one sequence to the next until it took you back to the

hotel to have dinner and lie down for a couple of hours before staying awake half the night while you mugged up for next day. The call-sheet being always such a killer, it was essential to know something about the country's past before going in, because when you got there you would see nothing except the present.

I already knew a bit about Japan before we flew to Tokyo. I had once been there on assignment for the *Observer*, and since then I had read quite a lot about Japanese history; and lately I had sat through several hundred miles of footage showing young Japanese game-show contestants performing routines out of a cabaret devised by Dante. That last thing, of course, was the principal reason somebody decided that we should make not just one film in Japan, but two of them on the trot. Our advance party returned with a thick folder full of sure-fire suggestions, and off we flew to make them real. I forget what I wrote on the plane. It should have been my will.

Barely had we moved into our skyscraper hotel in the Aoyama district of Tokyo when we made our first mistake. It was decided that I should carry a bag in the first few sequences, as if I was still looking for the hotel after having emerged from the subway system. We thus constructed a needless continuity problem, because when we got back to the editing room and duly reshuffled all the sequences into a different order, the bag mysteriously appeared and disappeared throughout the movie, always needing to be explained. (Memo: it isn't enough to dress the same throughout. Don't carry anything, because you never know if a walking shot from one sequence might not need to be patched into another, and if something even as slight as a hot dog magically appears in your hand, it will need an extra, awkward line of voice-over. 'On my way to the shrine I bought a hot dog which I consumed instantly.' Cue the sound of people switching off by the million.) But that lay in the future. At the time, I wondered if I would ever get home at all. My Japanese game-show expertise dictated that I should participate in, guess what, a Japanese game show. It was called *Takeshi's Castle*: far and away the most popular game show on Japanese television, out-rating even the dreaded *Endurance*. The castle was a pasteboard cut-out standing in a patch of waste land, but it looked convincing beside Takeshi himself, who was dressed like Michael Jackson in the later, militarized stages of his madness and did a lot of jumping about and crouching while pulling the Japanese front-man's standard idea of a subtly threatening face. Imagine Kirk Douglas feigning apoplexy and you've got it.

Hundreds of teenage contestants in crash helmets pretended to feel terrified. They shrank back, they clutched each other, they shivered. In my tight-fitting red tracksuit and white crash helmet, I wasn't pretending. Stretched high above a pond, there was a jungle-style rope-and-plank bridge on which you had to stand

while the other contestants tried to eliminate you with soft cannon balls fired by a spring-gun while Takeshi jumped around doing his threatening thing. Twice as heavy as the average contestant, I had trouble keeping my balance anyway. The bridge swayed wildly to either side even when the cannon balls weren't flying. When they did, the very first one hit me in the face and down I went, to discover that the pond had been dug shallow, in order to receive the falling bodies of much smaller people. Dug out of the slime, I was inserted into the castle to be chased by giants. They were small giants but they were good at poking you with a stick. I was propelled out of a doorway and fell into the moat. For our crew, filming the Japanese crew as they filmed me was tricky, so I had to do it again. This time I emerged from the door and did three-quarters of a somersault before hitting the moat stern-first. Anything for the camera. The massed contestants dutifully howled at the marvellous sense of humour of the *gaijin* – the foreign person – while Takeshi mimed jealousy with what I thought was, for him, uncharacteristic authenticity. It turned out that he wasn't miming. He was the one who was supposed to get the laughs. He had lost face.

He lost his temper along with it but we already had what we needed, so it was no great loss to take our leave as Takeshi did the equivalent of a Hollywood sulk. In the Hollywood sulk, the star retreats to his huge trailer and refuses to come out. Takeshi retreated to a very small bus and never stopped coming out, snarling at us, and going back in again. He was probably still doing that for the next fortnight, during which time we managed to prove that most of our planned story was like a game show anyway. I had been in on the preliminary thinking so I can't say that I was double-crossed. The problem of capturing Japanese culture would have been unavoidable however we approached the task, because so much of the old art depends on refinement, which takes a lot of explaining, and only the explanation can prove that you are looking at the real thing. A Japanese classical sword-smith takes a long time to make a sword, you need a degree in metallurgy to appreciate what he does, and the finished product looks exactly like a stage prop from an amateur production of *The Mikado*. In a Noh play an actor takes half an hour to cross the stage. The special walk he is using takes a lifetime's training, but he looks exactly like an old man with arthritis setting out to buy a newspaper. You can fall asleep while he is making his entrance and when you wake up again he is still making his entrance. In Kyoto, at the Geisha training school, the top lady was one of the greatest living players of the *shamisen*, the single-stringed guitar that has come down through the ages without acquiring any extra strings to compromise its purity by providing it with, say, the capacity to produce a chord. It goes plunk. It goes plink.

But from this woman we had been promised prodigies of subtlety. We had

been reliably informed that there was no one in her class. A ringer for Sessue Hayakawa, she applied her fingernails in various groupings to the string of her instrument, which produced a series of noises astonishing for their lack of variation. The piece she played, which had reputedly driven many a Tokugawa nobleman to hoarse grunts of desire in times gone by, sounded like a tennis racket popping its strings one at a time under intense heat. As I sat there on my crossed legs in the listening position, her display of virtuosity continued without any hint of an ending. She went plink. She went plunk. As she did so, she moaned at seeming random, evoking the last hour of a coyote with its leg crushed by a steel trap. There was a spoken passage which I thought I recognized as a reproduction of a tannoy announcement at Tokyo's mainline station saying that the Bullet Train to Osaka would stop at Nagoya. Then the moaning resumed, until it was finally climaxed, as she hunched with added tension over her instrument, by a virtuoso simultaneous combination of plunk and plink. The attendant trainee geishas politely told me how long it took to put on their makeup but they took just as long to tell me, and there was no way to save the sequence except to shoot reverses on my straining face while I showed the effects – no need for acting – of having to sit for a long time on my crossed legs. I couldn't manage more than a few minutes without getting up for a rest but then I had to sit down again. We filmed me doing this. It was a true story, and to let myself in for ridicule might mitigate any impression that I was setting out to ridicule the culture, which in fact I revered, even for its way of becoming even more incomprehensible as you focused your attention on it.

Ancient Japanese arts were proving a bit of a bust from our viewpoint. The modern stuff was easier. With complete dominance of the global electronics market as a motor, Japanese economic life was booming, the 'salary men' were working themselves to early graves, and it was fun reporting on the way they lived. In Tokyo the men in suits slaved a long day, got compulsorily wasted with the boss in the evening, missed the last commuter train and checked into one of the new capsule hotels. I checked in along with them, changed tightly into the pyjamas provided and climbed up to a capsule on the third tier. All around me were capsules full of salary men, at the rate of one per capsule. They were in there like bees. The crew had filmed then getting in. Now the crew had to film me. With my racked legs still aching from their agony in the geisha college, I climbed a ladder whose rungs were shorter than the span of my hands. But swinging myself horizontal so that I could slide into the flesh-pink plastic capsule was trickier still. For one thing, I didn't slide. I was exactly the same size as the space provided, which was not the idea. You were supposed to be a bit smaller, so that you had room to read a porno comic book one-handed while

politely tarting sake tumes. But the camera was on my face as I strained and grunted. Again, no acting necessary. The right effect first time. But it had to be done a dozen times, to get the angles and the long shots. Sweat poured from my face, suggesting that I was crammed into a microwave oven. From other capsules, voices emerged, which, our translator explained, were voices of complaint. The bees were being kept awake. All that the scene needed was Takeshi rushing in, jumping up and down, pointing his finger at me and screaming, 'You are keeping our salary men awake, foreign devil!'

We flew down to Kyushu to film me sitting in a pool of hot grey liquid mud dotted with melons and the heads of people who were there for the melon-flavoured hot grey liquid mud. Some of them had been there for years. They were quite tolerant of the intruder, but I couldn't help wondering why I was so often ending up submerged. (In subsequent movies the question would occur to me again: it was a kind of running theme.) The answer to the question, I realized much later, was actually quite simple. Like the wearing of the blue suit, the plunging of my body into alien liquids emphasized the only reason for my central role in the proceedings: I was the wrong man in the right spot. But the films we made in Japan had a bit too much of the wrong man and not nearly enough of the right spot.

We got closer to capturing the traditional Japan when we filmed my participation in the tea ceremony. The tea master was the top guy in the country. Radiating sacred expertise through the paper walls of his little house, he held the tea master's equivalent of a black belt, tenth dan, and he had not arrived at this exalted rank without suffering, as his permanent frown attested. Change his kimono for a naval uniform and he could have been Admiral Yamamoto just after he got the news that four aircraft carriers had been sunk in the Battle of Midway. As we squatted facing each other, I too suffered. At several points during the first hour, while the tea master was still preparing the tea for mixing with water – the leaves had to be pounded, sifted and closely contemplated before being pounded and sifted again – I did not get up quickly enough to rest my legs. Instead I rolled over backwards, to the amusement of the third participant. Her name was Yoko Shimada and she was present at my suggestion. Back in England, I had informed my troops that the actress in the television mini-series *Shogun* was the most beautiful woman on Earth and that if she were present during the tea ceremony her ethereal face might do a better job of conveying its spiritual significance than mine. This proved to be an accurate forecast and I don't apologize for having made it. Some of my critics were scornful about the way my Postcard programmes were populated with good-looking women. A few of my producers, especially if they were female, agreed

with the critics, but I thought the audience could use an effective relief from looking at me, and I would still think the same today. In Japan, especially, it was all too easy to fill the screen with brute reality. All you had to do was get a close shot of a sumo wrestler's behind. But if you wanted to convey spiritual beauty in its most refined form, Yoko Shimada's face was just the thing. Decked out in full kimono, she looked truly, deeply interested in the tea ceremony and declared herself honoured to be watching the tea being ceremonially mixed by the number-one tea master currently in existence. The camera could cut away to her divine countenance while the tea master got on with the job of mixing and whisking. The camera didn't have to watch me rolling over backwards.

In the course of about an era, the tea was finally all set to go. It looked like guacamole but it tasted of nothing, which was apparently the idea. A foreigner tasting his first ceremonial tea couldn't expect to get the nuances. Later on I asked Yoko if she had tasted anything either, but by that time she was back outside the house and had been joined by her manager, who whispered in her ear. She said the tea had been wonderful beyond all imagining, but there was a giggle going on somewhere behind that mask of translucent beauty. While she was inside the house and still on the case, however, she did a superlative imitation of someone being knocked out by subtlety. The cup came to her after it had come to me. As per the protocol, I had turned the cup around so that she wouldn't be sipping from the same bit of the rim I had sipped from. She turned it again, so I think her delicate lips ended up sipping at the same spot. If so, it was as near as I was ever going to get to sharing Richard Chamberlain's big moment in *Shogun* when he fell with her to the futon. We got miles of footage but there was never any doubt that it would have been just another slapstick scene if we hadn't introduced an extra element. Yoko was it, and I said goodbye to her with a correctly angled bow as she was helped into the back of her limousine by her manager, who hated me very much. I have often wondered whether he might not have been the reason why she didn't become the biggest star in the world. If so, he was probably right. She was the golden carp, and she belonged in the old imperial pond. In the open ocean, she might have drowned.

We got a lot of good material in Japan and I think the two movies it yielded hold up fairly well – they are still being screened somewhere in the world all the time – but a single movie would have been better if we could have captured the real texture. I had already figured out why it had slipped through our fingers: not because it is made of silk, but because it is all based on the language. Our fixer on the shoot, an elegant young employee of the BBC's Tokyo office named Noriko Izumi, was a born teacher. I called her Nikki and her spoken English was so good that she called me Clive, instead of the usual local pronunciation,

Karaibu. (Most of the gags about the way the Japanese pronounce English are exactly backwards, by the way: it's 'l' that they have trouble with, not 'r', so the famous 'Lip my tights!' sequence in *Lost in Translation* is nonsense, even if amusing.) So well did Nikki speak English, in fact, that she wasn't in search of practice, and could dedicate all her attention, during my downtime, to starting me off on one of the big adventures of my life. I won't try to record it all here. Sufficient to say that during the shoot I learned enough phrases to play my part in the standard everyday conversation that consists almost entirely of saying hello and goodbye, and I even learned to recognize my first half-dozen written words. That second thing, the written language, is what makes Japanese so hard for the foreigner. The spoken language is comparatively user-friendly. It's spoken in a monotone, in complete syllables, so you don't have to worry about your intonation, and the phonemes can be strung together as easily as in Italian or Spanish. In fact Japanese sounds a bit like Italian being spoken in the next room.

But the written language is a different matter. There are three alphabets going on at once. Two of the alphabets are syllabic, but most of the action is in the third alphabet, the *kanji* characters, and it's a brain-burner. The written language, with its emphasis on memory, is designed to be learned by children so as to be used by adults. An adult trying to learn it had better not be trying to remember anything else. Nevertheless, in the following years, during which I spent as much time as I could in Japan, I got quite a long way with reading and writing, but I didn't have to get further than about a yard before I discovered what our filming trip had missed out. The biggest artistic impact Japan makes is all contained within that amazing written language. A single page of a newspaper is a work of art. The whole population shares this enormous aesthetic turn-on and if you can't read it, you're out of it. *Ainiku*, as they say. A pity. Year after year, in the magic coffee shops of Jinbo Cho, the book district of Tokyo, Nikki would check my *kanji* characters as I laboriously entered them in my notebook. Always more keen to form friendships among women than among men – once a mother's boy, always a mother's boy – I eventually supplemented her invaluable help with additional instruction from a bunch of female teachers who had daringly started a two-room outfit to teach Japanese to foreign businessmen based in Tokyo. Their little school, called Business Nihongo, was an unprecedented initiative at a time when Japanese women were still meant to mind the hearth. I staked them to a few months' rent in return for free teaching. Eventually I could write the phonetic alphabets – the sinuous *hiragana* and the jagged *katakana* – with fair fluency, but the *kanji* characters were always a killer. The upside was that I got steadily better at reading and a lot better at

speaking. I learned women's Japanese – men would raise their eyebrows when I spoke it – but it sounds better than men's Japanese anyway. (Women, even when annoyed, sound like the pattering of a light rain on a tiled roof. Men, even when discussing the weather, sound as if they are whipping themselves up for a *banzai* attack.) Writing, however, was dead tricky, and I never really got on top of it even before the day came that I had to put it aside for a while, and then found, when I tried to pick it up again, that it had all gone away. One day I hope to start again, because it was one of the big aesthetic experiences of my life, like getting into the Bach cantatas.

13. PAGEANT CITIES

Rio de Janeiro was tricky too but for a different reason. A water city whose beautiful setting ranked with Sydney and Venice, with overtones of the Himalayas, it looked majestic in a wide shot but when the camera got closer it was a meat market. Such was the cult of the female body that I looked like a sex tourist just for being there. There was certainly no need to jazz up a tea ceremony with a pretty woman. Pretty women were wall to wall even indoors, and out on the beach they were sitting next to each other for miles as they slaved at the endless task of polishing their fingernails. When they were sitting down, their shapely breasts, only notionally contained by bits of coloured string, were sometimes masked by their arms as they bent forward to get started on their toenails, but when they walked, darkly outlined against the sunlight, every one of them, of whatever age, sported a pair of polished, pointed nacelles like the bumper bullets of a 1956 Cadillac. This was the home city of plastic enhancement for the female chassis, a craze that was later to conquer the world. The top surgeon was on our list of interviewees, but first we had to knock off the exterior footage in case it rained. This time Richard was with us in person and he was very strict about that. If we didn't get the beach life we wouldn't have a movie. He was a bit irritable because of what happened at the Copacabana Hotel when we moved in. We dumped our stuff in our rooms, changed into swimming costumes and gathered around the pool to make our plans, sipping at caipirinhas as we contemplated the same stretch of cool water in which the Hollywood stars had once recovered from the heat of secret trysts in the days when the media couldn't afford to fly. It was balm to our jet-lagged eyes, but after an hour the sun was too hot to bear, so Richard went back to his room, there to discover that it had been turned over: wallet, credit cards, return ticket, all gone. It was hard not to suspect the staff but when the cops arrived even they looked like crooks.

One of the immediately apparent things about Rio is that whereas most of the women are out of a good American surfing movie, all the men are out of a bad

American gangster movie. The level of crime was doubly unsettling for being instantly obvious. I already knew something about it because I had been there before, to cover the Brazilian Grand Prix for the *Observer*. One of the drivers, as he walked along the esplanade in broad daylight, had been hauled down onto the beach and mugged not only for his watch and wallet but for most of his clothes. Laurence Rees, rewarded for his success in Paris by being invited to direct the Rio shoot, had arrived equipped with a theory that muggers could be deterred if you walked with sufficient confidence. On the morning after Richard got robbed, Laurence walked confidently out of the front door of the hotel and straight into a pack of teenage thieves who kindly left him the clothes he stood up in but took his watch and everything in his pockets. The doorman looked calmly on. After that, Laurence abandoned the confident walk and adopted the same nervous slouch as the rest of us. You just had to get used to the idea.

Laurence was good at the coverage, though, and while the sun shone there was a lot to cover. I cleverly decided that the reverse shots on my face would look funnier if my head didn't turn. We could just shoot a few hundred feet with my head still and my eyeballs swivelling. Back in England, I could do a voice-over line about the strain of not looking, while the cutaways searched all over the place among the sun-kissed lovelies. There was just no end to the supply. Until now I had never supposed that my libidinous imagination could die of an overdose, but it happened. This was going to be as boringly predictable as a saturnalia, or, as we might say now, a successful suicide bomber's first afternoon in Paradise. Actually we can't say that now, lest we attract the bristling attention of some lethal maniac out to demonstrate the infinite mercy of Allah. But these were more innocent times, when a semi-naked female had nothing to worry about except being microwaved by the lustful glances of slaving males, and nobody bothered about the wrath of God, even though He, too, was supposedly a Catholic.

The body worship of Rio took on a more interesting perspective when we did our first night-shoot. There was a fashionable party in one of the old Portuguese colonial buildings and every colonnade was jammed with glamorous women, but these were the social elite and often of a certain age. Even the most ancient, however, had unlined faces joined to trim bodies by uncannily wrinkle-free necks. One of them didn't balk at telling me that she had been worked on by the top surgeon I referred to earlier. Then she started to point out all the others who had been to the same repair shop. Here was a revelation. There was a sorority of the surgically altered. The women of Rio not only looked on perfect beauty as their birthright, they looked on eternal youth the same way.

Up on the favelas above the city, where the destitute lived in hovels loosely

plugged into an incipient mud-slide, we paid a guy in white patent-leather shoes – a defiant gesture in a universe of pig excrement – to tell us about the gangs that plagued the poor. He got us into a voodoo ceremony taking place in one of the rare huts that were made of cement instead of scrap. A hundred people rocked and clapped to a slow rumba. There was an altar decked with votive symbols: a shell-encrusted cross, a barbershop mirror painted with the image of Elvis Presley, a plastic Kewpie doll, a broken blender. Tedious chanting took place while a chicken was sacrificed. The commentary was writing itself in my head all the time. Rich people were paying to go under the knife of a mad scientist while poor people were getting carved up for free. That latter part was underlined later when our guide to the favelas turned up dead. It wasn't our fault that the news had got out about what we had paid him. Perhaps it hadn't, and they nailed him just for his white patent-leather shoes.

Immortality was expensive but life was cheap. Clean-up squads of off-duty cops were kidnapping pavement children even as we set up for the interview with Yves Pitanguy, the pioneer plastic surgeon who founded the trade with the knowledge he acquired when he was rebuilding the burned faces of RAF pilots during WWII. His humanitarian credentials were excellent, and even in his later years he still spent some of his time correcting deformities. But he spent most of it keeping those society women young. His argument that he could never have paid for his charity work without giving rich women what they wanted was hard to refute. But a television interview is always about the general effect, not the logic, and even as the camera turned I knew that the doc's own face was telling the essential story. He didn't have a wrinkle. Some of his colleagues had been turning back his clock. The skin around his eyes gleamed like his teeth. Why, then, did he look like death warmed up?

Because plastic surgery, when its only aim is to stop time, *is* death warmed up. I could hear my voice-over deepening already. There are no empty subjects, there is only empty treatment. Back on the beach, I talked to the granddaughter of the Girl from Ipanema, subject of the immortal song written to a lyric poem by Vinicius de Moraes, whose poetry I later learned to love. He was a great lyricist, Vinicius, and he had been mad for the ladies. Nut-brown in her pale-green bikini, the granddaughter looked heaven-sent. The society women could never look like that again, but you couldn't blame them for trying, because young beauty was the only local currency that could keep pace with the dollar. Such was the inflation in Brazil that they wouldn't take their own money at the airport. It was a barter economy, and bartering began with the body. Or perhaps you could blame them. One of the old-time aristocrats, a member of the Betancourt dynasty, still lived in the family mansion, and no scalpel had ever

touched her. Barely mobile any more, she was the voice of sanity, and she could say it all in English, not Portuguese. Untouched by rancour but embodying the sadness of time, she told the story of the old colony becoming a modern ruin. Within the first five minutes of the interview I knew that she would clinch the movie. I was beginning to learn that a documentary special must be built like a poem, first planned, then modified as the texture emerged. Rio was a lyric poem, but all great lyric poems are tragic underneath, because they are inspired by human beauty, and beauty will die from the same force that made it live.

In my downtime I met a woman whose very existence dramatized the whole modern history of Brazil. Her name was Silvia Nabuco. One of her ancestors had been instrumental in the freeing of the slaves, and now her beloved nation was drowning in the chaos of its own liberty. In Rio she had a house like a fortress, and in the green *floresta* of Petropolis she had an estate surrounded by the walls of a valley. When she was a child the great poet Manuel Bandeira had written a poem for her. She was the one who told me where to look first in the Brazilian wing of the treasure house of Portuguese poetry. She was also the one who told me just how far and wide the voodoo cults still spread. To go with her beauty she had a melodious voice, from which it was disconcerting to hear that Brazil's current Minister of Education had been present the previous night at the ritual slaying of a cow. As we sat talking on the terrace of her fazenda in the early evening, men with shotguns patrolled the valley, her safeguards in a country where kidnapping was a recognized profession. What a story Rio was. But our movie would have been merely picturesque without the history. Matching that to the pictures was my job, and I was getting better at it because I had to. Otherwise we would have been making nothing except a travel brochure plus a dead chicken. Unless you are content to use a phrase like 'land of contrasts', you need to put some background over the foreground if you are to make any sense of the shot in which you walk away from the beach and trip over a rotting corpse.

The capacity to dig for the meaning behind the spectacle was essential even in the USA, where everyone walked around with the ostensible message blazoned on their T-shirts. In Louisville, Kentucky, a hundred spherical mothers were crammed into the Holiday Inn so that their children could compete in a pageant, one of the hundreds of pageants running somewhere in the US in any given week. Once they had all been beauty pageants but now, after too many scandals, they were just pageants, focusing on Talent. They are still running even as you read. All the children have at least one Talent and they are all destined to win a trophy. Everyone involved in our pageant, whether at organizational or competitive level, wore a shirt marked Louisville Pageant. If it had been a serial killers' conference in Detroit, the shirts would have said so. We had chosen the

subject precisely because it seemed so trivial but there were occasions early on when we thought we had overdone it. One girl's talent was to march up and down dressed as Uncle Sam. The disc she marched to was Barbra Streisand singing 'Don't Rain on My Parade'. Her actual Talent was hard to detect at first glance, but perhaps she earned points for not looking like her mother, who, like so many of the mothers, was a rolling sphere.

I risk being classed as a Body Fascist by saying this now, and I certainly didn't say it in my commentary to the movie, but the time comes when the truth can no longer be dodged. This wasn't the first time I had seen clinical obesity in America but it was always a shock to watch a family arguing about how many elevators they would need to get to where they were going, which usually meant downstairs to the dining room. Their talented children were occupying the brief window of life in which they would not be physically enormous. We were careful to avoid getting the shots which would emphasize this fact. I would indeed be evoking a story about a logical development of democracy, in which everyone must be special, a uniformity of uniqueness. Another logical development of democracy is that the poor get fat, but that would have been a less interesting story, and anyway it wasn't my natural slimness that sent me out jogging every morning. (Every morning I jogged several times around the vast Holiday Inn, which was surrounded by miles of nothing except an approach road to the interstate highway. Families who filled their cars to the brim struggled for room to point me out as they sped by.) Out of my sweats and into my blue suit after a breakfast of blueberry pancakes with extra cream, I sat at the back of the function room working on the plot-line while the camera was getting footage of a bespectacled ten-year-old boy called Elwood who sang a song about his rubber duck as he jumped in and out of a small plastic paddling pool. He clutched the rubber duck while he sang about it. Compared with what we had been getting for the previous two days, he was a highlight.

Elwood's rubber-duck number started looking like a prize sequence when the message came through from London that there was something wrong with the footage. Not some of it, all of it. Mike, our good man in Africa, was in charge of the camera and no one was more distressed than he was to find out that he had been shooting unusable stuff. The pulse of the fluorescent tube lighting in the hotel had been creating a 'bar' on the exposed film stock. I won't go into details because I still don't understand it myself, but you can take it for granted that we were in a bad spot, because everything we already had in the bank would have to be shot again. Cameramen have been known to drink themselves silly in those circumstances, so it was generous of Mike to buckle down and start shooting all the same numbers for a second time, but it's a rule of filming that the boy with

the rubber duck will not be quite so enchanting when asked to repeat the same routine. Elwood concentrated hard but his genius was under strain. There was something mechanical about the way he clutched the duck. Two entire days of my life disappeared as we laboriously went back over the same ground. The little girl who marched to Barbra Streisand marched again. As an impatient man, I tried to tell myself that I was getting only a fleeting taste of what it would be like to be in jail. Why had we persuaded ourselves to come here in the first place?

Richard reminded me. We were sitting in the bar one night listening to the cocktail piano player sing 'Desperado'. She was a good-looking woman but no great beauty, and she sang quite well but she wasn't Blossom Dearie. In her quiet way, however, she was giving it everything. 'This is the story,' said Richard. 'They all want to make it.' Right there I had my big idea. In another week or so, at the end of the pageant, the trophies would be given out. There would be hundreds of them. Everybody would get one. There would be a trophy for Best Holder of Rubber Duck Jumping In and Out of Plastic Pool. The trophies must all be in a room somewhere. Why couldn't we snatch a preview? The women in charge of the project were delighted by the idea, and next day we were filming in the trophy room. Standing on the floor with their plinths touching, the trophies were in there like a tinsel forest, trembling gently to the chug of the air conditioning. The women handed me trophy after trophy, explaining what each one was for. The women, however, were not, in this case, the story that mattered. It was the trophies. They didn't weigh anything. They were on the scale of small skyscrapers but they were made of some intermediary substance between metal and plastic that gave you about a hundred cubic feet of material to the ounce. A trophy whose pinnacle came up to your chin could be picked up with one finger. Suddenly the whole movie snapped into focus. It was a movie about a world of symbolism, where everyone could possess the signs of privilege, because signs were all they were. All I had to do was find a snappy way of saying that.

Thus it was that the Louisville Kentucky Holiday Inn, a tritely veneered breeze-block building parked out of town beside the interstate, proved to be the setting of one of our best movies. We had made something out of nothing. There were no trophies for making something out of the big American cities, although sometimes you could be led into trouble by the obligation to dodge the obvious. Chicago was like that. I wanted to avoid following the gangsters down memory lane to be blasted by a phantom hail of lead. 'But time was running out for John Dillinger . . .' I preferred to concentrate on the architects, but I soon found out why there are so many movies about John Dillinger and so few about Frank Lloyd Wright: even the memory of action is more gripping than no action at all.

I was also determined to tell the story of how the industrialists of the nineteenth century had not only turned millions of head of cattle into a river of fat that stunk up a whole corner of Illinois, they had also turned Chicago into a world centre of contemporary art by purchasing the best of Lautrec and Seurat straight off the easel in Paris and bringing it home to their houses. Eventually their well-chosen treasures were bequeathed to the Art Institute, where the masterpieces lining the wall of a single great room are a permanent demonstration of just how awesome American financial power can be.

But Chicago's expatriated European art would have been an unduly quiet story if it had not been offset by something noisier, and our candidate for that was the blues. Unfortunately, much as I loved jazz, I had only a limited tolerance for the kind of blues number in which the singer sings the same not very inspired line twice (or, even worse, three times) before capping it with a third (or, even worse, fourth) not very inspired line, followed by a peremptory wail from that least disarming of all jazz instruments, the amplified harmonica. I spent a long, harrowing night in a blues club where I had to look fascinated by the cacophonous remains of a famous blues shouter called something like Slow Dirt Buncombe (I remember his real name but his lawyer might still be alive) while he gave a string of examples of how a song with less than a minute of material could be stretched to thirty minutes if you made the same line and stanza sound different by mangling them a different way each time. Yelled at cataclysmic amplification, 'Well mah woman she done leff me' was a recurring motif. 'No bloody wonder' was the obvious continuation, but he never sang that. Thanks to the unnecessary volume – the sure sign of inadequate music – I was never completely clear what he was singing, but I could rely on a maximum air of drama when he pulled back from the microphone, slanted his polished ebony head to shield it from the blaze of the heavenly splendour he had created, and suddenly leaned forward again to give a long blast on his hellishly resonant harmonica. The desirable and necessary ideal of racial equality should, in my view, allow us to say that there is the occasional blues artist whose parade of desolation amounts to an acute pain in the neck. Slow Dirt Buncombe was one of these. Unfortunately Nobby, the deaf sound-man who was once again on the case, caught every line of Slow Dirt's act with perfect fidelity, and some of the results got as far as the final cut, accompanied by cutaways of my enchanted, lying face.

The Chicago shoot was carefully planned but somehow we missed the story. On the south side, whose housing projects scared me rigid, Barack Obama was working as a community organizer at about that time, but we didn't dig deep enough to find him. You can't see the future: you can only hope that the present

might be different, and one look at the housing projects was enough to tell you that the present was intolerable. We shot some of it, but we might as well have been in a war zone. I sat in a patrol car with a cop who told me that the tract of the Cabrini Green project we were looking at was a free-fire zone in which children regularly got shot just for target practice. We got some of that theme, but we missed its essence, and we even missed the city's undoubted magic. I would like to be able to say that there was no magic to be caught, but there was at least one moment that we might have snatched had I been faster on my feet, or at any rate stronger in expressing my wishes. We were shooting late at night beside the lake, catching the strolling traffic as the locals, after a Friday night out, made the *paseo*: always a good sequence in any city, but even better when you can see water in the background. Often a good story shows up unexpectedly in those circumstances, and so it did here. A pair of preposterously lovely young women in scoop-necked tops and hot pants came rollerblading along the esplanade as if in fulfilment of some adolescent boy's midnight fantasy. With each lazy sideways stroke they travelled another twenty yards. The laws of friction had been suspended. They were twins. It was American teenage heaven, twice. I wanted to collar them, rig up some extra lights and bring them past us again, but Helen, with arms folded, did the standard, 'Oh, Clive, you're impossible,' reaction that some of the female producers tended to trot out whenever I showed an urge to go for the cheesecake. She might have had a point, but I wasn't just doting on the jailbait, I was seeing the extravagant perfection of their skating, whose skill was underlined by the fact that they were both doing it. (The same point is made by synchronized divers.) I could have put a good line over that shot: only in America, never in Blackpool. But the possibility raced away into the dark, leaving us there with an impeccably worthy movie.

Worthy meant dull, however. Years later my friend Ruby Wax, who was born and bred in Chicago, said, 'Boy, you really missed it with that one.' Her remark hurt, because she herself was the supreme exponent of the documentary special. There has never been a better example of the form than her movie about Russia, which depended throughout on her ability to seize the moment. Similarly, in her special starring Imelda Marcos, Ruby might never have been able to snatch the famous scene with Imelda's collection of shoes if there had been a producer deciding what was serious and what was trivial. Sometimes the trivial is the serious. But I fluffed the moment. It wasn't Helen's fault – she usually indulged my more questionable inspirations if I insisted with sufficient fervour – and I make such a song and dance now only because I never quite got over missing the shot of the twin skaters. Get the shot first and then decide. In the same way, a

poet never gets over what he lost when he failed to write down that perfect line that came to him in the night. For once unarmed with pen and paper, he is sure that he will remember it in the morning. When he finds that he has forgotten it, he never forgets that he forgot.

14. THE HOUSE HAS THE EDGE

But there was no point going wide if you didn't go deep. Our Las Vegas movie was closer to the mark because I knew what I thought about gambling. Brought up within earshot of the Australian two-up schools and poker machines, I already had my underlying idea for a commentary that would hold the footage together without sounding preachy. It would have sounded preachy if I had set out to condemn the gambling as an unforgivable extravagance, an insult to the world's poor, etc. But my own conviction was that these *were* the world's poor, and were proving that if the poor had enough money they would cease to be materialist. It only sounds like a paradox. Las Vegas is high culture for people who have no other culture but kitsch. They really do think that a hotel shaped like a pyramid outranks the pyramids in Egypt because it has twenty-four-hour room service. As long as you bring your money to town, you are welcome to explain why they are wrong and why that matters. As so often in America, the amount of mental energy being put into the worthless was a marvel. The smartest man we met in Vegas was a security director in charge of the large staff watching from the ceiling of the casino in one of the biggest hotels, on the lookout for cheats. He showed us how cheating was done. Not only could he deal any card he wished from any part of the deck, he could neatly explain why the trick had taken half a lifetime to learn. He could also explain why the odds were better if you were the man in charge of security rather than the world's most skilled cheat. I could have listened to him for hours and I knew our audience would feel the same. But we still wouldn't have had much of a movie without the fast cars.

Louisville had taught us a lesson. It helped if you could pin the visit to an event. There was nothing else in Louisville except the pageant so the stratagem had been compulsory, but even in the big cities there was a risk of disappearing in several different directions if there wasn't a central happening. So we had timed the Vegas trip to coincide with one of those rare American flirtations with

Formula One motor racing. The Americans are never going to get the point of F1 because the cars rarely race beside each other, so where's the race? This is a question that only a petrol-head can answer. That year, however, the managers of Caesar's Palace Hotel in Las Vegas played host to a Grand Prix on a track laid out in the hotel's car park. If that space seems insufficient at first thought, remember that an American hotel's car park is usually a hundred times the area that the hotel itself stands on, because even though the people who have checked into the hotel don't mind being arranged vertically, they prefer it if the cars they arrived in are arranged horizontally. Many acres of tarmac were available for concrete boundary walls to be laid down in the requisite pattern, and the whole occasion was done due honour, with nothing skipped. Caesar's Palace, after all, had a distinguished association with motor sport. It was in the forecourt of Caesar's Palace, in the long driveway leading up to and away from the porte cochère, that the great Evel Knievel had jumped the fountain on his motorcycle. Or rather, he had failed to jump the fountain, descending at the wrong angle and breaking, yet again, bones that had already been broken many times, and were held together with metal pins. At Caesar's Palace he broke the pins.

It could be said that an international Grand Prix had inherently more dignity than a lonely madman in white leathers soaring on two wheels into the jaws of death, but I, for one, was honoured to eat in the same hotel whose fountain had made rainbows in the tent of light through which the daredevil had once plunged, ringed with chromatic mist, to yet another disaster. The Grand Prix would have to be going some to top that. Eager to do so, the whole travelling F1 circus came to town and started providing us with footage, not all of which we could use, for legal reasons. My compatriot Alan Jones was World Champion at the time and he gave himself a champion's traditional reward. One of his mechanics, in uniform and tight cap, had strangely little to do except stand about, but was suspiciously well developed in the area of the chest. From close up I recognized the actress Susan George. Similarly, one of Alain Prost's mechanics filled the uniform too well. It was Princess Stephanie of Monaco. It was hell leaving that sort of thing out but the actual racing gave us some valuable action to set off beside the gambling, which was all psychology. Globular people ingesting carbonated drinks from huge paper cups marked GULP while they crank their money irretrievably into slot machines might be ravaged by interior tragedies of an intensity unknown to Aeschylus but it doesn't photograph. I didn't find gambling in the least interesting – when I was young I had too often seen my admirably thrifty mother in tears at not having won even a token tenner with her single, dearly bought ticket in the Opera House lottery – but I found the way it was organized in Vegas fascinating. The people running

the place knew all there was to know about how the gamblers' minds worked. In the big hotels, a tinge of baby powder was pumped into the air-conditioning system because older people gamble more when you evoke their infancy. Did you know that? Neither did I.

But the people in charge of Las Vegas know everything like that. Their founding father, Bugsy Siegel, was an expert in the uses of fear. His descendants are experts in the uses of desire, including the desire to return always to the comfort of a fresh new nappy. Armed with such knowledge, they would probably get your money anyway, even if the odds weren't rigged in favour of the house. By nature averse to having my mind read, I was glad to get out of there. We got some watchable interviews. The best of them was with George Hamilton, an actor I had always admired, not least because he was too cool to care about his career. I talked to him in a sky lounge and had the sense to tell him, before the camera turned, that I thought his Evel Knievel movie and *Love at First Bite* were both wonderful. I wasn't lying and he could tell I wasn't, so he opened up. Quite often, when an actor does that, you wish he hadn't. But Hamilton was enchanting. As well as being hilariously full of showbiz lore, he looked like a million dollars, with a Palm Springs tan that might have been designed to go with his tuxedo. The camera ate him up like a crème caramel. There was also a dazzling few minutes with a blackjack dealer who could talk like your basic American dream girl: sassy, wise and quick. But even she was part of the apparatus. She taught me how to bet big only with the house's money or I would never beat the grind. The expression 'beat the grind' is still among my favourite expressions today, but I knew even at the time that the grind of Las Vegas was unbeatable. From all directions, like a hydraulic effect from the lower reaches of Dante's *Inferno*, you could hear the soft roar of the cataract as money poured from the pockets of the punters into the maw of the system. Under that kind of pressure I would have tunnelled out of Alcatraz with a spoon.

Alcatraz sat in the middle of our San Francisco movie like a cliché aching to be filmed. Every steep hill with a trolley-car heading upwards was screaming for a line about Steve McQueen's Ford Mustang heading downwards. Golden Gate Bridge? Very long bridge. I could have talked for an hour about the secondhand bookshops at Berkeley but nobody would have watched. Without a central story we would have been flailing. But a year of diplomacy had secured access to the San Francisco football team the 49ers, coached by the legendary Bill Walsh. Like the legendary Tom Landry of the Dallas Cowboys, his rival for the title of most legendary football coach in a country where all football coaches are legendary, Walsh was legendary for keeping the media at arm's length. Luckily the 49ers' press office was sufficiently impressed by the BBC logo to lower the barrier. They would not guarantee, however, that Mr Walsh would speak to us

banter. They would not guarantee, however, that Mr Walsh would speak to us for longer than half a minute, or indeed speak to us at all. We still would have got the movie without him, because the footballers were good material. The star quarterback Joe Montana was out of action through injury at the time but he was still on the scene. Worshipped by all, he was universally congratulated simply for being alive. 'Way to go, Joe!' Looking rather like Barry Manilow on a quiet day, Montana spoke with similar straightforwardness, assuring me that a positive attitude was better than a negative one and that it was the team that mattered, not the individual. These impeccable sentiments were in no way undercut, of course, by the fact that he earned ten times as much as anyone else in the team. Since they all earned millions, there was no warrant for envy. One of the tight ends – how I would like to have been, or even to have had, a tight end – had a personal collection of aircraft. Not model aircraft: real ones. As I recall it, his name was Scott Clark, or it could have been Clark Scott. He was as tall as Charlton Heston but looked like Tom Selleck. We filmed him climbing into his navy blue Hawker Sea Fury and taking off to do stunts. His girlfriend, who was studying for a Ph.D. in comparative community relations, or perhaps comparative related communities, assured me that Scott, or Clark, favoured a positive attitude over a negative one and believed that it was the team that counted, not the individual. While she was enunciating this principle, her tight-end hero passed low overhead at about five hundred miles an hour upside down, riding in a clap of thunder. After his return to earth he strapped me into a parachute and boosted me into the front seat of his Stearman two-seater biplane trainer. Noisily we gained altitude. All the bay area was there below us. The camera was in another plane and pointing at us when my intrepid pilot turned the plane on its back. All the bay area was there above us. This guy simply loved being upside down. I liked it much less but tried to smile into the slipstream because I knew that the camera was on me.

The level of intelligence among the players was even more startling than the level of wealth. You soon cease to be amazed by squadrons of American athletes all driving Ferraris but when they start talking in epigrams it's hard to get used to, because elsewhere in the English-speaking world it just doesn't happen. Australian cricketers can quite often be funny but they wouldn't send you rushing to write down what they say. One of the defence team (playing in the position of secondary half-back if not half-track) gave me two minutes to camera about knee injuries. You could have put it on television as a fascinating little medical programme all by itself. 'A lot depends on the surface you're playing on. If you're playing on grass and your knee gets hit from the side, your foot will skid. If you're playing on carpet, your foot will stick. The lateral pressure has to go somewhere. If you're lucky it cracks the bone. A bone can heal. A displaced

go somewhere. If you're lucky it cracks the bone. A bone can heal. A displaced muscle might never come back.' His name was something like Brick Loadstone, he was about seven feet tall with a neck the size of my waist, and he could talk like Oscar Wilde. He took us to see the therapy pool. On the way he explained that he was only just back on the team after an injury, and that he was replacing a colleague who had suffered a similar injury. What I hadn't counted on was that the colleague who had suffered injury was also a replacement for a colleague who had suffered injury. Stretched across the bubbling surface of the therapy pool was a whole line of half-tracks the size of Brick. In the reverses on my face I had no trouble looking stunned. There was something frightening about the degree of specialization and duplication. The 49ers had tiny men, barely my size, who could run fast; they had large men who could stop small men; and they had men the size of dump-trucks whose job was to run a single yard at the crucial moment through the massed bodies of the opposing team. There was a man who rose from the bench only to kick goals; there was a man to replace him if he got tired of sitting down; and there was another man to replace the replacement. There was probably a man with two heads whose only job was to count the rest of them. He would have needed a computer. People who could grow a team like that could grow an army. The 49ers' star wide receiver, Jerry Rice, was a multimillionaire. Looking at his magnificent black body as he took a shower, I thought: 'Well, there he is, the white man's nightmare.' It didn't occur to me that he might be the black man's nightmare too, because if equality depended on inborn ability, then it was all a lottery. He was rich, respected and adored because he was a weapon.

The warfare metaphor was my way into a conversation with Bill Walsh. One of the ferrets had unearthed – without benefit of Google, remember – an article about Walsh's interest in the American Civil War. Walsh owned a library of books on the subject. I didn't, but I had read the whole of Shelby Foote's three-volume treatise, which counted as a library in itself. A man of classic military bearing whose alert features gave him a striking resemblance to Admiral Nimitz, Walsh sat behind the rosewood desk of his large office as if he were the CEO of a large company, which was indeed true. With our camera behind me I sat looking at him, and while we were still fiddling with the preliminaries I mentioned how the Civil War generals had dealt with the concept of a war of attrition between two equally balanced forces. Instantly Walsh was off and running. With the camera turning, I got a perfect interview which I wish I could screen as a separate programme even now. Walsh explained why a strong running game was basic to the passing game, because if you were forced to go to the air, instead of choosing to do so, the opposing team would still be too strong in the pass-rush to allow your quarterback his freedom. He even dealt with the

tricky subject of injuries. He said they were bound to happen and that the certainty was reflected in the pay-scale. I asked him whether that idea wasn't ruthless, like saying that Hollywood studio heads got paid so much because one day they were bound to get fired. Walsh said there was a difference between ruthlessness and realism, and that the difference could be expressed by the result. 'A coach who cares too much about keeping the players from getting hurt will never reach the Super Bowl. A coach who cares too little will never even reach the play-offs.' Something like that, but better. Only a few minutes of what he said got into the movie and I can't bear to think of all the rest that didn't. But we included enough to show America's central paradox in a nutshell: the ingenuity and energy it could afford to lavish on what didn't really matter.

That paradox arose in more awkward form when we flew to Playboy Mansion West in Los Angeles to interview Hugh Hefner in situ. It might have been more instructive to interview him in flagrante, even though, in that earlier phase of his dotage, he was sleeping with his 'ladies' only one at a time, instead of, as later, by the bunch. In the course of his career, Hefner had been notable, among his fellow entrepreneurs of soft-core pornography, in having done more than all of them to raise the status of their field to that of a corporate business – and, beyond that, to a Philosophy. When a football coach talked about his 'philosophy' it was usually a matter of how he rationalized, often with daunting articulacy, the necessary balance between physical aggression and mental finesse. But Hefner's Philosophy was meant to be the full, capitalized thing. Over the course of hundreds of monthly issues of his magazine, he had expounded, in his editorial column, a Philosophy of hedonism that took in every pleasure, including his pleasure in printing the latest work of Vladimir Nabokov and Mary McCarthy. (Very few writers, no matter how exalted their names, could resist the sort of money *Playboy* offered: an instructive example of the sheer power of the cash nexus.) But the Hefner Philosophy, multiform in scope though it was, depended on his basic notion of absolute sexual freedom. If you thought, as I thought, that no such thing was possible, the Philosophy was simply bound to fall apart. I thought that Alan Coren had said all that was necessary about Hefner's promotion of sexual freedom: it advertised something that was not for sale. The neat shape of Coren's remark was still in my mind later on when I defined religions as advertising campaigns for a product that does not exist – a crack that is still widely quoted, although not always by people I approve of. Just because I don't like militant believers doesn't mean that I find militant unbelievers palatable. But Hefner's central belief, the motor of his extravagant life, I found impossibly solemn even in its moments of humour. I

have to admit that I arrived on location with this prejudice in mind. The ambience of Hef – everyone, down to the Mexican gardeners, called Hefner ‘Hef’ because this wasn’t just a democracy, it was, to use Hef’s favourite word, a ‘family’ – might have been designed to show me that my prejudice was antiquated.

If that was the aim, it failed. Hef’s feudal estate was indeed teeming with voluptuous young women, but they were vacuous almost without exception, and never more so than when they effervesced, each striving for individualism as they trilled variations on the theme that a positive attitude was better than a negative one. The dining room where free hamburgers were available twenty-four hours a day was indeed impressively populated with Hollywood male notables who had been given the run of the place because they were ‘family’, but it was sadly apparent that most of them were superannuated lechers. The film director Richard Brooks was typical. He hadn’t directed a film in decades, and one of the reasons was that he had been here, chomping the free hamburgers while he eyed the women. He had written *Elmer Gantry*, he had directed *The Brothers Karamazov*, he had married Jean Simmons, and now he was in Hef’s Hamburger Heaven, sizing up the poontang on his way to a final resting place in Hillside Memorial Park. This being America, there was plenty of conversation to be had, and it was all fluent; but, this being Playboy Mansion West, none of it was interesting, except when they talked about something else. All the women saw a future for themselves in the movies and of course none of them had a chance, simply because residence at the mansion was the principal item on their CV. The lucky ones got to be Playmate of the Month, and one of those married Jimmy Connors, but none of them was going to be a film star, not even the innocently pretty Dorothy Stratton, who caught the eye of my friend Peter Bogdanovich. I can’t blame him, but she would have had little chance as an actress even if her jealous ex-boyfriend hadn’t murdered her. Hanging around Hef’s playground was bad training for any serious activity. In days gone by he had worked hard for his first hundred million bucks, but now he was resting, and he wanted everyone else to be resting too. The work ethic was entirely absent. For most of the younger female inhabitants, getting up in the morning was an obstacle course. Under their compulsory ebullience, they were somnolent by nature, with dialogue to match. The veterans, mainly men, had been burned out for years. Some of them had good war stories but they might as well have just handed you the script, and none of them had anything gripping to say about Hef.

There was a good reason for that, as I was about to discover. None of the attendant bores was quite as boring as Hef himself. He gave me a lot of his time, and I have to say he spoke honestly. We filmed for hours and I never caught him

fudging an issue once. I had a key question: if this wasn't commodified sex, what was it? He had the right answer: everyone was a volunteer. But even when he spoke a useful and subversive truth, he had a way of putting it that sent you to sleep. Uniquely among all the American talking heads I ever interviewed, he couldn't say the simplest thing in a way you could remember. You couldn't remember it even while he was saying it. The middle of the sentence had already left the beginning of the sentence lost in the distance, and the end of the sentence was slower to arrive than a school holiday. We were in desperate trouble. This interview with the proprietor was our main event, and it was dead on arrival.

The only way to save the movie was to up the emphasis on the local colour. Hefner's current 'lady' took us to the gymnasium to show us how she stayed in shape by working out. She ran slowly for two minutes on a treadmill. She lifted a couple of tiny barbells. Hefner, in a silk robe, was in attendance to tell us she favoured a 'positive attitood'. Struck by a frightening burst of clairvoyance, I could see our audience falling senseless out of the couch as if their television sets were emitting nerve gas. Thus it was that I dived into the giant outdoor Jacuzzi to join three of the *Playboy* gatefold girls for an en masse interview that yielded almost no verbal information beyond the fact that they were almost as harmless as I was. On top of that, or rather on top of those, they were wearing both halves of their bikinis. One of the three was quite bright, with a sardonic streak. By no coincidence, she came from England. Even she, however, was keen to point out that it was the team that mattered, not the individual. The whole aquatic encounter couldn't have been more anodyne to the ear. To the eye, of course, it looked as if I was offending against the most cherished tenets of a whole swarm of male television critics, paragons dedicated to the defence of civilization against the rising tide of frivolity. I was no longer in business as one of those, but there were plenty of hungry young men who were, and when they saw the finished movie they combined to give it a drubbing. I had spent the whole movie arguing that Hef's dream of sexual liberty was irredeemably childish but here were the pictures to suggest I shared it. The sequence was used as a stick to beat me with for years afterwards. My only defence was that I had thought the whole notion of joining a trio of Hef's glazed inflatable nymphs for a pointless plunge in the bubble-bath to be self-evidently ridiculous. When they saw the programme transmitted, even my family agreed with that. One at a time and in unison. Of all the Postcards we ever shot, this was the one most patently short of material, and we would have been better off scrapping it before it left the editing room. But that option was never open. Too much money had been spent going in, so it was just too bad if I looked stupid on the way out.

I shouldn't give the impression that everything we did happened in Postcard

form. There were other formats asking to be developed. One of them was the star interview special, filmed abroad like a Postcard, but on a far smaller budget. It was a logical development, springing, as developments so often do, from lessons taught by an earlier project that had gone wrong. While at LWT we had done a Postcard programme about the opening of a new resort called Sanctuary Cove, in Queensland. The show had been mostly a dead duck, a condition proved by the only part of it that came alive. Frank Sinatra had flown in for the opening-night concert and I had briefly interviewed him. Access was tricky. It would have been a lot easier to approach Colonel Gaddafi. Sinatra's lawyers checked out every item in a contract an inch thick. There was a clause saying that the red carpet between Sinatra's Portakabin dressing room and the stairs to the back of the stage had to be fastened down with fasteners not more than six inches apart. One of the lawyers got down on his knees with a ruler. My job was to do the public-address announcement just before Sinatra went on. After hours of drafting, I had a brilliantly compressed and poetically cadenced couple of paragraphs ready in which I evoked his stature and significance. Another of the lawyers read my document, handed it back to me, and then handed me a piece of paper. 'Say this,' he said, 'and only this.' There was a single typewritten line. 'Ladies and gentlemen, Frank Sinatra.' (The lawyer was right, incidentally: as I found out much later, a solo performer, if he is introduced by an enthusiast, is robbed of the opportunity to start at his own pace.) But before I said my line I was granted entry to the star's dressing room for an interview which, I was told, would last exactly five minutes. It was a daunting prospect but I asked him the right opening question. 'The words of the songs have always mattered so much to you. Is that why you don't sing many of the songs being written now?' He said, 'Good question,' and he was off. It was the right five minutes and it turned the rest of the movie to dust.

15. FOCUS ON THE NAME

It took us years to realize that this hard lesson presented a new opportunity. If the whole show could be an interview at that level, we wouldn't need anything else. At the BBC we began to put this principle into practice. With only one location, filming could be all over in a couple of days, although the format took a great deal of preparation, so as not to waste the time of the stars with any questions that they couldn't answer, or, more important, wouldn't. Contrary to received media opinion, there is no point in needling celebrities with awkward questions. The adversarial approach hardly ever works, because the subject can see it coming, and switches to automatic defence. With a forbidden topic, an indirect approach is more likely to work, or at any rate look less intrusive when it doesn't. Katharine Hepburn became available for the usual reason – she had a stiff movie to push – and we flew to New York to interview her in her house in the Turtle Bay area of the Upper East Side. It's the kind of district where Stephen Sondheim is your next-door neighbour and all the pedigree dogs hang out at the same deli. We had been told in advance that the two no-go areas were Howard Hughes, who had once loved her, and Spencer Tracy, whom she had never stopped loving. Ruling these two out left us with almost nobody to discuss except Nick Nolte, her co-star in the stiff movie. Even there, there were things I couldn't say. 'Have you noticed his close facial resemblance to the Duchess of York?' It would not have been a good question.

But the question I did ask proved to be the right one. I put it in the form of a statement, which she could take or leave. 'I'm not going to try to draw you on the subject of Howard Hughes, but some people say that falling in love with you was the only sane thing he ever did.' She liked that, and told me some of the story. I was the first ever to find out that when he took off under the bridges of the East River in a seaplane with only one passenger, she was at the controls. 'Did you know how to fly?' 'No, but he told me what to do.' She also told me why Hughes was so defensive. 'Howard was deaf.' Privately I thought that

Hughes had been a particularly noxious freelance fascist, but Hepburn's insistence on his qualities was touching. After that, a direct question about Tracy seemed only natural. 'Tracy had everything, including you. So why did he drink so much?' Her answer – 'Tracy found life difficult' – was the start of something fascinating, a description of how the high living standards of the star system were designed to hold people prisoner. She expatiated without effort on the whole subject of how the declining bargaining power of an actress, due to age, could be offset only by the kind of leverage she was the first to achieve by actually owning the rights to the Broadway version of *The Philadelphia Story*, so that it couldn't be filmed without her. Katharine Hepburn was a very interesting woman. At that stage, the possibility that Marlene Dietrich and Mercedes de Acosta had been among her lovers was not generally known, and I wouldn't have asked her about it anyway. While people are alive, their private life is private if they wish it to be: it's a principle that was already vanishing from the world, but I believed in it, and still believe in it now. The great lady had been generous with her time and thought. We had enough to go on. While we were packing up, she finished making a batch of chocolate brownies and gave me a paper bag full of them to take away, having once again judged her man well. How lucky they all were to have been loved by a woman so brave, brilliant, funny and still beautiful even as the last of her youth melted into time.

Katharine Hepburn was a study in how to age gracefully. Roman Polanski was a study in what not to do when you never want to grow old at all. Still preferring domicile in Paris to the stretch he would have had to serve in jail if he had returned to Los Angeles, Polanski had just brought out an autobiography which stated explicitly that he had indeed had sex with an underage girl, but that it had been consensual. It was interesting that he seemed unable to get his clever head around the concept that if someone is under the age of consent it doesn't matter if she consents or not. But it was much more interesting that this man had directed a string of important films, one of them being *Chinatown*, which I had judged to be a political vision of the modern world. I couldn't help feeling that we were all better off if a man like that was living in comfort near the Avenue Montaigne rather than bouncing off the walls in Chino prison. There was plenty of anecdotal evidence to warrant his billing as the five-foot Pole you wouldn't touch with a ten-foot pole. But his pint-sized frame was packed with talent, and – a rare thing, this – he had a mind to match his gift. (The memorably tragic ending of *Chinatown* was his idea, not the writer's.) We flew to Paris to set up the interview in L'Amis Louis, a tiny bistro much favoured by Warren Beatty, Jack Nicholson and others among that intellectual elite of Hollywood stars who never flew in a commercial airliner and always regarded the menu as an

incitement to order something it did not contain. Interviewing Polanski over lunch was, as I remember, my idea. If it was, I was dead wrong. Always at the least desirable moment, different dishes arrived for hours on end. Polanski was very funny when he showed me how to hold a snail with the tongs provided. I sort of knew, but it was more fun to pretend I didn't. 'Would you like me to eat it for you?' He was directing me. What he couldn't do was follow the movie into the cutting room, where, predictably enough – so why hadn't I predicted it? – the order of our conversation had to be rearranged to make sense. So all the action was rearranged along with the conversation, and we ended up with a sequence of events in which the audience didn't have to be eagle-eyed to notice that the great director and his interviewer had begun a meal with coffee and ended it with snails for dessert.

But Polanski played the awkward question straight. 'I knew you were going to ask that,' he said, and very plausibly argued that if I had seen the girl in her make-up I wouldn't have believed that she was under age either. He rather spoiled things, however, by further contending that all men are switched on by under-age girls. Speaking as one who isn't, and who doesn't like the men who are, I have to say that I found him hard to admire for that. But unless the results were on the public record – which his California case most decidedly was – then his feelings were his business. I felt able to say, though, on air, that I could quite understand how anyone who had seen, as he had seen as a child, his own mother being taken away to be gassed, might be quite likely, in adult life, to be on the lookout for all the love he could get. But the idea that his personality might be entirely determined by his past was not one he seemed ready to entertain. (At this distance, having been subject to the attentions of a few amateur psychologists myself, I am inclined to think he was right.) I didn't think, however, that there could be any doubt that his childhood had affected his creative outlook. I had no idea that Polanski would one day make one of the great films on the subject of the disaster that had formed his vision. Neither had he. But you can be sure that *The Pianist*, a towering achievement for both him and its writer, Ronald Harwood, would never have happened in such a magisterial form if Polanski had stayed put in California to face the music. At best, he would have resumed his interrupted Hollywood career, and the man playing Chopin in the Warsaw ghetto would have been Keanu Reeves. Competent no doubt, but not quite the same thing.

In Paris, even with such a short schedule, there were still a few hours of downtime. Sitting outside my favourite cafe in the Rue de l'Université, where I still write at least part of all my books, I found myself working on the opening chapter of a novel about a young man from Tokyo having his life wrecked by a

wild young woman in London. Perhaps Polanski's story had something to do with that, but really the hero, as usual, was myself. The best way to disguise yourself when creating a fictional hero is not to play down his abilities but to play them up. Give him prodigious abilities and nobody will believe it's you. The hero of *Brrm! Brrm!* (bad choice of title: in America it was called *The Man from Japan*, which didn't help either, but at least people had some idea of what they weren't buying) had prodigious abilities in martial arts, which I definitely have not, although I once chopped a milk bottle in half by accident. A key theme in the book was the role played by sexual desire. The plot turned on the fact that every attractive woman in London wanted the hero. I have no direct knowledge of what that's like, but I do have direct knowledge of what it's like wishing it to be true. I think most men have, and especially when they physically don't look as if they should. One such man was Luciano Pavarotti. In his earlier incarnation he had been built like a footballer and the girls had gone for him. In his later incarnation he was built like a housing development but he was still going for the girls.

This was common knowledge but nobody sane thought less of him. For one thing, the continuing power and beauty of his voice made his amatory pretensions very plausible: intelligent women fall in love through their ears, not through their eyes. For another, he was a charming man. When he appeared on television he converted viewers to opera fans by the thousands, just from the way he sang, and millions more loved him just for the way he spoke. He was especially adorable when his command of English showed its limitations. Broadcast to the world, his personal tribute to my compatriot Dame Joan Sutherland was characteristic. 'Thank you, Joan, from the heart of my bottom.' But there was nothing approximate about his intelligence. Full of stories and self-deprecating wisdom, he made a perfect talk-show guest if you could get him. Getting him, however, took strategy on a military scale. We booked him as a guest on the weekly show by conceding to a set of requirements that made sense only if you saw the question of his bulk from his angle, i.e. from the inside.

Pavarotti happened to be in the UK at the time so he wouldn't be needing a private jet. But he would be needing to get to the studio. A BMW 8 series was specified. (He could get in and out of a 7 series but he thought he didn't look good doing so.) The dressing room would have to be of the stated dimensions at least. (A blueprint of an aircraft hangar was duly appended.) Since he was currently on a diet, no food except fruit would be required for the dressing room, but there would have to be enough for a regiment. (From my own experience of dieting, I recognized the foible by which, restricted to certain foods, one eats

twice as much of them, so as to diet more seriously.) When on set to be interviewed, he would have to be seated behind a table. We tried to get around this last part by making it a glass table but Pavarotti's minders spotted the trick and demanded a table of full opacity, the assumption evidently being that if the bottom half of their client's bulk were to be concealed, the upper half would take on a closer resemblance to Mel Gibson. But when we finally got him into position he was terrific. His fellow guest was the maestro Zubin Mehta, an equally sharp intelligence and fully articulate in English. Mehta did an entertaining job of helping Pavarotti answer questions about the opera business, and I could have listened to them both all night. Judging from the ratings the audience felt the same. This was a long time before Mehta conducted Pavarotti, Placido Domingo and José Carreras in the first Three Tenors concert, so we were in at the start of the whole thing. It was a festival. It would have been an even bigger festival if the star guest had sung something but you couldn't have everything. 'Clivay, I enjoy it various much.' That went down well at home, where my family were mad for the man.

Pavarotti had the invaluable gift of making you believe that he was giving you everything anyway, even when he wasn't displaying the attribute which made him famous. The soul of his art lay in his generosity and he gave you that every time. In a social role, I was actually present at Covent Garden for the Joan Sutherland farewell gala. My younger daughter usually makes a point of having me ritually slain if I drag her into the story, but I forgive myself in advance this time because the story is more about Pavarotti than about her. Justifiably daunted by the very idea of a big starry night out, she had agreed to attend on the understanding that she would see her hero close up after formative years of worshipping him from afar. During the intermission Pavarotti was behind a table in the Crush Bar holding court. I took my daughter over to meet him. He held up his hand for a handshake and she made the shy, nervous young person's response of failing to notice where her own hand was going. It knocked over a glass of red wine into his lap. He had a lot of lap to soak but there was more than enough wine to do the job. At that moment the great man would have had to show only the slightest sign of impatience and he would have destroyed her confidence for ever. But he did more than merely not doing that. He smiled like a happy grand piano and said that in the town where he was born, having wine spilled on you brought good luck. Then he kissed her hand. In what prayers I have left to me, I always make room for him.

Some of the Postcard programmes were taken up by individual American PBS stations but they rarely made it to the network, and the total PBS audience for them would have been only a tiny minority even if they had. Australia, however,

unexpectedly increased the dimensions of our little world. The ABC executive who had devoted his career to keeping my programmes off the air abruptly died, perhaps from exhaustion at the magnitude of what he had achieved. He must have had a warehouse full of our unscreened shows. The man who took over his desk had a different agenda. He put all my programmes on the air at once and I became one of the most familiar faces in Australia practically overnight – a nice study in just how meaningless celebrity status is. The weekly show made a particularly big impression because people like Pavarotti were sitting there talking to the local guy. The Kid from Kogarah was on at Covent Garden! The ABC immediately asked us to come to Sydney and do a series on the spot, with an all-Australian guest-list. At the time it seemed like a good idea even to us, especially when we considered that if we turned it down the new occupant of the desk in question might start emulating his predecessor. So Richard and I flew to Sydney to meet our executive producer, Michael Shrimpton. It was immediately apparent that he was a smart man, and equally immediately apparent that I now had a pair of smart executive producers, which is rarely a profitable duplication. I was lucky that they hit it off, but in other respects the luck showed quick signs of being under strain. Richard got through the welcoming party all right but it was a near-run thing. The ABC boardroom was jammed with executives, many of whom would have quite liked to be in charge of the show, or else, preferably, of a different show without me in it. I think one of them was the dead executive, propped up from behind. He certainly had a fixed smile. Everyone rapidly got smashed on the Chardonnay, a variety of hair oil whose popularity among my countrymen I have never been able to understand. Still on the wagon, I was soon the only person in the room not leaning on someone else. On the boardroom table there were numerous platters of edible refreshment including a magnificent Frog in the Pond, a standard form of festive comestible uniformly provided at any Australian celebratory occasion from a children's party to the opening of Parliament. I had made a serious mistake in not warning Richard of the possible presence of a Frog in the Pond. I should have seen it coming. This was a Frog in the Pond on the grand scale, about ten square feet of green jelly surrounded by scores of chocolate Freddo Frogs with their snouts buried in the verdant slime. Richard had never seen grown men and women in proper clothes pulling chocolate frogs out of a pond of jelly and sucking the green gunk off the frogs' heads before biting the heads clean off. For a moment he looked like a young British officer in India suddenly realizing that his first suttee ceremony was going to be climaxed by a widow being burned alive.

But this Frog in the Pond *de grand luxe* was a sign that the bigwigs of the ABC top echelon were ready to pull every string on our behalf. What they

couldn't do, however, was make the Australian audience tune in to watch Australian guests. Never before had there been an Australian talk show with such a roster. Nowadays, you can get that effect from the solo stars booked by the brilliant Andrew Denton, but in those days it was almost unheard-of to have such people on the air even one at a time, and we had them in bunches. We had Lloyd Rees, the great artist, and Les Murray, the great poet, sitting there next to each other. It should have sent the ratings through the roof, but the reverse happened. Finally the critics, of all people, told me what was going on. They didn't mean to, but all I had to do was read between the lines of some of the most contemptuous notices I have ever had. Their message was: he does his first-rate stuff abroad, and then he comes here to earn a quick bundle by doing second-rate stuff for us. The underlying assumption was not true – we had worked hard on every aspect of the show – but it was indicative. The assumption was that local achievement didn't rate on the international scale, and that I had reduced myself to the status of a local again simply by being present. We were shocked, but Richard, typically thinking faster instead of slower when he was up against it, quietly suggested that we might hoist the ratings if we booked Australia's Own Peter Allen, currently making a concert tour of his homeland. One of those versatile performers whose various talents are held together by nothing but ambition, Allen was famous in Australia for having written and recorded a song called 'I Still Call Australia Home', an anthem which somehow gained extra prestige from the evidence that he did no such thing. But at one stage he had been married to Liza Minnelli and for the Australian press he counted as being Big in Las Vegas, even though the majority of Americans couldn't recognize his face. They were lucky, incidentally, because he was one of the most unpleasant men I have ever met in show business.

After Peter Allen died of Aids it became infra dig to speak ill of him but I am glad to break the rule. In television, at the end of an interview, there is nearly always a bit of homework that the guest, no matter how illustrious, is called upon to do – a few extra angles, a wide shot, etc. – and you can measure their real stature by the grace they show in doing it. The true stars will turn the homework into a little extra show for the studio audience. Robert Mitchum, sitting still for a wide shot, said, 'You forgot to ask me what happened after I left the trailer door open while I was fucking the producer's wife and a dog came in and tried to swallow my balls.' A woman sitting in the fourth row fell into the aisle. Mel Brooks would slip into his Thousand Year Old Man character and tell the studio audience that 'many years ago, many, many millions of years ago, there was very little heavy industry, and the main means of transport was fear.' But some of the lesser stars soon showed you why they weren't any bigger. They

would get impatient and make sure you knew it. Peter Allen was like that. The interview, during which he had been no more interesting than any other cheap hustler with a collection of personal jewellery, was mercifully over, and he had been asked to hold on while we got a wide shot. 'Can't you put that together from what you've got already?' I put my hand over my lapel mike so that the studio audience couldn't hear me and explained to him that no, we couldn't. He writhed, snarled, and finally said, 'Jesus Christ, what am I doing here?' Then he was gone. A long time later, I realized that he was really asking himself what he was doing in Australia, the land he still called home. The answer was that he was robbing the bank.

I suppose I was too, but the money wasn't really all that great. The ABC, perennially strapped for cash, has never been able to fork out the kind of salaries that the commercial channels lavish on male anchor-men with improbably youthful hairstyles who can reliably generate the same air of vigorous portent when presenting a report on a massacre in Rwanda or the story of the baby crocodile in the bishop's bathtub. ('And finally, for more on that baby croc that threatened the bishopric, let's go over to Raylene Trotter. Raylene?') But I had other motives, although I was still in the process of figuring out what they were. The process is incomplete even now, but early on I was groping in the dark. The initial thing that had got me going, however, was fairly clear to me. It was something to do with national pride. I wanted to make it clear that I still possessed it, and I thought I might have less ambiguous means of doing so than marrying Liza Minnelli, although I would have been flattered to be asked. (She was the most marvellous studio guest, by the way, full of funny, self-deprecating stories about celebrity, as its most helpless victims so seldom are.) I was shaken by the way Australia's own arts stars had been regarded as no great event by the very critics who made most fuss about national identity. Had I but known it, this was a foretaste of an argument fated to go on for decades and bear little fruit even yet. Some of my best friends still believe that Australia is being denied its national identity, so I have to be careful when I point out that they were lucky not to have been born in, say, Poland. It was quite evident to me, even back there at the time of the Bicentennial in 1988, that a country which could produce a poet like my old classmate Les Murray wasn't short of a national identity, it was only short of people with a proper estimate of poetry. Nationalism, as a state of mind, is all fervour and no judgement. National pride, however, is a different and better thing. To have counted on it, and found it lacking, was a bad blow. But it might have been my fault. Perhaps I had been too long away, and had missed the moment when the land of my birth had graduated to a state of self-consciousness even more nervous than my own.

16. THROW TO AUSTRALIA

After two hundred years of European settlement, Australia was understandably preoccupied with its own story. There was a momentum going that was hard to buck. The country's most powerful television company, Kerry Packer's Nine network, wanted an enormous Bicentennial programme that would last an entire evening. It would have three anchors. Two of them were Australian household names – Jana Wendt and Ray Martin – and the third, the ring-in, was to be me. All I had to do was say yes to a preliminary tour of inland Australia so that I might sound as if I knew what I was talking about on the big night. The tour was a wise precaution because like most expatriates of my generation I had never been out of my home state before I went to Europe. Travel within Australia was expensive when we were young. Only the rich flew interstate, and usually because they owned the airline. Fast-forward to a new era, in which Richard and I climbed out of aircraft of various sizes all over Australia for two weeks on end, under the leadership of the show's producer. Peter Faiman had directed *Crocodile Dundee* and still owned a large piece of it, which was like having a tap in his kitchen that ran liquid gold. Blessed with the personal cash-flow that enabled him to do anything he wanted, he sincerely wanted to make a TV programme that would help to give Australia a sense of itself, on top of the sense of itself that it had acquired already from sending Paul Hogan abroad to charm the world out of its pants and Linda Koslowski out of her underwear. That sounded good to me and I happily allowed myself to be wound down the shaft of an opal mine in Coober Pedy by the town's Greek mayor in person. Fifty feet above me he shouted, 'Is beautiful?' down the hole. It was beautiful indeed. The opal seams in the walls glowed pink and azure in the torchlight. I was in a bubble of loveliness.

In the flood plains of Kakadu I was in a puddle of danger. Being paddled in a shallow boat through a club-land for crocodiles was nasty enough but a helicopter ride along the escarpment was nastier still, because crocodiles are

reasonable creatures compared with helicopter pilots, none of whom, in my experience, can be trusted. There was a whole generation of them who either pined for the great days in Vietnam or else were ashamed they never went. Making the passenger aware of danger was their mission, as if any passenger in his right mind ever doubted the danger: I mean, just look at a helicopter. If God had meant that thing to fly he would have given it wings. We shaved the escarpment so close that I saw a snake pull its head in. Hence the puddle of fear. Not that I wasn't enchanted by the flood plains on those occasions when I wasn't being shown off to the crocs or flown by a maniac. Kakadu reminded me of the Masai Mara. Here, surely, the African animals would be safe. Couldn't they be flown here two by two in an airlift version of Noah's ark? In years to come I tried the idea out on the PR representatives of several billionaires but I always got the same answer: the quarantine laws would never allow it. The quarantine laws had, however, allowed the importation of the cane toad, which was already, at the time of which we are speaking, taking over the country. The first cane toads had been brought in so that they might eat beetles inimical to sugar cane, but the cane toads quickly proved to be far keener on eating everything else, after poisoning it first. Leopards, I pointed out, wouldn't do that. Nobody listened.

Research had revealed that there was a town in upper South Australia consisting of one house with two people in it. When we arrived by Land Cruiser at the front door, only one of the people was at home. A large, soft woman who looked comfortable to sit in, she told us that her husband had driven to the next town because a pig was going to be killed. Were she and her husband stocking up on meat for winter? 'Nar, he just didn't want to miss the fun.' On the big night there would be an earth station camped in her front yard to watch her celebrate, so I gave her a firework to let off. When I asked her what she and her husband were doing out there – the desert stretched away on all sides until the world curved – she said they liked the simple life. So do I, really, but the world comes crowding in. Anywhere you set yourself up to be alone, a crew will arrive with a satellite uplink and ask you why you're there. Death is the only escape. In that year a lot of the Australian billionaires had died of terminal cash deprivation. One of them had sold all his Sidney Nolan desert landscapes to a gallery in Alice Springs. Off on my own during an hour of downtime, I strode into the tiny gallery, stood on the colourful carpet and bought one of the Nolans straight off the wall: a potentially useful gift for a wife who was starting to notice that I was at home far less often than not. It turned out that the colourful carpet I was standing on was an unrolled totemic painting by Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri. Every mark on it represented something tribally important except

the two footprints in the corner, which represented my size-nine desert boots. I bought it out of embarrassment but it is still in the family, growing in wonder with the years. Listen closely to it and you can hear the music, that delicious throbbing buzz that the great Aboriginal painters somehow get into the paint.

There was more, much more. About three million square miles more. We saw a lot of Australia. But apart from the gallery in Alice Springs, which had not been on the agenda, we saw nothing of the Australian arts, with one conspicuous exception. He was a painter called Pro Hart who was included in the schedule because of his impeccable Australian credentials. Like Crocodile Dundee, he wore a bush hat. Unlike Crocodile Dundee, he did not throw knives. But he did throw paint at the canvas in an uninhibited manner. Sometimes he fired the paint from a gun. Always ready with a few quotable banalities, he had been written up in the *Women's Weekly*: still, in those days, among Australia's most influential periodicals. Faiman and his staff regarded Pro Hart as the essence of democratic free expression. After a demonstration of his irrepressible spontaneity – he created a masterpiece in a matter of minutes, though the results made me wonder why it had taken him so long – Pro Hart was duly signed up for a satellite link on the big night. My suggestion that we ought to be including singers, writers and real painters in our purview fell on deaf ears. Peter Faiman was a nice man and a capable organizer, but he had little knowledge of the arts and cared less. His idea of an important writer was Colleen McCullough. I don't hesitate to record this, because she had the same idea herself. It was agreed that in the programme she would read out a passage from her own prose which was meant to be a hymn to the Australian identity. Back at Faiman's headquarters in Melbourne, before Richard and I left for England, I argued that if we could get Les Murray to write a special poem and read it to the camera at his house in the bush, we could get the whole story about Australia's new international literary status in five minutes. It was promised that this would be considered.

Back in Cambridge I was gratified to discover that I was recognized almost instantly by my family, but they soon noticed that I was further perfecting my trick of disappearing even while I was there. My essay collection *Snakecharmers in Texas* came out and I had to push it in the media. Profile writers skated through the book's themes in jig time before getting down to the business of talking about the supposed tensions of fame. It occurred to very few of them that the press profile *was* one of the tensions of fame. Television interviewers didn't even pretend to be interested in anything beyond television. Even more unsettling, radio interviewers also wanted to talk about nothing beyond television. Increasingly I felt that I would have needed only a flex with a plug to turn into a television set myself. But some of the reviews, although careful to

warn me that my visible presence among the massed breasts of the *Playboy* gatefold girls might possibly have eroded the authority of my opinions on the poetry of Eugenio Montale, were thoughtful enough to convince me that I might still be some kind of writer. This was lucky, because there were several articles due that I had had only a limited time to sketch out while banging around in the outback. On top of those, a vast amount of draft script for the Bicentennial show arrived from Australia via fax, the new world-shrinking machine which, like every technical advance nominally calculated to save labour, actually increased labour by blocking all routes of escape from incoming requirements. The links and speeches that would be expected from me were presented in draft form. Dutifully I set about injecting them with argument, historical background, rhythm, syntax and grammar. Back they went to Australia, only to return immediately with a lot of yellow markings to indicate bits deemed to be either superfluous or too abstruse. Without exception they were the bits that I considered vital. I found myself fighting to save not just phrases, but whole lines of thought. Snatching a Friday lunch with the London literati as a drowning man who had fallen off the back of a liner might snatch at a trailing rope, I bewailed my existence. It was universally concluded that I had asked for it. There was no denying that. Halfway through the main course, a limo driver walked in, tapping his watch. He had come to take me away. Some of the blokes looked sideways. I couldn't have agreed with them more. There is a wonderful sentence in Philip Larkin's poetry that gets the feeling exactly. 'Something is pushing them / To the side of their own lives.' That was the year when we, the men who were Friday, were forcibly reminded that we were lucky to have lives at all. Our beloved Mark Boxer was diagnosed with a brain tumour. The thing was inoperable, and he wasted quickly to death, but there was time to visit him. Martin Amis and Ian McEwan paid calls right up to the last minute. It bothered me, and bothers me still, that I couldn't bring myself to go. There is a possibility that when I was very young I got a permanent overdose of whatever antibody is released into the bloodstream when we lose a loved one. Anyway, that's what I wrote in my letter, which he sent word that he had been glad to receive.

When Richard and I flew back to Australia to do the actual programme, my idea about Les Murray writing us a poem was still being considered, but nobody at command level of the huge show could get past the idea that Colleen McCullough must be a greater writer than Les Murray because everybody had seen *The Thorn Birds*. I suppose there was something to it. Anyway, the amount of airtime given to Colleen McCullough's assurance that only Australia could have given birth to her unique vision made me feel less wretched at having so much of my own prose cut from the script during rehearsals. Visiting my mother

in a spare hour, I warned her that her beloved son would be making only a token appearance. She always had radar for any hint of discontent on my part. Having provided biscuits with the cup of tea, she could tell by the way I bit through a custard cream that I was 'in strife', but really that was too brave a term. There is such a thing as a level at which you can't compete. Besides, all the anchors, including even the mighty Ray Martin – justly revered for his ageless hair arrangement and his mastery of the uniquely Australian media attribute which might be defined as sparkling social concern – had to be cut to the bone to make room for the 'throws' from which the marathon running order was largely assembled. At this point I should explain what a 'throw' is. Look away if you already know. If you do, you probably work in Australian television. Nobody else cares, but everyone in Australian television persists in the belief that a throw is the most exciting thing that can happen on screen, the essential technical trick that defines the medium.

In the throw, the studio anchor hands over to the roving reporter on the spot, saying something like, 'And now, to give us a close-up of how the Prime Minister feels about these new allegations, let's go back to Mike Treadwell at Kirribilli House. Mike?' At which point, Mike says something like, 'Well, Ray, the Prime Minister hasn't come out of the house all morning but I gathered from the milkman earlier on that the general atmosphere in there is pretty subdued, pretty gloomy, pretty depressed.' In a more elaborate version of the throw, the person who has been thrown to does not throw back to the studio at the completion of his spiel. Instead, he throws to someone else who is also out on location, perhaps standing in front of a stretch of ocean which yesterday had been lashed by a freak storm. 'It might look calm here now, Ray, but yesterday it was a seething cauldron that spelt deadly danger to Steve Hewitt and his visually impaired brother-in-law Hugh Stewart. Yes, this is where two men and a dog met their fate.' As the reporter turns to look at the stretch of ocean where nothing is happening except water behaving normally, we go back to Ray in the studio. 'And we've just heard that those two men are still weak from exposure but ready to be interviewed. We'll be going to them later. But for now, the dog is with me in the studio. Bluey, how did it feel when . . .' Multiply that whole rigmarole by a hundred and you will have some idea of the pace, structure and lexical ambition of the achievement in which I was now involved. The gigantic, hideously expensive, technically epoch-making and potentially identity-creating Bicentennial TV spectacular consisted almost entirely of throws. We threw to Kakadu, to Kalgoorlie, to Wagga Wagga, to Woop Woop. We threw to a hut in the Antarctic where three huddling meteorologists assured their watching countrymen that their indomitable Australian spirit was proof against snow, ice

and the inability to view *Neighbours* on the day of transmission. There was meant to be a satellite dish parked somewhere near Uluru so that a nationally famous television correspondent – every reporter out in the field was more recognizable to the Australian viewing public than Her Majesty the Queen – could expatiate on the mood of the Aboriginals, this mood being detectable mainly by telepathy through the walls of dwellings from which the indigenous people, understandably cheesed off by the idea of celebrating two centuries of white domination, sensibly declined to emerge. The satellite dish was mounted on a truck, the truck had fallen sideways off the road, and the dish was damaged. The correspondent was there anyway so that he could report on the condition of the dish. ‘I’m afraid it’s out of action, Ray.’

At this point I looked at Jana Wendt – never a hard task – and could tell she was thinking exactly what I was thinking. Well informed and highly cultivated, Jana is one of those beautiful women who become even more beautiful when they concentrate, and right then she was concentrating hard on the mystery of how, while not having heard from a single person of imaginative achievement in any field, we had managed to throw to every ephemeral television personality in Australia in order to be told, in most cases, next to nothing. Watching the monitors with a growing sense of dread as one fatuous episode after another swam into view, I was unable to exclude myself from the category of well-known faces with nothing to contribute. My last remaining mini-monologue, the one about Australia in war, had been reduced to a paragraph in order to make more room for Colleen McCullough’s gruff assurances that Australia’s barren interior landscapes had somehow got into the rhythm of her prose. Well, that was believable, but why were we listening to her when we could have been listening to Joan Sutherland telling Jana about the richly sophisticated Australian musical background that had launched her on her flag-carrying international career? What was Jana doing there, she who had interviewed every prominent creative figure in Australia and was now allowed to mention none of them? And what was I doing there, saying nothing, when saying things is the only thing I know how to do? The lady in the desert let off her sparkler. That had been my idea, and the only one to have reached the screen intact. Otherwise, there was nothing of mine on view except my grimly eager face. Eventually, after several different kinds of eternity – there was a short speech from Prime Minister Bob Hawke that was a killing reminder of how a boring speaker needs only two minutes to evoke the concept of geological time – the thing was over. Respectful of my hosts, who had paid me well, I was careful never to be drawn on what I thought of the show. But now that a full twenty years have gone by I think I can risk saying that I was less than proud of having been in it. If we Australians

couldn't do better than that then we had an identity crisis indeed, but not of the kind that the intelligentsia was complaining about. Australia's creative and scientific life was teeming with specific voices, but what was missing was the general voice to place them in context. The general voice is the historic voice, and in Australia historic voices were in thin supply, despite the fact – or perhaps because of the fact – that the whole of world history could be viewed as having taken place precisely in order to bring about a society so prosperous, multicultural, egalitarian and politically well equipped to deal with even its most intractable anomalies.

Still, there is no free country that doesn't churn out trivia, and it might even be possible that the liberal democracies – of which Australia is among the most advanced examples – are fated never to reach a true estimation of their own stature. To do that, they would have to be fully aware of what it is like not to be free, and it is hard to reach such a harsh awareness without being born and brought up in a country that isn't free at all. To that extent, a liberal democracy is dreamland. Most of the people engaged in public argument have no real idea of what it might be like to be officially persecuted for holding an opinion, instead of being merely vilified by those whose opinion is to the contrary. As a student of history, I had at least some idea, and was able to keep my head when I was attacked for being a monarchist. Knowing that there had been a day when you could have your head cut off for being anything else, I was able to be grateful that I had only paper darts to dodge, instead of the axe. The matter had already come to a point before I went out to Australia to make the Bicentennial programme, because Prince Charles's staff had roped me in as one of his Australian advisers on the matter of whether his Bicentennial speech, to be delivered in Sydney, should mention the Aboriginals. The Foreign Office, with what I thought to be typical stupidity, had advised him to make no mention of the subject. I advised him to mention it. I doubt if I was alone in this. I imagine Barry Humphries, to name only one other Australian with his name in the papers, advised the same thing, and Germaine Greer certainly would have. (Charles loved Germaine: shyly aware that he could be a bit of a stick-in-the-mud, he was switched on by her coruscating fire.) But among Charles's numerous virtues is a knack for making you feel that he is listening to you as an individual, and not just as the representative of a group. I met him and liked him. More than that, I admired him: I thought he handled his difficulties well. As yet it had not become apparent just how difficult his marriage was going to get. It was easy to be blind on the matter because the Princess of Wales was so attractive that it was hard to imagine, on slight acquaintance, how any male with red blood would not want to follow her around like a puppy. I met her when I

went down to Cannes to host a black-tie dinner for Sir Alec Guinness. Charles and Diana were both there, and afterwards Diana came swerving through the crowd to park her radiant face in front of mine. (I mean her face was radiant: mine was just a face, no doubt looking more than usually sheepish.) ‘I do think it’s awful,’ she said, ‘what you do to those Japanese people in your programme.’ Even if she had called them Chinese, I still would have been enslaved. Perhaps a bell of warning should have rung. It should have been clear to me that she could do this to anyone in trousers.

But she was doing it to me, and I was immediately on her team. In mitigation, I can say that she and Charles still had, or appeared to have, a team going too, and it still looked as if their team were playing for Britain at world-championship level. On that basis, I thought that the future for the monarchy looked secure for a couple of generations at least. But even with a less promising couple waiting in the wings, I would have been in favour of the monarchy anyway, because of my conviction that the United Kingdom – and, by extension, my homeland – benefited from having a head of state from a family which had no interests beyond preserving its own continuity. Charles was going to be that head of state one day; he had few disqualifications beyond an excess of thoughtfulness and concern; and I was for him. It was an opinion shared, tacitly at least, by a great majority of the British people, but there were penalties to be paid for endorsing it. At some awards ceremony or other, when I followed Charles to the microphone and complimented him on what he had just said – he had indeed said it well, but he seldom gets high marks for doing that, especially from professional commentators who would say it worse – Auberon Waugh was in the audience and immediately decided, doubtless prompted by a gift for mind-reading, that I was a raw colonial truckling for honours. He went into print with this opinion as often as possible and included me on his list of Australians who should be sent home. Bron (everyone called him that, even his victims) either didn’t see the historical irony involved in recommending that a miscreant should be forcibly transported from England to Australia, or else he did, and promoted the idea in order to further his reputation for outrage. He was a fluent, original and funny journalist but the shadow of his great father Evelyn might have frozen him into a mental condition of self-contempt by which he thought it didn’t matter what he said because it was only him saying it. Certainly he was not one of those journalists who, lacking the means to make reasonable opinions interesting, must resort to unreasonable opinions in order to get the reader’s attention. He was more talented than that, so it must have been from some reservoir of anger that he wrote articles attacking the author rather than the work. My friend Lorna Sage – dead before her time, alas – suffered for years from his

calumnies. It could be said that she should have known how to defend herself in print, but there was no prospect of self-defence for the British and Australian prisoners of war who had suffered so cruelly in Japanese hands during World War II. Bron said, in cold print, that their sufferings had been exaggerated, and that the survivors, and the families of the dead, had been making capital out of stoking the memory of an event that had been largely the creation of Allied propaganda. As the son of an imprisoned soldier I found it hard to forgive Bron for that. But after his death I met one of his charming children and realized that he couldn't have been all bad, if he had brought up his progeny so well: the failings of Evelyn Waugh as a father had not been echoed by the son, possibly because the painful memory was so acute. Anyway, to harbour a literary grudge is time wasted. Your opponent isn't going to kill you, because he isn't allowed to. He can write all the denunciations he likes and you will suffer nothing except the strain of raised hackles. In a society without laws he needs to write only a single denunciation, and you are a gone goose. Literary figures who question the value of a free society should try to spend some time in one that isn't, in their imaginations if not in reality.

17. SHANGHAI EXPRESS

In Shanghai we spent only two weeks, which wasn't enough. But it was a start. An ancient Chinese curse runs: 'May you live in interesting times.' June 1989 proved to be more interesting than even the Chinese leaders had bargained for. In Beijing, Tiananmen Square filled up with protestors, often billed in the Western media as students. The same sort of people filled the Bund in Shanghai and it was clear that they weren't all students. Everyone who could read and write was out on parade. Had we been a news crew, we could have filmed nothing else all day. But we had a carefully prepared movie to make, so we knocked off the sequences one by one. We went to the circus and watched incredible feats of skill until our senses were numbed. How many people in silk pyjamas can stand on the head of the person below? The number is astonishingly high, but not as astonishing as the shape of the head of the guy at the bottom. Either he had been born with a cranium like a foot locker or, more likely, he acquired it under pressure. A fixed smile went with his flat skull but he seemed happy to be interviewed, although he would probably have seemed equally happy if we had set fire to his toes. We went to the opera and watched men pretending to be women pulling faces while other people of various sexes and sizes turned midair sideways somersaults to the rhythm of garbage-tin lids being struck with sticks. Our numbed senses were benumbed all over again. A man behind me in the crowded theatre blew his nose onto the floor in the standard Chinese manner and I lifted my feet so that the river of snot could slide by unimpeded. The river of snot wasn't all his: a couple of hundred guys had contributed to it. As I sat there with my knees around my ears, I reflected that the commentary for this programme would be no cinch. A whole society was being shaken to its foundations in the streets outside and here we were, stuck with this stuff. Even when the topic had a bit more heft, there was a limit to the extent we could explore it. A woman at the music school told me what it had been like to be included in a representative sample when the Gang of Four sent people of

suspiciously elevated accomplishments (the policy was called Three Famous, Three High) off to the fields to have their hands ruined and their pride broken. ('They would lecture us all the time. That was the worst part.') But she wasn't allowed to say that it was all Mao's idea. Nobody was allowed to say that. We talked to a young man called Yi Bin who had managed to assemble a small collection of ancient ceramic fragments and who had published a paper about them. He kept all his collection at one end of his parents' bedroom, on shelves around 'my little bed'. The bedroom was divided by a thin curtain. The thin curtain looked heavier to me than any iron curtain I had ever heard of. Yes, I knew what I would say when I got home: but there was small prospect of saying any of it on the spot, or even of setting up a scene that might imply it. The spooks were watching, or else listening to someone who reported to them, perhaps the guy that drove your van. They didn't have to watch or listen very closely because everyone else knew they were watching or listening. This was a society that was censoring itself. Except, of course, for the demonstrators.

Every night we were in Shanghai, the crowd on the Bund grew bigger. Since the whole mile-long sweep of road was already jam-packed the first time we saw it, growing bigger was a hard thing for the crowd to do, but somehow yet more people were always managing to fit themselves in between the people who were already shoulder to shoulder. Many of the banners were decorated with little bottles. Our interpreter – a nice girl who dressed up to the nines Western style, with an expensive pair of imported shoes – explained that the little bottles were a pun on the name of Deng Xiao Ping. My remaining hair stood on end when she told me that, and I told her to be careful what else she told me. But in her quiet way she was high on a sense of adventure like everybody else: whatever their age and walk of life, the people in the streets were ecstatic. Many of them thought our film camera was a news television camera and they struggled towards it to deliver their message, which was mainly about freedom. They thought I was a reporter. One of them thought I was Winston Churchill. Even if our footage was not impounded, it would be an age before it got to London, so there was no news value in any of it. Nevertheless I thought myself quite the ace. Some of my friends had a knack for getting into the historical action. (Saddam Hussein, when he dived into his last funk-hole, was lucky not to find Christopher Hitchens already down there holding a notebook.) This was my moment in the crucible of destiny. I was as high as a kite from Weifang in Shandong province, where the best kites come from.

Euphoria crashed when the manager of our hotel told us what would happen next. He was a Dutchman. Like everything else in the hotel except the service staff, he was imported. The hotel was the Shanghai Hilton. It was a modern

building that had been dropped into the decaying city like a shining probe from space, complete with its own water-recycling system. Even the food was flown in from Hong Kong. (These were still the days when the last place you could safely eat a Chinese meal was China.) The standard of service in the hotel was fabulous. When I opened the door of my suite, there were always a couple of young ladies in black pyjamas crouched outside ready to rush in and change the flowers, the toilet rolls, the wallpaper. They called me, in their language, One Fat Important Man, and equipped me with a tiny cup of red wax and a jade seal (called a chop) on which the name was carved in Chinese characters. They also joined in the task, gladly shared by every local we met including senior members of the Communist Party, of teaching me quite a lot of the Mandarin dialect: a very pretty way of speaking Chinese, as opposed to the Cantonese dialect, which is impossible to mimic unless you have the vocal equipment of a dying dog. Today, if you're asking, my Mandarin vocabulary has shrunk to the words for thank you, goodbye and One Fat Important Man, but for a while there, surrounded by these glowing sylphs as they corrected my grammar while rebuilding my room, I had visions of myself conversing fluently in their musical tongue. Alas, it never happened, but they behaved as if it was already happening. They were world-class flatterers, that bunch, and no doubt they went on to help organize the Olympics in 2008. But in 1989 all this Eastern-Western luxury was definitely a message from the far future. In the present, the manager told me, the demonstrations could end only one way. In Beijing, he said, Tiananmen Square would be cleared by force, and then everyone in Shanghai would go home. 'There, they will kill a few people. Maybe not here.' I was reluctant to believe that there would be a crack-down. But then the eerily lacklustre Li Peng appeared on television and started to speak. An hour later he was still speaking, even though he hadn't said anything except that the counter-revolutionaries, if they did not disperse, would be suppressed by force. Next day, in Tiananmen Square, they were, and everyone in Shanghai did indeed go home. The Bund emptied in a matter of minutes.

We went home too, on the last plane before Shanghai airport closed. At the time, I would have said that nothing could ever break the monolithic grip of the Chinese Communist Party, and in fact, even now, nothing yet has. But the Shanghai Hilton had already started to change the country. It just never occurred to me that the hotel we were staying in was the real story. Blind to the implications, I felt that our only course was to make the best possible movie out of what we had, and I was all too conscious of the subjects we had been unable to explore, for fear of getting innocent people into trouble. We had met a wonderful young woman who ran a small theatre company. I can't be more specific than that even now, just in case some sharp security officer gets the urge

specific man that even now, just in case some sharp security officer gets the urge to track her down and re-educate her. (If you think it unlikely that someone could be punished for what they might have said out of turn twenty years ago, you have a very rosy view of how a police state works: the spooks are never off the case, and they have nothing else to do.) When I was safely back in England I got a letter from her saying that she was in despair for her country and wanted to leave. I was all set to send her a reply and an air ticket when a Chinese refugee I knew said: don't. 'They' might conceivably have not read her letter on its way out, but they would certainly read any reply on its way in. I managed some direct help for exactly one person out of a billion. Our amateur archaeologist Yi Bin got a scholarship to London and he defected when he arrived. My family made a friend of him and I wrote the occasional reference. In return he gave me a set of Chinese classical poetry anthologies which are still on my shelves, closed books that I will never now learn to read.

And that was it. Apart, of course, from the movie, which turned out to be a crowd-pleaser. There was plenty of comedy as One Fat Important Man rode around on his bicycle, its tyres dutifully bursting when the scene required. And there was the resolutely cheerful yet infinitely sad face of the music teacher, back from such a living hell under the Gang of Four that she thought the China of 1989 a miracle of liberalism. Beyond help, beyond hope, her tired eyes were a reminder that pity was useless: and she would have been the first to say that she was the lucky one, when so many of her friends had died of heartbreak, pounded into despair by Madame Mao's insane vision of the future of mankind. And behind Madame Mao had been the old man himself, now long dead but still preserved in his full corporeal splendour inside the mausoleum that occupies the centre of the same square where that lone student faced down a tank, immortalizing himself in a stretch of footage which has since been screened a million times everywhere in the world except China. The significance of that last fact didn't become fully evident until somebody invented the World Wide Web. The Chinese leaders had kept the pictures out because they were scared of the possible effect. It followed that if the day arrived when they could not keep the pictures out, they would have to modify their behaviour. They still do everything they can, however, to slow the pictures down: the Web routes into China are more closely guarded than the Great Wall ever was. As of this writing, the Great Helmsman's shining corpse is still the touchstone of authority for each new batch of gerontocrats preaching modernization. Until they melt that waxwork down for candles, you can't trust them for a thing.

Being a good Samaritan is a calling for some, and truly they shall see God; but I have always been too selfish with my time. There are occasions, though, when keeping yourself to yourself will shrink the space that you are trying to protect

keeping yourself to yourself will shrink the space that you are trying to protect. As the weekly show's satellite interview slot became more flexible, we got into Russia, where the system, agitated by the benign example of Gorbachev, was breaking up with increasing speed. A stocky young journalist called Vitaly Vitaliev became our regular correspondent from Moscow, and quickly earned the love of the British and Australian public. Vitaly's English was pretty good but it never modified the inexhaustibly abundant personality that so many Russians bring to the task of celebrating victory in war, or the birth of a new baby, or just a new day. He always looked and sounded as if he drank vodka for water. He could throw an arm around you from three time zones away. From a clapped-out Moscow TV studio still decorated to match Stalin's personal warmth, Vitaly grunted, chortled and gurgled the story of what was really going on. It was better than anything on the news. After the Chernobyl disaster he walked into the area without a protective suit and still came out glowing with energy, although by rights he should have been glowing with radioactivity and lying on a stretcher. It seemed remarkable how much he was able to say, but it soon turned out that the new freedom of speech under glasnost had its limits. The KGB was phoning him in the night, and in their fine old style they reserved their most obscene threatening calls for his wife and little son. Vitaly was hard to scare, but anyone can be scared by a threat to his family, and the day arrived when he felt it prudent to do a runner. When he came to us in Cambridge on the weekends he was a huge hit with both our daughters. He made 'avuncular' sound like a Russian word, but then, he did the same for every word in the English language. His accent was so catching that even I caught myself wishing him Myerry Chryistmas. Like the refugee dissidents of the old regime, however, those who fled the new one were bound to encounter employment problems. For a while Vitaly was in demand by the BBC and the upmarket press for his opinions on the new dispensation in Russia, but it soon emerged that his opinions did not suit. Nobody knew what he was on about when he said the next big thing in his homeland would be gangsterism, not democracy. He would be proved dead right in the course of time, but for now he was thought to be a bit of a crank, and he soon decided that his chances might be better in Australia. At this point my celebrity status came in handy for once, because I was able to get him fast-tracked through the immigration process. My recommendation read like science fiction but it was all true. Off he went to the future, from which we were later saddened to hear that he had started another family along with another life. It often happens that way: when the pressure that a couple faced together relaxes, it turns out that they were never quite as together as they thought.

Since the majority of divorces are instigated by wives rather than husbands, a man with feminist sympathies – I count myself as one such. despite my

Neanderthal instincts – is bound to take a liberal view of the subject, and try to believe that the liberating effects often outweigh the destructive ones. By that time, a lot of the people I had known when I was young were moving into their second marriage, leaving the first in ruins. From a philosopher's viewpoint, this could only be a welcome development in the propagation of human rights. But I couldn't help noticing that my own children cared little for a philosopher's opinion. What they wanted was reassurance from their father that they were living in a proper house and not a bouncy castle. Divorce was getting so fashionable that it wasn't a surprise even when Charles and Diana showed public signs that all was not well. Young people couldn't be blamed for wondering if their parents might not catch the fashion too. I did my best to sound like a man who would always come home no matter what, but it's not an idea that can be very convincingly projected from a distance, and all too often I was away. Being away when I had to be away was perhaps forgivable, but being away when I didn't have to felt like treason even to me. I had become so caught up with learning to read Japanese, however, that I would stop off in Tokyo even if I was flying home from Valparaiso. In a Jin Bo Cho coffee shop I would sit down with my latest batch of second-hand books about the Pacific war and transcribe characters until my eyes bled. Why was it so hard, and how would I ever get anywhere unless I gave it everything?

Somewhere about then, I was having my portrait painted by a prodigiously gifted young artist called Sarah Raphael, daughter of the writer Frederic Raphael, who was of an age with me, which meant that Sarah was not all that much older than my elder daughter. I had seen Sarah's first exhibition and written a piece in which I said that for her to be called Sarah Raphael didn't quite meet the case: she ought to be called Sarah L. da Vinci. She liked the joke and offered to paint my portrait as a reward. After a long taxi ride I arrived at her far-flung studio to discover that she was good-looking far beyond the job description. She had all the intelligence and wit of her famous father, but they were contained, if he will forgive me, in a more disarming package. Married, with a couple of children of her own, she was pushed for time if she was going to get any work done, but I soon learned to value every visit. I hoped the portrait would take forever, like Penelope's tapestry or the tale-telling of Scheherazade. My admiration was apparent but she sweetly put up with it. She'd had plenty of practice. Quite apart from her suitably handsome young husband, her admirers were countless: William Boyd, Terry Jones, Tom Conti, Daniel Day-Lewis, the list went on and on, all of them helplessly, hopelessly dotting on her beauty and genius. That last word was, for once, not excessive. Clearly she was going to be

a great painter. She was well aware of this – the great always know they are, because they are never unaware that their gift comes from heaven – but she could be charmingly apprehensive about the burden of her duty. ‘You really think I’m quite *good*, don’t you?’ I did indeed, but I loved her for the question.

Stewing in the turmoil of a Platonic vision was made easier by the fact that my family loved her too. My wife owns more pictures by Sarah than I do, including the portrait of me, which I have to ask permission to look at. When, a few years later, my elder daughter, after taking a Ph.D. in molecular biology, turned from science to painting, she made it clear that Sarah’s towering example was one of the reasons. Sarah brought out the best in everyone who knew her. Her father and I had been literary enemies before I met her – the quarrel had been my fault, not his – but when I became a proponent of her work he forgave me my sins. For me, apart from the intoxication of her delightful company, the example of her dedication to her art was a constant lesson in how to focus every tension of your life into a single task and make something of it. She suffered terribly from migraines but she found a way of working even through the pain. When one of her daughters needed eye surgery she would put down her brush, take the patient off to hospital for a harrowing day and pick up the brush again when she got back. She valued everything that happened to her because eventually it would go into her work. Time had improved me anyway: when I was at home, I was of more use around the house. But Sarah’s example made me happier about pulling at least part of my weight in a domestic context when there was no camera present to watch me doing so. When my younger daughter and I set off every Saturday morning to do the weekend shopping – a ritual expedition that we still pursue today – I felt blessed, and doubly blessed because it gave my wife a vital extra hour at the computer to nail some crucial point in Dante’s *Monarchia*. No wonder she and Sarah adored each other: they were of the same stamp.

Playing the stalwart might have been easier if I had always been on the spot, but even if my temperament had allowed that, my trade seldom did. From that angle, a new format called the End of the Year Show had the merit of pinning me to the ground for the three months it took to write. The weekly show had always been a taxing job to script, to such an extent that a professional had finally been brought in to help me. His name was Colin Bostock-Smith and he was an inspired appointment on Richard’s part, because he wasn’t only a fountain of skilled gags, he had a practical sense that kept me to schedule. An awareness of timing, in the show-business sense of putting words in the right order, and an awareness of time, in the horological sense of little hands advancing around the clock’s face, are two things that very rarely go together in

the one personality. Bostock, as I immediately took to calling him, could do both. In addition, he was hilarious company, and we both looked forward so much to being locked away together in my inner office that some of the women in the outer office started to wonder if we weren't getting our rocks off in there – the snorts and giggles sounded like a bath-house bacchanal. I never met a man who entertained me more. More important, what we wrote together entertained the public. I still took the responsibility for the script. My power of veto was unquestioned, and if something unsuitable had threatened to get into the script I had the authority to keep it out. But it was an authority I never needed to use because Bostock's taste was impeccable, like his ear: working together, we created a complete grammar for putting words to images that is still, today, in such wide use throughout the industry that it is taken for granted, and although modesty dictates that I should disclaim my share in its invention, duty demands that I credit Bostock with his painstaking ingenuity. It was meticulous work, but in short order we were motoring at such a rate that Richard started wondering whether we might not need a bigger format to soak up all the scintillation. Hence the idea for an annual round-up was born. The show would be broadcast on New Year's Eve, ending as Big Ben struck twelve. It would be built around all the news footage that we could rake in and suitably misrepresent. Computers could already do a lot but they couldn't yet sort images. If you wanted to choose the right (i.e. wrong) moments from the recent history of Ronald Reagan, you had to collect miles of footage and look at it in real time. Elementary calculation revealed that it would take at least nine months to process the footage and the actual writing would have to start in September. Entrusted with the mission of framing every prominent villain, buffoon or misguided celebrity, a whole team of ferrets was assigned to tracking down the last potentially usable frame of such natural stars as our old friend Yasmin Arafat. That mission, though huge, had a clear aim. Another aim was less clear, but potentially just as rewarding. If Bostock and I could build a sufficiently portentous context, a perfectly banal statement from one of our gallery of the questionably famous could yield rich results. We wrote a test link about the ending of the Cold War, speculated as to the identity of the single historical voice that had brought this desirable termination about, and followed up the paragraph with some footage of the deeply beige Australian pop star Jason Donovan declaring that there would be less war if people stopped hating each other. The results were uncanny. But the idea was very hard to research, because the ferrets would have to see, in an incongruous historical context, the possible resonance of statements that otherwise meant next to nothing. Statements or actions: any footage of Ronald Reagan walking through a doorway, or just picking up a glass of water, might be

the start of something: so fill out the forms and get hold of it. We expected such prodigies of endeavour from the researchers that it was sometimes easy to forget they were a bunch of kids. Their den-mother, who I shall call Jean Twoshoes for purposes of respect, was a whiz at digging stuff up and getting the permissions, but she had a tendency to witter on. Richard made a gag out of looking at his watch while she wittered, and it made her witter worse. But she could do the business and I loved her for it. An excess of zeal is exactly what you want from a researcher: too great a sense of proportion and they come up short.

Months before it went to air, the first New Year show felt right, and I even got home on the weekends, radiating the contentment of a balanced life. Or I would have done, except there was always a new Postcard to be prepared for early the year after. It had been noticed that my lack of ability to drive a car could sometimes be a limitation when we were filming me getting about in a foreign capital. Riding on the subway system looked OK in Tokyo or Paris – in either city, only an idiot drives – but it would be a problem if we ever went to Los Angeles, which obviously we would one day have to do. How to find time to have driving lessons was the question. I had always had a theoretical interest in cars – provided I don't have to fix it, there is almost no form of technology that doesn't fascinate me, garbage-disposal units included – but for some reason I had never learned to drive. Probably the reason was a sound professional instinct: a writer might possibly read at the wheel, but if he did much writing at the wheel there would be a crash. From the practical viewpoint of filming, however, the inability to drive was a severe handicap. How to eliminate it?

18. WHEELS AT SPEED

The obvious answer was to buckle the learning period into the subject matter of a show. The chance to do this came when someone proposed a Postcard programme called *Clive James Racing Driver*. The Adelaide Grand Prix had invited my participation in the Celebrity Saloon Car Challenge race, one of the sideshow races to the main F1 event. The Adelaide organizers had been inspired by the knowledge of F1 that I had demonstrated when narrating the annual FOCA (Formula One Constructors' Association) video round-up for Bernie Ecclestone, who more or less owned the whole GP circus. Richard, who had known Bernie since he was only a millionaire, had rowed me in on the narration job before Bernie had a chance to find out that I couldn't drive a golf cart. But I must have talked a good game. The Adelaide people clearly had no clue. Without bothering to disabuse them, we worked out a format where I would qualify for my road licence in England at the start of the programme so that I could move straight on to the racing-driver school in Adelaide, there to learn track technique along with the other celebrities, who had all been driving ordinary cars on the road ever since they were teenagers. It would be a good joke to watch me learning what they learned, provided I didn't kill myself or anyone else when we zoomed around the speed bowl. But before I did any zooming in Adelaide, I would have to learn to drive an ordinary car in England, and the question arose of how we could make my driving lessons visually entertaining. Who would do the teaching? Richard, searching further into his contact bag, came up with the answer: Stirling Moss.

I thought this a brilliant idea until Stirling came shouldering into the office and said, 'How in God's name did you get this old without learning to drive a car?' He was one of those intensely confident men who, slightly shorter than average, are always the tallest person in the room, so that you find yourself looking up to them with your head bowed. I was only partly lying when I told him it had all been his fault. When I was at Sydney University in the late 1950s

Stirling had come out to New South Wales for a one-off non-championship Grand Prix. The local media contracted its usual case of severe backwater fever and turned the event into the biggest story since Frank Sinatra had been blacked by the Australian trade unions after referring to the women of the local press as a pack of hookers. Suddenly it was social death not to have an international racing driver as a dinner guest, with the suave Stirling as the top catch. At fashionable tables he would tell tales of the Mille Miglia, the great race in which, at the wheel of the Mercedes 300SLR racing sports car, he had *averaged* a hundred miles an hour over a thousand miles of ordinary Italian roads. The society ladies had no idea of what he was talking about but they could smell the heady cocktail of fame and danger and they leaned towards him like falling flowers. On the big day, the entire stratum of Sydney high fashion decamped to the circuit as if it had been Royal Randwick. With the side-panels of his car removed so that he could cope with the heat, Stirling won the race in such an heroic fashion that I resolved on the spot never to bother with doing badly what he could do so well. Also, I reminded him, he had cynically capitalized on his glory to get off with the University's leading beauty of the time, who had proved tenaciously resistant to my poems but had given herself to him five minutes after she smelled the petrol on his breath. 'You mean Veronica Minestrozzi? What a cracker. I did the whole race semi-conscious.' He gracious in his dominance, I flattering in my respect, two blokes had bonded. A rapport had been formed, which came in handy when I proved to be an unusually inept pupil.

Luckily he was an excellent teacher. Experts rarely are, but Stirling was one of those people who enjoy the discipline of putting hard-won knowledge into terse form. With a cameraman, a sound man and a lighting man all crammed into the back of our Mini, Stirling came up with one line after another that we could put straight to air. I don't even have to refer to the finished film: I can remember everything he said. 'When you come to a turn, get your changing down done first. Keep the clutch out and do all your braking in a straight line. Then let in the clutch and you're already accelerating into the turn.' It was just like Bill Walsh talking about blitzing the quarterback. I love that kind of talk and even today I still store it up whenever I hear it, because it all applies to the making of art: the economy of means, the concentration of effort, the exploitation of momentum. Stirling would have laughed at my suggestion that he was a natural philosopher, but he was. (At the time of writing, he still is: whenever there is a big crisis in F1, the press go to him for his opinion: he's the Old Man.)

When I took my test, the examiner was rather startled by my velocity from point to point and told me he would have failed me if I had hit anything, but I didn't, so now I had a road licence. Our next move was to the old racing circuit

at Donington, where Stirling got me started on a bit of speed. Nissan was in on the deal and provided a nice little number that really went. Stirling was in the passenger seat and was telling me not to overdo it at the very moment that I overdid it. We went off the track at about ninety and spun on the grass for some time. The camera got a shot of Stirling's profile while he was in the very act of remembering the spin at Goodwood which had ended his racing career. Although his bones were successfully put back together he came out of the hospital with double vision: not bad enough to keep him off the road, but no more racing. He had nearly died that time and clearly thought that this time might finish the job. When the car came to a halt in a cloud of steam I started apologizing and am still apologizing today whenever I see him. But he agreed to show up at the racing school in Adelaide to give me a few final tips before I went for my certificate of elementary competence.

In Adelaide all the celebrities congregated at the old speed bowl to get their first taste of the real thing. Flameproof overalls, visored helmets and thin-soled driving shoes led to a lot of posing before we even got into the cars. I particularly liked my driving shoes and took to wearing them to breakfast at the hotel. The retired World Champion James Hunt caught me at it and sent me up. 'Breaking them in, are we?' I liked Hunt, but my fondness could have had something to do with the fact that he was no longer in control of his life. We are usually relieved when somebody with great abilities loses the thread: it does something to lower the standard by which we are asked to live. Hunt had been a wonderful driver but never truly dedicated, and now, in the twilight of his career, when he was picking up small change by hanging around the circuits and decorating the set, the knack for dissipation which had led him astray in the first place was visibly trying to finish him off. One of the airlines had banned him for pissing in the aisle. His fans applauded this action as an example of his supposedly maverick nature, but it was more likely that he had just let go because the toilets were occupied. Anyway, even in the wreckage of his glory he still had his authority as a genuine champion, and I kept the memory of how he mocked my shoe-modelling moment as a reminder that posturing seldom goes unpunished. They were great shoes, though. I've still got them somewhere, at the back of a cupboard.

The cars, too, looked quite serious in their numbers and decals, and when the engines fired the atmosphere got all charged up with the cheap rhetoric of derring-do. Actually the cars, Nissans again, weren't as fast as they sounded. The Pulsar model can be dauntingly quick on a public road after it has been stolen by your daughter's bad choice of boyfriend, but for this occasion, on the batch of Pulsars assigned to us, the taps had been screwed down even further

than the exhausts had been opened up, so that the cars would sound like the crack of doom while going quite slowly. But they would still cruise on the ton, and when you went into the long banked asphalt turns of the bowl you had to keep the car balanced or it would bounce off the outside wall and come back across the track at just the right angle to T-bone one or two of your fellow students. Stirling's instructions about straight-line braking proved useful. Having been taught from the start to do it right, I didn't know how to do it wrong, while some of the celebs who had been driving on the road their whole lives were suddenly all over the place. Fiercely competitive in this as in everything, I was proud of keeping up, but I also, uncharacteristically, kept a sense of proportion: it was clear that Rowan Atkinson, for example, could really do this kind of thing. In civilian life he had a collection of Aston-Martins and had made a point of learning to drive even heavy goods vehicles to a professional standard. (Has there ever been, in all of history, any other headline comedian with an HGV licence?) The racing instructors didn't have much to teach him as he flew around without a squeak or squeal: nothing spectacular, just smooth precision. As in a ski class, I made a point of watching only the best students when I wasn't watching the instructor himself. The instructors were all veterans of the old-time speedway when the cars went sideways through the dirt corners, and I was a bit awed by their tips on how to ride the brakes: it was an offence against the gospel according to Stirling, but I thought they must know something. After all, they were still alive, and some of them must have chased gangsters with the Keystone Kops. When Stirling dropped out of the sky and climbed in beside me, he was horrified by my new bad habits and chewed me out right in front of the camera. 'Christ, who taught you this? Are you trying to kill me *again*?'

I slept badly that night and when it came to race day the Grand Prix circuit looked awesomely twisted, with hard concrete edges and a main straight long enough for a Boeing 747 to get airborne. I made a mess of qualifying, partly because I couldn't make my mind up about the brakes but mainly because, let's face it, nearly everyone else was faster than me except the marathon runner Deke Castella. The gauntly laconic Deke could do quite well on foot over a distance of twenty-six miles or so but he hadn't done much more driving than I had. Up at the front of the grid were people like Rowan and at least one of the insanely aggressive Australian cricketers the Chappel brothers. After you name-checked your way through a couple of dozen people who were all celebrated for baring their capped teeth on national television you got down to the dregs at the end, and finally to me and Deke. It felt good to leave him standing when we all took off. For several laps I wasn't bad through the turns and I had learned Stirling's trick of relaxing on the long straight when the car is going flat out. ('The engine

is doing all the work, dear boy, not you. So that's when you take it easy for a bit.') The little Pulsar was barely doing a hundred knots but it felt like contour-flying in a jet fighter as the concrete wall raced by only a few feet away. When a bunch of cars are all going at full chat in the straight they seem, relative to each other, to be floating like jellyfish, and there's the clue to what you should do: nothing. Let the car do it. Adjust your helmet with both hands if you want to. The car will steer itself, the speed holding the wheels nice and straight. At the same point, the F1 drivers, when they were racing tomorrow, would be doing a lot more than double the speed but they would all be peeling their vision-strips, wriggling their gloves to get more comfortable, writing letters home, etc. I was doing a bit of the old casual devil-may-care attitude myself when unexpectedly Deke's car appeared out of my blind spot and floated past me.

That wasn't supposed to be happening and I was mightily cheesed off. After the usual frenzied braking at the end of the straight he dived into the blind right-hander well ahead of me at what seemed an inadvisable speed. It was. A few hundred yards further around and I discovered his car in the middle of the track, facing the wrong way and emitting steam. He had rammed both walls in succession and shortened his car by several feet at each end. Luckily the bit that he was sitting in was a strong cage, but everything else was crumpled up. As I went skating by, now assured of not coming last, I had visible cause to remember that a stunt race like this one was no joke. In the inaugural event the year before, Mark Knopfler of Dire Straits had banged himself up badly enough for the rest of the band to gang up on him and ban him from racing, lest he put a crimp in their earning power, which was larger than that of most small countries but would not remain so if the star turn had to play the guitar with his teeth. In my race, now mercifully winding to an end, a few other cars slowed themselves down by hitting something or each other and I went past them too, gaining the places that the timid earn when the bold get wrecked. Our cameras were there to see me finish, ingloriously but safely. Actually we didn't need the footage. The Australian TV channels covered the whole event and pictures of me at the wheel had gone out all over Australia, to remarkable effect. Nobody was impressed and the women were particularly indifferent. Except, of course, for my mother, watching the race in Sydney. She passed out cold from fright while the cars were still revving on the grid.

Even the most well-behaved woman can lose her head when she meets a proper driver, but not when his car is no more powerful than her lawnmower. It isn't judicious competence that switches on a sensible female's baser instincts: it's the taste of danger. The apparently glib expression 'only the brave deserve the fair' is validated by an underlying truth. Danger evokes the reality of death,

and when death is in the room women of otherwise impeccable decorum can be visited by a sudden urge to reproduce the human race. (In more recent times, after the World Trade Centre collapsed, firemen found themselves being approached by women out of the social pages of *Vogue*.) I went to Adelaide several times in those years, but unless I have lost count, that was the year when Ayrton Senna won the heart of Elle McPherson. Hero of Brazil and messenger of the gods, Senna was so impressive he didn't need to say anything. Elle was a well-brought up girl and not easily carried away, but those are the very women who decide to go briefly crazy when they run into a man whose overalls smell of high-octane petrol and carry a certified written guarantee that he will plunge for their sake into the gullet of oblivion. Elle followed Ayrton all the way to São Paulo while every other heterosexual man in the world gritted his teeth like a missed gear-change. Even the other F1 drivers were ropeable on the subject, although without exception they were accompanied by at least one fashion-plate girlfriend at all times except when actually driving. When they drove, they were alone, which was, of course, part of the attraction. Given a whiff of that magnificent solitude, women with astronomical IQs revert to the thought processes of a butterfly: impregnate me *now*. The whole F1 atmosphere is as sexy as hell despite the fact that almost nobody understands the technical details. The standard of engineering is always way ahead of the current state of missile technology but the basic deal is as elemental as chariot racing. Once you get interested in the mechanical aspect as well, the GP circus can be hard to leave alone, and some surprisingly eminent civilians become dedicated petrol-heads.

One of them was George Harrison. At Adelaide I saw him trying to be inconspicuous in the depths of the McLaren pit. Some upmarket rubbernecks with pit passes – the platinum card form of accreditation – swarmed around him and asked for an autograph. Turning them down, he fascinated me with his answer. 'It's Thursday.' What a perfect ploy! It gave them the idea that he would have fulfilled their request had it been any other day in the week, but that today was sacrosanct, like Ramadan. Always the most thoughtful Beatle, Harrison was a canny operator and I was glad to have his acquaintanceship, however fleeting. Back in England, he read in some press profile that I was teaching myself to juggle. I never got very good at it, but I got past the elementary stage of juggling three balls in a circle and had moved up to four. It takes patience because you continually have to chase the balls you drop, and they all have an insatiable desire to roll under the couch. The answer to this is to train with soft balls that stick where they land. (Readers who are working on their own double entendres at this point are advised to give up: all the jokes had already been cracked by the time Chaucer saw his first juggler, Dickon Dawkins, who also did a show-

stopping trick with two starved voles and a pullet down his tights.) Typically, George Harrison had guessed my problem and sent me a set of luxury leather soft juggling balls that flew like real ones but didn't roll an inch when they fell. He also got in touch to ask me whether I would consider playing a gangster in one of his movies. His production arm, Handmade Films, was one of the British film industry's rare success stories, largely because of his perseverance and judgement. (*Withnail and I*, *Mona Lisa*, *Time Bandits*, *Privates on Parade*, *The Long Good Friday* and *Monty Python's Life of Brian* are just some of the films that would probably have never existed without Harrison's nose for a project.) Bob Hoskins had the gangster market wrapped up, but for just that reason he had created a vacancy, because he wasn't always available, even though he sprinted from one set to the next like a Bollywood soprano. Harrison pointed out that from certain angles I looked roughly like Hoskins: bald, thick-necked, patently libidinous. I pointed out that I couldn't act and Harrison said: 'I know that, but your head's the right shape.' He also said something about how millions of people associated my face with merriment, which would make the switch more effective when I dealt with rebellious lieutenants by issuing instructions that they be incorporated into the cement foundations of a building project.

Suddenly I could see it all: me in the back of a black limo, pressing the button to lower the window and smiling in a sinister manner at someone on the outside while threatening him with grievous bodily harm. A bit of the old grievous. I could hear myself saying it. I would have said yes like a shot if an actual role was coming up, but it never did. If it had, I probably would have been unable to do it, because of TV commitments. That was the downside of doing TV season by season: it locked you into vast blocks of time in which you couldn't do anything else. Later on, Jane Campion, the brilliant film director from New Zealand, wanted me to play a fast-talking Australian lawyer in her movie *Holy Smoke*. The part would have required two weeks in the Queensland rainforest with Kate Winslet. It was bad enough having to pass on an invitation from the Princeton Institute of Advanced Studies to lecture about Primo Levi, a gig that would have done a lot to make me feel that I was still, from the literary viewpoint, in the swim. But Kate Winslet in the rainforest! I had to turn it down and I still haven't got over it. In the course of time I interviewed Kate Winslet in the studio – she was, I need hardly note, utterly unspoiled, articulate and enchanting – and when saying goodbye to her afterwards I told her how close she had come to spending two weeks in the rainforest with me. She smiled nicely but there was something in her eyes that spelt gratitude. For those who make a living in show business, regret for what almost happened can be the second most dangerous emotion after envy, and it's a safe rule that if you can't

get your disappointments in perspective you will never last. In retrospect I think I have been not too bad at resigning myself to the chances missed. But I would like to have proved to that divinely talented creature that I, too, had a gift for acting, just as I would like to have proved to Ayrton Senna that I was hell on wheels. To do the latter, of course, I would also have had to develop my latent capacity for science, in order to distil an elixir of life that would have made me a few decades younger and a lot braver.

But I really loved it, being behind the wheel of a fast car. I hadn't been back in England long, however, before I proved to myself and all concerned that I had no business being behind the wheel of an ordinary car on a public road. Ordinary cars didn't come more ordinary than ours. By that time we had upgraded from a Mini to a Golf, which, though bigger, was possibly even less impressive in its surge of acceleration. Even my wife, who by nature favours the secure over the spectacular, sometimes wondered aloud whether the Golf had been the right purchase. We would all get into it, wonder why it wasn't going, and then find out, by close observation of the surrounding scenery, that it was. But with me at the controls the Golf became a weapon whose potential lethality was plain to all but the driver. The moment of truth came when I drove my elder daughter to Oxford for the new term. Passing through Milton Keynes, I drove twice around the wrong roundabout while my daughter made muted noises of apprehension. Kindly she waited until we had arrived at New College and unloaded her stuff – as always, I was good for lifting weights under female supervision – before she started reciting a list of all the times that I had nearly got us wiped out along with the numerous innocent civilians who were lucky to be going home in one piece. Shaken, I decided then and there to quit domestic driving on ordinary roads. I would save it for the screen. The whole family voted their assent with such unanimous alacrity that I felt I had no right even to be cast down. I have never driven on an ordinary road again, except when making a movie, which is a different world, where the budget pays for the damage and you are effectively preceded by a man with a red flag.

That being said, my new ability to make a car go roughly where I pointed it proved crucial when we made *Postcard from Miami*. At the time, the American police series *Miami Vice* was a big hit on British television, so our high-level executives were naturally keen to establish a thematic connection for promotional purposes. By that stage Richard's insistence that I attend a gymnasium twice a week had begun to pay off, and it didn't seem entirely implausible that I should be visiting Miami in order to pick up tips on a possible career as a fashion-conscious cop. I would have to be a fashion-conscious cop in a very ordinary blue suit, but at least I was roughly the right shape. My

appearance was further enhanced by my reclining position at the wheel of a Ferrari Testarossa sports car, hired for two weeks at a heartrending fee. The *Miami Vice* stars, Philip Michael Thomas and Don Johnson, were always tooling around in glamorous vehicles and I would do the same, thus to blend into the atmosphere of rehabbed Art Deco hotels, fresh-from-the-carton Architectonica skyscrapers, white beaches, blue water and the scribbled dribble of neon on balmy nights. The benefits of having a proper international road licence were now apparent. Without one, I would have been feebly hailing taxis. In the Ferrari, I looked independent. I even looked dashing. The Ferrari dashed at only a fraction of its potential because I didn't know how to get it out of second gear, but since it would do fifty in first there was plenty of speed to play with if I ever needed it. I did my best not to need it. Buses honked at me, impatient to get by. With the red-headed classic engine emitting a frustrated version of its characteristic coffee-grinder scream, I proceeded at the pace of a steam roller. But in my dark glasses and low-slung bright red car I looked the part while we shot miles of coverage to establish me as mobile in Miami and ready for action: lean, mean, dangerous and perhaps a little stupid.

The Ferrari footage was the link material for various episodes, which fell roughly into two categories: dead serious and utter nonsense. It was nonsense when a huge ex-Marine taught me to load and fire a .45 automatic. It was serious when I interviewed an ex-CIA agent who had been firing a .45 automatic for most of her life. An elegant blonde built along the lines of Christy Turlington, she could have stepped out of the annual Swimsuit issue of *Sports Illustrated*. But she would have still been with the Agency if the PR arm of a Colombian drug cartel hadn't blown her cover. Now she earned her living by writing books and teaching people like me to waterski, something she could do at championship level. The desire to show off to her, coupled with my usual urge to dare all for the camera, had an astonishing result. Most first-timers don't stand up on the skis within the first hour, but there I was, upright at the first attempt and skimming along the blue water beside the white wake of the speedboat from which she, bikini-clad, waved back to me in encouragement, and, I thought, admiration. Off to one side, our camera in another speedboat was getting the shot. It was a moment of triumph and it received its due reward. After my skis got crossed, there was a somersault of large radius that ensured the unyielding water would receive my descending behind at precisely the right angle to inflict a sea-water injection of stunning power. Shafted, I was hauled aboard. 'Not many people do that on their first day,' she said. 'Congratulations.' I smiled back, as a man will smile who has just been sodomized by a speeding pillar of salt.

She gave me a revealing interview, though. It was all about drugs, illegal immigrants, Latin American politics and everything else that Washington was spending billions on failing to cope with. She didn't say that last part but it was obvious that the whole thing was out of control. Off camera, I caught her speaking beautiful Spanish and asked her whether she had learned it as a child. Not at all: she had learned it in adulthood, with a self-devised programme of discipline by which she had set out to memorize the words for all the parts of the body in the first week, and then all the colours and seasons in the second week, and so on. I was abashed, and took the tip. From then on I was much more systematic about learning complete sets of words. (Left, right, ahead, behind, up, down: it's an essential early set to learn in any language.) She was lovely, my secret agent, and she was very bright: a tremendous human asset which America was rich enough to waste.

It was amazing, the wealth of gifted people they had on hand. There was a young customs narc who looked like Steve McQueen. He too was careful not to say that the war on drugs was long lost, but he didn't have to say it. He took me out on a fast boat. Fast meant really fast: with two engines bigger than the one in my Ferrari, it could catch the Cigarette boats that ran the drugs into Miami by night. On our day out, he just trailed a big gin palace into the river mouth while he told us why it was worth a search. 'See that guy at the back who's checking gear? It doesn't need checking. He's checking us.' As so often with the Americans, this was dialogue you could put straight to air. We filmed the narcs as they swarmed all over the target boat and came up with nothing. The day before, they had busted another boat with about ten million dollars' worth of cocaine stashed in its air-conditioning system. ('Don't worry. If this boat had been dirty we wouldn't have let you film it anyway. It would have screwed the case.') With so much powder being picked up, the inevitable inference was that many times as much was getting through, on its way to reducing a few thousand mothers' daughters to snivelling wrecks. It wasn't a war, it was a process, and the most you could do was to dress the process up to make it look reasonably good for the forces of virtue. That, essentially, was what a show like *Miami Vice* was all about: it gave a pastel tone to stark horror. Real drugs do ugly things to people but on television the actors playing the cops make it all look cute.

Looking cute was Don Johnson's cross. With me in the Ferrari and the crew in the van, we called on him one day when he had some downtime between jumping cutely out of a car with a gun in his hand and rolling cutely on the special grass that would not stain his pastel-blue jacket. His African-American partner, Philip Michael Thomas, was invisible in the trailer, waiting for the day, which then seemed impossibly far off, when a brother would become President

of the United States. But Don Johnson was available and generously ready to play along. (The ruthless rule is: a big enough star will give you his time for free but the one who calls for his agent is the one you don't want anyway.) Don Johnson was, and still is, a disciplined performer with the full American song-and-dance background, but he already knew all too well that he had the part because he looked so good in lipgloss. I could go on for ages about the harsh laws of an actor's life, but the quickest way of saying it is that while most of them get nowhere, those who get somewhere seldom get what they want. Don Johnson was a seriously accomplished actor and after he got off the pretty treadmill of *Miami Vice* he made at least two movies to prove it. In the reasonably successful *Guilty as Sin* he was very believable as the too-handsome villain and in the almost unknown *The Hot Spot* he was even better as the lawyer ready to kill for Jennifer Connolly. (Though it could be said that Gandhi would have been ready to do the same, Johnson made it subtle.) But he never got out from under his television image. It can be done: it started with Steve McQueen, James Garner and Clint Eastwood, and more recently George Clooney is a powerful example of the TV star graduating to big-screen hero. But on the whole, success on American TV is a straitjacket. Don Johnson's straitjacket was beautifully cut – nobody ever looked better in pastel poplin, light tan chinos and Gucci loafers with no socks – but he was a prisoner. Later in his career he came to the West End to play Nathan Detroit in *Guys & Dolls* and the London critics, who uniformly panned the production, were nevertheless astonished that he could sing. But of course he could. He could always do all that stuff, and instead he had spent his best years jumping in and out of cars and shouting, 'Go! Go! Go!' His example gave me a lot to think about. Somehow, although my working life was theoretically a version of paradise, I was forever planning my escape, like a citizen of Havana.

The biggest story in Miami was the Cubans. Though this was a political theme of such complexity that it could hardly be unravelled in passing, my producer Beatrice Ballard nicely succumbed to my demand that we trawl for vox pops in Calle Ocho, still officially called 8th Street but by now populated exclusively with people speaking Spanish. Calle Ocho was the main stem for all the Cubans who had transferred themselves from the workers' paradise of Castro's imagination to the opportunistic inferno of America's brutal capitalist reality. Her instinct, however, proved right. Among the one and a half million Cubans who had survived the trip by crowded boat, open raft or rubber inner tube, there were too many head-cases with well-rehearsed stories who would hog the camera even if you pointed it away from them. As if the Bay of Pigs disaster had never happened, they spoke loudly and continuously of secret missions to go

home in fully armed glory, an eventuality for which they trained in the Everglades by practising unarmed-combat routines against alligators while fire-bombing small areas of swamp with Molotov cocktails. The best way to handle the Cuban-exile story was to interview Gloria Estefan, which we did. A mainstream chart-topper as well as being by far the most popular singer in the Spanish world, she had a smart mind to go with her talent, and – rarer still, this – good manners to go with the smart mind. She couldn't have been more cooperative, but the best part of the story came by implication, just from the setting. We arrived by boat to visit her at home. She was living on a little island with an entry fee of many millions: a community gated by open water. 'I'm hardly ever here,' she told me, 'but when I'm out on the road it's nice to know that I've got this to come home to.' She waved sweetly at an acre of emerald lawn. The only conclusion to draw was that if you were content to play music for the Buena Vista Social Club and eat meat once a month, then Cuba was for you, but if you wanted to be a star singer on a world scale, then you had to go to Miami. The whole of Central America was heading for Miami. That was the story.

America's magnetic attraction for the disadvantaged of the region remained a hard story to tell because of the assumption among intelligent people everywhere that America had caused the disadvantages. This assumption was largely a false one. Mexico, for example, wasn't poor because America was rich; Mexico was poor because an endless succession of permanently revolutionary governments could waste any amount of American credit while pursuing employment policies which ensured the migration across the Rio Grande of every worker with the ability to swim or even wade. But the assumption kept on being reborn because among the intelligentsia of any free country the idea lingered tenaciously that the established order under which they themselves flourished was essentially a fraud. There had been a time when I had parroted such opinions myself even though not really believing them, so I was familiar with the mechanism by which one can profess a set of beliefs while harbouring contrary desires. This anomaly is prevalent in the field of show business, and especially prevalent in the theatre, where histrionic abilities are plentifully available to facilitate the cover-up. A radical playwright who accepts a knighthood after a lifetime of vilifying every aspect of the society that made him rich will look indignant if accused of hypocrisy, and his admirers will soon learn to go easy on the mockery if they wish to keep his favour. Among the admirers will be almost all the actors, who are scarcely likely, of their own free will, to get on the wrong side of someone who might write them a part. The almost complete absence of objections to his acceptance of an honour will soon strike the playwright as unanimous approval,

and any inner conflict is quickly put to rest.

19. IT WOULD BE AN HONOUR

I like to think that there was no inner conflict in my own case, when I was offered membership in the Order of Australia in 1992. The decoration is conferred by the Australian government. Mine, however was to be pinned on me by the Queen at Buckingham Palace. This invitation was bound to confirm me as an irredeemable Establishment figure in the eyes of the Australian media commentariat, but I didn't mind. By their standards I was already an irredeemable Establishment figure, so why fight it? I would have turned the gong down if my family had objected but they were already buying new hats. And my mother was pleased. Back there in Kogarah she was in the process of being moved into a nursing home on a permanent basis but she had more than enough energy still on tap to convey her approval. Always among her chief fears was that I would not be able to earn a living, and here was a new accreditation that might help get me a proper job. There was a certain amount of raucous comment from my Friday lunch cronies about the honour having been conferred for Services to Television rather than Services to Literature, but I could put up with that.

Harder to put up with was the fancy dress. I looked stout in the morning suit but the effect might have been alleviated if there had been no top hat. There was a top hat. It looked no more appropriate on me than it had looked on Hitler when he called on Hindenburg. The women in my family, who could give the effect of a trio of Furies even at the best of times, fought laughter as they took turns being photographed with the paterfamilias in the forecourt of the palace. Luckily, once we got inside, they were led away to join the audience of massed relatives while I was briefed, along with a bunch of other recipients, by Black Briefs in Waiting, Master of the Rigmarole. He was admirably succinct. It was the clearest set of rules I have ever had explained to me about anything. One advanced to meet the Queen. The Queen would hang the medal on the hook in one's lapel. The Queen might ask a question while doing so. Answer it. But when she extended her

hand, the audience was over. Shake the hand and walk away backwards. Try to extend the acquaintance and you would be hauled off with a hook.

I would like to say that it all went wrong because that would make a better story. But it went like clockwork, which, I suppose, is what's wrong with it. Why lavish so much protocol on something so trivial? But the answer is in the question. It's trivial for her, who has to do it thousands of times a year, and it's trivial for us, who must live for other satisfactions or else be sorely disappointed. But it's not trivial in itself: or rather, the triviality has weight. It stands in as a comparatively benign substitute for all the corruption that might be unleashed if people did their duties for no rewards except those of palpable substance. The great critic and thoroughgoing bastard Cyril Connolly always thought that he was being amusing when he told the story of how he had expected the Queen to know something about what he did for a living when she gave him a medal. But he was mistaken in two different ways at once. The Queen couldn't be expected to keep up with literary criticism, so there was nothing funny there. And if Connolly wanted his listeners to laugh because his expectations had been ridiculous, he must have been very confident that they were interested in what he felt: there was nothing funny there either. On the other hand, literary criticism had been honoured, in the same way that keeping a neat and honest set of housing-transfer certificates gets honoured when a civil servant receives an OBE for thirty years of service. The protocol is the prize. It's a tradition, and has the advantage of not having been invented yesterday. (Some of the British traditions, including most of the coronation ceremony, were indeed invented yesterday, but they were concocted out of scraps left over from the past.)

I was getting my award at just the right time in my own history. Very slowly, too slowly, I had been graduating out of contempt for the inherited order's injustices to gratitude that it was not more unjust. Object to the inherited social structure by all means, but object in detail, and always in the knowledge that an enforced wholesale alteration would be unlikely to ameliorate the condition of those you claim to speak for, and very likely to make it immeasurably worse. That, briefly, had been the story of the twentieth century, by then nearing its unlamented end. My increasing knowledge of recent history, which I never ceased to study even when out on the trail of tinsel glory, has been doing its work, along with the mere fact of growing older, and so less confident in my ability to change the world all by myself. Both for Britain and Australia, the constitutional order looked worth preserving, the Royal family included: the Royal Family whatever its limitations. (The Queen still knows next to nothing about literary criticism.) Unbroken even by the moment of death, the permanent existence of a monarch sets a limit to ambition. If I bend my knee to the

monarch, I don't have to bend the knee to anyone else. This knowledge would come in handy if I were ever to meet Rupert Murdoch, who would dearly like to rearrange the established order so that he could have a say in who would hold the office of head of state. He is a baron, and in my homeland there are many barons like him. At Runnymede, the great charter, by putting the monarchy beyond contest, limited the power of the barons in perpetuity, to the inestimable benefit of the common people. Barons are ambitious men. As an ambitious man myself, I know something about what goes on in their heads. They want the world. The wisest of them learn to temper their wish, but the wish is basic.

Perhaps I should explain, at this point, that it was the constitutional function of the Royal Family that attracted me, and not its personnel. In the mercifully brief time when I was occasionally bumping into them – almost always it was at an awards ceremony in which my function was either to present an award or to look brave when I lost – I liked my Royals bright, which cut the field right down. There were many commentators who thought that the Princess of Wales was no brighter than a forty-watt bulb that tinkled when you shook it, but I couldn't agree. I hadn't met her again since our first encounter in Cannes, because the distance between her and Charles had steadily grown to the point where, if you saw him, you never saw her: it was like matter and antimatter. My romantic view of the assured succession took a bit of a bashing on the several occasions when my wife and I invited Charles to dinner and he turned up alone. When he invited us to dinner at Sandringham, he was alone there too. By then even I could hear the hooter announcing that there was trouble at the mill. But though I was pleased and flattered to see the Prince occasionally, and admired his thoughtful concern, I had plenty of intelligent men among my friends, and some of them outranked him, unless you were put off by the fact that none of them would be King one day. I also knew more than my fair share of bright and beautiful women, but none of them outranked Diana for fascination. It wasn't just because of her position, either. She would have been the centre of the action even if she worked behind an airline check-in desk, an effect that could not be ascribed merely to her beauty. The picture of her standing in front of me in Cannes had never left my mind, but it was partly because of the accompanying soundtrack: in two minutes she had convinced me that I was a clever chap, she had enrolled me in a conspiracy to despise Robert Maxwell – looming like a rotting whale elsewhere in the crowded room, he seemed unaware that she had drilled him with a glance – and she had scattered showering sparks of conversational delight. Clearly in love with the whole idea of off-trail chat, she had evinced the rare knack of persuading her interlocutor that he – in this case me – was a necessary voice in her private campaign to stir things up. One of the things that her lovely eyes shone with was clear. It didn't occur to me then that

things that her lovely eyes shone with was glee. It didn't occur to me then that her taste for mischief could have been akin to madness, but I would have been up for more of the same even if it had. She had only been working the room, but not even Jackie Kennedy in her heyday at the White House had worked a room leaving such a trail of charmed lives.

Diana had an even bigger room to work at Buckingham Palace one night. It was somebody's birthday, I forget whose. It could have been Charles's birthday, but it might have been the Queen Mother's: she had hundreds of them. Anyway, all the royals of Europe were there, along with the regulation sprinkling of media celebrities. They had the fame factor of Elton John at the very least, however, so I don't think I was there on that ticket. Perhaps I had been invited because I was bald, and Charles, whose hair was merely growing thin, wanted a few reminders around him that a man could lose the lot and yet retain the will to live. The sheer extent of the shindig I won't try to evoke. If you can imagine St Pancras Station crammed with a cast painted by Alma Tadema and wired for sound, you're getting near it. Sufficient to say that after too much champagne I needed to take a slash and headed for one of the royal men's rooms, which was a second cousin of the Garrick club's dining room and had a line of solid marble urinals stretching for the length of a cricket pitch. Such was the traffic that every urinal was occupied except one. I took up my position to strain the potatoes and was lucky to get most of the job done before I glanced sideways in each direction and finally noticed that I was the only man present who was not a crowned head of Europe. After I washed my hands I was passed a towel by a flunky who must have been a television fan, because he gave me the appreciative smile that he had just withheld from the King of Norway. But equally clearly he was wondering how I had got in.

Back outside in the teeming ball-room, the field of gravity had been altered by the arrival of Diana *en grande tenue*. You could see immediately why she was bound to have, vis-à-vis the standard Royal set-up, the same effect as the invention of the jet engine on the history of powered flight. Suddenly all the putatively glamorous aristocrats looked ordinary. When it was my turn to chat her up, I was doltish enough to say 'Care to dance?' She said no. Already a dead man, I found it easy to take my life in my hands. 'So can I take you to lunch instead?' She said yes, give me a buzz.

It was as easy as that. Explaining my rationale to the women in my family in advance, I said that as a writer I had to know things. At least one of my listeners rolled her eyes towards the ceiling like a judge hearing from a lifetime burglar that he was a student of objets d'art, but there was no veto. Perhaps the sheer incongruity of the project had wrapped me in a mantle of seriousness, as when a

man who proposes to ski down the Eiger blindfolded while reciting the 'Immortality Ode' is interviewed on *Newsnight Review* instead of being locked up for observation. My first lunch date with the Princess happened at a Notting Hill Gate restaurant called Kensington Place, one of her standard hang-outs. She was on time to the minute. (In this and every other respect, her manners were perfect: at the end of any lunch her credit card had always to be beaten from her hand, and her bread-and-butter thank-you notes, to anyone for anything, arrived next day and were always more than a page long.) I got cast immediately in the role of funny uncle and had a wonderful time making her laugh. Too few years later, after her untimely death, I said my piece about Diana, and eventually it was published in my book *Even As We Speak*. If I can be permitted the luxury of a cross-reference to one of my own books, anyone interested can find in its pages most of what I am competent to say about her, and after that book was published I never spoke of the subject again until now. But the reader of a book of memoirs has a right to hear, at the appropriate chronological point, anything that the author can legitimately say about his own history, so I should say this much now. I loved her dearly, even though I hardly knew her.

Though I was always apt to think a beautiful woman intelligent until the facts proved otherwise, which they quite often did, I didn't dote on the Princess just for her physical attraction, which was far out of my age-range, and anyway not that remarkable: as someone who had to deal with people like Helen Hunt and Charlotte Rampling for a living, I knew what physical perfection looked like, and Diana didn't have it. For one thing, her nose was on sideways. But what she did have was lit up like Christmas, from an inner fire that was really the fire of curiosity. She was interested in everything. It was as if she had had not just a deprived childhood, in a household where she was groomed for a dynastic marriage by neurotics whose own ideas of conjugal union might have been derived from a horse-breeding manual, but a childhood without any intellectual stimulus whatsoever, like Kaspar Hauser, the savage infant. Released into the world, she was voracious for news about what accomplished people did. She was interested in accomplished artists, accomplished doctors, accomplished coal miners. This worshipping curiosity, coupled with a wicked knack for reflecting a man's ideal self back to him, made her intoxicatingly flattering as a companion. I was slow to see, however, that she was making the fundamental mistake of taking it all personally. With no security of her own, she dreamed habitually of 'becoming herself', as the fashionable saying went; and of doing so in any or all of those fields of achievement that were opening up continually in front of her. You're a sky-diver? Can I go sky-diving too?

I recognized her, because I have the same personality flaw myself. I have been

that way all my life. When I first heard David Oistrakh play the violin, I wanted to be him. When I first saw Greg Louganis dive the inward three and a half somersaults from the tower, I wanted to be him. Even today, I would like to be Roger Federer. But I know I can't, and I have something else to do. Diana had nothing to fall back on. Eventually, had her life not been cut short, she might have built a base for herself more solid than that conferred by her ability to make men who could do marvellous things fall in love with her: a base of realism, founded on a more certain knowledge of what she could get done, through her position, by her unusual and true talent for empathy. But at the time I knew her, she was far from being sure about any of that, and it was all too clear that the multiplicity of her yearnings was scrambling her brains. It would have been easier for her if she had been unattractive. But that's just a way of saying that she would have been better at being herself if she had been someone else.

Alas, she was who she was, with all her charm, and so the charm was a deadly gift. I was on the receiving end of it, and I know. Not that she flirted, even for a moment. Older men who say they are no longer attracted to younger women are almost always lying, but a wise older man does not expect that the same force will operate in the other direction. Certainly it didn't in this case. But she was charming anyway. Why was that? When interrogated at home, I wasn't just trying to save my skin when I said that I thought her more than a touch ga-ga. I had heard her tell obvious untruths. She told me that she had not cooperated with her unofficial biographer when it was quite clear that she had. Such whoppers would have been understandable had she been in show business, where finessing the truth is a recognized survival mechanism. But she wasn't in show business, or at any rate was not supposed to be. I had seen her turn the same atomic smile on the waiters that she had just been using on me, and the news was already out that she had been lavishing a ration of her personal magic on every editor in London, in the dangerous belief that men incapable of loyalty would remain servile even if they were fed the whole carcass. To put it briefly, I thought she was childish. But as I loftily explained to the household furies when they grilled me, the days of her eating disorder were over, she was well fed, she would live for a long time, and I thought she had the capacity to learn. She was one of those people who start off with no wisdom at all and have to learn everything by trial and error, but so was I. I got some sceptical looks, but I suppose the manifest absurdity of the friendship conferred a certain plausibility, and anyway, it wasn't as if she hadn't bedazzled every man she met, with the possible exception of her husband. (And, I might have added had I but known, every other senior Royal who had seen her in close-up long enough to know that she was a ticking fruitcake.)

There was no safety in numbers, however. If she had enrolled, one by one, every man in the country among her admirers, they all would have had their faces in the newspapers. There were even journalists who got their faces in the newspapers because they had been seen talking to her. To be seen eating with her was a signal for a press stampede, and she and I had scarcely reached the second course of our first lunch before a Range Rover full of photographers and reporters arrived outside. It went on like that for what seemed like years. How long was it, really? Not long enough. I would have liked to know her forever. But it was just the occasional meeting. She had an infinity of people that mattered to her more, and I had things to do. But already I could see myself when I was ancient and doddering, summoned to the palace when she was Queen, no longer in her first youth but still insistent on hearing my jokes. Though there were rumours about the possibility of a divorce, I didn't see how it could happen. And there would surely be an accommodation. (In the *Spectator* I published several articles about the necessity for this, presuming to speak as one with authority, and not as the scribes.) There would always be time. I already knew that time was finite for me, but for her it would be infinite.

To know her took an hour a month at most, and every other moment was crowded. There lay my real anguish. It was too crowded. Television was eating me alive, but I couldn't back out of it, not just because it paid the bills but because I was still trying to get it right. More cursed than ever by the desire to practise everything as an art form, I was trying to give shape to a storm of light. It can't be done beyond a certain point, but I was still keen to know where the point was. Anything else I could do would have to happen in the wings while I did that. The weekly show and the End of the Year show were based in London so I could always write in the back seat of the car on the way to and from the office or the studio. The travel programmes were less forgiving. For writing poems, it was easy enough to find some downtime while I travelled to the location and sat around between set-ups. One of the poems, about the life of W. H. Auden, took months to assemble. I wrote pieces of it all over the world. But Tina Brown, the latest editor of the *New Yorker*, took the finished thing and gave it a whole page to itself, with the opposite page occupied by a Richard Avedon portrait photo of Auden that made the whole splash look very grand. So I had got the thing done. Writing essays was harder, especially if they needed research, but since I travelled light I could always carry a few books with me in my hold-all, and I was steadily getting better at keeping the thread of a prose argument in my head until I could get back to the notebook on the desk in my hotel room. Keeping the thread was sometimes difficult when I had been stoked up by the action during the day. The action was seldom dangerous but it could be

unnerving, thereby inducing an adrenaline squirt that doesn't agree with the sedentary process of nutting out an essay about Gerard Manley Hopkins. And just occasionally it *was* dangerous, though it was never meant to be. My producers had a vested interest in keeping me alive, and some of them could barely be restrained from tasting my food before I ate it.

20. WHERE ALL ROADS LEAD

On *Postcard from Rome* the producer was Elaine Bedell, who had come to us from radio and proved a natural at dreaming up pertinent action. A trim brunette so good-looking that she could enslave her presenters by just standing there, Elaine was also an excellent dancer: invariably a good sign, because it means that the person doing the dancing can think in pictures. When I told her that one of the reasons I liked the Castel Sant'Angelo was that Tosca had jumped to her death off the battlements, Elaine instantly had the idea of filming me in a helicopter as it hovered above the castle, thus to provide the perfect shot for a vertiginous voice-over. Though my dedicated hatred of helicopters had only increased after my high-speed horizontal close-up of the escarpment at Kakadu, I saw the point and said yes, but with conditions. If the camera was shooting past me as I looked down, the door would have to be removed, so I wanted a bar across the doorway. And I wanted a six-point harness. (A six-point harness has straps over both shoulders and both thighs as well as the strap at the waist, the whole assembly secured with a circular buckle that will open only at a firm whack from the wearer's hand.) Elaine got on the blower and the guy at the helicopter pad said yes, yes of course, how could it be otherwise?

The Italian way of saying 'How could it be otherwise?' is *senz' altro* and it's a phrase you should watch out for, especially when filming. This merchant had obviously been saying *senz' altro* to everything all his life, because when we got to the pad there was no bar on the doorway and the harness was only two-point, meaning that it was no more substantial than the thing you fasten over your lap in an airliner so that you won't injure yourself from the shock when the voice on the public address system tells you that you have only ten more minutes to choose from the wide range of duty-free items. A two-point harness with frayed webbing and a rusty buckle: I had premonitions of diving from the door at the first lurch. The helicopter stood there in a pool of its own oil and the strenuously rejuvenated pilot looked the way Silvio Berlusconi does now, with a hair

arrangement suggesting that any other qualifications he might have had – a pilot’s licence, for example – had also been obtained by mail order. But Elaine was up for the trip and I would have felt weak if I had downed tools. (In such circumstances, one should always say, ‘I feel weak and I’m downing tools,’ especially if your interlocutor is a young female you are trying to impress. Why are you trying to impress her?) Up we went in a rattling roar of loosely arranged machinery, and in due course we arrived over the Castello at a height of only a few hundred feet. The cameraman wanted the chopper to tilt a bit towards the side where I was sitting, so that he could get both me and the castle in the same shot. I shouted, ‘No tilting!’ Elaine shouted, ‘What?’ I shouted, ‘Keep it straight!’ and somebody must have thought I said, ‘This is great!’ because suddenly we were canted over at forty-five degrees and I was looking straight down into the castle’s circular courtyard. It looked like the barrel of a giant mortar. I held on to the rim of the door with all the strength I had, but the grip was awkward and I could feel my weight popping the threads of my ratty lap-strap. If the thing had snapped, I would have been going a lot faster than Tosca when I hit the deck. She would have been still speeding up. I would have been going at terminal velocity. They wanted another pass to get the shot right, but for the one and only time in my career I called off the deal.

There was an equally grim scene waiting on the ground but at least I wouldn’t need a harness for it. To help us tell the story of well-connected Roman decadence in faded palaces, we had recruited a female aristocrat from the permanently historic Vilaponte family. Though Rosetta, in common with the Colosseum, was no longer in possession of the full complement of her original marble cladding, she had a beautiful daughter called Liliana who was one of the stars of the upper-crust younger set. Buzzing around on the pillion of Liliana’s moped just behind her perfect bottom while holding an ice-cream in each hand spelled fun – we were trying to spell fun in large letters – but hitting the high spots with Liliana’s mother was no fun at all. The routine was meant to be as follows: Rosetta, with her inexhaustible connections, would row us in on various high-toned Dolce Vita-style settings, fashionable nightclubs, etc. She had the entrée, and other denizens would fall on her neck with spontaneous cries of greeting while we filmed over my shoulder to make me part of the fizzing scene. The facts proved otherwise. The arrival of Rosetta aroused no more excitement than if she had been handing out a religious tract. She was, however, quite canny on the financial detail. It took about an hour to set up the extra lights outside a nightclub so that we could arrive at it by limousine and still be visible when we climbed out. Rosetta would invariably try to renegotiate her price after the lighting had been done but before the camera turned. We were committed to the

shot and it was too late to fire her. Pulling similar stunts many times, and always at the critical moment, she cost us a lot of trouble.

We had some good stories to tell. Dado Ruspoli, by then living in the attic of what had once been the family palazzo, was the genuine, non-hysterical version of crumbling elegance. He had been a favourite walk-on for Fellini. Later on, Francis Ford Coppola used him to dress the set of *Godfather III*. Like all the aristos, Dado spoke excellent English. He got the pronunciation of my first name right when he said things like ‘Clive, Rome is not what it was’, even while the noble planes of his face proclaimed that Rome had been what it was since the time of Tacitus. We also got a spine-tingling interview from Mussolini’s jazz-pianist son Bruno, who revealed, for the first time in any medium, that his father had been a fan of Fats Waller. But what held the Rome documentary together was the look of the place, which we revealed not only in some carefully chosen static shots, but in a swathe of travelling shots focused on the little car – a Lancia Lunchbox or whatever it was – that I was jokily driving. Traffic chaos was the story of Rome at that time, and we knocked ourselves out trying to tell it. My newly acquired driving skills were vital and soon proved barely adequate, but going the wrong way at the wrong speed fitted the story as long as the camera car could stay with me. If I did the wrong thing, I had to do the wrong thing again after the crew piled out of their car and set up on a tripod to catch me from in front. There was a light rigged under my dashboard to point upwards so that my facial expressions – mainly in the spectrum from fear to shame – would register on film. That kind of filming is very demanding on coverage but you have to do it. In any documentary you can always tell when the coverage has been skimped because suddenly you notice the lack of logic, and then *that* becomes the subject instead of the subject you were meant to be talking about. Take the scene where I got the Lunchbox stuck in a crowded square. It took a dozen difficult set-ups. I was getting better at helping to plan these, and at anticipating what would be required. It gave the satisfaction of being useful, but it filled up the day.

In the late afternoon and early evening, the city comes to its full life. As one who worshipped the very memory of Fellini, I asked for, and got, my scene at a cafe in the Via Veneto. If the audience had never seen *La Dolce Vita*, I would evoke it for them in voice-over. I got my scene at the Trevi Fountain. If the audience had never seen Anita Ekberg wading in it while Marcello Mastroianni looked on with suave lust, I would evoke that too. I even got a scene with the little Barberini fountain, Bernini’s fountain of the bees, once a meeting point for myself and my future wife when we were first in Rome. If the audience didn’t know who Bernini was, they might be encouraged to find out. For all these

scenes I was in on the planning and the arranging, and I can say in general that the whole scenario proved the benefits of thinking things through in advance. But once again, as so often, the best thing wasn't planned at all. We were set up to shoot a big open-air concert in the plaza at the head of the Spanish Stairs, with the whole of fashionable Rome present including the dreaded Rosetta, who, by that time, had been fired. She threw herself in front of the camera anyway, in a rare fit of altruism. The audience kept on arriving and she kept on arriving with them. Like any fashionable audience for music, they looked as if they had been temporarily placed under arrest, but the gowns and tuxedos did the visual business, and I'm bound to say that I, too, looked the part. I was wearing a cream jacket which had been tailored for me by the famous men's outfitter Littrico in a separate sequence, during which Littrico had played up marvellously by telling me I had the same measurements as Gorbachev, for whom he had made a similar jacket the previous week. Thus several sequences tied together at the critical moment. The unexpected bonanza, however, came after the show. We were toting the gear back to the bus when I saw a familiar face at one of the tables in the cobbled street outside an expensive restaurant. It was Leonard Bernstein. Letting my crew go on ahead, I bent over his candlelit table and asked how he had liked the concert. 'It was disgusting. Absolutely disgusting. Fully in keeping with the audience.' I asked him if he would mind telling me that on camera. 'I wouldn't mind a bit.'

I raced off to catch up with the crew. Elaine, bless her, got the point instantly and we were soon back at the table, shooting from the shoulder with a little hot light held up on a stick to further illuminate the maestro's craggy face as he sat there smoking. I asked him how he had liked the concert. 'It was wonderful. Absolutely wonderful. How they love art, the Romans.' He went on to sing hosannas for the artistic taste of the Romans since Nero's first solo concert, all the while encircling my upper thighs with one arm, whose exploring hand had a mind of its own. But anything for the camera, and anyway, as he knew full well, his affectionate embrace was happening below the frame. I thought the world of Bernstein, whose TV series on music had been one of the milestones of the medium. Along with Alistair Cooke, Bernstein had been one of my models for what a television presenter could do with a big subject. There were times, when he conducted, say, Mahler, that his range of portentous facial expression left the music sounding like a penny whistle at the Apocalypse, but the man who had written the score for *On the Town* could do no wrong in my eyes. His clear intention of invading my trousers I took as a compliment. He showed no signs of disappointment that I did not respond, by the way. He was just copping a feel while it was there. And from meeting many a prominent homosexual male I had

long since learned that from their viewpoint it was always worth a try: apparently the rate of conversion made it well worth the effort. Perhaps I missed a trick by never succumbing. At one time I often saw Gore Vidal socially, and he several times assured me that my butch facade was trembling under the pressure of ill-concealed ambivalence. I had to tell him that much as I loved him – and I undoubtedly did – there wasn't, from the angle of sexual desire, even one woman in the room who didn't interest me more than he did, including the Dowager Duchess of Dubrovnik in her two separate wheelchairs. His vulpine smile remained undaunted. 'Talk is cheap.' But it wouldn't have been in his nature to make a physical pass, and it was always possible that he wasn't gay at all. Certainly the grandes dames who mobbed him seemed to be acting on that basis. With Bernstein, however, there was never any doubt. He was a crusader. Elaine thanked him very much as she tore me from his embrace.

As a producer, Elaine could take charge of anything, but not even she could control the weather, which dished us in a big way when we made, or tried to make, *Postcard from Sydney*. Back in the year dot, when I was making my first programmes at LWT before I met Richard, my very first documentary had Sydney as its subject, and I muffed it through staying loyal to a Mickey Mouse voice-over which kept saying again what the pictures had said already. This time I had a better plan. But it is always important not to fall in love with the plan, no matter how good. The lack of sunlight wasn't Elaine's fault, although she was at her most engaging when she behaved as if it was. She danced with anger as she cursed the sun, which resolutely failed to appear for more than twenty minutes in two weeks. Back in London, Richard gazed mesmerized with horror at the footage of a ferry ride in which I stood outlined against the sky at the front rail of the ferry as it ploughed the harbour. I looked passable for a man fighting the onset of the fatal final calorie, but the sky looked as if it were dying of despair. Ingmar Bergman would have thought our exteriors too gloomy for *The Seventh Seal*. A whole day at Bondi yielded a sequence with about twelve people in it, one of them a beer-bellied beach inspector who said, 'Nar, ya come on the wrong day.'

We got a few minutes of sun for a surfing sequence that we shot at Manly. It was a rigged gag but the components were well chosen. One of the components was an Iron Man champion called Craig Wayne. As if sculpted from caramel marble, his naked frame was in the crisp bloom of youth. Wearing only the vestigial pair of trunks that the Australians call a budgie-smuggler, he could sit on a surf ski and bend forward to touch his toes with one hand while, with the other, he held his two-ended paddle aloft, twirling it like a drum majorette. The other component was myself. Clad in a neck-to-knee costume of pink and black

Lycra, I looked like an ox wrapped tightly in the flag of some unsuccessful West African republic, and while sitting on the ski I could not lean forward at all, even with the ski being steadied from behind by the assistant cameraman. The idea, with the surf ski, is that you sit on it and paddle. The camera dwelt briefly on Craig as he dug in his paddle with a quick succession of darting strokes and headed straight for New Zealand. Then the camera was pointed at me. My idea for the gag was that I would go very slowly in comparison to Craig, but I was not ready for the possibility that I might not go anywhere.

The secret of paddling the surf ski is to compensate for each thrust of the paddle by very slightly tilting the body. After only a couple of thrusts, during which the frail craft moved forward less than half its own length, I rolled over and disappeared, leaving the ski floating upside down. To give me the small credit I've got coming, I had realized the comic possibilities before I got back to the surface, and while still puffing and blowing I was asking for all the retakes we could get of exactly the same fiasco. We had to work fast before the sun went behind the clouds again, but the rollover was well covered and I was already working out the voice-over in my head. The final result is still remembered by people who have forgotten the rest of the movie. I can say that for myself: I was getting better at realizing, on the spot, that the moment of failure is exactly the moment that you need for the story. A lot depends, however, on not doing too much with your face after you have just lost it. The really essential retake was the tight close-up in which I came up looking resigned instead of annoyed. Indeed I didn't even look resigned. I just looked impassive, as if the whole thing had been inevitable. Let the audience make the interpretation and they would reach the right conclusion: that I was a man whose dreams had been overtaken by the passing of time.

There were a lot of other good moments. For the first night of a new production of *La Clemenza di Tito* at the Opera House, my black-tie arrival by speedboat – stand aside, James Bond – told the story of Sydney's artistic and financial prosperity at a single stroke. But nothing could compensate for the lack of sunlight. Back in England, we put the whole thing on ice for a year and then sent out a crew to do re-shoots of the sky. Once again the sun failed to appear, so eventually I had to write the script to fit what we had, the first-ever movie about Sydney to feature empty beaches in the middle of summer. It was then, in the editing room, that I made my big error. Elaine still says that I should have strangled her for letting me commit it, but she is too kind. Richard, too, generously attempted to claim the blame. But it was entirely my own blunder, and arose out of misplaced cleverness. To tie in with our Opera House sequence, I thought it would be self-evidently absurd, and therefore cute, to say that

Mozart had been born in Sydney. The fantasy failed to connect except with thousands of people who gained the impression that I was stating a fact. The worst of it was that I was going against my own principle: exaggerate by all means, but only while telling the truth. I never did it again but I shouldn't have done it then. Besides, the joke wasn't very funny, and there are never any excuses for that.

Still, the Sydney Postcard came out well for something filmed in the wrong weather, a circumstance which usually spells doom unless you can work around it. The sequences were well prepared and they connected into a plausible narrative. The Postcard format was getting a reputation for itself. It was a kind of miniature feature movie with me in the middle, doubling as pundit and clown. I was very pleased when I bumped into Ken Russell one day in Soho and he complimented me on what I was doing. 'You're making movies. You're telling stories. Keep it up.' Coming from a man who had mortgaged his house over and over just to stay in business as a director, this was high praise and I didn't forget it. The Postcards were becoming part of the television landscape and I hoped to get better at playing my part in them. The only question was how big a part that would be. It was a matter of confidence. If the story was to be under my control from point to point, then I couldn't let the director impose a visual style of his own, or there would be two narrators getting in each other's way. There had to be a unified viewpoint, even in a collaborative effort. This was a perennial problem but my naturally minimal diplomatic skills grew sharper under pressure. *Postcard from London*, an attractive prospect because we could save on travel bills, was held together by its story, not by its visual style. Our young director Dominic Brigstocke was at the start of a fruitful career and he was eager to exploit the full resources of the camera. He was naturally good at coverage. When we were filming as I walked with Peter Cook through the streets of Soho on our way to the site of his old Establishment club, we got all the shots required to make the sequence tie up. (Filming anywhere in central London you need Hollywood money to 'close the street', so if you want to keep any rubbernecking civilians out of frame you have to shoot fast and tight, which can be very tricky.) But when it came to the wide shots Dominic found it hard to resist the less humble opportunities available to his virtuoso technique. We did a sequence in Hyde Park which was meant to allow me to comment, in voice-over, on all the modern buildings that had made a hash of the skyline since I had first arrived in London more than thirty years before. Dominic wanted to do a panning shot, supposedly from my viewpoint, that swept around the skyline. I politely let him do it but I asked also for individual static shots of each building. The static shots were the ones we used in the finished film, for a simple reason: you can't

comment on individual objects when the camera is panning past them, because however slowly it pans the image travels too quickly to allow even a phrase, let alone a sentence. On the whole, panning shots are to be avoided, because you can't cut into them. A panning shot controls the pace of the narrative, whereas the ideal balance is obtained when the narrative controls the pace of the cutting.

Dominic took it well. He even took it well when I told him that if I caught him using a short lens on me I would throw it into the Serpentine. (A short lens won't just make an ugly man like me look even uglier, it will distort the background, thereby reminding the audience that they are looking at an image, when you want them to be looking at reality.) Like every other young director only more so, Dominic had a prodigious knowledge of filters and focal lengths. He knew how to do it. But I knew what I wanted, and there's a difference. Later on, keeping an eye on his work, I could see him getting steadily more in control of his effects. He had learned to avoid that fatal moment when the technique takes over.

Even in the most technical of all the art forms, technique is only the servant of expression, not the instigator. At the Royal Ballet School we filmed the dancers at their morning exercises. Alessandra Ferri was there. The few minutes I spent watching her at work added up to one of the most powerful visions of the beautiful that I had ever known. Even today, the memory is still with me: and I have tried to transmit some of its intensity through the compilation, on my website, of excerpts from her performances as Juliet both at Covent Garden and La Scala. Ferri was the last great muse of Kenneth MacMillan, a man of genius. To my astonished delight, he liked the way I wrote, and wanted me to write a spoken libretto for a ballet he had in mind based on the diaries of Nijinski. The project never had a chance, but the pay-off, from my viewpoint, was that I got to spend quite a lot of time in his company. He was already sick with the disease that would slowly kill him but he generously found time to listen to my views on ballet, almost as if they might be as interesting as his. I could have handled the friendship better, and that I didn't is among my great regrets. But at least I saw something of him. The public saw less of our ballet-school sequence, because it had to be cut back to nothing in the editing room. At greater length, it would have unbalanced the picture, which had its own demands: the surest sign that it was alive.

21. PUSHING IT

So there was a second story to the travel programmes, and it was much more about me than the programmes were. The programmes were about the cities, which I was careful, in each case, to make the hero. But the story underneath was about how I wanted to push the forms we were working in towards their most concentrated possible outcome. To me this seemed a serious purpose, even if it didn't seem so to my literary friends. They were less likely to disapprove of a new format we started for BBC 2, called *The Talk Show*. The idea was that I would sit with a panel of three pundits and steer the troika through a conversation on a serious topic. Such a layout was nothing startling, but it had rarely been a success on British television, where there is a chronic shortage of intellectuals who can conduct a conversation on screen. Nearly all of them can conduct a monologue, but a conversation is a different thing. The French, Germans and Italians can all do conversation shows, and for the Americans the form is a staple, even though it usually sounds like a version of *Gladiators* fought with words for weapons. But for the British it is a regularly recurring no-no. I have to give Alan Yentob credit for thinking that I might make a fist of it. Elaine was the producer in charge and in collaboration with me and Richard she did all the casting. Alas, Yentob the Enabler was also Yentob the Destroyer. Right from the jump the show got into deep trouble because he was always on the phone demanding that every panel should have at least one woman. Elaine, herself a woman in all visible aspects, and mentally a blazing feminist, went nuts trying to tell him that there just weren't enough women to allow good casting. Fair casting yes, good casting no. There weren't enough women then and there still aren't now. The urge on the part of the controllers to satisfy the requirements of social engineering would be the ruination of serious talk shows from that day to this. In the view of those in charge, there always has to be the politically correct number of minority representatives proportionate to the size of each minority as a component of the total population. For all I know, the TV

version of positive discrimination, alias affirmative action, has had beneficial effects in British society. Affirmative action certainly helped America towards a political climate in which it was conceivable that a black man could be elected President, and Britain is still a long way short of that. But I had a show to run, and just wanted the guests to be good at what they were doing. I wouldn't have cared if the guests were gay dwarves with green skin as long as they could talk. Elaine felt the same. But Yentob had an agenda, and she had to listen to him on the phone, sometimes while she was in the control room and the show was actually running.

The pressure was relentless and it jammed us up. Most of the British men were hopeless on screen anyway, with that fatal combination of diffidence and dogmatism that makes you wonder how they ever emerge alive from breakfast with their wives. We had to fly some Americans in at vast expense, on the reasonable assumption that they would be more upfront. Some of them were, but Carl Bernstein scarcely bothered to pay attention and David Mamet thought it would be cute if he said nothing at all. If it had been live television instead of a tape, I would have asked him what he thought he was doing, accepting a transatlantic plane ticket from us and then stiffing us on air: did he think he was starring in one of his own scripts about con-men? But it wasn't live television, so I couldn't face him down, and anyway I admired him too much. I admire him even today – *State and Main* is one of my favourite movies about the movies – but I can't forget my disappointment, and Elaine was out of her head with anger. Richard wrote Mamet a note that I bet he didn't keep. Strange to say, our best upfront American was a woman, the ex-model sexologist Shere Hite. She was touring the UK with one of her books so she didn't even cost us a ticket. She fought her corner well on screen and she was very glam. Off screen she was a wild soul whose company I enjoyed, because like many a male stick-in-the mud I secretly dream of the milk-skinned strawberry blonde in the black classic who dances on the table. And Shere, although some people thought she was nuts – my agent Pat Kavanagh was among them – was very smart, with infallible radar for any incoming male-chauvinist remarks. She told me a lot of stuff that I needed to hear.

Dare I say that it didn't hurt if the females were lookers? Some of the TV critics resented that, but the truth was – is still – that with females, looks breed confidence. If you want to correct this injustice, go fix society, and tell me how you get on. (If you can work the trick, nobody will applaud louder than I: even more than Michael Frayn's 'tyranny of the fortunate', the tyranny of the attractive strikes me as an unending tragedy, a really nasty brainwave on the part of the Man Upstairs.) At the time, we went for any woman who could talk the

part, and if she looked the part as well it was certainly no reason to turn her down. This aspect was crucial when it came to the only episode of the series that I later thought of as an unqualified success. It starred two male heavyweights, George Steiner and Christopher Ricks, and a female heavyweight, Annie Cohen-Solal, the biographer of Jean-Paul Sartre. Annie Cohen-Solal was a known favourite of Mitterrand and when she arrived on a plane from Paris we soon found out why. 'Heavyweight' was a misleading word. 'Angelweight' would have been closer. Though razor sharp even in her second language, she looked as if she belonged beside Anna Wintour in the front row at a couture collection, making notes on the frocks. Faced with the spectacle of her soignée silk and cashmere delicacy and the unsettling speed of her dialectical brain, Ricks and Steiner immediately went into rutting-stag mode. The nominal subject was the politics of culture but they might as well have been competing for mating rights. Their exchange of epigrammatic arguments was like a clash of antlers. Nor was there anything doe-like about the prize they were fighting for, beyond the size of her eyes. When she caught them scamping their logic she pouted with disdain before emitting an aphorism that stopped them in their tracks. But the two professors barely paused before charging each other once again. Somewhere in the middle of all this, I did my best not to beam with happiness. This was the way it was supposed to be, but hardly ever was. And not even Yentob could say that this particular panel was without a woman. But there couldn't be one and a half women. It just wasn't possible, and eventually the word came down that the show was not fulfilling the management's hopes. I myself could stand the squeeze, but I couldn't bear seeing my production staff being run ragged for what I thought was a foolish reason.

Management interference was beginning to be a general story at the BBC in that period, now known to media history as the early phase of the Birt Era. Executives at the middle level were learning Birt-speak, as speakers of Cantonese in Hong Kong learn Mandarin today. My outfit had half a floor at White City all to itself and our swish designer desks were occupied with dedicated staff who arrived early each day and left late, but our top-echelon people, often including Richard himself, spent a precious half-day each week absent at meetings where they were told how to manage. Richard loathed every minute of it and gave me scathing reports about how apparatchiks half his age, who had never made a programme in their lives, would give him instructions, couched in barely comprehensible language, on subjects he had learned about the hard way many years before. At one of these management-training sessions he was asked to form a team that would tie a thread around an egg, lower it out of the window and then discuss the group dynamics of the decisions they had

made. His suggestion to just throw the egg out of the window and then go and buy a new one was not well received. He came back hopping mad, which for a man with a bad foot was a painful condition to be in. Elaine was doing another of her angry dances about Yentob's interference with the BBC 2 show. There was aggro at every level.

But a fizzer on BBC 2 didn't matter so much when we had a hit on BBC1. The weekly show was reaching a high level of development, with ratings to match. Diana, in the company of her colonic-irrigationist, came to watch the show from the gallery one night. She howled at all the right moments, and after the show, in the Green Room, she was perfect, asking everyone about their jobs and wolfing down the answers, clearly fascinated by the whole business. Suddenly she wanted to be a television producer, a researcher, a set designer. The divorce was on its way by then, and it filled me with regret. What a Queen she would have made. Having done the rounds in impeccable style, she wanted me to join her and the irrigationist in an expedition to the nightclubs. I would have loved to watch her dance, but I had my duties to the troops. Her last word on the way out was that the show was like some amazing circus. 'Really, really *amazing*.'

I'm bound to say that she had a point. For one thing, the set was a marvel. By then the wall of monitors had grown to the size of an entire cyclorama: a universe of images. It weighed tons, and one day the scene-shifters tried to push it into position too quickly and it toppled hugely forward, exploding on the floor and filling the studio with toxic gas that took two days to clear. But they built an identical wall in another studio and the show was taped on time.

The guest system was further refined so that the subsidiary guest worked for the show. If, say, Peter O'Toole was the star guest, the subsidiary guest might be Peter Cook, whose job would be to comment on all the video material that had appeared in the running order up to that point. Since Cook had got to the stage in his life when he would far rather talk about other things than talk about himself, the spot was enjoyable for him and he gave little trouble. His latter-day investigations into the effect of a diet of alcohol only sparingly punctuated by food were far advanced, and he did not always show up in suitable clothing. He might need a shave and haircut from the make-up girl while suitable clothes were collected from the wardrobe department. But when he was commenting on video material he was unbeatable. There was a video clip from German television about the making of mayonnaise. Cook used it as a springboard for a long verbal flight about German mayonnaise-making throughout history. I spent a lot of time doubled up and I wasn't mugging. After a virtuoso performance like that, we could slot in a satellite interview with Sylvester Stallone's mother and a

few more take news computations before we fired the signal for Peter O'Toole to drift in and stretch out in his chair with his typical lazy grace. More cool than O'Toole they didn't come. It was a sumptuous change of pace and made the show look as wealthy as Byzantium in its years of glory.

O'Toole would have been a perfect guest for the BBC 2 show. He was a writer of high distinction – his autobiographies are up there with David Niven's and Dirk Bogarde's as models of the form – and he was widely cultivated in all the arts. In his dressing room he talked about the paintings of Jack B. Yeats in a way that I never forgot, and from then on I always looked out for Yeats pictures whenever I was in Dublin. (The Guinness family house in Phoenix Park is jammed with them. I probably would never have got to see them if Barry Humphries, always the most socially connected of the top performers, hadn't been with me to get me through the door, but I certainly wouldn't have understood the importance of what I was seeing if O'Toole hadn't started me on the trail.) Still in the dressing room, O'Toole put me on the spot with his raised eyebrows of wonder when he found out that I hadn't read the diaries of Schuschnigg. Why not, if I was so interested in pre-war European politics? 'Dear boy, you really haven't read them? *Really?*' The sprawling drawl was like being beaten up with a silk handkerchief. I repaired the deficiency as soon as I could. O'Toole was also learned in poetry, with a repertoire of memorized verse that he could draw upon at any time. (Years later, he quoted one of my own poems to me and it was one of the great moments of my life.) But he wouldn't have been interested in talking like that on a BBC 2 show for pundits. He had his stardom to protect, and he was right, because the world fame that had begun with *Lawrence of Arabia* had made everything else possible. My own opinion of *Lawrence of Arabia* was that it was no more spontaneous than *Dr Zhivago* on defrost. But without the global renown which O'Toole had acquired from striding dynamically around the desert, the tallest actor ever to play a short man, he would never have been at the focal point of *My Favourite Year*, which would be on my list of the ten best comedy movies ever made. In other words, he would never have made his interesting movies if he hadn't been rendered colossal by an uninteresting movie. His film career wasn't over yet and he had a lifetime's investment to protect. He was on a BBC 1 weekly show because he was a movie star with a product to push.

The same was true in almost every case. Dirk Bogarde, although he had been established for years as an important author, still thought of himself as a movie star when he took a turn as my guest. He proved his status by insisting that there was only one direction from which he could enter, because he wanted the camera on one side of his face and not the other. Through my eyes the two sides of his

face looked equally distinguished but not through his. I didn't mind that he was a handful because I admired him greatly not just as someone who had come to writing late and made such a success of it, but as an actor who had been one of the few bright things about British movies from his first day. For me he wasn't just Simon Sparrow in *Doctor in the House*, he was the man who had bravely laid his career on the line to make the first film about a closet homosexual forced into the open, *Victim*, and who had used his prestige, star power and high intelligence to help Harold Pinter and Joseph Losey make *The Servant*. Bogarde was my idea of an artist and I liked him all the more for the frailty by which he counted his social connections on a par with his creative achievements and was ready to talk the higher gossip with grand ladies. Only human beings have human weaknesses. He rated himself, but then they all did. They were right to. A star is a nodal point around which everything happens. Some of them are better than others at staying sane in those circumstances but their divine right to the limelight unites them all. Even Michael Caine, who loved doing his Michael Micklethwaite act even more than the many comedians who were pleased to copy it, made sure to mention his next movie as well as the current one.

The same was true for Tom Hanks, who could give you an exact imitation of a normal human being except that he was so perfectly fluent he might have been working from a script for *Saturday Night Live*, the long-running American show on which he made regular appearances as the most accomplished of all guest hosts. His facade of normality boosted the clout that would one day enable him to translate the box-office success of his starring vehicle *Saving Private Ryan* into a monumental television production, *Band of Brothers*, in which he did not even appear, but whose stature transformed the expectations of an entire industry.

Image meant power, even for Tom Cruise. That was the only reason he was available. He came on as a satellite guest from Paris and we were lifelong friends within seconds. Since he had no monitor at his end and couldn't even see me, it spoke well for the telepathic powers conferred by his expertise in Scientology. For ten minutes his teeth lit up my wall. We were buddies. Pointing both fingers at me, he shouted, 'I feel that you and I have really formed a rapport, Clyde.'

The self-merchandising of the star guest was a law of the business, and the trick of our format was to squeeze enough original stuff into the hour to disguise the fact that its climax was an infomercial. We had got to the point where we could do that almost every time, but the ending remained a problem. It was a good idea to clinch the deal by reviving a has-been band to give another airing to its quondam hit. If it was Kid Creole and the Coconuts, the number could raise a

riot. The Kid, showing remarkably few signs of wear for an ex-headliner who had played some pretty obscure clubs in recent years, had recruited a couple of new Coconuts to accompany his unexpected revival and they were entirely gorgeous. They hailed from Sweden and they hardly knew who he was, but he had rehearsed them down to the tiniest shake of the sweet hip in the tinsel microskirt. When the show was over, neither of the Coconuts wanted to go home with the Kid in the limo we had rented for him. They wanted to go home with Jeremy Irons, on the back of his motorbike. A man of principle and fidelity, Jeremy accelerated away in a fast leaning turn into Wood Lane. He was only just ahead of the Coconuts. Running side by side, they squealed, 'We love you! We love you!' in Scandinavian accents as the distance increased between them and the object of their desire. That time the ending worked, but sometimes it fizzled. There was still room for improvement.

There was still room for innovation, in fact. One format would suggest another. When you have the urge and the means to make things up, it is hard to stop before you hit the buffers. Orson Welles once called a movie studio a big train set for adults, and television could similarly feel like a plaything as long as your standard stuff was paying its way and left some budget to spare. One of the advantages of managerialism's psychotic emphasis on accountancy was that there could be no arguments if you were cost-effective: the figures were all there in the computer spreadsheets. If you kept your expenditure down while the viewing figures went up, there was an argument for funding a new venture. My introductions to the highbrow talk shows and the star interviews on the weekly show, and my voice-overs for the Postcards, had given me a taste for narrating to serious pictures that I thought I could exploit further: perhaps for a whole series, if the subject was big enough. I hadn't forgotten Alistair Cooke and Leonard Bernstein. I didn't sound as professorial as Jacob Bronowski or as aristocratic as Sir Kenneth Clark, but perhaps it would be an advantage to have a voice that could not be placed in a narrow context while I addressed a subject whose context was limitless. The minute somebody mentioned it in passing, one subject suddenly struck me as fitting the bill: it was full of historic significance, dripped with ready-made visual material, and it cried out for an informed, judicious and aphoristic commentary to hold its infinitely ramifying implications together. It was fame. Fame in the twentieth century.

I even knew something about it from the inside. For about fifteen years now my mug-shot had been all over the place and I knew for a fact that to be so recognizable had made me two different kinds of wanted man, simultaneously up there and on the run. Richard went for the idea instantly and assigned Beatrice Ballard to produce it. She was ideal for more than one reason. She, too,

knew about fame from the inside. Her father, J. G. Ballard, was a famous writer and she had grown up with an icon in the house. And within her fetching form burned the soul of a staff officer, which would be a vital attribute, because to organize the research would be a taxing logistical effort. Just to secure the film footage would be a military task. Jean Twoshoes, in charge of the film-research ferrets, was about to be pushed out of an aircraft deep behind enemy lines.

Nobody flinched. Everyone went at it like a fanatic, and I still bless them all. Two assistant producers spent months working on a set of themes. Bea had all kinds of ideas about experts to consult. The Professor of Media Communications at the University of This, the Professor of Communications Media at the University of That. Endless lists were compiled and countless documents were drafted. Compilers and drafters all took it well when I insisted that the enormous beast would find its plot-line in modern history, and should have a strict chronological narration put together in voice-over, with no current face appearing except one, and even my face should show up only briefly at the top and tail of each episode. Every other face in the enormous plot-line, hundreds and hundreds of them, should be a famous face from the twentieth century, doing its famous thing while I told the story. It was simple. It was just very hard to write, and I put the complete script, running to eight hour-long episodes, through eight separate and distinct drafts before we had something we could read over the assembled footage, which took a long time to select, collect and edit. Without electronic editing, which by now had well and truly arrived, the thing would have been impossible: the reason there was no precedent for it. *Fame in the Twentieth Century* was thus entirely dependent on the state of the technology, a pre-echo of the emergence, later on, of the World Wide Web. The Web was already getting started but had not yet revealed its full potential. To say that 'it's all in the timing' is essentially meaningless. The timing is all in the engineering. When the machinery is there, you can do it, and I'm proud to say that we did it.

I have to blow my own trumpet for *Fame in the Twentieth Century* because there is nobody else left to do so. It was the television project dearest to my heart, it took more than a year out of my life, and it disappeared as if it had never existed. Nor, for copyright reasons, will it ever come back, even in the smallest part. For that very reason, I will keep short my account of its fate. Some of my part in it might have been done better. My talking-head pieces at the top and tail of each episode were shot in studio in a single day, with me sitting in front of the great, glowing word FAME in ruby neon, an idea I had got from Elvis Presley's last big special. A director, whose name I have been careful to forget – I need hardly say that his name was there in a hundred per cent title at the end of every

episode, as if he had conceived the whole thing – shot the short pieces with elaborate camera movements, although the effort might have been better put into the lighting. I thought there was something wrong with it but feebly let the director do the directing. I would have done better to take Richard aside to tell him that we should think again, because I was the one with his head on the screen and the head looked more than usually like an egg. The lighting had the effect of blending the little hair I had remaining on each side of my head into the dark background, thus producing a cranium that seemed to come to a point. Some back-lighting would have helped, but there wasn't any. So the tops and tails, though they sounded, in my ears, sufficiently fluent and authoritative, looked like those moments in *Star Trek* when the weird head of the alien starship commander occupies the video screen on the bridge of the *Enterprise*.

‘Surrender your ship, Captain Kirk. We, the Egg People, have you in our power.’

As for the main body of the show, I still don't think I made a mistake about the general approach – it was certainly the most careful stretch of extended writing that I ever did for television – but I might have made a crucial mistake politically. Bea, though she served my conception of the format with her full commitment, never abandoned her conviction that we should have talked to experts on screen. It might have gone over better upstairs, which was where our inexorable problem lay. The management just never got behind the show, even though it had cost them a lot of money. The price for copyright footage kept on going up all the time as the agencies who controlled it got a better idea of the goldmine they were sitting on, but somehow we contrived to buy the rights on the basis that all the material could be screened four times. The American PBS network, who put in a million dollars, screened the whole thing the full four times to their sparse audience. The Australians, who put in another million, screened it twice. But the BBC, who paid the bulk of its enormous cost, screened it exactly once, during the week, and without even a repeat at the weekends. On its weeknight it was given suicide scheduling against ITV's *Inspector Morse*, the biggest ratings hit of the day – my own family never missed an episode – but we still peaked at seven million viewers and averaged about five million for the whole run. Such figures would be a sensation today. Nevertheless the series was regarded as a failure.

I'm afraid it was pre-judged as a failure, simply because of its format. Alan Yentob was a dedicated enemy of the presenter-led documentary. Ever since the deserved success of a programme he had produced about the Ford Cortina, it had become BBC orthodoxy that a documentary on any subject should have no central face, but simply narrate itself, with a voice-over recited by an actor, preferably from a script written by the producer. There was something to be said

for this approach, but the cost of making it a dogma was that the outgoing generation of over-qualified writer-presenters was the last to practise the form, and a new generation was not recruited. No more would Robert Kee, who really knew something about Ireland, head up a series that would tell you about Ireland. Some producer who knew not much more about Ireland than what he read in the *Guardian* would tell you about Ireland. There would be no new John Betjeman until Jonathan Meades came along half a lifetime later. Eventually it was discovered that for some subjects a narrator in vision was indispensable, especially if the subject was not as inherently telegenic as a Ford Cortina. Indeed Alan Yentob himself, in a later incarnation as head of BBC Arts, rediscovered the necessity at the turn of the millennium, and in the absence of other candidates was forced to appoint himself in the role of anchor man for the arts series *Image*. In his post as Head of Arts, Alan Yentob had searched high and low and found that only Alan Yentob could handle the task. Having hired himself at a suitable salary, he did some excellent programmes – the one about the Soane Museum was especially fine – but I often wondered, while watching him in action, if he ever thought back to the days when his decisions had made life difficult for those of us who were doing the same thing.

Still, there is no point complaining. The series on fame got made, and quite a lot of people saw it. (As Richard never failed to remind me when I showed too much concern with the ratings, a million people was a city, five million people was a country, and there was no other form of writing I could practise that would ever come near reaching that many people so directly, with their attention on nothing else.) There was even a book of the series, written by me with all the care I could summon. It got one very laudatory review, from Neil Kinnock of all people, but it didn't sell very well in the UK, although eventually it was put into paperback as my one and only Penguin. In America it hardly sold at all, which made me sorry for my publisher, Harry Evans at Random House. Harry Evans and Tina Brown, the most radiant celebrity couple in New York, threw a launch party for the book at their house in Sutton Place. All of fashionable New York was there to hear a modest speech from me. Modesty is always a mistake in America. I should have said that it was the greatest book in the world and that anybody who didn't read it would get warts. But the book wouldn't have taken off no matter how I promoted it, because it was essentially a book of opinions about modern history, and my qualifications for having such opinions were not clear. In America, opinions are accepted only from licensed opinion-makers. Looking back, I can now see that the fame book was one of the precursors for a heftier work that I would write in the next decade, *Cultural Amnesia*; and that the central thesis of the series, about the connection between celebrity and

politics, was simply ahead of its time. But to say that you are ahead of your time is just a consoling way of saying you have failed. The worst aspect of *Fame in the Twentieth Century*'s gradual but terminal dive towards death, however, was that there was never any question of its resurrection. If I didn't own the rights to the footage, then the thing was gone. More than a year and a half of work had vanished. I resolved never to be in such a situation again if I could help it.

22. BACK TO BASICS

It felt, far and away, like the biggest setback of my career, but I was the only one who noticed. It's the only bearable thing about having a flop in show business. By definition, most people don't see it. Even in the office, life went on. The weekly show kept getting more assured, and the End of the Year show was now a recognized part of the festive season. Everyone who didn't go out for the evening – in effect, that meant anyone who wasn't too young to understand it – tuned in to watch our annual fantasy. Though the bulk of the show was mainly news footage talked in and out with a script by me and Bostock, there were guests at the end. We played the beauty card ruthlessly. Fake awards were handed out, and there was always a glamour girl to read the names and open the envelopes. Jerry Hall, Elle McPherson, Louise Lombard: they all took a turn. There were production numbers. Tom Jones presented his pelvis while belting out 'It's Not Unusual' in that raging baritone he could have used to sing the title role in *Don Giovanni*. It was a butch moment, but standing right there beside him was Kiri te Kanawa, all aflutter to be on screen with the rock star. Kylie Minogue bounced up and down in a delirious fit of song and dance. I didn't have to do much acting to convey the impression that I loved them all. Each was my favourite. I liked Jerry for her gameness, her general determination to be not just a stunningly statuesque blonde in a couture frock. With her catwalk stardom coming to an end, she was determined to have a professional life apart from being Mrs Jagger, and appearing on our show was part of her break-out plan.

I was surprised when, during a supper in Soho with Mick Jagger and his admirable parents, he seemed scornful of Jerry's extramural activities. When I asked him, foolishly, if he thought she had done well in my show – never ask a question if you might not like the answer – he said, 'Didn't watch it, Clive.' For a while I thought less of him for that, but later on I heard that ructions were taking place. So all I had been hearing was noises off at the edge of a battle.

Unless you are actually closely acquainted with a star of Mick Jagger's

magnitude – and I wasn't – a casual meeting will tell you nothing. Most likely it will tell you even less. The truth is that someone as famous as Mick Jagger is living his life well if he even continues in one piece. Even when considering how big the Stones still are now, it is hard to credit how very big they were then. History wasn't allowed to happen unless they were there. In Prague after the Velvet Revolution, I chanced to be backstage when the Stones gave the first rock concert that the audience had heard in many years. Most of them had the words by heart and they sang along. 'Icon GEDNO saddest FACTION . . .' It was the sound of their freedom, once stolen, now restored. Mick Jagger was the bearer of the torch. The audience didn't know that their heroes, several of whom had no idea of which city they were in, were already in the limo and on the way to the airport before the last of the applause had died. The Stones had a whole world to look after. Jerry was married to a tribune of Planet Earth, so she did pretty well too. She was a bonus for the show, sweet and sassy, although of course not a show-business pro like Kylie.

In our house, Kylie was a great favourite, especially with my younger daughter, who had grown up with the Kylie hits pumped into her head through earphones. If it wasn't Abba it was Kylie. Nobody who hasn't met Kylie can quite realize how little she is. She could dance on your hand, but the astonishing thing is how good her dancing is. She rehearsed the routine for our show at the Pineapple Studios in Covent Garden and I went down there to help her block out the moves and rehearse her lines. She worked like a cattle dog. On the day, she had the whole thing pat and looked terrific in every shot. We taped the post-midnight production numbers in the afternoon so as to leave time for editing. With Kylie we didn't need a single retake except when she had to stand beside Elle McPherson. Elle, you probably won't need telling, is very tall. But already you have guessed the problem. It was hard to get them into the same shot.

My literary friends smiled tolerantly about my dance number with Kylie, but my nose-to-neck badinage with Elle was not forgiven. Nobody could expect his reputation as a poet and literary critic to survive intact when he appeared on screen in a clinch with a young woman who looked as if she had arrived by shell-shaped elevator in the penthouse of Vulcan. Things were, if possible, made even worse when Louise Lombard took her turn as the young lady who opened the envelopes. She was not only a lyric poem to look at, she was genuinely funny. Later on she built another television career in America because the British scene didn't know how to use her. I simply loved having her around and I still think we should have brought her back on a regular basis, but it was thought better to ring the changes in what was meant to be a subsidiary role. (Actually the thing to do, when someone has a hit in a subsidiary role, is to keep them on

and make the role bigger, which is exactly what happened ten years later with Martin Sheen in *The West Wing*: but the lesson is always being lost because the plans stretch too far ahead.) Within the framework we had set for ourselves, I always had a say in the casting; and I had powers of veto, so I have to take the blame for the only real mistake we made. It didn't show, because it wasn't a case of casting the wrong person, it was a case of not casting the right one. I had seen Catherine Zeta-Jones in *The Darling Buds of May* and I made the classic mistake of thinking that the performance I saw on screen was the only one she could do. So we didn't book her. What an error.

But generally the End of the Year show was getting to the point where we couldn't improve it, so already I was getting restless, and starting to wonder when we might shut it down. In five years you can make an impression but still get out clean. In ten years, you're stuck, and it takes another ten years to shake the memory. We weren't going to do any better than when we brought on Pavarotti as our after-midnight main man. This time we had to fly him in from Italy on a private jet, and when he showed up at the studio he turned out to be even bigger than last time. The expression 'on his last legs' was not inappropriate, because the weight of his upper works had finally wrought irreversible damage to his knees. By that time, when he sang the role of Cavaradossi in *Tosca*, he had to sit down for the firing squad. This development was unfortunate because we had a big white set with a grand staircase we wanted him to walk down when he made his entrance. His management team didn't even need to see the studio floor-plan before they announced that their star wouldn't be walking down anything. He would be walking on from the side. We readjusted the scheme.

We were always ready to rejig the layout for the star, even when the requirements seemed irrational. Diana Ross, when she was our star guest, had a contract that said she wouldn't even walk diagonally without a week's notice. She was as difficult as could be but I didn't blame her. She was coming out of a culture that had spent three hundred years being screwed by Whitey and she was sensible in wanting to take control. And also, she was who she was. I thought that the 1966 *Ready Steady Go!* Tamla Special, hosted by Dusty Springfield, was the greatest single TV music show ever screened, and now one of its brightest stars, Diana Ross, was living and breathing right there beside me: the fabulous face was singing her fabulous songs, or at any rate miming to playback. I was knocked out, along with the public.

Jason Donovan was equally difficult but with perhaps a touch less reason to believe that the results would be worth it from our angle. The year that he appeared, we had a cyclorama of a rather subtle tint somewhere between

aubergine and egg-plant, if those aren't the same thing. Jason Donovan turned up in his standard fetchingly casual attire, the trousers of which proved to be coloured somewhere between aubergine and egg-plant. By a million to one coincidence, they exactly matched the cyclorama. The result, to the camera, was that he spent a whole hour of our first rehearsal period minus his legs. Wearing his regulation stitch-on cheerful smile, the rest of him floated around the studio thirty inches above his shoes, which uncannily matched his progress as he swerved about mouthing the pious banalities of his chosen song. It looked like a horror movie, and Elaine, who was in charge that year, moved from the control room out into the studio to make direct contact with the apparition. With her powers of charm cranked up to the max, she asked him whether he would consider changing his pants. He wouldn't change his pants. They were his lucky pants, containing the secret of his mojo. It was in these very pants, he explained, that he had first sung to an adoring public and realized that he had a duty to their love. Elaine smiled nicely, marched back to the control room, and did her dance of anger. The dance was of small radius – she merely placed her elfin weight alternately on each foot while tossing her head and muttering things like 'Really, is it *worth* it?' through gritted teeth – but to anyone familiar with it, this was the full-scale version. Then she went out there again and told the superstar that there was no option: the pants would have to be changed. Jason thought about it for a bit and declared that he would not change the pants. It was a question of integrity. It was a question of his art. So we changed the cyclorama. It took half an hour but there were other things we could do while it was happening, such as slitting our wrists.

Beside that kind of artistically determined display of uncompromising values, Pavarotti's demands were slight, and fully in accord with the unalterable physical facts. He was a pussy-cat in rehearsal, and it wasn't his fault that we ran out of time. Production numbers need a complicated camera plot and if just one camera blows a valve then the whole thing slows to a crawl. The clock dictated that we would get only one go at taping the complete ending, which was meant to be climaxed by me and the world's most famous tenor framed in a close two-shot as we led the singing of 'Auld Lang Syne'. You might think that a close two-shot with Pavarotti would need to be in Cinerama but actually it looked quite good. There was a potential problem, however, with the words. 'Clivay, what is the words of this song?' He already knew the melody but not the lyrics. I told him it would be no sweat. The words, I explained, were written in huge letters on a giant song sheet which would be lowered from the gallery at the right moment, and he just had to sing what he saw. With the clock ticking like a bomb, we launched into the production number, which went like a dream until

the backing track surged into the melody, the song sheet came winching down, and Luciano was faced with the first stanza. He managed the first three lines all right, but when he saw the final three words of the fourth line 'For the sake of auld lang syne' the whole town was suddenly underwater. He sang it as he saw it, which in this case, when you think about it, is the last thing anyone should do. The word 'ah-ooled' came out more or less all right, but the rest of it was an outtake from *La Bohème*. However weird it sounded, though, our duet looked superb, and I treasure it as one of my showbiz golden moments. A duet with the most famous singer of all time: tell me if it isn't among your dreams too. The confetti rained down, balloons were released, the great man opened his arms to embrace me as a Kodiak bear in black tie might approach its lunch, and I was in heaven. When we played the tape in real time after midnight, with more confetti and more balloons to augment what was already on the tape, the studio audience erupted, no doubt wondering where the beloved man was. He was already back in Italy, where the tax-gatherers and a phalanx of vengeful women were sharpening their knives for the moment when the magnificent beast would finally fall.

Heaven. I suppose it wasn't a metaphor. I loved doing that kind of television and I think it showed. But at the BBC it was getting increasingly difficult to do, because the paperwork and the pie charts were turning themselves into the main event. Birtism had its rationale. Even Richard admitted that. 'Something', he said, 'had to be done to sort this place out.' And Birt was prescient about the Web, for which he laid the foundations of a BBC presence that dominates the field today. But at the operational level the bureaucracy had become Kafkaesque. Nevertheless we were determined to persist. With the skilled advice of Norman North, we approached the management with our ideas for the next stage of our rolling contract. With the proviso that the End of the Year show should now be retired, our ideas consisted mainly of providing more of what we knew how to accomplish in the formats we had devised, with less administrative hassle in carrying out the work. Really we were saying that they could leave it to us and they would get a guaranteed return, with savings all round even though my own price had gone up. The efficiency we could offer would offset my fees, which, I should hasten to say, were minuscule compared with what happens today, although I would undoubtedly be doing a lot better than a taxi-driver. By a miracle, Alan Yentob was located, and persuaded by Will Wyatt, my oldest friend among the executives – he had risen to be the highest-placed operational officer in BBC television before you got to the level where programmes were never mentioned except in a language that only a Martian intelligence officer could decode – to attend a breakfast where negotiation could occur. The

negotiation went well and even Yentob pronounced himself satisfied with the prospects. He had to leave early for a meeting with Gustav Mahler or somebody but he wished us well, and I am sure he was sincere. (One of the many good things about him is that he is too rude to lie.) What happened next, however, was nothing. The paperwork was all prepared, but nobody in the continuously reorganized management seemed to have the power to sign it. Not even Will Wyatt, who was keen for the deal, could prevail upon the bean-counters to get their fingers out. For months, the nothing that had happened before was succeeded by the nothing that happened next. In desperation we tried to contact Yentob, hoping that he might translate his spoken approval into a written executive order. Nobody could find him. As always, rumours of his location abounded. He was on an ice floe in the Red Sea, in conversation with the Dalai Lama. He was in the Aleutians with Lord Lucan. Finally the day came when we could take no more. We had about fifty staff members milling about, talking about their mortgages. Just at that moment, by the kind of wild coincidence that looks like a plan only in retrospect, Richard and I were lunching in Mayfair with Jonathan Powell, who had powers of decision at ITV. Under the combined influence of Valpolicella and existential angst, we spilled our story and Jonathan made a suggestion. Suppose we made the same proposal to him, how would it be framed? We said that we could not only offer the same set of formats, we would undertake to organize their manufacture, through our own production company which we would set up for the purpose. So all he would have to do would be to pay the bill. Jonathan said that he had a cut-off point coming up because of the timing of the financial year, but if he could see all that in writing on his desk by the following Monday, he would sign it. Norman North spent the weekend rewriting the papers, they were delivered by courier, and the deal was done.

The news got out pronto throughout the industry, because an independent production company with just one on-screen asset was still quite rare. In fact David Frost's Paradine Productions was almost the only instance, and even he ran other horses if he could. Some of the independent outfits were already important. Cinema Verity, the organization put together by the prodigiously gifted Verity Lambert, had been a pioneer, but now there were Tiger Aspect, Hat-Trick, Talkback and others. Most of the others were grouped around John Lloyd, a creative demiurge whose every idea turned into an industry. All of these enterprises, however, had a whole range of on-screen personnel. Ours had just me. We didn't even have a name for the company. The moment that set the symbolic seal to our unusual move was a phone call I received in Cambridge. It was Alan Yentob. He was calling from the deck of Charles Saatchi's yacht in the Mediterranean. He sounded genuinely disappointed when he said, 'Clive, this is

one of the worst moments of my professional career. How did we lose you?’ But the bit that floored me was when he said, ‘Why didn’t you phone me?’ Never one for the right reply at the right time, for once I had the gumption to state the awkward truth. ‘Alan, we couldn’t find you.’

So the switch was made. I should say at this point, to stave off accusations of fickleness, that I am a believer in sticking with an institution even through its days of uncertainty. But a media organization is not like a royal family or a marriage. Wittgenstein said a game consists of the rules by which it is played. A media organization consists of the qualities it can bring about and protect. Its formal charter is a mere document if the things produced don’t live up to it. The BBC had a great tradition but it was going through a time when it was hard for someone like me to do his best work under its aegis. (The word ‘aegis’ repays study: it means a shield, not a set of shackles.) The opposition offered better opportunities for creative work, so I switched sides. Morecambe and Wise notoriously made a huge mistake when they transferred from the BBC to ITV, but they did it for the money, and fatally neglected the likelihood that their new employer would not have the production expertise to protect their work. But I wasn’t after the money, I was after the oxygen, and anyway our production skills belonged to us, not to the corporation. There is no need to accuse oneself of treason in such circumstances. One hasn’t deserted the King in his time of trouble. It is the duty of a cavalier, if the institution he serves should falter, to take his stand in the last ditch and die in a muddy shirt. But if a broadcasting company has become uninhabitable, then to transfer one’s efforts to a rival is logical, and if one does well in the new home it can only serve to remind the old one that it needs to get its act back together.

Over the course of twenty years I went from one side to the other as it suited my work, not my whim. The organizations, whatever they thought of themselves, were no better than what they could do. Though I believe that the BBC’s right to a licence fee, far from being a political imposition, is a political freedom that should be defended with all our hearts, not even the BBC deserves unquestioning loyalty from its creative personnel if it contrives to frustrate their efforts. I was loyal to both sides of television because I thought that they added up to the one valuable thing. In the whole period, whenever I was asked to make a speech to the Royal Television Society, I stressed the essential unity of the binary system, and I did the same when I wrote articles about the state of British television, a topic perennially fascinating to the press. Taking the task seriously, I kept the manuscripts of my ex cathedra pronouncements and eventually collected them into a volume called *The Dreaming Swimmer*, undoubtedly the thinnest of my essay collections, but with a solid subject, in my view. (The

reason that I no longer write such pieces is that I am out of touch with British television, because rather than suffer through the brain-curdling fatuities of *Celebrity Big Brother* I much prefer to sit up all night watching boxed sets of American television such as *The West Wing*, *The Sopranos*, *Entourage*, *30 Rock* and *The Wire*. Only a moron wouldn't.) The subject was the parallel structure of an industry, whose components drew part of their energy from the freedom to move between them.

I followed the same principle in the print media, and never lost a night's sleep when I jumped ship. When Faber and Faber were, in my opinion, slow to see the possibilities of what I could do best, I went to Jonathan Cape, who did see the possibilities, and twenty years later, when Cape showed signs of wanting me only for what suited them, I went to Picador, who were ready to see the possibilities in what might suit me. I was loyal to all of them. But first and foremost I was loyal to an ideal. It was the same with the *Observer*, which, after I left it, several times tried to ask me back. But if I thought the paper was being badly led, I never answered the call, and when I was asked to help with an *Observer* museum they had in mind, I told them that museums were for obsolete institutions. Really the media organizations aren't institutions at all, in the strict sense. They are facilities, and when they start laying claim to a perennial mystique it is usually a sign that they are in decay. So move to another, or start your own.

23. COMPANY STORE

To start your own media facility, however, you need a business brain. Luckily I had one, in the form of Richard Drewett. On my own, I could barely organize my own lunch. But Richard could have organized D-Day. It was a talent, and a talent will always express itself to the full if it can. Out in Sydney, where Richard was acting as my manager while I did some stage appearances, we sat beside the swimming pool of the Regent Hotel and worked on a name for our company. After two days and a stack of lists, I was the one who got struck by lightning. Richard was mad about classic watches. He had a collection of them, and would occasionally give me one to mark a significant occasion, even though he knew I never collected anything, was not interested in the value of objects, and would inevitably lose the gift or leave it lying neglected. (The only reason I have a drawer full of his gift watches is that I also neglect to throw anything out.) On every trip in any direction, Richard collected high-quality things, which he called ‘stuff’. In the duty-free shops he sought out the best stuff with the most favourable discounts. He had a collection of cameras. He had a collection of antique model cars that he added to in every city in the world. Richard never missed a bargain. He was systematic, for example, about keeping track of his air miles. I never did and still don’t. After a quarter of a century of flying everywhere, I probably could have piled up enough air miles for a free trip to the Moon. To the despair and wonder of my frugal family, I just couldn’t be bothered. It’s a bad character flaw and I’m sorry for it. I continually buy a new cheap watch because I abandon the old one when the battery runs out or when the wrist band rots through. You might ask why I don’t just reach into my drawer of Richard Drewett Presentation Classics, but they all need winding. My carelessness about what I strapped around my wrist was a particular puzzle to Richard, who wanted his watch to say ‘Cartier’ at the very least, even if he had to wind it every five minutes. ‘Do you realize the workmanship that goes into a thing like this?’ He was winding his latest treasure beside the swimming pool

when suddenly the perfect name hit me. Watchmaker. It was a pun. We would make people watch. And it was a simile. We would be meticulous craftsmen. It was neat and sweet. It was perfect. Richard said, 'That's it.'

So we built a company called Watchmaker. It was a huge job of organization and thank God it wasn't up to me. Richard and I were equal senior partners but he did the heavy lifting, starting with the working capital, which came from the Chrysalis corporation, by means of a management buy-out deal, timed to reach fruition in five years: a deal which I still don't understand today even in its smallest part. The simplest interpretation I can manage is that Chrysalis would share in the production fees we received from the television companies and when the lustrum expired near the end of the millennium, Chrysalis would reward us by buying the company back from us. You understand? Neither do I. But Richard, a very practical man, had it all taped. He was so practical that he realized we would need a junior partner as a programmes executive. From the several candidates we had in mind, we chose Elaine Bedell primarily because she had the fire to face us down whether separately or together. She started off by demanding a salary and a share fifty per cent bigger than the highest figure we had conceived of. There was no way of paying it without giving up some of our own whack, but we did it anyway.

After that, the fun started. Luckily I missed most of it. I just went to the office each day and tried to be grateful as it was steadily transformed from an empty space into a thriving community with all the right filing cabinets. Our first, temporary, office was a large suite of rooms in a building somewhere in the Ladbroke Grove area. The building was so anonymous that I can't even remember where it was, and seldom could remember at the time. I had to be delivered to it by car from my flat in the Barbican: from one dead zone to another. I still marvel at the patience of a bunch of people who could devote such meticulous labour to moving all their stuff into a place that they would soon have to move out of, but before we could switch to a permanent office on a whole floor of the Chrysalis building we had had to make our first programmes, just to stay in business. In those short five years of Watchmaker's existence there was a whole string of Postcard programmes made practically back to back, and that tempo was at its height in the very beginning of the company, so that I was filming when I wasn't flying, and flying when I wasn't filming.

The Bombay Postcard was typical of the tight new approach. We poured the effort into preparation so that not one precious hour on location was wasted. Mumbai, still called Bombay in those days (it is still called Bombay now by everyone in the city who doesn't care about nationalist posturing, which effectively means everyone), hit me right between the eyes from the moment we

moved into the Taj Mahal Hotel and I realized that most actual Indians had the same chance of seeing its lavish interior as they had of being invited to a White House ball. The story of the city was poverty, all right. The problem was not how to tell it, but how to tell anything else. Poverty got into everything. Anything that wasn't soaked in poverty had a view of poverty just outside the window. In streets that were already shanty towns, there were shanty towns in the gutters. All you had to do was point the camera. It was pointed by John Bowring, a well-fed Australian cameraman/director who was surprisingly light on his feet. He could do a smooth travelling shot while running backwards downstairs. When we filmed in the Pacific area we always used him because, based in Australia, he was less expensive on flight costs. Also he was exceptionally efficient, so the savings were doubled. And he was cheerful, which really helped. He had seen everything the Far East had to offer in terms of human suffering, but in Bombay even he sometimes surfaced from the eyepiece and said 'Christ almighty' after seeing something in the frame that passed all imagining for sheer misery. Yet that wasn't the whole story, even then. There was a new energy getting set to burst, rather like the bombs which terrorists were planting as their contribution towards solving the insoluble. If there was going to be an answer, prosperity was it, and prosperity was visibly getting started. Some of it took a ridiculous form, laying the place wide open for a standard City of Contrasts commentary. (In television documentaries, the phrase 'city of contrasts', along with 'land of contrasts', comes just behind 'meeting the challenge' and 'time was running out' as a sign that you won't be hearing anything remarkable.) If only to keep faith with the poor, I would try to do better than that.

The fine ladies of the social elite, all in their saris, gathered in a function room at the Hilton to check out Pierre Cardin's collection especially designed for India. Draped on loosely stalking imported models, none of his designs looked even remotely as good as the saris in the audience. Pierre Cardin himself, a carefully restored listed building in a suit, made an appearance at the end of the show, prancing on with the massed models and reaching down from the catwalk to make contact with a tiny percentage of the population of India, which he congratulated on its taste. I thought his own taste was exceeded for elegance by the merest fishwife, who could be filmed at the sea's edge as she came swerving through the uproar and the filth, her gracile figure infinitely poetic in an emerald sari as she balanced a basket of cuttlefish on her finely chiselled head. John Bowring caught her on a long lens against the gathering dusk and I already knew it would be the last shot of the finished movie, the shot over which I would narrate my conclusions. The beauty among the squalor was the key to the film's texture.

texture.

Other signs of incipient prosperity were a lot more fun than the irrelevant Frenchified frocks, which I knew I was going to call, in voice-over, the exact equivalent of coals to Newcastle. The burgeoning of a new Bombay could be seen at its most outrageous in Bollywood. Not yet world-famous but soon to be so, already the Bollywood system was generating half a dozen films a week and we went out to the main open-air set to include me in one of them. (This inclusion principle, by the way, had been pioneered long before by George Plimpton, and I lay no claim to its invention, although Plimpton, who had a solid literary background, seldom gave his television narrative the depth of his journalism: an opportunity which I thought was there to be taken.) In a musical drama telling the standard story of an attack by pirates on the stronghold of the runaway princess, I played a man with a moustache, a sword and pointed hat. The film was about as ludicrous as I was, but it was vital. The whole business was teeming with life. And the set itself was fascinating. It was a castle made of lath, plaster and cardboard, the whole thing painted silver. It must have cost fourpence and it looked like . . . well, I can't say it looked like a million dollars, even to the camera. It looked like a million rupees, which was only a few hundred quid, but all kinds of stuff was going on in its courtyards and on its battlements, and going on all the time. Everybody had a real job, even if it was only carrying props about. You would see a dozen blokes go tottering by carrying the components of a plaster pavilion. Miming their hearts out to booming dance tracks, some of the female stars were working on three different movies simultaneously. There were whole chorus lines of sinuous soubrettes with bare midriffs, the fake jewels plugged into their navels glittering like a sexy galaxy. The sense of purposeful occupation was a big contrast to what was happening in the streets of the city, which was nearly nothing, multiplied by millions and stirred into chaos. If a taxi broke down, a thousand people would gather to watch the driver failing to fix it. All of them found the camera even more fascinating than the taxi, so there was no choice except to make rubber-necking a theme of the movie. John Bowring was uncannily good at picking faces out of the crowd. When his eye was glued to the eyepiece, he had the precious gift of being able to scan with the other eye and spot opportunities. Very few cameramen can do that.

We filmed at a school for pavement children. Most of them, with no home except a traffic roundabout or a piece of tin in the gutter, had been employed collecting and sorting rubbish before they had been rounded up by the cops and forcibly enrolled at the school. Where they might go next, nobody could say, but it didn't look hopeful. Outside the school there were hundreds more urchins trying to get in: these didn't need to be rounded up because they had been lured

trying to get in. These didn't need to be rounded up, because they had been lured by rumours of a free sandwich every day. Filming inside the school playground late one morning, I spotted, among the shouting crowd of dust-balls at the gate, a particular face, and asked John to get a shot of him. I knew already that the question of what would happen to him would be at the core of the movie. I didn't yet know that it would also be at the core of a novel, but I figured it out before we left the city, and I wrote the first chapter on the plane home.

The urge to write *The Silver Castle* was my first big clue that the Postcard format, much as I treasured it, would eventually not be sufficient to make me feel that I was covering a subject. Some subjects need a deeper texture than film to ponder, and poverty is one of them, because the camera always glamorizes it no matter how honestly you shoot. For one thing, a picture doesn't stink, so that when you get a close-up of tots playing in a puddle of raw sewage, their paddling pool will just look shiny, without wrenching your guts. And anyway, I was telling a story about my real, non-media self: a story which would have been an indulgence on film. The hopeless little boy at the gate could have been me. If I had been born in Bombay, minus the advantages I had inherited without effort in democratic and prosperous Australia, I would have had no chance. As it turned out, the novel had no chance either. I still don't quite see why. Perhaps there were just too many novels about India written by real Indians. I thought *The Silver Castle* by far my best stretch of fictional writing. As usual, most publications handed it for review to their resident wag, on the principle that a television face who had produced a book was asking for the same treatment as a dog doing new tricks, and that the wag, suitably inspired by contempt, would produce 'lively copy' as he dipped into his own well of comic inspiration. (My main reason for hating such treatment wasn't the injury to my self-esteem, but that I was always revolted by the idea of being enrolled, even inadvertently, in a conspiracy to bore the public.) But the book got some very good reviews in Britain and Australia, even from some of the older reviewers who were still wedded to the belief that media prominence had got in the way of my true vocation. Anthony Thwaite, a senior poet of real stature, wrote a review for the *Telegraph* that answered all my prayers. But reviews don't sell a book, although they can certainly help to bury one. Later on I was told that if I had held the book back until Bollywood became an international news story ten years later I might have had a hit. But no complaints, and the book did well enough, after it got to paperback, to pay for itself, if no more. It just refused to take off towards any level beyond respectability, and in America it died the death even with the logo of Random House on its spine. The *New York Times* review killed it at birth.

With thousands of books a week to choose from, Michiko Kakutani, tenured star book reviewer for the *New York Times*, could choose one book a week to review and decide its fate. She chose *The Silver Castle*, a book which I had thought to be seriously concerned with the effects of Indian poverty. She, however, by the application of her critical powers, was able to detect that I had been insufficiently concerned with the effects of Indian poverty. Bombay, she explained, is full of poor people. Michiko has been kind to other books I have written since, so I must be prudent in what I say, and my American publishers would have a fit at the very idea of my bringing her authority into question. But really, this prostration before a guru is one of the most unsettling things about America. Especially in the field of culture, gurus acquire an absurd degree of authority. They become immortal legends without having lived in the first place. In the benighted heyday of old Broadway, the *New York Times* theatre reviewer, a worthy plodder called Brooks Atkinson, could kill a play in a single night. More recently, the ineffable Michiko can kill a book. She is better qualified than Atkinson ever was, but the great German man of letters Marcel Reich-Ranicki was right when he said that a critic, though he might write a death certificate, should never have the power to write a death sentence.

I had bigger trouble with *The Silver Castle* than that, however. I had handed Jonathan Cape what I thought was a striking novel about India, but for some reason they couldn't supply it with a striking design. One design after another came up looking no more interesting than a panoramic photograph of Swindon. Tom Maschler was seldom on the scene any more – while retaining an advisory role, he had cashed in his pile of chips and retired to a villa in France – but on a trip back to London he agreed that the proposed final design for the book looked like nothing, and he joined me at the computer while we patched something together from material on the Web. But I regarded the company's lack of concern as the writing on the wall, and when the new chief executive suggested that my next book of essays, provisionally entitled *Even As We Speak*, might have to wait for an extra year, I took it as a sign that I was being put up with. Peter Straus, the chief executive at my paperback publishers, Picador, had been saying for several years that he would like, if he could, to publish me 'vertically' (it meant that he would do the hardback as well as the paperback) and after a quick conversation with Pat Kavanagh I fired the signal to jump ship. My pangs of compunction lasted exactly one and a half minutes. When they take you for granted it's time to go.

All this happened in London, where I seldom was. Mainly I was in mid-air, or what felt like it even if I was on the ground. In Mexico City there was more poverty, but it was tidier. Mexico City has more people in it than the whole of

Australia and most of them are a lot less well off than the people who govern them. This imbalance has obtained since the time of the Aztecs, and even today, with the vaunted 'permanent revolution' solidly installed and universal justice theoretically secured for all time, the centre of the city, dominated by a cathedral steadily sinking into the earth, is still the place to hang out if you want to see what a power structure can do to a population when it gets out of hand. In the normal course of events, however, the poor people are out at the periphery. The periphery was bigger than anything we could hope to film without a fleet of helicopters. In the centre, things looked more picturesque than desperate. The begging groups who had trekked in from the hinterland put on a little circus at the traffic island, so that when you tossed some money to a couple of kids in clown costumes you could congratulate yourself you were rewarding enterprise. The rich, in fact, evoked as much pity as the poor. We filmed a wedding party for one of the unluckily privileged children of a wealthy banker at his hacienda. Masquerading as an old-style landowner in real life, in his fantasy life he masqueraded further as a cowboy, complete with tight trousers, jangling spurs and a sombrero that could have been worn simultaneously by all three of the Three Amigos. He gave us a self-satisfied interview that might have been designed to incite the next revolution. A whole phalanx of such off-putting plutocrats played collective host to us at a rodeo in an arena in the heart of the city. Horsemen in big sombreros raced towards our camera and came to a stop. At least they stopped in the right spot – I still had memories of Willie Nelson – but as with almost all horse-based activities anywhere in the world that are accompanied with many a cry of 'Hey, Hey!' in whatever language, there was an irreducible boredom to it all. We had planned some extra life for the scene by getting me trained to whirl a lariat. Naturally I was dressed as a cowboy in an absurdly big sombrero. It was hard to get the effect of an absurdly big hat when everybody else's hat was absurdly big already, but my tight outfit helped. As with the other numerous facetious outfits I wore on location in the course of twenty years, the publicity stills of my Mexican cowboy incarnation are still out there in the database somewhere, patiently waiting to decorate my obituary. Before we get to the stirring scene when I twirled the lariat at the rodeo, let me digress for a moment on the tedium of being photographed.

Being photographed for publicity stills is something that should not happen to normal human beings if they can avoid it. Perhaps optimistically, I never ceased to regard myself as one of those, but I couldn't dodge the chore. It's in the nature of the business. If you dress up in the movie, the publicity stills show what you look like dressed up. Usually, in any medium, I learned to cope with the chores by making a performance out of them: when pushing a book on radio, for

example, it takes less out of you, and makes more sense, to be prepared even if your interviewer isn't. If he hasn't read it, don't tell him he's a dunce, tell him that your book would be the most exciting thriller since *Thunderball* if it wasn't marred by an excessive number of sex scenes. But there was no redeeming a publicity-stills photo session. I could have wept with boredom as I posed endlessly in this hat and that hat. I wore white suits for the sun, wetsuits for the surf, black boots for the boondocks, high heels for the nightclubs. Invariably the photographer kept on shooting until I twinkled. In real life I seldom twinkle, but when a photographer was giving me the benefit of his bedside wit I would finally twinkle to shorten the agony. 'Smile, Clive. It might never happen. Come on, give us a smile.' A tiny, dull gleam of weathered teeth would appear, and that was the shot they used. Gradually, over the course of decades, an archive accumulated, featuring a man whose mirth was irrepressible, a fountain of merriment at the fall of civilization. Always the shot I hated most was the one that got into print.

Strangely enough, being photographed for the literary papers and magazines was even worse. Every publication always wanted its very own portrait photograph of me, even though it could scarcely be much different from the portrait I sat for the previous week. You might think that nothing apart from my unfortunate physical appearance could make a literary portrait shot look weird, but you would be wrong. A short lens can make Hugh Grant look like a conger eel poking its head out of a hole in the coral. And once again, the photographer will want you to twinkle, even if the picture is meant to decorate an article about your book about the Gulag. (Editors call it 'a wry smile'. Have you ever wanted to extend your acquaintance with anyone who smiles wryly?) On being told that you would sooner die in a pool of your own vomit, the photographer, conceding that you might look more impressive being thoughtful, suggests that you will look even more thoughtful if you cup your chin in your hand, preferably with one or more fingers extended upwards. Since nobody ever does this in real life even to scratch a pimple beneath the eye, the fingers-to-the-face portrait looks as artificial as can be, but that's exactly why the photographers want it: it looks like a photograph. So they keep on at you until they get it. American female photographers are the worst. They all want to be Annie Liebowitz, and they will assure you that with your fingers to your face you look more thoughtful than their favourite philosopher, Deepak Chopra. Timidly you give in, just once, and from the several hundred individual frames that have been secured in the course of an entire hour – another chunk of your life gone – the one that the editor will use is the one where you have your fingers to your face. I have thrown in this apparent digression mainly to suggest the way in which, over the course of

years, the little, incidental irritations can mount up to sap your will for pursuing a larger object. The larger object might be a more attractive prospect than, say, coal-mining, but the irritations are like the drip of water on your helmet. Eventually you will tear it off and crawl screaming back down the tunnel. But Mexico awaits, and the hushed arena in which the gringo will twirl his lariat.

Guess what, I twirled my lariat and it went nowhere. The scene was a dud, plus a funny hat. But at least, in voice over, I could contrast my lack of skill with the undoubted expertise of our chosen young bullfighter. Called something like Pedro Cojones, he was a truly gorgeous young man who would have looked good in overalls, but in his tightly fitting *traje de luces*, the suit of lights, he was so beautiful he looked sacred. We shot the build-up to his big day and as part of his preparation he managed to seduce the prettiest girl on our production team. Engaged to be married when she got back to England, famously faithful to her fiancé, she was a byword for strict ethics, but she wasn't going to miss out on Pedro. Not this time. Just this once. No doubt buoyed up by his exotic conquest – the endless supply of local beauties scarcely counted in his estimation – Pedro, on the appointed day, killed one bull after another without even bending his sword. It went straight in, every time. Hemingway was fond of saying that you should not condemn bullfighting until you see it. I saw it and I condemned it immediately. Indeed I was rather glad of the transmission rule which dictated that we would not be able to show the Moment of Truth, which looked to me like the Moment of Butchery whatever way you sliced it. But Pedro sure looked good when he swung the cape, and there was no denying that the legato linking of the different passes, the *faena*, had a kind of poetry. This macho thing had something to it: just not enough. As the basis for a view of life, it had the incurable drawback of adding more cruelty to a world that was already choking on it.

The exaltation of machismo took a more palatable form when I interviewed the writer Carlos Fuentes in the library of his house. In Mexico City the architecture that really counts is within doors. The old public buildings aren't bad, but inside a modern house you see a different kind of creativity, less monumental but much more human. The library of Carlos Fuentes was a masterpiece. So was his face. Carlos looks the way a writer should look but so few writers do. There are always a few good-looking writers on the scene. My friend Ian Hamilton could brood so darkly it was unfair, and the merest smile from the poet Mick Imlah – dead too soon, alas – would make women lean together to console each other for the pain in their breasts. But most writers look like the wreck of the Hesperus. Carlos, however, was up there with Benicio del Toro, or Antonio Banderas without the pout. For me, though, the centre of

fascination lay in his books. There was shelf upon shelf of Aguillar editions, their spines gold-stamped on maroon morocco. I lusted after them. They were a reminder of what I should be doing.

In Mexico City I did quite a lot of it, but only with difficulty, because there was very little downtime. The *New Yorker* had asked me to review a new book by Daniel Goldhagen called *Hitler's Willing Executioners*. The book advanced the idea that all Germans, whether Nazis or not, had been out to kill Jews. Though it might conceivably have done something to counteract the perilous delusion that only the Nazis had been in on the conspiracy, I thought Goldhagen's thesis was even more perilous in the other direction, because the last tactic you should use in condemning racism is to indulge in a new racism of your own. I thought that this diligent young academic's brainwave blurred the point of the whole tragedy, and I was eager to rebut it, but my argument needed a lot of backing up and of course I didn't have my own library with me, so I had to rely on my memory when I wrote the piece. Tina liked what she saw when I faxed it through to the *New Yorker* but she wanted more of it, so that she could uprate it from a book review to a 'Critic at Large' piece for the middle of the magazine. That requirement altered the proportions of every paragraph, so I had to write it again.

It was a bit of a wrench to be working on such a serious piece of writing late at night and then heading out in the early morning for a day on the pleasure canals where punt-loads of citizens were poled about among the overhanging trees, singing the while and downing the soda pop. By then the mariachi trios, omnipresent in the city, had become our running gag, popping up all the time like a triple-threat version of Kato in the Inspector Clouseau movies, but with less musical interest. Every trio had only two songs, and both of them were versions of 'Guantanamera', one of those international ditties favoured by tourist parties and holiday makers who can't sing but won't be stopped from trying. They want to hear 'Guantanamera' from a mariachi trio, so that they can join in. They want to hear the song delivered at high volume from beneath big sombreros while guitars are hammered in unison, six rows of unkempt teeth are bared and skin-tight velvet trousers pop at the seams. In our pleasure-garden sequence there was no need to bring in a mariachi trio from the city in order to cap the gag. There were mariachi trios lurking in the shrubbery and hiding in single file behind trees. Stealth is part of every mariachi trio's plan because the element of surprise is thought to be crucial, in order to maximize your delight. The essential purpose of a mariachi trio is to show up suddenly wherever you are and whatever you are doing – burying your uncle, for instance – and start singing 'Guantanamera'. In my punt, suitably staffed with extras hired for a few

pesos and a free tortilla, we got the shot when our chosen mariachi trio leapt aboard and burst into 'Guantanamera'. Then we got the same shot from the bank of the canal. 'Guantanamera', they howled. Then we got the same shot from the other bank. 'Guantanamera', they howled again. I stayed alert, but all the time I couldn't stop thinking about Hitler, who had the power to stop this kind of thing with a written order. There would have been three closely spaced pistol shots and that would have been it.

24. FIRST TANGO

Back in my London library, I checked all the references in my Goldhagen piece, which I entitled 'Hitler's Unwitting Exculpator', and sent it off. Then began the notorious process of *New Yorker* fact-checking, by which one of the magazine's vast graduate research team rings up the Professor of Political Science at the University of Heidelberg in the middle of the night to establish incontrovertibly that Germany is in Europe. But I try not to inveigh against the fact-checkers because often enough they save you from a howler. It's the magazine's style police, the ones who wreck your rhythm for the sake of a comma, who drive me nuts. This time Tina had them under the gun and the text was finalized within a week. When the piece came out, it generated a big postbag, most of it in approval. There were even family members of Holocaust victims who approved: they agreed that to say everybody was guilty was just another way of saying that nobody was. But the note of approval that moved me most was verbal. It came from Ian McEwan, who said, '*That* is what you should be doing.' It moved me to anxiety, because I knew he was right. The time was coming when I would have to get back to bedrock. I still believed that my work in television was giving me a wider scope, but here was a reminder that it would take concentration to go deep, and there was only so much of life left.

By then, Watchmaker was installed in its permanent home on two whole floors of the Chrysalis building, not far from Lad-broke Grove station and a million miles from anywhere you would like to be. Inside our teeming complex I had my own little office with a door I could close and a z-bed inside on which I could stretch out for an hour's sleep every day after lunch, thereby turning every day's work into two. I needed the extra time because the work-rate kept on going up. Since I was still the only asset, the fifty or so toilers outside my door were all dependent on my health, so I suppose it was no surprise that they catered to my every whim, including a cup of tea every fifteen minutes. (When we were writing together, Bostock drank twice as much tea as I did: nobody knew at the

time that it was a form of caffeine addiction. We thought we were high on our own inspiration.) It would have been nice to have been spoiled by such attentiveness but there wasn't time. Apart from our office management squad, the key factor in holding the whole enterprise together was Richard's secretary, Wendy Gay, an orchidaceous bombshell who dressed like a film star from the early 1950s, with high-piled spun gold hair, cinched waist, stiff petticoats and peekaboo shoes. At first acquaintance, the unwary tended to belittle her until she quietly corrected their spelling. She wrote short stories about the death of Jayne Mansfield but she was so full of smiling life that it was almost a joke. The best kind of joke, however: we were always glad to see her in the morning as she bopped around getting things done. In the evening she was still doing that. She made a point of telling me, when she thought I was being a sad sack, that life was very brief. Since she had seen scarcely thirty years of life herself, this was quite a perception.

There was another reminder of life's brevity in Buenos Aires, where we almost got our director killed. All my other cameramen/directors won't mind my saying that Robert Payton was the most accomplished of their breed I ever worked with, because only he had something they hadn't: a spare silver camera box full of vintage wines. Rob had a gift for not lowering his standard of living when he was on the road. Emperor of the air miles, king of the upgraded ticket, he rivalled even Richard in collecting high-quality stuff. Unusually for a sybarite, he was also very quick on the uptake, so it was a rare lapse when he set up the camera on a tripod to film the gauchos taking delivery of their new horses. Out on the pampas, the gauchos form a camp once a year so that the older men can stun the youngsters with their skill at breaking in the *postros*, the next generation of their flying steeds. As noted earlier, horse-related activities are almost invariably tedious, but when a grizzled old gaucho on board an insane young horse comes thundering towards you it can be quite exciting. Too exciting, in this case. Ideally Rob should have had the camera on his shoulder, so that he could move with it. But he had his eye glued to a camera that wasn't going anywhere. The old man on board the horse was waving his hat and shouting an imprecation which, we were told later on, was the dialect version of 'This horse is out of control. Get out of there or die.' Valiantly filming until the last moment, Rob finally took off and left the camera to its fate. The *postro* went straight through it, pausing only to turn around and start kicking it to bits while the experienced old gaucho left the saddle, hat in hand, described a high parabola and dived head first into the crowd of his cheering colleagues.

Apart from his courage, technical acumen and tireless cunning in search of the *petit bonheur*, Rob had the precious, ego-free gift of trusting me when I thought

I was on to something. When the gauchos sat down at a trestle table to eat, they were served with plates of meat straight from the fire. Their only eating utensil was the knife each of them carried at his waist. Each gaucho would hold a hunk of meat in one hand, stick the end of it in his mouth, and cut off a chewable piece close to his teeth with an upward swipe of the knife. The knife would go very close to his nose. I asked for one specific shot after another of different gauchos doing this. I had already spotted that one of the gauchos had the end of his nose prominently wrapped in sticking plaster, perhaps because of a boil. Rob got the shot without my even asking because he had already guessed that I would climax the sequence in voice-over by saying that this method of dining was a test of manhood.

Things threatened to be less interesting back in town. The way our hotel in the high-tab Recoleta district fleeced us would have been a story in itself, had we been able to tell it. Phone calls home were out of the question because of the mark-up, and the laundry service was so expensive that we had to do all our washing in a laundrette. But the hotel managers were offering us their bargain showbiz deal – the full whack was set at the spending levels of an Arab prince – and we couldn't rat them out. Nor was there any filming my discovery of Henschel's bookshop. Henschel has gone out of business by now but at the time he still tended his books personally. The bookshop was in a big room a flight up from one of the cross-streets leading off the downtown end of the Avenida Corrientes, and of all the bookshops in the world that I have ever haunted it was my top favourite. A lot of German Jewish refugees had come to Buenos Aires and later on a lot of Nazi refugees came there as well, so the stock was an enticing mixture for any student of European cultural disaster in the twentieth century. In the next few years I spent thousands of pounds in there and the results fill the shelves before me as I write this. But my discovery of the place would have made a dull sequence. There was another scene available, however, that filmed like a dream. It was the tango.

How a dance so complicated, refined and beautiful had come to being in Argentina is a question that still puzzles scholars. Little else about Argentina is notable for those qualities. As Juan Perón and his dreadful wife proved, they couldn't even do populism without turning it into fascism – 'We shirtless ones!' Evita would cry to the peasants, rattling her jewellery at them – and the adventure in the Malvinas had proved that a whole junta of generals, otherwise quite efficient at things like electric torture, had been too dumb to realize that they were picking on a dragon. As previously noted, no country with an ample supply of meat on the hoof has much idea of how to cook it, but the way the most famous meat eatery in Buenos Aires presented its product left any

restaurant in Nairobi looking like Maxim's. We filmed a sequence where I lunched alone, from a mixed grill called an *asada grande*. Every cut and kind of beef in Argentina had been heaped on the plate after being incinerated with napalm. Though Buenos Aires fancied itself as the most European city in Latin America, the resemblances were notional in all respects, and yet out of all the uproar of pretension, inflation and macho posturing had come this poem of a dance.

On an afternoon recce at one of the daylight ballrooms I took one look at the dancing couples and had my big idea. We had already filmed me having elementary lessons so that I could chug about the floor in the required graceless manner while the locals provided a stunning contrast, but the question remained of how to shoot the story on the night. Here in the afternoon, with the windows full of sunlight and no romantic atmosphere whatsoever, the best of the couples were creating poetry. I could see that the Argentinian tango was nothing like the Hollywood version, in which rigid poses are dramatically struck while a rose is passed with stunning brutality from one set of teeth to another. The real thing was more like an ideal conversation. Like the local version of the Spanish language, which features a smooth, sumptuous, almost Russian 'zh' sound for the double 'l', every step was a smooth glide, one step sliding without a break into the next, the progress of one partner providing a silent commentary to the progress of the other. I watched one young man, about my height, performing a series of smoothly connected steps that sent his lovely partner through a whole linked sequence of attitudes you could have stopped with a still camera at any time and you would have had a picture to hang on your wall. She looked like a heavenly visitation and it was partly because of what he was doing. I knew I couldn't do that, but suddenly I wanted something more illustrative than just cutting from him being brilliant to me being awful. Then I noticed that he looked, from the waist down at least, roughly the same as me. He even had the same shade of dark blue suit.

Rob got the idea as soon as I explained it. On the night, in a tango salon full of carefully cast extras, we shot plenty of coverage of me lurching through the elegant milieu with a champion female in my arms. Though I was theoretically leading her, she was actually doing most of the steering, by squeezing me in the right places. She was so commanding that she could probably have made me do cartwheels, but the tango isn't an athletic feat, it's a visible meditation. I could, however, with her subtle guidance, manage just well enough to get along. Having secured the master shot, our next task was to do a close-up which gradually travelled down my body as I danced. Then we shot the good guy's legs as he did a dazzlingly intricate set of *giros*, turning on the spot with much

flashing of the spare foot while my partner's pretty shoes whirled around him through the frame. This was timed so that it could be inserted between the shot travelling down my body and another shot travelling in the other direction. When the footage got back to the editing room, it would be possible to turn my lower body into a genius before panning back up to reality, at which point I could announce in voice-over that it was all a dream. I knew on the spot that it would all work exactly as planned. I hadn't learned much yet about dancing the tango, but I had learned something about making movies. Fifteen years before, I would have had no clue how to achieve that sequence, even if I had been capable of thinking it up.

These were the little triumphs that I took away from the programmes I was making, and I still like to think that the results were worth the effort. Even the most acute critics rarely noticed how the work was done, because they themselves had not been through the slog. Like any other form of art, it had to be done first of all for its own sake. I didn't mind that. The ability to plough a lonely furrow without much thought of immediate applause is one of my strengths, if I have any. There could be no question, though, that I was feeling the squeeze. As the programmes got nearer to where I thought they ought to go, the urge to have done with them and do something else crept further into my mind: it's the weakness that goes with the strength, a restlessness born of the very ambition that gets things made in the first place. (The supreme case of that itch was Leonardo da Vinci, but he was a truly terrible tango dancer.) At least the weekly show still had a glaring gap: we still had no reliable way of ending it. Doing a final dance with the star guest was all right if the guest was Dannii Minogue or Victoria Wood, but if it was, say, Sir Richard Attenborough, then the effect could be less disarming.

Out of nowhere, our problem was solved. We had a stringer in New York whose life was spent collecting awful things for us off the cable channels: biker astrologists, transvestite psychics, body-building sexologists, stuff like that. He lived in a cold-water flat somewhere on the Upper West Side dodging cockroaches the size of rats while he survived on pizza. One night he was watching a cable channel unbelievably called Channel 69. Exercising their rights under the First Amendment, anyone at all could pay ten dollars and go on Channel 69 to do a number, because in America everyone is entitled to self-expression: it's in the Constitution. Our stringer was halfway through a five-cheese pizza with extra cheese when he was suddenly face to face with an Hispanic woman in a green feather boa singing the Lionel Ritchie hit 'Hello' while she pounded away at a Yamaha portable piano. He had never seen anything like her in his life and for a while he thought there might be something

wrong with the pizza, but when he recovered his mind he sent me a video by courier. The video had the artist's name handwritten on the label. It was Margarita Pracatan.

I took one look at her in action and realized that it was payday. Against the evidence of his senses, I persuaded Richard that Margarita was a yodelling bonanza. The musician in Richard rebelled against the notion but the showman in him recognized that she had the screen presence of an avalanche. There was a new season of ten programmes coming up and we had a hole to fill. I suggested that we fly her in for a couple of days, shoot ten numbers, and fly her out again. If it didn't work, it would cost us no more than an economy-class return ticket and a cheap hotel bill. On that basis, he agreed, and that's what we did.

After she arrived at Heathrow, and managed to hustle her boa through customs without having it quarantined, we didn't see much of the actual Margarita, because she went straight from jet-lag to the taping session and then back to the airport. But we tacked her first number, 'Hello', on to the end of our first programme, and she was an immediate sensation. Twirling her boa, shaking her spangles, hammering away at the helpless Yamaha, filling the screen to the very edge with her hair extensions, in every sense she was bigger than I was, and by the end of the first season I was a guest on my own show. I didn't begrudge that at all. Enjoying the accomplishments of others is one of my few virtues and I regard my happiness for Margarita's success as the clearest proof.

To jump forward a bit, the enjoyment was put to a harsher test the following year. It was my mistake. I suggested that we do it right this time: fly her in for the whole season and back her up with a band. We had the excellent Harry Stoneham and his quintet as a resident orchestra and the musical aspect went quite well. Margarita had no real idea of standard musical rhythm but she had a brio – not say a *rubato* and a *basso profundo* – that was all her own, and anyway Harry, who had seen it all, could have provided the musical accompaniment for a banshee. The difficulties arose from the awkward fact that Margarita was high maintenance. She was even more exuberant when she wasn't singing than when she was. 'Darleeng!' she would cry to a policeman. 'I LARV YOU!' Like many Cubans she sat down to dinner at midnight and was still dancing on the table at dawn. We had to provide one of our young men to look after her and she was using them up at the rate of one a week. The connection was purely Platonic but the guys had to eat amphetamines to stay with her. Just to use up some of her energy we sent her out on a theatrical tour. The audiences loved her, especially when she climbed down among them and sat on their laps. But there was a downside. She was making a lot of money and she did not always spend it wisely from our angle. She spent some of it on singing lessons: the last thing we

wanted. But you couldn't blame her. Despite the contrary evidence supplied by her songs in English, she could sing quite accurately in Spanish (things went wrong in English only because she would forget which word came next) and understandably she wanted to improve her gift, as all true artists do. The audience was puzzled, however, when she launched into a string of Vikki Carr hits in the original lingo. With Margarita in our lives, we could never relax – a frequent result when you finally meet your dream girl.

But the weekly show was now clearly in its most fully developed form. Though Bostock and I still had an indecent amount of fun writing it, there were no new techniques left to discover. (In the next generation, the brilliant Harry Hill would take the business of interacting with snatched footage to a whole new level, but the electronics he uses now weren't available then even for a cruise missile.) The same should have been harder to say about the Postcards. After all, they had a different subject every time. Yet my own part in them was becoming predictable to me, if not to the audience. Quite often, in any form of creativity, you hit the point where you are walking in your sleep. So it proved with *Postcard from Berlin*. I pulled all my now standard tricks, including driving the bad car, dressing up for the bad party and eating in the bad restaurant. But the subject was so rich that the whole thing pulled itself together as if pre-ordained. A lot of this was due to a new producer, Martin Cunning.

He's a media tycoon now and it's no surprise, but he himself would have been surprised had he been told his future when he first came to us. So broke that he was sleeping under a bridge, he was so young that his long trousers looked like an affectation. He had a lop-sided smile that went halfway around his head, and his Scottish accent was so thick that I couldn't understand a word. Richard and Elaine, however, both spotted him, correctly, as a fountain of ideas, which he advanced with daunting certitude and defended with bitter scorn. Generously, however, he paid attention to what I wanted to do in Berlin. This time I wanted to get the history in, because the history was everything. The Wall was down and some of the old Weimar Berlin had come back, but the Nazis were still a terrible memory. In the East of the city, though the skyline was thick with cranes, the old buildings still bore, all the way to the rooftops, the grey tidemark of the dreary empire that had retreated to the east before it boiled away. Somehow we had to get that in. It would mean doing a lot of narration while I drove the car.

The car was a Trabant from the communist era and it was perfect casting. We didn't have to rig it to emit smoke, go backwards at the wrong moment and burst into flames. It did all that anyway. Up and down the Unter den Linden I drove, popping and banging through the Brandenburg Gate time after time. Goebbels had once ordered the Nazi torchlight parade to do the same thing while he

improved the lighting. He was there ahead of us. So, of course, was Hitler. One of the best things we did in Berlin was to realize that the bunker where he spent his last days was a key location. There was nothing left to look at except a low bump in the wasteland, but the very fact that it looked like nothing made it mean everything. We got a long shot of me standing there in my blue suit on the apparently meaningless heap of dirt. But I knew what my voice-over was going to be. Finally it had come to this.

Hitler had never loved Berlin and I didn't either. It was history I was in love with, and here was the place to talk about it, at its focal point. The great buildings are mainly a long way out of town, in the Mark Brandenburg, and most of the city was architectural blah: shop windows in the West, the old stone-faced apartment buildings in the East, block after block. But if I had been a young student again, and just starting off in Europe, I would have started there rather than in London or Paris. I would have had a room in Prenzlauerberg and sat at a table outside one of the cafes writing poems to the Russian waitresses. The story of the city in its dreadful modern times would have become mine. I tried to make it mine even though it was too late. The attempt to understand twentieth-century politics – by now I was writing about almost nothing else – had become one of my preoccupations, joining the urge to write poetry at the centre of my mental life. For a writer, comprehension is as close to being politically effective as he can ever get, or ever should. In the few years since the Wall came down, a seismic shift in the world's political history had taken place, and I had played no part in it except, I hoped, to understand it.

The Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia had partly been made possible by the ability of the leaders to communicate by computer. Harold Pinter had bought a computer for Vaclav Havel. The new President was lastingly grateful to Pinter and took care to be gentle every time he had to tell his fellow playwright, during one of Pinter's visits to liberated Prague, to go easy on his tirades about the ruthlessness of the Americans when everybody listening to him was still getting over the ruthlessness of the Russians. But Pinter, though his geopolitical picture was essentially a prop doorway through which he could make entrances in profile, had his heart in the right place, and giving Havel a computer was exactly the right thing to do. I bought a computer for Rita Klimova. Though she died of leukaemia not long after the victory, she had been a vital figure in her country's recovery of its freedoms. But all I had done was write a cheque.

Later on I wrote a few more cheques for the Viborg, the outfit, headed by Olga Havel, that devoted itself to the endless task of looking after some of the thousands of wrecked people left behind by a regime so dedicated to pollution that the children's milk was full of acid rain. Olga had already suffered enough

but she volunteered to suffer some more because she thought it was her duty. With the aid of my good friend Diana Phipps, who had now returned to her homeland in her original role as Countess Sternberg, Olga coped nobly with the heartbreaking task of bringing a measure of redress to a river of human ruin. Very feminine and graceful in appearance, she had an iron soul and could be quite tough with fools and bores. I was dining with her once at a restaurant beside the river. The steak was a challenge – unlike in Argentina, it had probably never been very good even while it was alive – and she caught me picking my teeth with a fingernail. She handed me a toothpick. I liked her for that. But financing a computer and a couple of oxygen machines for blue babies was as close as I ever physically got to being effective in the biggest set of European events in the late twentieth century. Mentally, however, I was right in the middle of it, and never more so than in Berlin. This, I finally realized, was why I had been collecting and reading all those old books that had been scattered across the world.

What I loved about young Martin was that he could go with my ideas even when he could not foresee how they would add up until we got the footage home. He could read my heart, if not my mind. It was easy for him to let me have my head when one of the Trabi's regular nervous breakdowns happened at a set of traffic lights in the West as night fell on a long day's work. A sports car full of party girls slowed down to heckle me and I thought of a sequence on the spot. We enrolled the girls, rigged more lights, and went on shooting for an hour so it would appear that the car full of raving lovelies stopped beside me, told me to follow them to a party and then, when the lights changed and I put my foot down to roar off after them, the Trabi went backwards before conking out. A baby spotlight clipped under the dashboard lit up my face to show me doing my patent resigned-loser look. It was an expensive hour but the results would obviously be worth the graft.

It was far less obvious that the outcome would be worth it when I asked for a whole afternoon of filming in the Ploetzensee prison, where the conspirators of 20 July 1944 were executed after the failure of their plot against Hitler's life. Once again, like Hitler's bunker, the location looked like nothing. But I knew what had happened there. I knew that the sluice in the middle of the stone floor was where the blood had gone after victims were guillotined, and that the rail high up at one end of the room was where the hooks had been from which the July conspirators had been hanged to strangle slowly in nooses of thin wire. Martin got the point, and okayed the extended static shots which would give me the space to tell the story when we got home. I was already writing the commentary in my head, though, while we were filming in the execution

chamber. I never wrote anything more carefully in my life. The brightest of the conspirators had known that they would probably fail. But they went ahead anyway, because they thought it was a ceremony. I respected that ceremony. To understand, and to express, why their practical failure was a spiritual triumph – that would be my contribution. Increasingly I was becoming aware that such understanding was all I was good for. But I never belittled the privilege of being able to express it in a mass medium. I thought it was one of the things television should do, and precisely because the audience had not read all the books. Ideally, I thought, an entertainment programme of any kind should bring the human world in, not shut it out: and history was the supreme example of the human world. This conviction, however, was on a collision course with the oncoming celebrity culture, which would have no concern with the past, and exist only in the present. But I was slow to accept that. Like a hedgehog on the highway, bathed in the lights of an oncoming truck, I persisted in believing there might be room for both of us. The Postcard programmes meant a lot to me. Readers today might wonder why. Later on the format became a staple, with every known comedian sent off to be astonished by a City of Contrasts. But it was less usual then, and I thought it my best chance to say something serious in an entertaining way. I still have critics who suppose that I can have no reason for doing that except to show off. But I never struck myself as an egotist: more as someone with a sense of duty who might fail to fulfil it if his concentration lapsed. Although there again, I suppose, only an egotist would think that. Quicker to plead guilty.

25. IN THIS VALLEY OF DYING STARS

Most of the stars of *Postcard from Berlin* had been a long time dead. Our leading lady was Marlene Dietrich, represented by her gravestone, and her voice over the closing titles as she sang '*In den Ruinen von Berlin*'. In Los Angeles most of our stars were alive, although some of them were teetering on the brink. The movie pullulated with famous faces but that fact in itself was enough to remind me that it was a step sideways, if not downwards, because I wanted by then to treat harder subjects more closely. Avowedly to treat a shallow one, though that was a theme in itself, had no significance except in the broader context of what a free society might aspire to if only it could get over its obsessions with celebrity and spoon its brains back into its empty head. One day I would have to write about that, but in Los Angeles the pace was too hot to think. The best thing I did there was ask for a tour of the domestic architecture, with selected shots of all the demented houses, so that I could compose a syncopated scene-setting paragraph which I still count among my plums in writing for film. ('The neo-colonial baronial pagoda . . .' etc.) The rest of the movie, however, was famous faces, and some of them looked strained.

Charity events were the best place to catch them out of school. Richard Dreyfuss made himself available as long as he could plug his charity. I had only a few seconds to convince him that I admired his work – I was telling the truth, which always helps –and he was quick and funny, but you could tell that all kinds of uproar were going on in his head, perhaps because he had never got over the fact that it was not far enough from the ground. There are plenty of short men who can make any tall man feel awkward just by the confidence they radiate, but Richard Dreyfuss seemed to have no such assurance left. I had never seen a pair of elevator shoes quite like his. In most cases, men who wear elevator shoes must get used to standing on their toes. The front of the shoe looks quite normal and it's only when you spot what's going on at the back that you realize something's up, as it were. But Richard Dreyfuss had a whole thick platform

under each foot, like the Mikado. Why? Who knows. You see how perfectly, wonderfully, he can incarnate a sensitive, self-critical human being in a minor movie like *Stake-Out*, and you assume that a man like that would be equally in command of every other aspect of his life. But then you discover that in real life he clumps around on a pair of kabuki shoes. You don't stare, though. In Hollywood, nobody notices. If Larry Longstaff, erstwhile romantic leading man of the 1950s, turns up at a party with most of his head replaced by a piece of machinery, people will tell him he's looking good. People will slap him on the back and say, 'Same old Larry,' even though the only part of the old Larry still in existence is his left eyeball.

In Hollywood, the intention is always taken for the deed. If your capped teeth look like the assembled tombstones of a graveyard in the snow, they will still be universally regarded as your own teeth, and not as a piece of engineering. The veteran television star Milton Berle smiled into our camera, his head from a vanished era, his mouth from beyond tomorrow. For anyone in my generation, Kirk Douglas would have looked like our greatest catch, but my generation was passing, and Kirk was well aware that his fame had passed to his son Michael. To get to Michael, we would have needed a congressional order. Kirk, however, was available, at the kind of charity event where they passed out caviar on a cardboard plate. His face was a challenge to credibility. I should say straight away that this encounter took place years before he had a stroke, after which he coped very bravely with impaired speech, a condition that would undoubtedly reduce me to tears of self-pity. But at this charity event, where everyone including me was dressed for the Wild West, Kirk was still in a condition where everything that had happened to his face recently had been a matter of choice. Once, Kirk's face had been recognizable even if extreme. I think Barry Humphries was the first to say that the dimple in Kirk's chin had originally been his navel, but in fact he had looked like that even before his first facelift. The first facelift, however, was now far in the past. Fifty-seven varieties of facelift had happened since, including that drastic intervention by which the flapping wattle below the jaw is not only removed, but the line under the jaw is lifted to conform with the line of the jawbone, so that in profile the victim looks as if his throat has been torn out by a wolf. Around his eyes, all the wrinkles had been removed, reducing the whole area to a glassy surface, from which the eyeballs popped like penguin's eggs from sheet ice. The missing wrinkles had been bunched together and added to the edge of his face as a crêpe ruff. All of this is less fun to say than it sounds, but I have to record it because Kirk Douglas was a hero of mine for his realistic approach to show business. The author of an unusually sane autobiography, he was the man who had made the great analysis

of fame, an analysis which can be paraphrased more or less like this: 'Fame doesn't change the way you behave, it changes the way other people behave towards you.' It's true. That is indeed fame's most savage effect. Unless you keep your family close, you will hardly ever hear a trustworthy word from anyone. Kirk left out, though, the further fact that when a famous person tries to stay that way too long, all the changed behaviour of others will eventually change his behaviour as well. If the famous person is smart enough, he will try to take his name out of the sky at the right time. But Kirk wanted to go on being Kirk: hence the facial roadworks. At least the hair on top of his head looked like his own, even if some of it had not started its life on that part of his body. With other male stars, the hairpiece was widely in use. Most of the hairpieces were so improbable that they defied you not to burst out laughing. But some of them were convincing, and we decided that, rather than going for the obvious gag and kitting me out with a stupid wig, we should go through the process of having an upmarket version custom-made for me by the celebrated hair stylist José Eber. In his white silk suit, high-heeled boots and cowboy hat with feathers, José was better company than the plastic surgeon we had met the previous day. The plastic surgeon had shown me, on his computer, how my profile could be improved by taking a piece off the end of my nose and adding it to my chin. He also suggested that I should have my eyes lifted. This was good dialogue but he spoiled it by saying that he wanted to get into comedy and could I give him some tips. José was more confident in his mission. With many a sweeping gesture, he explained that I would need four copies of the piece: one for the day, one for the open car, one for the pool and one in the garage for repairs. 'The one for the car you wear anywhere there is wind there. If there is a party you don't want the piece flying off your head and ending up in the avocado dip there.' He gestured with his scissors to indicate a flying rug. This he did while he was cutting the raw piece as it sat in situ on my bare skull. He was a master. Steadily the thing looked more normal. José had earned an Academy Award for his work on the back of Tom Cruise's head in *Rain Man* and he was giving me the works. The results were stunning. Suddenly I saw the point. I had lost twenty years. I would also have lost twenty thousand dollars if José had built me the whole kit of pieces, but he was giving us one for free just to be in the movie.

To try the effect of José's masterpiece of a piece on someone who had known me in days gone by, we enlisted the services of Dudley Moore, who at that stage of his life was spending more time running his Santa Monica restaurant than in the movie studios. His time as a Hollywood headliner was over and he wasn't taking it well: too many pills and too many of the wrong women, all of them twice as tall as he was and most of them with half his intelligence. But

somewhere in the depths of his racial memory he was still Dudley, and he took a visit by a crew from the old country as a chance to step back into his original persona as the sharp British wit while momentarily abandoning his Californian quest for spiritual fulfilment assisted by chemicals and a six-foot blonde sitting on his face. I explained the number to him and as an old revue hand he saw immediately where the sketch was going. I would walk in, complete with piece, and take up my position at the bar. In his role as proprietor, he would walk into shot, start a conversation and gradually become fixated on what was taking place on top of my head. He had his line ready first time. 'Bought, or rented?' We did a single shot on him and he added, 'I know it isn't yours, because the last time we met you had the same hairstyle as Telly Savalas. It's a great job, though. I can't see the join.' In the editing room we had to trim the scene back for time, but there was enough left to show him in all his elfin charm, the Cuddly Dudley of old, brimming with talent and quick as light, still sparkling even as he drove the extra mile on the road to destruction. He was still a star.

Except for Chuck Pick of Pick's Parking, the star faces were the story in Los Angeles. I remembered Chuck Pick from the night I saw him shouting hysterical orders to his team of drivers while they parked the vehicles of the arriving guests at a gala dinner for the visiting Queen in 1983. When the Postcard programme came up I said we had to get Chuck. When they saw Chuck in action, my crew realized why I had insisted. He and his team of Top Gun car-parkers were parking the cars at a party thrown by Cubby Broccoli. In the front drive of the house, Chuck jumped around shrieking to his drivers, telling them which car was to be parked where, screaming, 'Go, go, go!' and 'Yeah, man, *park* that car!' Ryan O'Neal and Farrah Fawcett, still together in those days, stepped out of a Bentley and were greeted by Chuck as personal friends. It looked like a surprise to them but it was great on film. Chuck carried on like a celebrity but he well knew that the movie stars outranked him, even though very few of them would know how to park a car under pressure.

The stars outranked everyone in the world. Continually in search of one star after another, I linked the narrative by driving around in one of the first examples of the Mercedes 500 drop-head coupe. It was expensive to hire and we were lucky I didn't ding it. In Nashville I had driven a borrowed brand-new Chevrolet pick-up truck whose owner had been assured that it would be returned to him in one piece. It was, but the rear end was a different shape, because during a night shoot in the woods I had backed it into the steel stanchion of a letter box. We had some high-grade assets lined up in Nashville and the film should have clicked. Chet Atkins gave me a guitar lesson, Tammy Wynette gave me personal advice on the creative consolations of heartbreak and Mark

Knoptler composed the melody for a lyric I had written. The song was performed at the Grand Old Opry by an up-and-coming female singer. Resplendent in a pastel-blue cowboy suit with silver trim, Porter Wagoner, acting as MC, said, 'Pretty girl, pretty song.' My bliss was complete, but the film was a flop in the British ratings, because only a small part of the British television audience cared anything at all about American country music. Here was a harsh reminder that the presenter depends on the subject, and that the best setting for my kind of documentary should be full of stars; real ones, internationally famous; faces you had seen on television or, even better, at the movies.

My own activities were thus abetting the celebrity culture of which I had become suspicious: an anomaly that had begun to nag. But that was the way it was, and in that respect Hollywood was the location without equal. In Hollywood the famous faces know how to lead their strange lives. The strangeness was their answer to a violently artificial condition, by which people became symbols of themselves. In their wigs and facelifts and elevator shoes, they understood each other even if nobody else did. Kirstie Alley was a delight to talk to but she believed in Scientology. Perhaps it was her protection against the kind of reporters who had no means of talking about her talent but were always ready to talk about her increasing weight. Shirley MacLaine, who had been given both the beauty and the talent when her brother Warren Beatty had been given only the beauty, was as smart as a whip but she believed that flying saucers made the journey across the universe specifically to land in her garden. What they all really believed in, because they had to, was the indispensable efficacy of the special air they breathed, the modified atmosphere of their stellar context. Deprived of that, they went out like lights.

26. WHAT BECOMES OF THE BROKEN-HEARTED?

It was what Diana died of. She should have been in show business, where there is a protocol for survival after your life has been eaten hollow by dreams come true. But she was on her own. I was working late in my London apartment when I got the news, and for several days afterwards I couldn't stop crying. Such an outburst of grief had never happened to me before in my life. I spent a couple of days at the office but I was useless. Behind the closed door of my cubicle I lay on my little z-bed and sobbed. Outside the door, Wendy Gay fended off callers from every media organization in Britain and Australia, all wanting my opinion. My opinion of what? The wrath of God? I went to ground in Cambridge and still couldn't stop crying. My family, stricken too but still upright, were very nice to their cot case. My wife, whose tenderness was a lesson in generosity, was good at cutting the incoming phone calls short. Finally a call came through from Tina Brown at the *New Yorker*. I owed her too much to give her the freeze, so I took the call. She wanted me to write a memoir of Diana. I said I couldn't. Tina, always the master psychologist, asked me what else I would be doing in the next few days. I took the point, got a car to the office and wrote a piece called 'Requiem'. It was a kind of poem, its every paragraph starting with the word 'No'. I was still crying while I worked on it but it was something to do.

During this time, there had been a national emotional outpouring which reached its focal point of expression as a field of flowers in London. Later it became fashionable to claim that one had never joined in, but I can claim no such thing, although I still believe that the Royal Family should not have been dragooned into a populist gesture by the very newspapers which had done so much to make Diana's life a lethal fantasy. Charles looked concussed but anyone with any sense realized that his anguish was without limit. The truth was that nobody really knew what they were doing because nobody was ready for it. This will be the hardest thing to explain to the next generation. Nobody knew that she

would die. Only from the fake wisdom of hindsight can her life be seen as leading up to that event. Her own expectations, like anybody else's, were quite otherwise. She had a future in front of her, and all kinds of qualities to make it fruitful. Perhaps she would have found, in time – time which we all need – a peaceful balance into which her corroding neuroses might have melted away. And now her future had been cancelled. One among millions, I coped with a sense of loss whose intensity defied explanation. A psychologist might have said that I was weeping the tears that I had never wept for my own family tragedy, the death of my father when I was young. But that same psychologist would have done better to say that I had seen my mother's life ruined in a single moment, and never since had I been able to tolerate the spectacle of a vital young woman being stopped by misfortune from achieving what she might have done. Either way, the psychologist wasn't available, and all I had, apart from the kindness of my wife and children, was my own resources. They seemed to me to have broken down completely. But I got my article written, so perhaps they had not.

Some commentators said that what I had written was embarrassing, but when the piece came out in a special issue of the magazine it got the biggest postbag I ever received for anything. There were hundreds of letters, all saying that they felt the same, and I knew that there were countless more people who would never read a magazine with so many words in it and so few pictures, but who had likewise been surprised by the same grief. This solidarity of response among people from all walks of life, and from everywhere in the world, is the thing I remember best. Of the funeral in the Abbey I remember only fleeting impressions. I thought that the way Tony Blair read the lesson, with an ornately bogus display of pious emphasis, was enough to prove that he was an actor to the core of his nature. I thought that Elton John did a good job of singing a bad song. I thought the Earl Spencer's speech bordered on sedition but was well spoken. But mainly I thought nothing. I just sat there, in my seat on the aisle, halfway along the central block at the left-hand end. Then, as the ceremony wound to a close, this thing happened that I knew I would remember until my own turn came to die. Down the aisle towards me came the Guardsmen carrying the coffin on their shoulders. I thought they would go right past me on the way to the front door. But just across from me on the left, a side aisle had been left between the rows of seats. The side aisle led to a little door in the stone wall. Right beside me, the Guardsmen turned into the side aisle and carried the coffin through the door, with only a few inches between the coffin lid and the roof of the corridor they had entered. The soft crunch of their spit-polished boots on the flagstones became a whispered conversation of lingering echoes as she went away into the

dark.

27. AS TIME RAN OUT

It was said that when people wept at Diana's death they were weeping for their own mortality. If they did, why should they not have done? To treat your life as if it will last is an illusion. If chance doesn't stop you early, decrepitude will get you later on. Even when I was young I could hear the clock tick. Now, with my sixtieth year coming up, I could hear it boom. I was pledged to work out my time at Watchmaker, but as the formats, one by one, got to where there was no more I could do that was new, I had begun to look beyond, and sometimes with longing. I made the first promise to my wife that some day soon I would get out of television. She looked sceptical, but I meant it. There were still, however, several things I had to do first. The company had to be built up beyond one asset, if only to keep faith with our backers. Jonathan Ross, whose gifts I admired, had just hit the wall with his own production company, which had made all the classic mistakes that start with getting the office furniture designed by a friend instead of just buying it off the peg. Jonathan had his suits designed too, apparently by a team of satirical tailors. He put a lot of emphasis on personal appearance, almost as if he had no talent. But it all cost a lot of money, and at that stage he had blown his budget. We tried to offer him a home with us. He liked the look of our office. When Wendy Gay went bopping by he must have thought that he had dreamed her up. Several times we took him out to dinner but the deal was never sealed. Eventually it became clear that he was enjoying our company at dinner far more than the idea of being beholden to anyone except himself. He must have been right, because later on he became a BBC star of such magnitude that they paid him more money every two months than I ever earned in my entire television career. I bear no grudge, but sometimes it does make me wish that I, too, had been born with a speech impediment. All I had was an Australian accent.

Collaring extra assets was proving less easy than it sounded. As a friend of Nigella Lawson, I had watched her getting nowhere with book shows and often

wondered why she wasn't being given the formats that would make her a star. But neither Richard nor Elaine thought that Nigella had a chance: too posh a voice, the network would never go for it. The poshness was exactly what I loved, and I thought the public would love it too, but I was outvoted. I have to admit I didn't realize that one of the conditions for her finally reaching stellar status was that she would have to have a frying pan in her hand. Trying to promote Nigella without the frying pan was like recommending Gabriella Sabatini without the tennis racket. But as Nigella, with me in the passenger seat, scooted around Shepherd's Bush at the wheel of her rattletrap Mercedes 190 sports car – it was a pit, like her handbag – I knew she would make it somehow. It just wouldn't be with Watchmaker.

We had better luck with Jeremy Clarkson. Richard and Elaine thought of him first but I took one look at him on air and knew that he couldn't miss. He was too big, too burly and he was full of bluster, but he could write it and say it. He was that rarest thing in England, the articulate bloke. I thought he was tremendous and I was very proud that he made his first couple of series under our logo. I liked him a lot. He eventually decided that he didn't like me one bit, apparently because he thought that I had made some remark that insulted his family. I can't imagine doing any such thing to anybody, but you can't expect everybody to love you. He went on to become, in the next decade, almost the biggest television star on earth, partly because, like Nigella and her frying pan, he had got himself identified with a universal activity. Cars are an object of fascination in every country, and especially in any country that doesn't have any. There are Clarkson fans in the upper regions of Nepal. Thus it was that the Watchmaker office became the launching pad for a globe-girdling career that left mine looking the size of a game of marbles: a clear case of television as a new kind of British Empire. I didn't resent his success at all and I still watch his programmes with a professional admiration for how he can pack so much into a paragraph, although few of his opinions are congruent with my own, and for his central premise I have an ineradicable objection. I think that to encourage ordinary citizens to drive fast cars on ordinary roads is the exact equivalent of handing real guns to schoolboys, and that's that. But it's a free country, and young petrol-heads who watch him in Libya probably say the same.

Nor would I have had any comeback if somebody had accused me of doing more than my fair share to encourage the ambitions of the boy racers. When the rights to broadcast the F1 carnival were switched from BBC to ITV, the network wanted a big studio programme to mark the event, and my well-known amateur affiliation to the sport got me the job of host. I would rather that the cup had passed from me, because I knew there would be trouble: but it was too fat a

contract for Watchmaker to turn down. At the command of Bernie Ecclestone, all the drivers were in the studio. All except one. Michael Schumacher underlined his status as top dog by refusing to turn up in person. He appeared only as a satellite image on the back wall. When I spun around in my swivel chair and interviewed this banana-faced apparition, I thought I could hear, behind me, the first soft explosions of a rich crop of raspberries blown by the other drivers. For the ruthless exploitation of supremacy, Schumacher left even Ayrton Senna nowhere. Right up until the moment when he was killed at Imola, Senna had behaved as if the road ahead belonged exclusively to him. Schumi felt the same, in a German accent. He was just quieter about it, and more polite. I often wonder if the camaraderie of all the other drivers was not based on their common annoyance of Schumi's supercilious cool. Perhaps he played the same role as Zeppo Marx, who was disliked by the other Marx Brothers because he was good with money.

Along with the thrill and the glamour, money mattered to the drivers, and you couldn't blame them. The better they did, the more cash they had to lay out for protection against an intrusive world. A world champion needed a castle with high walls. Damon Hill's castle was still in Ireland when we did a special about him. We filmed him at home with his family and he impressed me straight away with his sensitivity and sanity. Somehow he would make it all balance up: the artificially illuminated public life, and the domestic peace that made it bearable. That he was brave went without question, but not even a man as brave as he was could afford a gamble that might weaken his base. When he left Williams he could have gone to McLaren but he would have been paid only to win. Another team, with a slower car, would pay him a guaranteed wedge, win or lose. He had a choice to make.

He was still making it when we went with him to watch him race in Hungary. After the race he had to make a quick trip to Bulgaria for the sponsor. I was his passenger when he drove to the airport, with only half an hour to get there. It was a challenge and time was running out. While I sat there holding on to my seatbelt like a lifeline as he followed the leaning police escort motorcyclists into the turns, he started giving me the low-down on the politics. How he could drive that fast and still speak rationally was a mystery to me. We were doing a hundred miles an hour nearly all the time but I suppose for him it was half speed. On the private jet he told me more. It all sounded a bit like the politics of television: do this now so you can do that later, guard your base, build up a bank so you can quit while you're ahead. The main difference was the velocity. I liked Damon very much, perhaps partly because he could focus on what he was doing without falling prey to a circumscription of his interests. (He asked me whether

Carlos Saura's film *Carmen* was as good as he had heard, and I was glad to be able to tell him that it most certainly was.) In his world of machinery, he himself had not become a machine. The finished movie drew an audience far exceeding the total number of petrol-heads. I was pleased about that because I felt that we had captured at least something of a human personality. I never saw him angry even once, not even with his own team when they cost him a win by muffing a pit-stop. Later on, though, when he moved his castle to England, one of the tabloids published an aerial map of the layout that might as well have had arrows on it telling the thieves and kidnappers where they could get in. He got angry then.

As the millennium year approached, heralded by dire warnings of mass computer malfunction and imminent heat-death, the old British Empire was lowering the flag in its last few outposts. Our *Postcard from Hong Kong* felt like part of the ceremony. The day of the handover was not far off and Chris Patten, the last governor, had a lot to deal with, including the irritating task of shooing the blowflies of the tabloid press away from his beautiful daughters; but he found time to deal with us. An hour in his company was enough to tell you that Britain was in trouble if it couldn't find a way of making a man like that Prime Minister. After a tennis match in which I had to do little pretending in order to lose miserably, we settled down on the veranda to film one of the best interviews I ever did. Eloquence, historical sweep, charm, wit: he had it all. He also had a family of clever women with a collective talent for keeping him down to earth, a condition with which I was familiar. Together, the Pattens had turned the official residence into the best kind of country house, much more a literary salon than a hunting lodge. In the evening, justifiably celebrated names came in for drinks after dinner and spread themselves around in the cushioned couches as if this was a second home. Jung Chang was one of them. I thought that her *Wild Swans* was one of the great political books of modern times and told her so. She didn't mind hearing it, but she was possibly less impressed with my opinion that China, with any luck, would change Hong Kong less than Hong Kong would change China. Patten, however, flatteringly thought that I might be right. He wanted to know why Hong Kong mattered to me so much and I told him the reason: that my father was buried there. I went out to Sai Wan Bay to visit my father's grave, as I always did when I was in Hong Kong. He had given his life in the fight against the totalitarians and soon they would be here again. But nothing shook my confidence that this time it would be different. The Chinese leaders on the mainland had an unchanging system but they were now living in a changed world, where PR mattered even to them. In that way, and in my time, the development of global communications had altered the flow of history. In the

main part of the movie I did all the standard things to bring out the city's always teeming, shouting, hyperactively productive character. I argued with the mad woman driver of a sampan, I got lost in the underground labyrinth of a suburb-sized nightclub in Kowloon, I visited the gold-plated house of the nutty plutocrat and his dotting wife. The dotting wife gave us a ten-minute piece to camera on how to prepare shark's fin soup ('First you boil the fin for two days . . .') which was probably the single most boring stretch of film in the world until Baz Luhrmann directed the closing scenes of *Australia*. In a restaurant on the Peak, the exquisite actress Maggie Cheung showed me how to spit out chicken bones in a polite manner. (Don't believe her air of gloom in *In the Mood for Love*: the real-life Maggie is a spiritual descendant of Carole Lombard.) But I didn't bother to face the camera to ask the mandatory question about meeting the challenge as time ran out in the city of contrasts. I didn't ask: will all this come to an end? Somehow I knew it wouldn't. The mainlanders, if they wanted to, could do to Hong Kong what they did to Tibet. But they wouldn't want to. Instead of changing it, they would see the advantage in letting it alone. I said that last line on the deck of a junk as the sun went down towards the sea. It was setting on my screen career. Not yet, but soon, I would have said all I had to say as a presenter of television documentaries. It was just too expensive a form in which to be pressed for time. I ached to express my opinions as chapters instead of paragraphs.

But I worked harder than ever on the paragraphs. *Postcard from New York* ended with the most tightly written paragraphs I ever wrote for television, and they did much more than illustrate the pictures, just as the pictures did much more than illustrate them. The final scene wasn't planned. It emerged during the packed two-week shooting schedule, and came as the kind of light-touch surprise that always made the heavy lifting seem worthwhile. We had a good cast of characters: the cute lady cop with the gun, the stick-thin socialite, the aromatherapist who wrapped me in seaweed while talking balls about crystals, the crazy gerontocrat party girl whose apartment walls were covered with two-shots of her embracing every celebrity she had ever trapped.

Most bizarrely of all, Ivana Trump gave us an audience in her gold-plated apartment in Trump Tower. For one terrible moment, when we walked in, I thought I had been returned to Hong Kong through some kind of space warp. But then things got worse. Already in position on a velvet couch, Ivana, suited and coiffed as an air hostess with dreams of greatness, was looking at her watch. Incorrectly supposing that there was nothing off-putting about her air of superior knowledge, she came forth readily enough with a supply of polished banalities – the only true privilege of wealth, apparently, was to express one's taste – but

seemed insulted at the very idea that we should take more of her precious afternoon by shooting coverage. We wanted some shots of her walking into the room so that I could narrate a short introduction, but she demurred. I told her that Katharine Hepburn hadn't minded walking six times around her own garden but it cut no ice. So in the finished picture Ivana appeared suddenly in the sitting position, with a one-line introduction in which I was able to suggest that she had magical powers of teleportation. I would also have liked to suggest that she was a nitwit, but there was no time. And anyway, she gave the film some of the star lustre which it was otherwise a bit short of. It had some names more worthy of note, but they were less recognizable than Ivana, whose face, at the time, was familiar to flax-gatherers in Zimbabwe.

The writer Richard Price, whose low-life novels and screenplays were especially distinguished for their compulsively quotable dialogue, gave us an interview in a Bleecker Street cafe, correctly advising us that Downtown was the area that mattered now. But Downtown did not, in those days, have a hotel remotely like the Royalton on 44th Street. Festering down there near the Village, the Chelsea Hotel had its memories of badly behaved poets and musicians dead from drugs, but there was nothing to film except the proprietor's bad shave. The Royalton was something else: a nodal point of contemporary glamour to which all of New York's trendies came in the evening to have a drink, just so they could say that they had been there. We were staying there at my suggestion, which I made as soon as I heard that it had been renovated throughout according to the designs of none other than our old friend Philippe Starck, he whose concept of the reinterpreted three-legged chair had left such a lasting memory of Paris imprinted on my brain. At the Royalton he had been given a big budget to go mad with, and he had excelled himself. He had reinterpreted the concept of the elevator so that you couldn't find the buttons, and when you were inside it you couldn't see. The lighting levels, throughout the hotel, were set according to his specifications, so that the place could be navigated with any degree of assurance only by a bat. On my first evening there, I groped my way out of my room, located the elevator by touch, got into it and had travelled several floors downward in the direction of the reinterpreted lobby – it looked like a bar, whereas the bar looked like a funeral parlour – before I realized that I was not alone. There was a dark, mysterious figure in there with me. It whispered, 'Hello, Clive.' I was scared to death. They know where I live! When the door finally opened on the slightly less dark lobby, I recognized Pete Townshend. He said, 'If you ever get used to this place, it means you've gone crazy.'

He was right. The room furniture was especially memorable evidence of Starck's genius for the irrelevant. There were pointlessly low armchairs,

needlessly high tables. There was a circular bath about a foot deep suitable for bathing a chihuahua. From the walls, shining horn-like objects in brushed aluminium protruded, for no apparent purpose except to be bumped into in the half-light by occupants searching in vain for the reinterpreted air-conditioning control unit, which turned on the television that looked like a mini-bar. (The mini-bar looked like a toilet.) Anywhere in mid-town, you could tell which people were staying at the Royalton by their plaster casts and eyepatches. Knowing that I could do a good voice-over about my room, I suggested to Beatrice Ballard that we should set up the camera and get some shots. Our cameraman, who she subsequently married, had one of the new Steadicams among his kit, and they both suggested that we should get a slow, virtuoso 360-degree panning shot of the room, to illustrate my viewpoint as I stood in the middle of it, gazing in wonder. Knowing that it would be even harder to cut into such a shot than to narrate over it, I asked for some individual static shots as well. Later on, back in the editing room, the usual rule applied: the static shots were the ones we used, and a few fragments of the Steadicam shot were all that survived. So in twenty years I had learned that much. Watch out for the technical improvements. Do they bring new limitations?

But the best thing I had learned was to grab the chance when the gods present it to you. One day early in the shoot, we were filming one of those long walking shots on a crowded sidewalk. The camera was halfway up a building somewhere, filming me on a long lens while I negotiated a couple of blocks in the lunchtime crush. When walking through a crowd, the secret of staying visible in the centre of the screen is to keep your eyes on the camera position, even if it is a mile away. If you can see the camera, it can see you. The process becomes automatic over the years, and you need fewer and fewer retakes, but it is always very boring, and I was asleep on my feet until I saw a roller-blader racing towards me among the buses and taxis. The traffic lights changed and he had to pause in his flight for a while, so he danced, swerving about in tight figures of eight, sometimes going forwards, sometimes backwards, with no moment of hesitation. With a shock of spiked blond hair and an outfit consisting mainly of shorts and a T-shirt, he was the all-American version of a solo act from Cirque du Soleil. He was a Cab Dancer. He danced with cabs the way Kevin Costner danced with wolves. Remembering what I had missed that night in Chicago, I shouted, 'Get him!' but the lights had changed and he was already gone.

Nothing, though, could get away from Bea. It took her a week to track him down but she found him. By then I had the sequence planned in detail. We would film him in Times Square late at night, and so get two scenes at once: him and the magic lights. You would think that there would be enough light in Times

Square to shoot without any more, but it never worked out like that. The film camera, far more specific than the video camera that would soon take over the trade, needed buckets of light aimed at the chosen spot, which in this case was the few square yards at the traffic lights where the Cab Dancer would come to a halt and do his routine before taking off again. With the cops in attendance to check the abundance of paper that you have to have in New York before you can film a sparrow on a windowsill, it took our gaffers an hour to rig the lights. The Cab Dancer practised his routine in the right position while flaps on the lights were adjusted and focal lengths were checked on the camera. It took another hour. Then the Cab Dancer was despatched upstream to his starting point so that he could come back down with the traffic and stop when the lights turned red. They stayed green and he kept going. Back he went again and this time they changed too early. Why was I suddenly thinking of Willie Nelson? It took another hour before things went right. He came to a halt at the same time as the traffic, did his number and took off again. Then we had to film the dance routine several times on various lenses. The whole deal took from just before midnight until just after three in the morning. Back at Watchmaker, I sat at the Avid machine right beside the editor for two days while we put that scene together. (In olden times, before the electronics came to save us, we would have been in there for a month.) I shaped and trimmed my paragraph over and over until everything fitted. What I wrote had nothing to do with roller-blading but everything to do with American energy, the urge and freedom to excel, the spirit of the city. It was the last scene in the main body of the movie. On the tail of it we tacked the panoramic night-time footage that would form the end-title sequence as *Rhapsody in Blue* took over from my voice and ended the picture. The results looked like a miracle of spontaneity.

After the show was transmitted, the television critics were unusually kind, but only on the understanding that the subject matter had done all the work and we had just been lucky enough to have a camera with us that we could point at it. I met one of them socially and she said, 'I loved the way you spotted that skater going past and just grabbed him.' It's an ideal of art: make it look as if it just happened. But it was a bit harder than it looked and it took me twenty years to get ready. I knew that I would never do anything better on screen than those few minutes. Two kinds of writing had joined at a single apogee. The written words were as good as I could do, and the unwritten words, the pictures, were as good as I could arrange.

28. LATE FINAL EXTRAS

The complete film was popular but not wildly so, mainly because it was short of stars. If Robert De Niro had been in it, there might have been more impact. At the time, De Niro was already active in his transformation of the TriBeCa district, but we couldn't get to him, because he didn't want to be got to until the work was more advanced. Other stars of comparable magnitude were less elusive. As the time approached for Watchmaker's backers to buy us out, we went on increasing the company's income by supplying the broadcasters with star interviews filmed on location. Earlier on there had been a *Postcard from Cairo* that was essentially a star interview because Omar Sharif was the only face in the picture that anyone would have tuned in to see. I spent the rest of the movie doing my Indiana James number, striding around among the pyramids in my brown fedora. At one point, for a fantasy sequence, I was kitted up as Lawrence of Arabia in the full set of flowing robes, only my eyes showing as I gazed hawk-like towards destiny. I was meant to climb into the saddle of a racing camel and head off to the horizon. The camel looked to me like a hairy version of an Italian helicopter so I requested that its saddle be taken off and parked on the desert for a low shot of me climbing aboard. Then a local stuntman in the same outfit did the actual riding.

It was not a brave moment but it fitted my mood, because Cairo held few thrills for me. Some of the mosques were magnificent but everything else was a bazaar, including the City of the Dead, which the security police didn't want to let us into until the pile of money we were offering them reached a sufficient height. I liked to be in places where I could read the books. Our driver was a natural teacher so I made a good start at speaking Arabic – I can still say *yalla bina*, which means 'let's go' – but I never got far with learning to read. That was a mistake. I should have pushed on with it, because in the next decade I would have been able to read the fatwas as soon as they were issued, instead of waiting for the translation. But the assertive future, for the Arab nations, had not yet

arrived. High society in Cairo was one big inferiority complex about the enticements of the West. The city's leading hostess, reigning supreme over her daughter's wedding party, moved in an aura of vulgarity that left Ivana Trump looking like Diane de Poitiers. The US was pouring at least as much money into Egypt as it did into Israel and most of it was pouring out again through the necks of champagne bottles. Behind closed doors, where people who claimed to despise alcohol behaved as if they had invented it, the whole culture was as tediously dedicated to hedonism as Playboy Mansion West without the hamburgers. And all the men were exponents of this terrible dance, in which they held their hands high above their heads, snapped their fingers occasionally to no discernible beat, shifted their hips about an inch without moving their feet and pursed their lips in profound thoughtfulness while the women expired with admiration. The tuneless revelry was so dire that you grew old just watching. At last I figured out why the Sphinx looked like that: it had been to a party in Cairo. Omar Sharif, born and raised in Alexandria, did a polite job of pretending that Cairo was the city of his dreams. We interviewed him in a houseboat restaurant on the Nile and his radiant dentition was an assurance that he was having as much fun as if he were in Monaco. But he was acting, and I knew that the secret of his show of happiness was that he had a date to play bridge in Geneva the next day. There he was, though, up on our screen, his eyes gleaming like fresh dates: Dr Zhivago in person. Fame had trumped the background yet again.

The same thing happened in a Postcard we did about the Paris catwalks. Almost two decades after having fronted the first television special ever made on the subject, there I was again, trying to flog myself into the same enthusiasm for the frocks. But the only reason the network wanted the show was because Naomi Campbell would be the central attraction. She was intensely celebrated at the time, partly because of her erratic behaviour. After long negotiations with her phalanx of representatives, a deal was struck: I would meet her at Orly Airport when she flew in after her latest holiday in Morocco and keep close company with her as she went through the two-week season of preparing for, and participating in, the fashion shows in which she would be by far the most stellar model to strut her stuff. She arrived at the airport, I presented her with a tree-sized bunch of flowers while the camera watched, and I accompanied her to her limousine, into which she stepped with lithe grace. The door slammed behind her while I still had one foot in the air. She disappeared for a week. We camped outside the building that contained her new apartment, two floors up. Periodically her latest personal assistant emerged to reveal, by instalments, that her boss was up there with her new friend, the fledgling diva Kate Moss, and that the two of them were engaged in scientific research, to establish how a

termite mound of white powder could be reduced to the dimensions of a crushed aspirin. Days went by. Not even the dress designers, who were increasingly frantic to get the two British stars to the fitting rooms, could insert their envoys through the door. Our movie was going down the drain. Finally I hit on the idea of altering the title. We could call the thing *Waiting for Naomi* and I could do a voice-over based on her absence.

As it happened, Naomi eventually did make herself manifest, and we were able to contemplate the possibility of gracing the second half of the movie with her actual physical presence. Her original written commitment to give us unlimited personal access, however, turned out to have been a hallucination on our part. Her representatives assured us that if such a document had ever been signed, she had not been present at the signing. Since she had not been present at the writing of her own novel, this contention sounded quite plausible, but it did leave the way open for a third configuration of the title, *Litigation with Naomi*. I personally vetoed that course of action and I was glad I did. She had enough trouble in her life and I didn't want to be remembered as having added to it. We just trailed her abjectly around as she went through the motions at one show after another. The motions, of course, looked wonderful: at the challenging task of walking fifty yards in both directions, there was no one to beat her. But the schmutter worn by her and all the other models was pale stuff compared to what I had once seen. I hailed from the days when Yves Saint Laurent used to arrive at the venue in the boot of a car and had to be held upright at the end of the show while the audience went berserk with gratitude at the beauty he had created. Now I was supposed to be moved by the prospect of John Galliano trying to make the girls look as freaky as himself. It was more thrilling to point the camera at Anna Wintour's dark glasses so that I could speculate about what was going on behind them. If it wasn't boredom, why did her mouth look so bitter?

Our movie was on its way to being a complete bust, but luckily for us, if unluckily for Naomi, at her last show one of the other models accidentally stepped on the hem of her best dress and tore the thing in half. Naomi thought it had happened accidentally on purpose. Suddenly she was once again the girl who had been picked on once too often in the school playground. She collapsed in tears against the wall of a corridor. I interviewed her there, and, perhaps because I genuinely sympathized with her plight, she poured out her heart. What she was saying between sobs amounted to a protest that it was all too much. The attention was too much. Her life was too much. The sequence would save the movie but I felt like a thief. If I could have left her alone, I would have. But I stayed on the case and got my scene with the damsel in distress. It was against my nature, though, and if my nature had altered to the point where I could do

what went against it, perhaps the time was approaching when I should pack it in and try to get back to square one. The finished movie was amusing in spots but the high-priced ambience went for nothing. Either the frocks looked like rags, or my eye was jaded.

It was getting to the point where it was easier to leave out the background and just go for the fame. The networks were going steadily colder on the Postcards because they wanted famous faces instead. This had already been true when we filmed Polanski and Katharine Hepburn and it became truer still when Jane Fonda became available, which happened because nothing else except that kind of publicity would make anyone go to see her latest movie. It was called *Old Gringo* and she was starring opposite some revolution in Mexico. For any star – Robert Redford was the most prominent example – a sudden urge, against all advice, to set up the film that furthers the cause of the poor people of Mexico is a sure sign that a rich actor has lost his marbles. Jane Fonda was no exception but she was terribly nice about it. I was suspicious of her Hanoi Jane track record but the first few minutes in her company told me where her political enthusiasms came from: she had a generous nature. She was a dream, in fact: smart, funny and without pretensions. Instead of a gated stronghold in Bel Air she had an ordinary frame house in Santa Monica and didn't at all mind walking with me barefoot along the beach a few times while we got the coverage. I had already figured out why one egomaniac after another had fallen for her: she gave them the humility they lacked. She was full of affection and there would always be some cold-hearted male monster to suck it up. Posing with me for production stills, she embraced me from behind with one leg wrapped around my waist. Eyebrows were raised at home but you could tell she would have done the same for Ronald Reagan.

I talked to Reagan, too. The flight to Los Angeles was becoming familiar and always at the end of it there were these world-famous figures ready to pretend that they were giving their all. Actually Reagan held relatively little back. He was no longer in office but was still addressed, in the American manner, as Mr President. His autobiography had just come out; he had no idea what was in it; and he told me a few things that weren't there in its pages. I interviewed him in one of the bungalow suites of the Beverly Hills Hotel. Nobody yet knew that he had Alzheimer's disease. It was assumed that he had merely become forgetful. When I brought up the subject of Nicaragua, he forgot the name 'Somoza' and started referring to 'that guy down there'. Helpfully I mouthed the name 'Somoza' and he must have thought I was saying 'move over', because he moved over. Always a tractable actor, he was touchingly ready to take direction. In fact he had a daunting eagerness to please generally. He wasn't stupid,

though. The only trade union leader ever to have become President of the United States, he knew all the angles, and would have protected himself against a hostile question. Not believing in the adversarial technique, I didn't ask him any. The touchiest subject on my list revolved around the question of the post-war Hollywood days when he had crusaded against communists in the film industry. If I had asked him 'Were you a stoolie for the FBI?' he would have just smiled nicely while the bodyguards moved in to carry me away. But I had a better question. 'Just how serious was the communist menace in Hollywood?' He was out of the starting gate in a rush, with plenty of stories that told you more than anything in his book. 'There were these men in black cars, and they would pass out money in brown, you know, envelopes . . .'

The audience would be able to deduce that here was a man whose imaginative frame of reference was made up from flickering fragments of old movies, mainly ones that he had been in. Even his plainest statements had to be decorated with special effects to hold the audience: a trick I know well. Had he been like that with Gorbachev in Reykjavik? But the charm was real. Where he might have been as truculent about requests for coverage as Ivana Trump, he was as eager to cooperate as if it was his first time on a film set. The main interview done and dusted, we walked together down the concrete footpath that led through the carefully landscaped shrubbery to the bungalow. Over this walk would go my introductory paragraph, so it needed to be quite long. We had to do the walk a few extra times because he was talking to me with such fervour that he tended to wander off the concrete and disappear among the palmettos. The finished show got big ratings and I suppose that if it turns up again on the history channels one day it will serve as a historical document. It didn't go deep, but television interviews rarely do. They give an impression. This one gave an impression of a kind man devoid of guile. If he had been devoid of brains as well, the deficiency would have shown up on screen. It didn't, but nothing can stop a legend. The orthodox opinion remains that Ronald Reagan was some kind of right-wing ogre limited in his depredations only by his stupidity. The facts say otherwise. When Reagan came to office, only two of the USA's client states in Latin America were democracies. When he left office, only two of them weren't. But the facts can say all they like and a myth will remain what it was. All I could do was help to prove that he was a human being. It did something to offset my bad memories of a social occasion in London when I had met Nancy Reagan and made the usual mistake of trying to say something unexpected so as to capture a celebrity's attention. 'Go on,' I said, 'admit that sometimes it's fun.' Considering that her husband had only just been released from hospital after somebody shot him, it was kind of her to glide past me with a smile.

One day I was walking past a television studio when I saw a man in a dark suit and a woman in a light-colored dress walking together. The man was looking at the woman and she was looking at him. They were both smiling. I was walking past them and they were walking past me. I was walking past them and they were walking past me. I was walking past them and they were walking past me.

Our backers bought us out between one star interview and another. It was the only really big money I ever made in show business and by today's standards it seems like nothing, but I was able, for the first time, to feel that my family's future was secure no matter what follies I might commit next, including the folly of walking away from the fountain that had gushed the cash. But I couldn't do that yet. In order to convince our backers that they had not bought a pig in a poke, we felt honour bound to go on building up the company for another year. (Later on, one of the backers asked me, 'Why on earth didn't you people bugger off straight away?') Outside the door of Richard's office, in which he, I and Elaine sat sipping champagne and congratulating ourselves on our hard-won affluence, the Watchmaker headquarters stretched away into the distance, went up a flight of stairs and stretched back again in the other direction, the whole expanse buzzing with dedicated people whose futures were still in our hands. They deserved a decent interval in which to make their plans. They were all out there: Wendy Gay, Jean Twoshoes, the whole crew. I owed them a lot, and for once in my life I saw my duty at the time instead of after. I had never been very good at remembering birthdays, sending cards, choosing gifts, and doing the little things that matter. It's a missing piece of my mentality. But this was a big thing: too big for even me to overlook.

29. DRIVEN MEN

Back we went to Los Angeles to meet Mel Gibson. If I had tabs on myself as an Australian empire-builder, here was an example of what the species really looked like after a full meal of energy pills. This movie wasn't just a star interview with a top and a tail, it was a complete two-week shoot showing every aspect of the star's activity as he ran his production office and went about the complex business of being a Global Brand. In cruel fact, the reason for his being available was that one of the production office's latest efforts, *Conspiracy Theory*, starring the Brand as the rebellious victim of a CIA plot, needed all the help it could get. I had seen the movie before its release and I knew it to be a stiff, which meant I had to tread carefully when talking to the Brand, who had a tendency to treat anything less than complete approval as an armed attack. To that extent, the system had sucked him in, but in most respects he had a right to think of himself as a pillar of integrity in an industry otherwise devoted to the main chance. The movies he made in the *Lethal Weapon* franchise – big hair, dumb plot, bang bang, let's go – raked in hundreds of millions of dollars for the parent studio, but he had parlayed his star power into a string of genuinely interesting projects. Even *Braveheart* wasn't just your average bloodbath. In its plot it was yet another example of Mel's continuing counter-attack against Perfidious Albion, but it was beautifully directed, and he had directed it. (Note the naturalness with which the key characters speak French and Latin as well as English, and ask yourself whether any other director, even in France, has ever brought out the full sumptuous beauty of Sophie Marceau.) Mel knew everything about making movies and he was determined to push his vision to the limit. The vision was uncomfortable but, I think, considerable. If there is such a thing as a necessary contribution to be made from a right-wing viewpoint, it is to take account of the facts of human cruelty. Mel would go on to do so in *The Passion of the Christ*; and his almost unwatchably violent *Apocalypto* is, in my view, an important work of art. Every minute of it scares me witless, but it is meant to. A

man who can conceive a thing like that has a direct mental connection to a primeval state. (The reason why he likes to have his actors speaking foreign languages, or no language at all, could well be that he wants to remove the consolatory filters of speech that lie between us and the primal scream.) Mel has always heard the Devil's voice within himself. In his younger days he tried to drown it with drink, but it can swim. Later on he learned to live with it, but only at the price of a rigorous discipline.

As to the accusations of anti-Semitism, Mel didn't look very anti-Semitic to me when we both sat down to dinner with Joel Silver. A producer of great commercial acumen, Joel Silver is responsible for movies like *Die Hard*, in which Bruce Willis implausibly maintains his pout while slaughtering terrorists by the bus-load. But while he revels in such vulgarity, Joel Silver is a man of exquisite personal taste. He lives in Frank Lloyd Wright houses which he restores at his own expense. Even amid the frenzied hokum of *Die Hard*, the quick of eye will note that the treasure in the vault of the Sumitomo Corporation includes a set of pastels by Degas. Joel Silver does low-life on top dollar. Rich, influential, cosmopolitan and domineering, he is a Jewish mogul out of the worst nightmares of Hamas. But it was clear that Mel respected him. The Brand made his anti-Semitic remarks when he fell off the wagon. The poison is deep in his memory, where he would like to keep it bottled up. Most likely he got it from his father, who really was an anti-Semite: a Holocaust-denier of the classic demented stamp. Mel heard it all when he was a child and clearly it got into him. But the grown-up Mel Gibson doesn't believe any of it. He can't, however, attack his own mental inheritance in public, because he honours his father, as I do mine. So he is torn. The tensions in his mind are fierce, but they make him what he is. Though he smiles with winning charm, there is nothing easy about him, and I think our film showed that.

Helping to show it was the contrast between him and his friend George Clooney, who was just then emerging as a fully accredited film star after a long apprenticeship in the television series *ER*, where he was worshipped by every female member of my family in the most abject manner: one and all, they would sit back with their knees up and coo like pigeons. In our Mel movie, we had a scene where I toured the back lot in a golf cart with Mel at the wheel. George Clooney, in his downtime from an *ER* episode, was discovered shooting hoops. He shot a last hoop, fronted up to the golf cart and got into a dialogue with me and the Brand. None of it was scripted but Clooney was hilarious. Above all, he was relaxed. You could tell that he would do everything with the same casual grace. He had the advantage of his heritage. Mel had come up from nowhere, slogging all the way and learning from his mistakes. Clooney had never made

any. Raised in a showbiz household, he knew, from the start, the rules and the limitations. Just by being what he was, he stole our movie from Mel in two minutes. When I got him alone for a few seconds I asked him if he would be my guest one day and he said, 'Sure. Count on it.'

I left mainstream television before I could call in the marker, but I didn't forget that easy moment. Nothing else seemed to be easy any more. Putting the screws on the network, we got the finance for one more Postcard. The subject was Havana and the network hated the idea because it was obviously destined to be another of those historical background things they were getting so nervous about. (Market research, on which the younger executives had come to rely, was supplying more and more evidence that nobody in the desirable demographic had the slightest interest in any historical period earlier than the previous Tuesday.) If they hadn't needed our weekly show to fill slots, they would never have coughed up. So I was dragging a piano from the start. Cuba looked good to the camera because not even Castro, in four decades of trying, had been able to make it look bad. I had long before formed the opinion that if the Cuban revolution had happened in a European climate it would never have lasted beyond the first winter.

During the course of Castro's rule the total number of people who left the island by any means of transport they could find had amounted to at least half the population of Israel, and they had all taken off because they couldn't stand the regime's brainless dedication to a command economy that was able to command nothing except the approximately equal distribution of grinding poverty. Without the sunlight and the sparkling water, everyone would have gone. But since the best things in life were free, there was some apparent happiness to be filmed, and we dutifully filmed it. Our best interview was with Che Guevara's daughter, who spoke well on behalf of the health system, in which she worked as a doctor. She deserved respect, and nobody, certainly not I, would have wanted to tell her that her father, who she revered, had a habit of assessing the guilt of any suspected traitors by shooting them through the head to see which way they fell.

We were staying at the old Hotel Nacional, where the waiter who once had a love affair with Ava Gardner was still available to bring you a mojito and reluctantly reveal his secret, as he had done to every visiting journalist and film crew for forty years. The Tropicana cabaret was still in business, giving the same show that I had first seen decades before. The beautiful girl was still up there in the floodlit trees singing that lovelorn song about her crying need to be kissed. She was a different girl but she was wearing the same feathered costume. Everything was still roughly the same, but even more roughly because it was all

decaying. I did my best to be fair, though. In the market square where the second-hand books were on sale, I scored, as always, every Aguillar edition I could find – not all of the morocco bindings had been ruined by the humidity – but I was careful also to buy the booklets that featured Castro’s speeches and interviews. They were very good for my Spanish because they used the same phrases over and over, so I could easily improve my knowledge of the syntax and the grammar by underlining the various ways in which the clichés were held together. But in another square nearby, the moment of truth arrived. Sitting at a table outside a cafe, I was reading Castro’s *Nothing Can Hold Back the March of History* (a bad choice of title from a man who had managed, all by himself, to do exactly that) when a fourteen-year-old girl in pink hot pants and a sea-green halter top approached me and offered herself to me for twenty dollars. The crew was filming something else just around the corner. After telling her to take a seat, I dived around the corner, brought back the crew and asked her to go back to where she had been when she had first seen me, approach me again and ask me the same question.

She did it, and she got fifty dollars for it without even having to lie down. A uniformed female member of Cuba’s ubiquitous neighbourhood watch spotted the transaction and came sprinting over to give the poor kid a wiggling, but she wasn’t arrested. There was a good reason for that. It was all official. Just for the tourist dollars, Cuba had made prostitution legal again. Back in the day – when the revolution of the bearded ones was the revolution of all of us, all over the world, who had beards too – Castro had come to power with the promise that there would never again be any slot machines or their female equivalent. But the peso, theoretically at parity with the dollar, was now almost worthless, and finally the real money talks.

Karl Marx, wrong about so much, had been right about that. Merely to be alive can be beautiful in Cuba, even when everything you eat is rationed. In the food queues, the people smiled for our camera while they waited for the pat of butter that would have to last them a week. On any airline that serves food, you get two pats of butter with a bread roll and you can ask for more if you run out. It costs you nothing except the effort of pressing a button. In Cuba, a single pat of butter will cost you an hour of waiting. How many hours are there in a life? I knew that most of our audience would blame the American embargo, although really the fault was all with Castro’s ideological arrogance. As the awful old joke goes, ‘What would happen if the Sahara went communist? Nothing, for the first ten years, and then there would be a shortage of sand.’ The effect of an economy of shortages is to use up, by making them wait, the energy that the people might otherwise devote to protest. Thus the revolution stifles all rebellion. If the

Americans hadn't been so dumb, they would have bombed Havana with a million pairs of trainer shoes, and the revolution would have been washed away. The young people dreamed of nothing except imported trainer shoes. Such was the power and persistence of the dream that the government eventually felt obliged to respond, and came forth with an official all-Cuban sneaker which had apparently been designed to the requirements of Khrushchev's mother. Some of our crew were wearing new Reeboks and the Cuban kids eyed them as if they were made of gold. They were: they were made of the unattainable. Yet it could have all been so easily attained. The reasonable standard of living that even the unemployed take for granted in the decadent capitalist West had been stopped cold in the warm air of Cuba by nothing but an idea. It was the wrong idea but the sun shone on it anyway. We filmed the sun sinking behind me as I walked along the Malecón for our final shot. From the sea wall, boys in shorts somersaulted into the waves to impress the girls. I thought we had done well. From some angles, even the revolution had done well. At least its children would be safer there from knives and guns than they would have been in Brixton, because in Cuba all the weapons belong to the government.

But as we put the movie together in the editing room, I knew it would be the last. I had too much to say about these things by now, and in an hour of television there was too little space, even with the pictures doing half the talking. And there were no stars, so the network executives – all of them born long after Che and Fidel came down from the Sierra Maestre – could offer us no firm idea of when they would schedule it. The studio show was what they cared about, and they cared in the wrong way.

They liked it when we booked Tony Curtis, because Tony Curtis was famous in America, and therefore in the whole world. The British media's abject enthrallment to everything American had by then become so total that its victims didn't even realize they were in its grip. But that's a subject for another book. Let's stay with the stars. Somewhere beneath a hairpiece of improbable luxuriance, Tony Curtis arrived at our studio in a state of nervous breakdown and he wouldn't come out of his dressing room when it was time for him to go on. Out in the studio, there were people in the audience who had adored him since he had starred in *The Black Shield of Falworth*, and that might have been the trouble. He was feeling his age. He was feeling it in the dark. He had turned the lights off, disabled the switch, and anyone who came in could detect his presence only by his breathing. One after the other, in ascending order of authority, the whole hierarchy went in to try and winkle him out: researcher, assistant producer, producer, executive producer. He wouldn't speak to any of them. Finally I was sent in and said what he really wanted to hear. 'Some people

say that you were the key element in three of the greatest movies ever made: *Some Like It Hot*, *Sweet Smell of Success* and *The Boston Strangler*. But I think there's a fourth: *Insignificance*. Your performance in that one left me overwhelmed with helpless awe.' Somewhere in the corner of the dark, a familiar Bronx accent whispered: 'You forgot *Spartacus*.' And out he came. Equalling Peter Sellers's trick of suddenly turning into a normal human being under the lights, he gave me a brilliantly funny interview, but it was all pretty unsettling. If fame had done that to him, what was it doing to me? Mine was on an infinitely smaller scale, of course. I clutched that fact to me for comfort.

And anyway, some of the famous guests seemed perfectly sane. Goldie Hawn was a model of politeness. We had such a bubbling time on air that we talked over each other at one point, and a joke got lost. Later on she came to say goodbye, put her hand over her mouth in mock horror and said, 'I trod on your *line*!' And Alice Cooper, whose whole schtick was to carry on like a psychopath, couldn't have been more sardonically witty or down to earth. My spot with him was one of the neatest things I ever did on air. Every crack the host made, the guest capped: which is just how it ought to be. (The American talk shows work in the opposite direction.) The layout of the set was at its dizzy height by then: a panoply of images and colour, like a book of hours. But it occurred to me that the inspired Alice would have been just as dazzling with nothing in the background at all. I had recently seen the very first successful webcast. The image, only about as big as a postage stamp, stuttered and fluttered, but it didn't take Nostradamus to predict that the computer screen would one day be able to transmit the only thing about face-to-face television that really counted. In the studio we were surrounded by thousands of tons of concrete and millions of pounds' worth of machinery. I had begun to wonder if any of all that hoo-hah was any longer necessary. There could be another way.

The network executives still liked it, although a good deal less, when we booked Freddie Starr, who was at least a draw, mainly because everyone in the country hoped that the famous headline FREDDIE STARR ATE MY HAMSTER would one day be topped by something like FREDDIE STARR SETS FIRE TO WINDSOR CASTLE AFTER BEING CAUGHT IN BED WITH ANNE. I should say, going in, that Freddie Starr is a lavishly accomplished performer. He can sing, dance, do magic and write whole sketches on the spot, playing every character with no pause for transition. While his elfin features are filling the screen with knowing innocence, he can fire, out of the corner of his mouth, a scatological joke so perfectly constructed in its shock value that it is worth a whole hour from most of our laboriously offensive stand-up comedians. But he is harder to handle on air than a runaway train. There was no way of knowing what he would do next. For a few minutes

he would sit there being reasonably normal, and then suddenly he was out of his chair and marching in circles, pretending to have messed his pants. Then he was goose-stepping around in his Nazi routine. Then he was in the audience, sitting on an old lady's lap. And he was just warming up. When he got into his sex-crazed werewolf phase he was ready to rock. The ratio of what we shot and what we could transmit was about four to one. The editors had to work half the night. The worst thing from my angle was that I would have been enjoying the mayhem much more in the previous decade. I, like Freddie, had been in the kitchen too long. But whereas his brains were merely scrambled, mine were turning into an overcooked omelette.

The network executives didn't like it all when I lobbied to book Deborah Bull, prima ballerina at Covent Garden. I had admired *Dancing Away*, her book about becoming a ballerina, and I had more than admired her BBC2 series about dancing, especially the episode devoted to the tango, in which I had participated. Ever since I returned from Buenos Aires I had been learning to dance the tango – sometimes I flew back there just to get some lessons – and Deborah's documentary had been the first time that I had gone public with my passion. The results could have been worse, and Deborah couldn't have been better. Telegenic, knowledgeable and highly articulate, she was the dance presenter that the BBC bigwigs had been looking for since forever and would have built up into a screen superstar if they had had any sense. I thought Deborah was the goods in all respects and I knew her well enough to be sure that she would give us an incandescent interview. But the network executives thought that a ballerina was too elitist for the general public. They wanted me to interview Geri Halliwell. My previous interview with the emerging Spice Girls had been a big hit and they wanted more of the same. Worse, my own colleagues agreed with them. Richard, by that stage, was paying the same kind of attention to the ratings that he had once discouraged in me. When I asked him what was up he told me the dreadful truth. From the network's viewpoint, the show was only just holding on. I realized how tough things were getting when all my producers, speaking as one, advanced the idea that I should interview the Duchess of York. Ever since I had first seen her dishing up food in the hospitality marquee of the McLaren F1 team, I had always thought her a cheerful soul. But I had no interest in interviewing her on screen. Yet I now found myself having long lunches with her social secretaries, who assured me that what was really, really *amazing* about the Duchess was that she worked jolly, jolly *hard*. I was asleep already. What would it be like when I had to ask her questions? Luckily she had more important things to do and the idea went away, but it had been a rude shock to find Richard so intent on persuading me to do the very kind of thing that we had

set up our own outfit in order to avoid.

30. TRUMPETS AT SUNSET

The same was true for many of our early hopes. One of them had been to get control of the product, but here we were, after years of work, and the control was back in the hands of the controllers. We had made our fortunes, but the programmes we made didn't belong to us. For the next generation of independent producers, it would be a sine qua non to retain their rights in the sell-on, but we had arrived too early in the game. I was too tired for the next fight. Even more daunting, Richard seemed tired too. That was a real worry, because all the time I had known him his nervous energy had been as inexhaustible as his judgement was sound. If I may be permitted for a moment to compare the lesser with the greater, we had always worked together like Yves Saint Laurent and Pierre Bergé. Saint Laurent was the nutty creative one and Bergé was the practical brain. Theirs had been a productive relationship right up until the time when Saint Laurent, bombed out of his skull on multiple medication, finally wiggled out for keeps. But if the practical brain shows the same kind of impulsiveness even for a week, the thing is over. It had seemed like a good idea to revive the End of the Year show format for the end of the millennium. I had my doubts, because I was still meeting people who told me they always watched the End of the Year show even though we had last done it five years before. If we did it again even once, I would be back in the same frame, perhaps for another decade. But the occasion sounded too good to miss, and the thing was scheduled. Six months ahead, the deal was sealed, the studio was booked for the show, and then Richard said he wanted to replace Bostock.

Richard said that we had got stuck in a groove and I needed a fresh mind to bounce off. I didn't believe that for a moment but I had at last run full-tilt into a problem that had been inherent in our command set-up from the beginning. We had no mechanism for disagreeing with each other at a fundamental level. We had always done everything by mutual agreement: there had never been a time when we hadn't been able to settle on a plan even if it was preceded by a quarrel.

But this time I thought his proposal was so wrong that I couldn't see his point at all. And there was the flaw. My only effective course of action would have been to walk out, and I couldn't walk out on my own company. So I caved in, to my lasting shame. Bostock was pissed off, and I don't blame him. I blame myself. I should have pulled the plug, no matter what the cost. A true egomaniac would have done so. But my own ego, though more than sufficiently robust, is tempered, I like to think, by an underlying sense of the reasonable. The trouble with a sense of the reasonable, however, is that it has, built into it, a dangerous readiness to believe that the opposing voice might have something to it. Perhaps the fresh mind would energize me.

The fresh mind turned out to be two fresh minds, answering to the names of Andrew Collins and Stuart Maconie. When they arrived in my cubicle they were very nice about not noticing that I lived like a prisoner. They were already well known as a tightly scripted radio double act, and I found out why in the first five minutes. Each of them had verbal talent spraying out of his ears. But I'm bound to say that they seemed very young. Barely adding up to my own age, they could tell I was missing Bostock but they did all they could to help. They were smart and full of up-to-date ideas. My problem, however, was that I myself was no more up to date than Queen Victoria, and was thus very soon tipped head-first into a permanent state of being puzzled. I couldn't stump them with the Bayeux Tapestry, but when they talked about the Beastie Boys I was clueless. For all their impressive range of reference, however, they knew a lot more about movies and music than they did about history, which, in a show concerning a whole millennium, had to be the main subject. Carolyn Longton was one of our best producers – she had put together the Mexico City shoot, which was a tough one – but she won't mind my saying that history wasn't her thing. She said it herself. 'We didn't do history at school.' The British school system, by that stage, was giving As at A-level to young people who had to consult a database before they found out that World War I came before World War II. In just such events, of course, lay the show's insoluble problem, and I might not have been able to crack it even if Bostock had been at my elbow. When the story got to the twentieth century, there was just too much stuff that I couldn't be funny about. When people made jokes about Hitler and Stalin, I seldom laughed, so why, if I made jokes about Hitler and Stalin, would anybody else laugh? They would hear the sense of strain, and humour is always a shared relaxation. While the gargantuan preparations for the End of the Millennium show were still in the works, I flew briefly back to Los Angeles with Richard for our last star interview special. Barbra Streisand was still the number-one female showbiz name on earth at the time, and therefore impossible to approach. We had been after her

for fifteen years at least. She became momentarily available only because she had a stiff album to push. Recorded in company with her marginally gifted husband, the album was dead at birth, but the opportunity to interview her had attracted production teams from every major broadcasting outlet in the world. Theoretically she would give them half an hour each, but in practice each interview took at least an hour because she insisted on rearranging the lighting, choosing the lenses, checking on the pollen count, etc. That was her right, but it meant we had to wait. The crew ahead of us ran out of budget and had to fly home to Munich, so we got bumped up by a couple of hours, but we were still running a day late when we finally got through the door to do our set-up. Five hours after our scheduled starting time, she finally arrived on set and launched herself into the task of changing the layout in every detail. I was busting for a pee, but now that she was at last physically present it would have been foolish of me to leave, so I held it in.

When we got talking, things went smoothly enough. I genuinely admired the way she had turned Hollywood around for women, making the studios dance to her tune instead of the other way about. On being told repeatedly that her success in revolutionizing the film industry was almost as impressive as her creative genius, she gave several signs that she was taking my pitiless interrogation quite well. Three-quarters of the way into our allotted time frame, however, I had to put my hand up and ask permission for a toilet break. Nothing like that had happened to her in years. She was stunned. Our camera kept rolling, so somewhere in the archives there must be a few feet of film of Barbra Streisand looking as if she had seen the Devil rise out of the earth and expose his flaming member while announcing his intention of overthrowing the government of the United States by force. I went off to pee and made one of my early discoveries that my waterworks were no longer what they were. I had always found it hard to urinate when I was under pressure but this was ridiculous. It was like tapping a rubber plant. I expected her to be gone by the time I got back to the set but she was still there. What Tom Cruise would have called our rapport, however, had disappeared. She responded with only mild enthusiasm to my final few questions about how she coped with her excess of inspiration. Then she rose to leave and it was all over.

The whole thing was over. In the end, nobody beats the grind. Richard said it first. 'I could never go through that again.' I felt the same. At the airport, he didn't even buy a watch. At first I took it as a sign of his annoyance, but there was something listless about him, and on the plane home, for the first time in our lives together, I saw him fall asleep.

Back we went to the millennium show, waiting for us in the office like some many-headed, tentacle-headed monster from a John Carpenter horror movie, or

many-headed, tentacle-decked monster from a John Carpenter horror movie, or a frog in a pond. As the chief author of the script I did my best to convince myself that it was hilarious, but I would go home to my family and spread no more cheer than a bomb-disposal expert granted two days' leave for nervous exhaustion. Finally the main show was taped over a period of two days, with a further day reserved for editing before it was transmitted. Richard, for the first time in his career as an executive producer, didn't turn up for the edit. He had gone sick. I had been worried about his health for some time. His hands had always trembled but I thought it was nervous energy. Lately, though, I had been hearing his knife and fork rattle when he ate. And now, on the vital day, he wasn't there. The kids had to do the edit themselves and they made their first mistake only two minutes into the show. They neglected to weld a laugh over a cut. When the laugh stopped abruptly, it suggested that every laugh in the show would be artificial. I had extracted every one of the hundreds of laughs in the show from a live studio audience, but the audience at home would assume it was a laugh track. Glumly, as another thousand years came to an end, I watched the show go out. It wasn't all that bad, but if it couldn't be better than any of its predecessors, why had we done it? My only consolation was that a few million fewer people than usual would be watching with me.

As the time approached when I would at last be free of my weekly schedule in the Watchmaker office, I got sick of wondering when the executives would screen the Havana postcard and I rang up the most senior factotum who would take my call. He sounded about twelve years old. Resisting the urge to ask, 'Is your father in?' I asked why the show, which they had paid for, had not been on the air. He cleared his throat and said that there was a problem. 'What problem?' The answer told me all I would ever need to know. 'We've done some market research and not enough people know about the Cuban revolution. We thought we might wait for a big news story and then peg the screening to that.' And what big news story would that be? 'We thought that we might wait for Castro to die.' I told him that I would see if I could arrange to die in the same week, so that they would have two pegs. But I got the impression that he thought there would still be only one.

I was still shaking my head when Wendy Gay told me that Richard wouldn't be coming in at all for a while. She looked stricken, obviously knowing something that I didn't. Elaine Bedell, always a blunt speaker, told me straight out. 'Richard's sick. Really sick. He might not be coming back.' I made the call and he said there was nothing to worry about. But he also said that it was time for me to go home. I packed a few books in a box, said my goodbyes and left. In the cupboards of my office there was a row of blue suits and on the shelves and on my desk were the drafts of all the scripts I had ever written. I planned to come

on my desk were the drafts of all the scripts I had ever written. I planned to come back and get all that stuff one day but I never did.

EPILOGUE: THE RETURN OF THE METROPOLITAN CRITIC

So I did a fade. In my telling of it, I may have overdone the neatness. The milestones in life are seldom so squarely cut. Well before the end, before it had become fully clear that the network, driven by its hunger for the youthful demographic, wanted the celebrity culture and no other kind, Richard had put feelers out to the BBC. But Alan Yentob, even if he had wanted me back, was in no position to pay the tab for my whole organization. He had just got through forking out the down-payment for a couple of newly emergent front-men and the total bill had left him traumatized. (One of these fledglings cost the Beeb millions until it was at last realized that he had nothing to offer except a built-in grin, and the other, although he can at least put his own sentences together, expects us to be astonished when he *doesn't* swear.) For me, Yentob was the executive who had had the boldness to buy in the magnificent German series *Heimat* and screen the whole thing on BBC2. If a man as clever as that made a decision that was not in my interest, I could have no quarrel.

Besides, I didn't really want to continue. The will was gone: not so much because I had ceased to enjoy the limelight, but because I wanted to be alone again with my writing. Most of the essays in my collection *Even As We Speak* were written during the transition period when I was getting ready to leave mainstream television, but the book came out after I had made the jump, and its publication marked, in my own mind at least, the moment when my erstwhile persona, the Metropolitan Critic, made his comeback. I didn't expect the reviewers to say the same. I expected them to review my book as if it had been written by Bruce Forsyth. But in the event the response was gratifying, even though the fact that I had definitively kicked the crystal bucket was slow to sink in. I had no beef about that, and still haven't. Most of the television faces hang in there if they can. I am always careful not to speak against the ones who go on

forever. Terry Wogan will be worth the money if he broadcasts from an iron lung. There are plenty of presenters who agree with the press that there is no life beyond television. Most of them end up trying to convince themselves that their new spot on a cable channel, with nobody watching, is even more exciting than their old spot on a mainstream channel, when everybody watched, but there are always a few that look as if they are only fulfilling their destiny when they grow old and die on the big-time air, still twinkling as they go.

I wouldn't have been one of them. I had other things I was longing to do, and I would have cared little if they came with no celebrity factor attached. After too many years of pestering the stars while they glowed and faded, it had become all too apparent to me that celebrity, unless it was based on real achievement, would always decay at the same rate as time marched. I made that the major theme of my next book of essays, *The Meaning of Recognition*. That book, too, got a thoughtful press, whose general effect helped to eliminate the impression that I might be mourning for my lost prominence. In the tabloids, it was not long before the nametag 'TV Clive' was transferred from me to Clive Anderson, who had started his career as my warm-up man but was now the go-to guy for any show that needed fronting by a flip lip. So I was relatively safe from the attentions of the gossip writers. For as long as the press is free, there will always be the concept that a private life is an offence against the public's right to know; and the turnover merchants will thrive as a consequence. They wouldn't enjoy being turned over themselves – a fact which tells you all you need to know about the putative legitimacy of their trade – but there is no point complaining. All I can say is that I don't envy them their job. The lucky ones get sick of their work; the unlucky ones come to regard it as normal; and it is hard to know which fate is worse. But now they were busy chasing faces they could see on the screen, and my face had gone missing.

The profile-writers, however, were still on the case. Television executives don't place much value on the press profiles of a star, but for publishers such attention counts for a lot, and the more 'thoughtful' the profile the better. Alas, the thoughtful press profile is the one I hate most, because I am just no good at sitting still to be summed up. After moving from the Barbican to a loft across the river, and lining the loft with books as a soldier might stack sandbags to heighten the rim of his foxhole, I had dreams of being left alone, but it still hasn't worked out that way. The profile-writers still get in. I sincerely wish I could make their job easier, but I can't. They still want to know what I am really out to achieve, and they tend to get impatient when they find out that I don't know. The best of them are highly intelligent, but the sum total of their attentions was already driving me to distraction as the next thousand years got started. I wouldn't be

seeing many of those years in person, so any time wasted hit me hard. I can't complain, however, about the general tone of the press I have been getting in recent years. Even those Australian journalists who once accused the expatriates of treason are nowadays likely to concede that we flew the flag. For those of us who took off so long ago to find out what the moon was made of, the most dangerous part of the flight used to be the re-entry. You had to get the angle exactly right, or there would be flames in the sky. The press liked nothing better than a mismanaged homecoming. Now, however, there is a welcome waiting. I cherish my share of the approbation. Besides, what the press says never matters as much as what the common people think. Whenever I am in Sydney in these last, less hectic years, I sit down to write at one of the open-air tables of Rossini's cafe on Circular Quay. Kindly saying that they are sorry to interrupt, passers-by thank me for my books or my television programmes. If I didn't enjoy being interrupted, I would sit somewhere else. Once a performer, always a performer. But the writing still gets done.

One of the penalties of living out your allotted span is that some of the people whose existence you relied on will cash in their chips. 'At my age, of course,' Anthony Powell once told me, 'they start dropping orf like flies.' During the later part of the time span covered by this book, Kingsley Amis died. He could be tough company, especially towards the end, but I always revered him. Terry Kilmartin, of whom I thought the world, died too. When I spoke at his memorial service, I tried to tell the story of what a privilege and an education it has been to have him as an editor. Peter Cook I knew less well but I had never doubted that he was a formative influence on all of us who aspired to putting a commentary into comedy. My wife and I were skiing at Aspen when we got the news. At a restaurant high up on Ajax, Barry Humphries suddenly appeared, clad in the splendid ski-suit that kept him warm as he rode up and down the mountain in the chair-lift. He must have skied about ten yards on the whole trip, and was perfectly ready to make a joke of it. But for once he looked bereft. He said, 'Peter Cook died.' I didn't know what to say. Barry, by a heroic act of will, had saved himself from the menace that nailed his friend. But Peter would never have gone on drinking unless he wanted to get it over. The same applied to Dudley Moore: he chose other means, but to embrace extinction was his aim. I know the impulse well, but nobody succumbs to it unless they feel that their work is done.

Bad news travels fast among those in the same business. Not long after the computers surprised us all by ringing in the new millennium on time instead of announcing a re-run of the Battle of Hastings, I was at some literary festival or other. I met Al Alvarez in the bar of my hotel and he said, 'Ian Hamilton is very

sick.' Always a picture of health even when his latest physical adventure had left him busted up, Al loathed the idea of illness taking a friend, and so did I. Ian had cancer and he died soon after. He had been the key man at the start of my literary career and I felt cut off from my beginnings. It made going on with the end-game feel all the stranger. More recently, that feeling was redoubled when Pat Kavanagh died, from a brain tumour that struck at only a moment's notice. Her memorial service was a gathering of all the people whose lives she had enriched, and I won't pretend to have grieved more than they did, and still do: but I had always been grateful for the work and thought she put into helping give shape to my literary career. To dedicate my book of essays *The Revolt of the Pendulum* to her memory was the best tribute I could think of, when my only consolation was that she had not, at least, been cut down young; even though she was always young, at any age, just as she was always beautiful.

Ian went too early, but at least he had lived a life. Lorna Sage, who had adored him as so many women did, also went too early. The woman with the most enchanting name in the literary world had a way of flattering the male writers in her life with her admiration, but few of us realized soon enough that she had the power to write rings around us. When, just before her death, her autobiographical memoir *Bad Blood* was published, it left all of us wondering whether we would ever do anything as good. Had she lived to write a few more books like it, her position as the dominant female voice of a generation might have been assured. But she got far enough to make her voice count.

Terence Donovan frightened me by choosing to die. I had always thought I understood him, and then he proved that I had never understood him at all. The cockney photographers had always impressed me with their boldness. Unlike the invading Australians, for whom the British class structure was no obstacle because they had never seen such a thing when they were young, the cockneys had to fight their way up. They did it with good cheer. David Bailey, with whom I collaborated both in print and on film, could deal out withering sardonic punishment for any loose word, but his company was a constant delight; and Donovan was a belly laugh every minute. I had thought that such a funny man must be full of joy. His dreadful suicide was a bad blow but at least it was a mystery.

When Sarah Raphael went, it was no mystery at all. Chance, which I knew all about, had simply reminded us that it is our only ruler. But why choose her, when she was still in the opening stages of a career that might have changed the modern history of her art? She caught a cold; the cold turned to something worse, and then to something worse still, and she was gone. The shock was terrible. Ustinov, Pavarotti, Pinter, Ayrton Senna, Olga Havel, Dirk Bogarde,

Katharine Hepburn, Alan Coren, Kenneth MacMillan: they have all gone, but they went in the fullness of their achievement. Sarah was only at the beginning of hers. The loss blew like a freezing wind into hundreds of lives. For her funeral, the chapel was an atoll in a sea of people. I was one of them, and when I saw the faces of her parents I found it hard to keep my feet. For her father, an adept of the classical languages, it must have been as if the concept of tragic irony had been redefined for him by jealous gods. Only a month had gone by since I had made my exit from television and I had not yet begun to construct my website, but the day would come when I would ask his permission to include, in the site's gallery section, a pavilion devoted to his daughter's work. At several meetings to discuss the project, we became even closer friends. The friendship had begun through mutual wonder at his daughter's gift, and it grew through mutual grief at her death: but my share of the grief, thank God, could only be a tiny fraction of his.

Perhaps it would be better to leave God out of it, because His casual violence, if He exists, can have no excuse. Better always to blame chance, which is without a mind. When chance takes the older and fulfilled, it can seem wise and even benevolent, but when it takes the young and the barely begun, its arbitrary vandalism stands revealed. Wendy Gay sent me her first short stories to look at. I was, I really was, going to get back to her and tell her that they were full of promise; but I was short of time. Not, however, as short of time as she was. She was out cycling and she was killed by a lorry. The driver said that she didn't see him. It could be said that he should have seen her, but such arguments are just whistling in the dark. To know just how dark the dark is, you have to lose a daughter. I rang her parents and said the most useless of all things. 'I only wish I had something useful to say.' They were nice about it, but I would have done better to say nothing. The truth was that I felt guilty. When the young die, I always feel guilty, because I have been granted a long life. So was my mother, and when she at last died, after having lain in the nursing home for several years, I tried to be thankful that she had lived to see her son achieve at least some of the things that her husband might have done if his life had not been cut short. But the story of her passing will be told at its proper length in the first chapter of my next, and presumably final, volume. The end of her life marked a new beginning for mine; the last of my new beginnings.

Nor is this the place to tell how I wrote *Cultural Amnesia*, published my collected poems, went back on stage, re-launched my song-writing career as Pete Atkin's lyricist, found a new position as a broadcaster on BBC Radio 4 and built the first few levels of my multimedia website – which might prove to be my most characteristic means of expression, if only because, having made a start

with it, I have no real idea of where it might end. All I need to say now, in closing, is that I would have been far less well equipped for any of this if I had not done twenty years of television first. At the time it might have looked like a false trail. In our family we have an expression about the trail to Kublis. The expression can be used about any of us but is most commonly used about me. At Davos, near the bottom of the mountain, it was possible, at the end of the day's skiing, to take the trail back to town, or else, by mistake, to take the trail to Kublis, a little town much further down the valley. The trail led for miles over fields that were cow pastures in the summer. When the snow was thin the cow pats would be near the surface. The effect of skiing over a cow pat is to stop the ski while the skier goes on, often to fall face down in the cow pat after next. The complete trip could take a couple of hours and the trip back up the valley by train took another half hour on top of that, so the victim would arrive late for dinner and be greeted by universal mockery. All of us took the trail to Kublis once but I was the only one who took it twice. On the second trip the snow was particularly thin, which made the cow pats easier to spot in the moonlight but also provided a surface consisting mainly of grass and dirt. I was sobbing with fatigue when I arrived in Kublis and only just caught the very last train. Having missed dinner altogether, I was not regaled with the full chorus of derision until breakfast. Many a time during my years in television I heard, from one or other member of my family and often from all of them at once, the expression, 'He went to Kublis.' But I still think that it was the most instructive way to reach Davos. How else would I have learned so much about cow pats, or acquired the all-important skills to ski on dirt?

I might have forgotten to say that I had a lot of fun in mainstream television. But I would have been glad to be in it even if the whole thing had been a sweat, because the long-term pay-off was a sum of practical experience that has served me well. Much of the fun was provided by the personality of Richard Drewett. At his funeral service in 2008, the chapel was packed with quondam ferrets. Some of them had arrived in limousines: they were the new hierarchs. All of us who spoke drew on the fund of running gags that he had brought into being and made part of the texture of our working lives. Right to the end, even as he wasted away to nothing, his merriment was always there. When he was being lifted onto the trolley that would take him into the last hospital room he would have to see, he whispered, 'Any chance of an upgrade?' This book has been, in its largest part, the story of the career he gave me in television. He was convinced, and helped to convince me whenever I wavered, that it was worth doing in itself; but he could not have foreseen that it would be crucial in what happened to me next. From the practical matters of putting a studio show

together, I learned more about the structure of writing, and of the necessity to make every word count; and from the films we made when we travelled, I learned more about the world. The films were only little things. Making documentaries about Hugh Hefner and Naomi Campbell didn't turn me into, say, Bill Forsyth. But they did turn me into a more informed critic, who could appreciate a miracle like *Local Hero* not only on the level of its bewitching lyricism, which everyone enjoys, but on the level of its construction, which not everyone can see. And from all our films, and from all our other programmes, and from all the other experience that my measure of fame had made possible, I brought home a stock of memories that made me a much more cogent writer in general.

Sometimes the memories lasted in my mind only as particular images, in the way that our dreams are assembled from fragments. But the images are sharp, and all the sharper when they are reduced to trinkets. In that regard, everyone is a dreaming swimmer. As time runs out, we might remember the precise mentality of a treasured friend in the winding of a watch, and the death of a princess as a single earring that was found in the crumpled dashboard of a crashed Mercedes. In my last essays, my last poems, my last anything, these granules of recollection will provide the substance. I might never live to write my novel about the Pacific War: the book to which, in my mind, I have already given its title, *The River in the Sky*. But one tiny part of it is already written, even if not yet written down. Once, in Japan, on the shore of the Bay of Toba, I watched the sun rise over the pearl farms, and saw the still, pale water turn to silver fire. There was no camera there to catch it, but I was there. I would not be able to do the things I do now, and might do next, if I had not done those other things first. It was sheer luck, of course, that I lived long enough to start again. I have always been a lucky man. Try to forgive me if I pay myself the compliment that I was wise enough to know it.

Clive James is the author of more than forty books. As well as essays, he has published collections of literary and television criticism, travel writing, verse and novels, plus five volumes of autobiography, *Unreliable Memoirs*, *Falling Towards England*, *May Week Was In June*, *North Face of Soho* and *The Blaze of Obscurity*. As a television performer he appeared regularly for both the BBC and ITV, most notably as writer and presenter of the 'Postcard' series of travel documentaries. He helped to found the independent television production company Watchmaker and the multimedia personal website www.clivejames.com. His book *Cultural Amnesia* was widely noticed in all the English-speaking countries and is currently being translated into Chinese. His popular Radio 4 series *A Point of View* has been published in volume form. In 1992 he was made a Member of the Order of Australia and in 2003 he was awarded the Philip Hodgins memorial medal for literature. He holds honorary doctorates from Sydney University and the University of East Anglia. In 2012 he was appointed CBE and in 2013 an Officer of the Order of Australia.

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