

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

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# A Lie About My Father

John Burnside

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# A LIE ABOUT MY FATHER

John Burnside



JONATHAN CAPE  
LONDON

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This book is best treated as a work of fiction. If he were here to discuss it, my father would agree, I'm sure, that it's as true to say that I never had a father as it is to say that he never had a son. —



We stand upon the brink of a precipice. We peer into the abyss – we grow sick and dizzy. Our first impulse is to shrink from the danger. Unaccountably we remain. By slow degrees our sickness and dizziness and horror become merged in a cloud of unnameable feeling. By gradations, still more imperceptible, this cloud assumes shape, as did the vapor from the bottle out of which arose the genius in the Arabian Nights. But out of this *our* cloud upon the precipice's edge, there grows into palpability, a shape, far more terrible than any genius or any demon of a tale, and yet it is but a thought, although a fearful one, and one which chills the very marrow of our bones with the fierceness of the delight of its horror. It is merely the idea of what would be our sensations during the sweeping precipitancy of a fall from such a height. And this fall – this rushing annihilation – for the very reason that it involves one of the most ghastly and loathsome images of death and suffering which have ever presented themselves to our imagination – for this very cause do we now the most vividly desire to approach it. And because our reason violently deters us from the brink, therefore do we most impetuously approach it. There is no passion in nature so demoniacally impatient, as that of him who, shuddering upon the edge of a precipice, thus meditates a plunge. To indulge, for a moment, in any attempt at *thought*, is to be inevitably lost; for reflection but urges us to forbear, and *therefore* it is, I say, that we *cannot*. If there be no friendly arm to check us, or if we fail in a sudden effort to prostrate ourselves backward from the abyss, we plunge, and are destroyed.

Examine these and similar actions as we will, we shall find them resulting solely from the spirit of the *Perverse*. We perpetrate them merely because we feel that we should *not*. Beyond or behind this there is no intelligible principle; and we might, indeed, deem this perverseness a direct instigation of the arch-fiend, were it not occasionally known to operate in the furtherance of good.

Edgar Allan Poe, 'The Imp of the Perversity'

Where, during all these years, was my free will? From what deep and hidden place was it called for in a moment so that I might bend my neck under thy yoke, which is easy, and take up thy burden which is light?

St Augustine, *Confessions*

## BIRDLAND

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*. . . fell on his knees and looked up and cried out, 'No, daddy, don't leave me here alone, Take me up, daddy, to the belly of your ship, Let the ship slide open and I'll go inside of it Where you are not human . . .'*

Patti Smi

Every year, it comes as a surprise. The leaves flare, for a time, to crimson and butter yellow, the air shifts, ~~in the early morning, from the damp greens of late summer to soft graphites and an occasional miraculous quail grey.~~ Everything brightens before it burns away, the way a dying man is suddenly filled with new hope, hours before they are laying him out to be washed and dressed for the last time in a cool side room. I was brought up, not necessarily to believe, but to allow for the possibility that the dead come back at Halloween; or rather, not the dead, but their souls: whether as individual wisps of fading consciousness or some single, aggregated mass, it didn't matter. All I knew was that something was there, in one of its many guises: ghost, or revenant, breath of wind, figment of light or fire, or just some inexplicable memory, some snapshot filed away at the back of my mind, a picture I didn't even know I possessed until that moment.

So it is that, with the usual show of scepticism and something close to total conviction, I have celebrated Halloween all my life. Most years, if I can, I stay at home. I make an occasion of the day, private, local festival of penance and celebration in more or less equal measure. I think of my own dead, out there among the millions of returning souls permitted, for this one night, to visit the places they once knew, the houses they inhabited, the streets they crossed on their way to work, or to secret assignments, and I remember why, in my part of the world, the living spend this day building fires, so they can light them all at once, all over the darkening land, as night approaches. It's not, as medieval superstition says, that they are trying to frighten off evil spirits. No: the purpose of these fires is to light the way, and to offer a little warmth to ghosts who are so like ourselves that we are interchangeable: living and dead; guest and host; householder and spectre; my father, myself. One day we may all be ghosts, and the ghosts we entertain will live and breathe again. Perhaps, in the past, each of us knew what it was to wander home and find it strange, the garden altered, the kitchen full of strangers.

To make it work, Halloween has to be a collaboration. The dead have their part to play, but so have the living. The reason I stay close to home on Halloween – whatever *home* happens to be – isn't just because I am conscious of, even dutiful about, my part in the ritual, but also because I know how vulnerable I am at such times. Halloween is an occasion, not just for visitations, but also for subtle yet significant shifts and slips in the psyche, near-imperceptible transformations that, by the time they become visible, have altered the path of a life for ever. At Halloween, when the ghosts are about, I feel more open; more open, and more alert, but also more threatened. It's best, at such times, to sit at home until the first light breaks, and send my personal spirits away satisfied.

There have been times, however, when I had to be away: out on the road, somewhere in transit, alone, exposed, capable of forgetting what I think I am. Ten years ago, for instance, I was driving through the Finger Lakes region of upper New York State, alone in a rented car, as the day of the dead approached. I had arrived in Rochester, NY, towards the end of October, and now I was searching for the little town where a friend lived, not far from Lake Keuka. I get lost easily – willingly, perhaps – and it was an easy place to get lost in, all the little roads leading off to places that were more beautiful and silent than any I had seen till then. So I was thoroughly lost that morning, when I stopped to pick up the clown. I didn't know he was a clown when I picked him up, but I could have guessed as much from his looks, and from the way he stood by the side of the road, utterly indifferent to the absence of traffic, or to the question of whether I would give him a lift. Even though he didn't appear to be local, he looked like someone who knew the way.

It was the mid-nineties and I had been having a difficult year. I was stressed, tired, grateful to be alone and out on the road. I was tired of my work; tired of my history; tired, more than anything, of being *a person* (when St Paul tells us that God is no respecter of persons, he is saying more than what

usually understand). I was tired of acting, tired of being visible. Driving around in that quiet corner of the world, passing through little townships where the children had set great grinning or mock-scary jack-o'-lanterns on the porches, I might as well have been invisible, a man from nowhere, as anyone when he is passing through. I had been on the road for a while, and I was content just to drive around stopping from time to time for a coffee and moving on, like a faint gust of wind that the local people with their own dramas and hurts to enact, barely noticed, if they noticed it at all.

So I was happy being alone, enjoying the quiet of who I am when I am not with others, and I had no wish to change my situation till I stopped in a small town for lunch. I don't remember where it was, why it appealed to me particularly, all I recall is the narrow, sparsely furnished diner, and the fact that it was empty. Empty, that is, but for the woman who brought me the menu, a painter working as a waitress (I have never met a waitress working as a painter, or an actor playing Hamlet till the next busboy position frees up, but I believed her, that day, and I still do today). She was a very beautiful woman, which struck me as odd at the time, because I hadn't thought of American women as beautiful till I met her. Pretty, yes; attractive, very often; but not beautiful. To me, they usually looked too new as if they had just come off an assembly line. But then, I was more accustomed to California, where *everything* looks too new.

As is the way of quiet days, I spent a little time talking to this beautiful woman – I'll call her Frances – then I paid my bill and left. It had been one of those brief encounters that happen in transit of no significance to either party beyond the level of pleasant, courteous exchange. She hadn't seen me as anything other than a friendly face – an outsider, someone she could relax and chat with, one far from busy day – and I hadn't planned for anything other than a light but leisurely meal, to break the tedium of driving; after a few miles, however, I realised that Frances had shocked me out of my solitary mood and I found myself thinking about her, wondering, speculating, as it is possible to do when there is nothing but road ahead, no home, no obligations, no basic facts of existence. I was annoyed, I was charmed, I felt silly, and I was a little touched by my own silliness. I imagine the mood would have passed after an hour or so, with some country music on the radio and the not at all pressing, even faintly amusing problem of finding the way to my friend's house, but I had been feeling more than geographically lost for a while when I came upon a hitch-hiker and stopped to pick him up.

I'm going to call him Mike. He had come up from the city, he said, on his way to visit his father. We got talking about New York, about the Lakes and, eventually, about his father who, according to Mike's account, was a rare, living example of those men who had come to seem, for me at least, a matter of myth: competent, quiet, broad-minded, solitary, he had run a building supplies store in a nearby town, but was now retired and, ever since his second wife died, living alone in a simple house out in the woods, among the red and golden trees, not far from his nearest neighbour, for all practical purposes, but far enough to afford him real privacy.

At the time, I had no idea why it mattered to me, but I immediately decided that Mike's father whose name, in this story, is Martin – was one of those people who liked to wake alone in the early morning and stand on his porch looking out at the woods, or at the little dirt road that ran to his door to see what he could see. A man – I can imagine him so easily in the telling – for whom every sighting of the local deer, or the woodland birds, was a significant event, no matter how common those sightings might be. A significant event for him because, every time a human being encounters an animal, or a bird, he learns something new, or remembers something old that he had forgotten. This was one of the four or five things Martin has learned in life, and he is one of those men who understand that knowing four or five things is more than enough. I could imagine him allowing himself a good half-hour or so to stand outside with a warm coffee cradled in his hands, watching the day begin.

before he went indoors and made breakfast. The rest of his day would be spent in patient work: the good work of daily maintenance, the odd task that had been waiting for the right moment or season to be carried out, the sudden emergency repair.

I don't mean to say that Mike told me all – or any – of this about his father, but I knew, from what he did say, that Martin was just such a man. I could see him married, then widowed: self-sufficient and alone, and no less so when he was bound to his wife and children – and it wasn't even a matter of time before this man, this father, merged with the ideal I had grown up expecting to find, a man like Walter Pidgeon, say, in his best movies: a creature mostly removed from the world inhabited by other people, sitting alone with his paper, or musing over his pipe. My childhood dream of a father had been just that conservative-seeming type: a man who willingly accepted his imposed silence, his easy invisibility, and lived inside himself, in a self-validating world that had gradually become richer and quieter, like a pond in the woods that goes undisturbed for years, filling with leaves and spores, becoming a dark continuum of frog life and the slow chemistry of generation and decay. By the end, I could imagine, everything would have been internalised. Others would think him reserved, even withdrawn; they wouldn't see the faint smile that played about his face or, if they did, they would think of it as self-effacing or conciliatory, or even slightly embarrassed, the smile of a man who has nothing to say for himself. Nothing to say, nothing to show, nothing to prove. But it might as easily be the smile of someone who has seen through all the usual aspirations: the wry, mocking expression of someone who had learned, early on, that being a successful man, in worldly terms, is the ultimate pyrrhic victories.

Mike was a different kettle of fish. He was tall, perhaps too tall, a rather gangly boy-man who looked ten years older than I guessed he was. He had sandy, already receding hair and oddly dark eyes as if he had dyed or tinted them in some way. He told me he had gone off to the city at nineteen, to study acting, but what he really wanted to do was become a clown. Now he was in clown school – I had no idea, till then, that people actually studied such things – and even though his father had been a practical man all his life, he had been supportive, if not always clear about what it was Mike wanted to achieve. 'My dad never disrespected me for doing what I wanted to do,' Mike said. 'He was always there for me.' He spoke in that way, like a character on television, but I recognised the shorthand he was using. 'I got to hand it to him.' He shook his head in appreciation. I imagined he might be a good clown: everything he did was exaggerated, every phrase he uttered was picked out of the great treasure trove of received ideas. 'I can do other stuff,' he added. 'I made sure of that, for his sake.' He looked out at the trees. 'I'm a pretty fair carpenter,' he said, with a hint of pride.

I nodded. I wondered, if these lines had come up in a script he was learning, whether he would recognise himself in them. Not that I mean this as a criticism. I liked Mike. As he talked, I drove along, trying to find a suitable place in his story to interrupt him, and find out where we were going. Before I could, however, he gave me the kind of *interested* look that is so arresting in Americans. 'So John. Tell me about your dad,' he said.

'He's dead,' I replied.

This seemed to surprise him, though he was probably just taken aback by my un-American directness. 'I'm sorry to hear that,' he said, after a moment. 'How long has it been? If you don't mind me asking.'

It was my turn to take a moment. 'Ten years now,' I said. 'Ten years – more or less.' I had to think but I didn't mind sounding vague, hoping that would prompt him to change the subject.

'And your mother?'

'She died a long time ago,' I said. 'When she was forty-seven.'

‘That’s young,’ he remarked. I realised that this subject wasn’t going to go away and I was beginning to feel that Mike was too interested in family history. Or maybe I was beginning to suspect that I wasn’t interested enough. There was silence for a minute, then Mike put the question I’d known was coming. ‘So – what was he like, your dad?’

Now it was my turn for a long pause. Looking back on the moment, after I had dropped Mike off and driven away, it occurred to me that there was so much I could have said. I could have said that I came to believe that, when a man becomes a father, he is – or he ought to be – transformed into something other than the man he had been until that moment. Every life is a more or less secret narrative, but when a man becomes a father, the story is lived, not for, but in the constant awareness of another, or others. However hard you try to avoid it, fatherhood is a narrative, something that is not only told to, but also told by those others. At certain points in my adult life, I have found myself talking, over dinner, about fathers and sons: the hour late, the coffee drunk, the candles burning in the smoke, and men around the table reminiscing about the fathers they have lost, one way or another. The ones who died, and the ones who went astray; the weak and the false; the well-meaning and the malicious, and the ones who were never there in the first place, or not in any recognisable form. Regarding my own father, I could have told Mike the truth. I could have talked about the violence, the drinking, the shameful, maudlin theatre of his penitences. I could have told him about the gambling and the fits of manic destruction. I could have spoken for hours about his cruelty, his pettiness, the way he picked obsessively at everything I did when I was too small and fearful to defend myself. I could have told him that I had buried my father with gratitude and a sense of what he might well have called *closure* a long time ago: buried him, not only in the cold, wet clay of the defunct steel town where he died, but also in the icy subsoil of my own forgetting. Ten years before, I had returned him to the earth and walked away, ashes to ashes, dust to dust, abandoning his memory to the blear-eyed strangers who hadn’t had time to move on or die before he had his last heart attack, between the bar and the cigarette machine in the Silver Band Club. I could have said that I had buried my father long ago and walked back to the funeral car in the first smirr of afternoon rain, thinking it was all over, that I was moving on. I could have added that, before my father died, I hadn’t seen him in years, but I hadn’t been able to relax, quite, as long as he was still alive. I had always known he was there, decaying in the old house, enduring a half-life tinged with whisky and heart pills, a dull gleam of anger and regret fading into the remaining sticks of battered and burn-scabbed furniture, into the glow from the absurdly large rented television in the corner, into cupboards emptied of everything except leftover dog food from his brief experiment in keeping a Dobermann and tattered packs of duty-free cigarettes his mates brought back from holidays in Torremolinos and Calais. I could have explained that I hadn’t seen him for years because I had walked out on him, in nothing but my shirtsleeves, with no money and nowhere to go, two days after my mother’s funeral. I could have said that, since that day in 1977, I hadn’t sat down with him, other than on the odd family occasion, but I had carried him with me everywhere, an ember of self-loathing in the quick of my mind, caustic and unquenchable. I could have said that, partly because of my father, I had always been – and still was – one of those binge drinkers you meet from time to time, out on a mission to do as much clandestine damage as possible. I could have explained that I carried myself fairly well, that I was responsible, hard-working, possessed of an almost excessive and clumsy affection for my own, 90 per cent of the time; that, in the normal course of affairs, I could take just about any insult or injury. I could have said that, like most men, I tried hard to maintain the front needed for ordinary social existence, all the time longing for one spontaneous, honest expression of vitality, but that I never saw it coming when, after weeks or months or even years of pained and shamefaced pretence, my control would snap – a far-off b

resonant crack at the back of my mind – and I would find myself in the midst of a binge that might last for days, only to end miserably in some anonymous room, leaving me drained and ashamed. I could have told him that I on no account wanted to suggest that I'd had an abnormally difficult upbringing and that, even if I had, I had no intention of using it as explanation or excuse for anything. I just wanted to put all that behind me, to take responsibility upon myself alone for how I met present demands.

I could have said that I knew it was too simple to say that my father injured me, and that I had taken years to recover from that hurt. I knew, *of course I knew*, that life is always more complicated than our narratives. I could even have said – had I known – that I appreciated the fact that my father himself had been hurt in ways that I cannot begin to imagine, when he was abandoned, one May morning, on a stranger's doorstep, that he had no doubt spent his whole life looking back, wishing all the time to absolve or accept or expunge that original pain, if not for his own, then at least for his family's sake. I never occurred to him, I think, to look away, to forget himself: there was always that gap he had to fill, there was always a flaw in a self he could never really trust. I could have said all these things, and then I could have told Mike – a stranger on the road, whom I would never meet again – that, in my own way, I had forgiven my father for what he had done, but that I would never forget it. I thought about it, and I think I was tempted, not to spite this well-meaning, well-raised son, but for my own sake, to put into words something that had been buried for too long, something that needed to be worked out in the saying. Finally, however, and with some misgivings, I abandoned that idea and, as Mike wanted me to do, not just because his head was full of beautiful, simple scripts, but also because he was a certain kind of son, and because Martin was a certain kind of man, I told him a lie about my father.

We are what we imagine.

N. Scott Momoday



My father told lies all his life and, because I knew no better, I repeated them. Lies about everything great and small, were the very fabric of my world. The web of his invention was so intricate, so full of dead ends and false trails that, a few months before that encounter with Mike, I had only just uncovered the last of his falsehoods, the lie that had probably shamed him most, though it was an invention that, under the circumstances, he could hardly have avoided. It was an invention, an act of the imagination, when he managed to convince others, and so convince himself that, as a child, he had been wanted, if not by his real parents, then by someone. It's easy to understand why he didn't want to be a nobody; he didn't want to be *illegitimate* – but it was probably just as important to him to feel that he came from somewhere. It mattered, once upon a time, where a person came from, and my father didn't feel he had the luxury of saying, as I can, that it doesn't matter where a man was born, or who his ancestors were. Nobility, honesty, guile, imagination, integrity, the ability to appreciate, ease of self-expression – in his time, most people believed that these were handed down by blood. This notion amazes me, now; but I think my father believed, till the day he died, that he was inferior, not only because he was illegitimate (*that*, he could have lived with), but because he was a nobody from nowhere, a lost child that no one had ever wanted.

And no one ever did find out where my father came from. He really was a nobody: a foundling, a throwaway. The lies he told were intended to conceal this fact, and they were so successful that I didn't know, until after he died, that he'd been left on a doorstep in West Fife in the late spring of 1926, by person or persons unknown. He had gone to considerable lengths to keep this secret; in the end, I only discovered the truth by accident, when I was visiting my Aunt Margaret, seven years after we had buried him. To me it was shocking news that, as soon as I heard it, made perfect sense. For a while, I even managed to convince myself that it explained everything.

It was the first time I'd visited any of my relatives since I returned to live in Scotland in the mid-nineties. Margaret was my favourite aunt, mostly because she was so close in age and temperament to my mother. I had gone round to her house, more or less unannounced, and she had welcomed me in, a little surprised to see me, but just as hospitable as I remembered her. An hour later, I was asking if she knew anything about my dad's adopted family, who had supposedly come from High Valleyfield, not far from where she lived. According to my father's stories, he had been adopted by his biological uncle, a miner and lay preacher, after his real father, a small-time entrepreneur and something of a rogue, had abandoned a girl – a sometime employee in one of his shady business ventures – he had made pregnant. A slight variant was that he was the son of a moderately wealthy industrialist who had paid one of his factory girls to move away when she turned out to be in the family way. Or he was the son of a lay preacher who had strayed. Or he was the son . . .

It went on, depending on his mood and how much he'd had to drink. All that mattered was that he was *somebody's* son. He'd had a father and a mother. For practical, or social reasons, they had given him over to the care of others, but they had at least existed. I had heard all manner of variation on these basic stories over the years, some of them patent contradictions, some elaborately styled; the only consistent details were that his foster-family, usually the Dicks, though sometimes the McGhees, had lived in High Valleyfield, that my father had had a half-sister, much older than himself, possibly by the name of Anne, and that his foster-father was a quiet, upright man, well respected in the pit and an occasional preacher.

Aunt Margaret was confused. 'I'm not sure I understand you, son,' she said, looking faintly worried.

when I enquired about these imaginary half-relatives.

‘Well,’ I said. ‘I know my dad was adopted.’ I went on to explain what I knew about his history including the lay-preacher detail, which made her smile grimly.

‘Oh, your father,’ she said. ‘He had some stories in him, right enough.’

‘How do you mean?’

I watched as she considered her words carefully. My aunt is a good woman, and she has always been kind to me; she is also a person of particular tact. Like my mother, she moved to Cowdenbeath when she married, and the two sisters had stayed close, supporting one another through the various trials of life until my father moved us all, suddenly, to an East Midlands steel town, in the mid-sixties. During that time, she must have seen – and guessed – much more about what went on in our house than she had ever acknowledged. Now she was an old woman, still bright of eye, still capable of lighting up with a smile whose warmth had always cheered me; but I imagine she was also tired, and perhaps a little fed up with the very mention of her brother-in-law Tommy Dick, or George McGhee, or whatever his name was. He had brought too much pain to her favourite sister, he had embarrassed too many people she cared about, and I think she had heard a little too much nonsense over the years to let this particular deception pass. ‘Your dad wasn’t adopted,’ she said. ‘Or, not in the way you mean.’

‘No?’

‘He was a foundling child,’ she said. ‘The people who found him did take him in, but only for a little while. I don’t think they were from High Valleyfield, though.’ She fell silent, thinking back to the time just before she was born. ‘Those were hard times,’ she said. ‘It was around the time of the general strike, and people didn’t have much. From what I heard, he was passed about quite a bit. Of course there weren’t the social services they have now.’ She studied my face, looking for a reaction, before she went on. ‘So, I wouldn’t say he was adopted. When you adopt someone, you make a choice. But nobody chose your father. He wasn’t chosen so much as – passed on.’

*A foundling child.* I don’t think I had ever heard that phrase before, outside the world of fairy tales. It becomes confused with changeling, with the bewitched child left for innocents to take in, a cuckoo soul with a nature he cannot change, or even understand, marooned in the human world. I try from time to time to imagine the morning when he was found, wrapped in nothing but a blanket according to the story Aunt Margaret had heard, a thin, squalling child of the General Strike, wrapped in a blanket and left on a doorstep in a West Fife mining town. Nobody I have ever known was there to witness his abandonment, so I can imagine it as I like: as a scene from a fairy tale, perhaps, the unknown baby left at the door of some unsuspecting innocents, who take him in and try, as well as they are able, to bring him up alongside their own children, only to tire of him after a while and pass him on, first to relatives and then, as seems to have been the way of such things, to near strangers. I could imagine it wet and windy, the blanket sodden, the child crying plaintively, weak with hunger and terrified. My father wouldn’t have liked that image, which is why he put so much work in imagining alternatives, some fairly close to the truth, though never as desolate or as cruel as the abandonment must have seemed.

I could stick to that kind of grainy, wet Thursday morning realism, and I would probably be fairly close to the truth; but what I choose to imagine is a summer’s morning. It would have been sometime in late May or early June, so there is a slim chance that it was one of those days when the sun comes up warm and, in a matter of minutes, burns off the dew on the privet hedges and the little drying greens between the houses. At that hour, it would have been quiet in the coal town: the men on early shifts already gone to work; the children drowsing in their beds; women in their kitchens, boiling great bundles of linen in huge cauldrons, or kneeling at the door to polish the front step and the little bit

linoleum at the threshold. Though early June offers no guarantee of warmth in West Fife, I try to imagine a pleasant day because, in this story, the baby on the doorstep of one of those coal-town houses is my father. He is about to be discovered by one of the many foster-families he will know during his childhood, people with whom he will dwell for a few years before being passed along, the years when the General Strike was turning into the Great Depression. He will learn the names and faces of each family in turn, and he will try to feel that he belongs to them as much as any child belongs to its given parents; then they will explain, awkwardly and with as much kindness as the occasion allows, that he is going to stay with an aunt, or a cousin, or a neighbour, someone more able to feed him, someone with fewer children of their own. He will move several times between this June morning and the day he signs up for the air force and leaves the coalfields for what he always thought of as the best years of his life, yet the houses he knows, the people, the towns, the self he feels himself to be, will not differ much from one temporary home to the next. The houses are tenements, mostly the families working-class miners. The General Strike hit them hard, perhaps the hardest of all, and nobody had much to spare. It is possible that my father had been abandoned for some reason connected with the strike, or with the conditions that had preceded it; either way, people had other things to worry about that year. Once they had passed him on, they would soon have forgotten the sad waif in his pitiful blanket. After a while, he would be a boy: big, hungry, awkward, always underfoot. Someone they would rather keep a week as a fortnight.

Until he joined the air force, my father lived in Cowdenbeath and its environs. I don't know what the town was like during the thirties and forties, when he was a boy, growing into a young man, but I cannot imagine it was very different from the Cowdenbeath I knew in the fifties and early sixties. The town had been known for its poverty and overcrowded housing conditions early in the century; when I lived there, things had improved, but the overall impression was of an ordinary pit town, with its slag heaps and grey streets. Opposite St Bride's, the school I attended for six years, the pithead still stood with its wheels turning; even if, by then, the onshore mines were starting to run down. In my father's day, everything would have been going full tilt, though the miners wouldn't have seen much of the fruit of their labours. So I'm guessing that my father's Cowdenbeath was nearly identical to the town where I grew up, only a little darker, a little more crowded, a little smokier. The houses he passed through, as he moved from family to family, would have been dimly lit and almost bare, but there would have been gardens and allotments where people grew essential vegetables to supplement their meagre incomes, or wartime rations. Later, no matter where he lived, my father tended a garden of sorts, but he never grew flowers. I used to think it was a masculine thing, that he thought flowers were sissy; but he probably just remembered those allotments of the Depression, the taste of fresh leeks or new potatoes dug from your own patch of ground. The most obvious sign of his collapse, later in life, was the fact that the last garden he had was overrun with weeds and volunteer bedding plants, and not a potato or a cabbage plant in sight.

It's odd, imagining my father as a baby, or a growing boy. The first image I have of him is a wedding photograph: in it he is gawky, but proud of his air force uniform. His prominent teeth suggest that his smile was a calculation for him, a calculation he has failed to get quite right as he looks straight at the camera and gives it all he has. My mother is more natural-looking: pretty, already a little roundish, she is obviously happy. They were married on another June day, twenty-six years after my father had been abandoned and, again, it is easy to imagine a warm summer's morning, the lilac in bloom in his father's garden and sparrows brawling in the hedges around St Kenneth's Church. I try to imagine

bells, but all I hear is the crank of the pithead wheel across the street and someone unloading crates of soft drinks in the yard of the nearby pub. Yet here they stand, arm in arm: her waxy-looking bouquet curdling in her hands, while he adopts that smile I never saw in thirty years, boyish and awkward and marred by his buck teeth, yes, but at the same time *almost* confident, and only a hint in his eyes of what he knew was fear, before he learned to call it love. I have always been puzzled by this picture. Were these my parents? Why did they never look like this, all the time I was growing up? Most of all, did they really have not the least inkling of what was to come? On their wedding day, did they really know nothing at all about one another?

I've seen other weddings. Strangers in California, friends in Croydon or Devon; Mexican wedding, Russian weddings, Finnish weddings. In one of the most beautiful ceremonies I have ever seen, I've watched processions of couples coming from the *casa de matrimonios* in a mid-Transylvanian town, the dark-eyed Romanian girls smiling, the men solemn, as they stand for photographs in the gusts of charcoal smoke and the burnt-sugar scent from the braziers along the river bank, where local women cook little sweets called *floricel* especially for the newlyweds and their guests. Every time I see a wedding, I wonder what the bride and groom expect from it all, and why none of the others there, the old ones, the long-married, do not step up and warn them about the enterprise. I think this, because I watched my parents torture themselves and one another for twenty-odd years, before my mother finally gave up and died, from disappointment more than anything, leaving my father to sit alone in the house, rehearsing what, for him, approximated grief. At my own wedding, I remember the fear I had of making a false promise, but also the sudden realisation that this was exactly what mattered, that we were here to take exactly that risk, to make promises we could only hope to keep, in sickness and in health, madness and sanity, joy and fear, all of them inexplicable, even inexpressible, so that, often as not, one is mistaken for another.

I imagine that, for the first time perhaps, my father felt wanted that day in a way he had never felt wanted before. It's in my mother's face, that small, but perfect victory a woman of her nature feels when she chooses to love a man who is loved for the first time. I have no idea what goes on in the human heart, but I do know, if I know anything, that men and women love for different reasons. I imagine most men love what pleases them, and think no more of it – but for women, love is an imaginative act, a choice, an invention, even. Maybe it has to be. I don't doubt that there were people who wondered aloud what she saw in him. He was a nobody from nowhere, an illegitimate child, and a non-Catholic into the bargain. Not a great catch, even in his uniform. If they'd known the man she supposedly jilted when my father came along, their thoughts that day might well have been with him.

There is something sad about wedding photographs seen long after the event. The picture I have of my mother and father shows hopeful, brave, smiling people that I never knew: all I saw were the disappointments and the lies that, for them, were still to come, still unimagined. Yet now, looking at him in his RAF uniform, with his white bride by his side, I can feel a little better about my father than I did when he was alive. He lied all the time, even when there was no need to lie, but I don't think I ever thought he was being dishonest. I think he had a sense of himself as someone who had as much right to a history as anybody else, but when he asked his 'relatives' to tell him about himself, he must have been received in embarrassed silence, or with kind inventions, part-truths that had served, for strangers and others, in the absence of anything else. That wouldn't have been enough for him, though. He needed a *history*, he needed the sense of a self. By a process that demanded some wit – perhaps a little more than he possessed – and only very casual deception, he invented that self. It took more than a little doing, and who can blame him if he wasn't altogether successful or wholly consistent. If the world says you are nobody from nowhere, then you can choose not to argue, or you can invent yourself.

as someone other than you first seemed. Nobody wants to be a foundling child, and being something has to be better than being nothing.

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It's unsettling, when a child realises for the first time that his parents existed before he was born – and from that moment on, it gets ever more complicated and worrying: not only did they have a *life* before they became his parents, but there was also a time before they were married, a time before they had even met, when they were other people, with their own ideas, their own hopes, their own fleeting moments of hapless understanding. Perhaps they were in love with other people, or they swore they would never get married, never have kids. Tracing the line back to its origin, there was a time before all that, when they were children, and even a time before that, when they didn't exist. As a child, I came to this idea with a horrified fascination. Once upon a time, I wasn't here. Before that, my parents weren't here. And before that . . . What kind of world was it, when nobody I knew existed? What did people do? How could anything have been there at all, if I wasn't there to see it?

As far as my father is concerned, I know absolutely nothing about who he was, or what he did before he was my father. I was shown photographs of my mother when she was a young woman: dark haired, pale, her lipstick too freely applied, she is standing on a beach, or posing with friends in a garden or park, surprisingly slim in her striped jersey and black slacks. To me, this *girl* was an impossibility. She was nothing like my mother: carefree, even a little wild-looking, she bore no resemblance to the preoccupied woman who kept trying to make something of our condemned home by trailing offcuts and sale items back from the shops, knitting and sewing all the time so we would have decent clothes, scavenging old magazines and notebooks from anywhere she could find them so she could teach me to read and write before I got to school.

My mother was a maze of contradictions. A dutiful, if not devout Catholic of the simple faith and variety so beloved of the clerical trade, she hated Communism which, to her, was politics of another variety. Yet, perhaps because my father wasn't, and every other male member of her family either wasn't, or had been, associated with the pits, she revered the miners, and she could tell us all about the hardships they had endured, about what they had done in the war, about how the pit bosses had brought in people from all over Scotland to break their will during the General Strike, and how they had stood fast when everyone else had crumbled and given in. She could also tell you how, according to family lore, her father, a devout Catholic, had been picked up by the police, supposedly for drunkenness, and taken to the cells. This was part and parcel of the routine harassment of Catholic men, or 'the Irish' as the Protestants called them – and the police in those days were all Protestants in that corner of Scotland. A known Catholic emerged from the pub, none the worse for wear, and was pulled in, to pass the night in a damp cell, his pockets emptied, his belt and shoes removed, all the routine humiliation. My grandfather had endured all this in the steady, stoic manner bred of daily necessity, but when he came to be discharged, the rosary beads he always carried were missing. My mother's voice brimmed with pride when she told how he finally left the police station that morning, after being threatened with a charge, but kept coming back, day after day, asking for his rosary beads till, one evening, the desk sergeant finally relented.

'They arrested him for being drunk,' she would say. 'Your grandfather has never been drunk in his life.'

This was true. My grandfather could put away as much whisky as anyone, but he would never have been seen out on the street with a drink on him. He always dressed well to go out, in a worn, but clean black suit, a flat cap or bunnet, very polished shoes. He kept a picture of the Virgin Mary in his breast pocket, and his rosary beads in his jacket. He took me aside at a family occasion once – one of the

many weddings a man with twelve children was obliged to attend – and offered me a small card, like those collectors' cards you used to get with cigarettes, or tea. It was a picture of the Virgin.

'Every man should carry a picture of the Blessed Virgin Mary with him at all times,' he told me.

I stared at the card and nodded.

'Take it,' he said. 'It's for you.'

I took it.

'Look after her,' he continued, as I put the card in my blazer pocket. 'And she will look after you.'

It was from her parents that my mother's values came. Like her father, she disliked people who loved money, yet what she wanted, more than anything, was the most routine form of chintz respectability. Like her mother, she loved flowers and gardening. She had a reverence for learning that sat heavy on my childhood: every spare moment, I was set to work, studying, reading, writing – yet she herself never once read what she thought of as a 'real book' in all the years I knew her. She was quiet and secretive, and she had the air about her, even when I was very young, of a woman whose loves and friendships were all in the past, or at a distance. She was fierce about family, even when her family let her down. Perhaps most of all when they let her down.

My mother's pictures – photographs of her family, of her friends, of herself on days out with fellow workers from the Co-op, all the scraps and images she treasured – were kept in a large, shabby handbag that my father had brought her from Egypt, when he was stationed out there, but there were no photographs of my father before his air force days, when he is always the one at the back of the group, usually with a glass lifted to his mouth and obscuring his face, a man making it all too clear that he wasn't interested in posing for snapshots. But then, photographs can be misleading. What we remember, when we truly remember, rather than when we recall the memories that are planted in our minds by others, is the only testament that can be trusted; not because it is precise, but because it is our own. A photograph, a family story, the recollections of some old-timer at a wedding or a funeral, recollections of a time when nobody else in the room was even born, are works of art, not facts. I knew, at a fairly young age, that anything my father told me about himself, anything he told me about *anything*, was to be treated with suspicion. But why was he the exception? Why should anything I was told be treated as definitely true or absolutely false? When they told stories, when they showed pictures, when they reminisced together with a room full of family, all people communicated with their intentions. Whatever was true, was secret.

My father had no history that he could talk about with others. Nobody reminisced with him about the old days, nobody brought snapshots out of an old box and handed them around so the assembled company could see what he was like as a boy. All he had were his own, unverified stories. His own apocrypha. By the time he was my father, he wasn't so much a man as a force of nature, something that came out of nowhere, an unpredictable, wild, occasionally absurd creature who could be all smiles and charm one moment, and utterly venomous the next. He was a square-built man of around five eleven, strong, physically ruthless, very quick. *Quick with his hands*, was the phrase people used when they wanted a euphemism for domestic violence, but my father was almost never actually violent. At some instinctual level he understood that a threat is much more potent than an actual blow: after the first few times, a blow can lose its power, because – as he himself liked to say – people can get used to almost anything. He'd got used to working in a rubber-products factory, standing all day in the heat and stench, at the age of fifteen, and he'd got used to the smell of burning flesh when he worked on the disposal squads during the foot-and-mouth epidemic of the early sixties. He'd got used to a few blows

himself, no doubt, over the years, and he could take as good as he gave. He'd come home a few times when I was a child, with blood on his face and shirt, cuts on his arms, bruises on his knuckles. Yet his injuries never troubled him. 'It's a scratch,' he would say, when my mother tried to get him to go to the hospital; then he'd wash the blood away with warm water and throw his shirt in the dustbin.

So he rarely hit out. He knew the threat of violence is always stronger than violence itself. It works much the same way horror movies work: if you see the big rubber shark, or the killer from beyond the grave in his ghostly make-up, you're more inclined to laugh than scream. My father was one of those men who sit in a room, and you can feel it: the simmer, the sense of some unpredictable force that might, at any moment, break loose and do something terrible. Now and again, he would break out something: carefully, deliberately, letting us see how much he enjoyed it, letting us register how easy it was. The worst thing that could happen was when he fell into one of his dark silences and sat brooding all day, waiting for the small provocation that would set things going. I don't think he could control it, once it began, any more than he could stop drinking, or gambling until all the money in his pockets was gone. Yet he hardly ever hit anybody inside the house. Not in those early days, at least. Maybe I was just sheltered from the worst when I was still so young. Later, he seemed a changed man, a kind of monster; but he might have been that same monster all along, transmuted, by my childhood need, into something like a father, if not a protector. As I grew up, I wondered what was happening to him. I wondered why he was changing. But he didn't change: he just became real. For years, I would have sworn that I remembered better days, but when I stop to look back, I remember nothing about him, other than what I was told. I do not see him. I barely even see myself.

For me, memory begins in King Street, in the condemned house where my parents lived after they were first married. I was told so much about the time before I was born that I can imagine I was actually present at the death of my mother's first child – a girl she called Elizabeth, after her own mother – or if not present *at* the death, then certainly *for* it. I seem to know this girl, first as a baby, then as a toddler, a girl who was just over a year ahead of me all the way through childhood. Pretty, fair-haired, but with my mother's dark, almost motionless eyes, she comes and goes through the home movie of King Street that runs inside my head, a child in a white hand-me-down dress standing beside me in the garden, squinting into the sun; a girl who set off for school one day and came home a different, with ink stains on her hands and the smell of dried paint in her hair. I remember this girl because my father talked about her when he was upset, or when he came home drunk and sat in the kitchen muttering to himself. It was characteristic of how they were, I see now, that my mother never once mentioned Elizabeth's name, while my father talked about her all the time. Even in grief, they were separated.

I seem to know my ghost sister, but the truth is that she died before I was born. I could never find out how long she was in this world; some stories suggest she died in hospital after a few hours, or a few days; others that she lived for some time before succumbing to whatever it was that ailed her. I always felt kin to her, though, even when my father took me aside, one drunken Saturday afternoon. The first time, this may have happened when we still lived in King Street, but it happened more often than I can recall, and it went on for years – and told me that he and my mother had had another child before me, that her name was Elizabeth, that she had died and that he wished she had lived, and I had died instead. He always told me this as if it would come as a surprise, a piece of unexpected news about his, or my history, and he always went through the steps in the same order, with due solemnity, building up to those final, brutal words, which he uttered without the least hint of brutality, without



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