

# Contents

	Preface	I
1.	Wiltshire	17
2.	Berlin	71
3.	Majdanek. Les Salces. St Maurice de Navacelles 1989	117
4.	St Maurice de Navacelles 1946	157

# PREFACE

Ever since I lost mine in a road accident when I was eight, I have had my eye on other people's parents. This was particularly true during my teens when many of my friends were casting off their own folk, and I did rather well in a lonely, hand-me-down way. In our neighbourhood there was no shortage of faintly dejected fathers and mothers only too happy to have at least one seventeen-year-old around to appreciate their jokes, advice, cooking, even their money. At the same time I was something of a parent myself. My immediate milieu in those days was the new and disintegrating marriage of my sister Jean to a man called Harper. My protégée and intimate in this unhappy household was my three-year-old niece, Sally, Jean's only child. The rages and reconciliations that surged up and down the big apartment – Jean had inherited half the estate; my half was held in trust – tended to sweep Sally aside. Naturally, I identified with an abandoned child and so we holed up nicely from time to time in a large room overlooking the

garden with her toys and my records, and a tiny kitchen we used whenever the savagery beyond made us not want to show our faces.

Looking after her was good for me. It kept me civilised and away from my own problems. Another two decades were to pass before I felt as rooted as I did then. Most of all I enjoyed the evenings when Jean and Harper were out, particularly in the summer when I would read to Sally until she fell asleep, and later do my homework on the big table by the open french windows, facing out to the sweet smell of scented stock and traffic dust. I was studying for A levels at The Beamish on Elgin Crescent, a crammer which liked to call itself an academy. When I looked up from my work and saw Sally behind me in the darkening room, on her back, sheets and teddies pushed down below her knees, arms and legs flung wide, in what I took to be an attitude of completely misguided trust in the benevolence of her world, I was elated by a wild and painful protectiveness, a stab in the heart, and I am sure it was for this I have had four children of my own. I never had any doubts about it; at some level you remain an orphan for life; looking after children is one way of looking after yourself.

Unpredictably, Jean would burst in on us, powered by guilt or by a surplus of love from making peace with Harper, and she would bear Sally away to their end of the apartment with coos and hugs and worthless promises. That was

when the blackness, the hollow feeling of unbelonging, was likely to come down. Rather than skulk about, or watch TV like other kids, I would slope off into the night, down Lad-broke Grove, to the household currently warmest to me. The images that come to mind after more than twenty-five years are of pale, stuccoed mansions, some peeling, others immaculate, Powis Square perhaps, and a rich yellow light from the open front door revealing in the darkness a white-faced adolescent, already six feet tall, shuffling inside his Chelsea boots. Oh, good evening Mrs Langley. Sorry to trouble you. Is Toby in?

More likely than not Toby is with one of his girls, or in the pub with friends, and I am backing off down the porch steps with my apologies until Mrs Langley calls me back with, 'Jeremy, would you like to come in anyway? Come on, have a drink with boring old us. I know Tom will be pleased to see you.'

Ritual demurrals, and the six-foot cuckoo is in, and being led across the hall to a huge, book-crammed room with Syrian daggers, a shaman's mask, an Amazonian blow pipe with curare-tipped darts. Here Toby's forty-three-year old father sits under a lamp reading untranslated Proust or Thucydides or Heine by an open window. He is smiling as he stands and extends his hand.

'Jeremy! How nice to see you. Have a scotch and water with me. Sit down over there and listen to this, tell me what you think.'

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And eager to engage me in talk that bears on my subjects (French, History, English, Latin) he turns back a few pages to some awesome convolution from *A L'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*, and I, equally eager to show off and be accepted, rise to the challenge. Good-humouredly, he corrects me, then later we might consult Scott-Moncrieff and Mrs Langley will come in with sandwiches and tea and they will ask after Sally, and want to know the latest between Harper and Jean whom they have never met.

Tom Langley was a diplomat with the Foreign Office, posted home to Whitehall after three tours of duty abroad. Brenda Langley ran their beautiful home and gave lessons in the harpischord and piano. Like many of the parents of my friends from the Beamish Academy they were educated and well-off. What an exquisite, desirable combination that seemed to me whose background was middling income and no books.

But Toby Langley did not appreciate his parents at all. He was bored by their civilised, intellectually curious, open-minded ways, and by his spacious, orderly home, and by his interesting childhood spent in the Middle East, Kenya and Venezuela. He was half-heartedly studying two A levels (Maths and Art) and said he did not want to go to university at all. He cultivated friends from the new high-rises towards Shepherd's Bush, and his girlfriends were waitresses, and shop assistants with sticky bee-hive hair-dos. He pursued chaos and trouble by going out with several girls at once.

He worked up a dim-witted mode of speech complete with glottal 't's and 'I fink' and 'I goes to him' for 'I said to him' which became an ingrained habit. Since he was my friend I said nothing, but he caught my disapproval.

Though I maintained the pretext of calling on Toby when he was out, and Mrs Langley colluded with such protocols as 'you might as well come in', I was always welcome at Powis Square. Sometimes I was asked to give an insider's opinion on Toby's waywardness and I would sound off disloyally and priggishly about Toby's need to 'find himself'. Similarly, I inhabited the home of the Silversmiths, neo-Freudian psychoanalysts, man and wife, with amazing ideas about sex, and an American-sized fridge jam-packed with delicacies, whose three teenage children, two girls and a boy, were crazy louts who ran a shoplifting and playground extortion racket up at Kensal Rise. I was comfortable too in the big untidy home of my friend Joseph Nugent, also of the Beamish Academy. His father was an oceanographer who led expeditions to the uncharted seabeds of the world, his mother the first woman columnist on the *Daily Telegraph*, but Joe thought his parents were dull beyond belief and preferred a gang of lads from Notting Hill who were happiest of an evening polishing up the multiple headlamps on their Lambretta scooters.

Were all these parents attractive to me simply because they were not mine? Try as I might, I could not answer yes, for they were undeniably likeable. They interested me, I

picked things up. At the Langleys I learned of sacrificial practices in the Arabian desert, improved my Latin and French and first heard the 'Goldberg' Variations. At the Silversmiths I heard tell of the polymorphous perverse, and was enraptured by tales of Dora, Little Hans and the Wolf Man, and ate lox, bagels and cream cheese, latkes, and borscht. At the Nugents, Janet talked me through the Profumo scandal and persuaded me to learn shorthand; her husband once gave an imitation of a man suffering the bends. These people treated me like a grown-up. They poured me drinks, offered me their cigarettes, asked my opinions. They were all in their forties, tolerant, relaxed, energetic. It was Cy Silver-smith who taught me to play tennis. If any pair of them had been my parents (if only) I was certain I would have liked them more.

And if my parents had been alive, would I not be breaking for freedom like the rest? Again, I could not answer yes. What my friends were pursuing seemed to me the very antithesis of freedom, a masochistic lunge at downward social mobility. And how irritatingly predictable of my contemporaries, especially of Toby and Jo, that they should consider my domestic set-up as a very paradise: the stinking coven of our uncleaned apartment, its licentious late-morning gin, my stunning, chain-smoking sister, a Jean Harlow look-alike, one of the first of her generation into a mini-skirt, the adult drama of her hammer-blow, whip-crack marriage, and sadistic Harper, the leather feticheur with red

and black tattoos of strutting cockerels on his tuberous fore-arms, and no one there to nag about the state of my room, my clothes, my diet, or my whereabouts, or my school work or my prospects or my mental or dental health. What more could I want? Nothing, except, they might add, to be shot of that kid who was always hanging around.

Such was the symmetry of our respective disaffections that it happened one winter's evening that Toby was at my place, pretending to relax in the freezing squalor of our kitchen, smoking cigarettes and attempting to impress Jean who, it should be said, detested him, with his voice of the people – while I was at his, comfortable on the Chesterfield in front of an open fire, a glass of his father's single malt warming in my hand, under my shoeless feet the lovely bokhara that Toby claimed was a symbol of cultural rape, listening to Tom Langley's account of a deadly poisonous spider and the death throes of a certain third secretary on the first landing of the British Embassy in Caracas, while across the hall, through open doors, we heard Brenda at one of Scott Joplin's lilting, syncopated rags which at that time were being rediscovered and had not yet been played to death.

I realise that much of the above tells against me, that it is Toby pursuing in impossible circumstances a beautiful crazy young woman beyond his reach, or his and Jo's and the Silversmith kids' excursions into the neighbourhood which display a proper appetite for life, and that a seventeen-year-old's



infatuation with comfort and the conversation of his elders suggests a dull spirit; and that in describing this period of my life I have unconsciously mimicked not only, here and there, the superior, sneering attitudes of my adolescent self, but also the rather formal, distancing, labyrinthine tone in which I used to speak, clumsily derived from my scant reading of Proust which was supposed to announce me to the world as an intellectual. All I can say for my younger self is that although I was hardly aware of it at the time, I missed my parents terribly. I had to build up my defences. Pomposity was one of them, another was my cultivated disdain for my friends' activities. They could range freely because they were secure; I needed the hearths they had deserted.

I was prepared to do without girls, partly because I thought they would distract me from my work. I rightly assumed that the surest route out of my situation – by which I mean living with Jean and Harper – was university, and for that I needed A levels. I worked fanatically, putting in two, three, even four hours a night long before the run-up to exams. Another reason for my timidity was that my sister's first moves in that direction, when I was eleven and she was fifteen and we were living with our aunt, had been so noisily successful, with a faceless horde processing through the bedroom we were supposed to share (our aunt finally ejected us both), that I felt quite cowed. In that apportioning of experience and expertise that goes on between siblings, Jean had spread her beautiful limbs – to adapt Kafka's

formulation – across my map of the world and obliterated the territory marked ‘sex’, so that I was obliged to voyage elsewhere – to obscure islets marked Catullus, Proust, Powis Square.

And I did have my affair of the heart with Sally. With her I felt responsible and intact, and I did not need anyone else. She was a pale little girl. No one took her out much; when I came in from school I never felt like it, and Jean was not at all keen on outdoors. Much of the time I played with Sally in the big room. She had the three-year-old girl’s imperious manner. ‘Not on the chair! Come down here on the floor with me.’ We played Hospitals, or Houses, or Lost in the Woods, or Sailing to a New Place. Sally kept up a breathless narrative of our whereabouts, our motives, our sudden metamorphoses. ‘You’re not a monster, you’re a king!’ Then we might hear from the far end of the apartment a shout of rage from Harper, followed by a yelp of pain from Jean, and Sally would render a perfect, miniature adult grimace, a beautifully timed wince-cum-shrug and say in the melodiously pure tones of a voice still new to grammatical construction, ‘Mummy and Daddy! What silly billies they are being again!’

And indeed they were. Harper was a security guard who claimed to be studying for an external degree in anthropology. Jean had married him when she was barely twenty and Sally was eighteen months. The following year, when Jean’s money came through, she bought the flat and lived off the

change. Harper gave up his job, and the two of them hung around all day, drinking, fighting, making up. Harper had a gift for violence. There were times when I looked uneasily at my sister's red cheek or swollen lip and thought of obscure manly codes which required me to challenge my brother-in-law and defend her honour. But there were also times when I went into the kitchen and found Jean at the table reading a magazine and smoking while Harper stood at the kitchen sink, naked but for his purple jock strap, with half a dozen bright red weals across his buttocks, humbly washing the dishes. I was grateful to acknowledge that I was out of my depth, and I retreated to the big room and the games with Sally I could understand.

I shall never understand why I did not know or guess that Jean and Harper's violence extended to my niece. That she let twenty years go by before she told anyone shows how suffering can isolate a child. I did not know then how adults can set about children, and perhaps I would not have wanted to know; I would be leaving soon, and already my guilt was growing. By the end of that summer, soon after my eighteenth birthday, Harper had left for good and I had my A levels and a place at Oxford. I should have been overjoyed a month later when I carried out my books and records from the apartment to a friend's van; my two-year plan had worked, I was out, I was free. But Sally's dogged, suspicious questions as she tracked me backwards and forwards between our room and the pavement were an indictment of

betrayal. 'Where are you going? Why are you going? When are you coming back?' To this last, sensing my evasiveness, my clotted silence, she returned again and again. And when she thought to lure me back, to divert me from a History degree with the suggestion, so pertly, so optimistically put, that we play instead, *Sailing to a New Place*, I put down my armful of books and ran out to the van to sit in the passenger seat and weep. I thought I knew only too well just how she felt, or how she would feel; it was nearly midday and Jean was still sleeping off the gin and pills with which she was mourning Harper's departure. I would wake her before I left, but in some important respect Sally was on her own. And so she remains.

Neither Sally, Jean nor Harper play a part in what follows. Nor do the Langleys, Nugents or Silversmiths. I left them all behind. My guilt, my sense of betrayal would not permit me to return to Notting Hill, not even for a weekend. I could not bear to undergo another parting from Sally. The thought that I was inflicting on her the very loss I had suffered myself intensified my loneliness, and obliterated the excitement of my first term. I became a quietly depressed student, one of those dull types practically invisible to their contemporaries, apparently excluded by the very laws of nature from the process of making friends. I made for the nearest hearth. This one was in North Oxford and belonged to a fatherly tutor and his wife. For a short while I shone there, and a few people told me I was clever. But this was not