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Historic Passions

Family Matters

My father called it ‘turning a deaf ear’ and it was an essential life skill if you wanted to read a book in our crowded family home. My deaf ear was turned to the squabbles and squeals of much younger siblings. It also tuned out my mother’s peremptory, ‘You’re not doing anything, come and do the drying-up,’ if I thought I’d already done my bit on the domestic front – cleared the dishes, put down the drop-leaves of the table and restored it to the window bay, swept the crumbs from the carpet – and was entitled to pick up where I’d left off in my latest library volume of Enid Blyton, Agatha Christie or Noel Streatfeild.

The library was at the corner of Old Kent Rd and New Kent Rd. It was a mock-gothic structure with stained glass windows recalling Chaucer and his pilgrims about to set out for Canterbury, telling stories along the way. I felt some responsibility for Chaucer, as I did for Shakespeare, the site of whose theatre at Bankside was also within walking distance. I had been born into a neighbourhood that gave birth to English Literature. This was obviously a glorious thing, and long before I read either Chaucer or Shakespeare I proselytised about their virtues to my father, a slum child who had grown up in Blackfriars and gone to a school named Charles Dickens. Very willing to accede in the abstract, my father had neither time nor inclination to venture on the classics, which he viewed as beyond – meaning above – him. It was he who took me to the library.

I didn’t prefer the world of books but I did think books gave me access to the real world, and that it was a world my parents knew nothing of. My mother, an immigrant from Greece, read only the simplest of English sentences; my father occasionally packed a thriller into his saddle-bag if he was cycling off to the night shift. He was a turbine operator at Bankside power station. At night informal rules prevailed: he said you could often ‘get your head down’ between tasks. I learned about the importance of Chaucer and Shakespeare from teachers who came from richer parts of London – Kensington, Highgate, Clapham – to educate the poor of Southwark and Bermondsey. They conveyed a sense of rightful possession while being willing to share what they had, as a gift. The keenest pupils were invited into the uplands. Literature was for everybody, but at the same time only certain people seemed to know this.

I joined another library after I began secondary school in Bermondsey. It was in Spa Road and it was associated with a more recent writer, George Orwell, who wrote some of *Down and Out in Paris and London* in the reference room while he lodged at a Tooley Street doss-house. I was entirely mistaken in thinking my father would appreciate ex-Etonian Orwell’s descent into the lower depths and his friendships with vagrants. The final straw came when I explained that Orwell had asked advice about how to get himself arrested because he wanted to experience a short spell in prison. ‘Bloody fool,’ was the response. But a prison cell appealed to me too, as an extension of the quiet in the library. The custodians at Spa Road, the teachers at school, the friendly policeman at the zebra crossing on whom I had a crush, and uniformed officers with caring dispositions and keys hanging from their belts, all figured for me as elements in a single organism, a public realm whose intentions towards me were wholly benevolent. If I ended up in jail I didn’t think I would be unhappy.

London was my city and I was proud of how much more it gave me than it had given my father. His schooling ended at fourteen; I was able to stay until eighteen and then go to university. By staying at school beyond fifteen, the then statutory leaving age, I brought no money into the household but nor did my choice put much of a strain on the family budget. That the state would provide rather than try to cheat you had been a revelation to my mother when she arrived in England in 1946. She did not understand about National Insurance. What she saw was free medical care and free education dispensed from above. The generosity of the authorities confirmed the rightness of my decision to be, as she saw it, a perpetual student in the world I'd chosen although it didn't quite remove her suspicions. Learned people were superior but not necessarily better. On the other hand, professionals like the local doctor and the teachers who encouraged my interest in literature and history clearly had higher incomes than the people on our street who worked in factories and shops or – the women – went early morning cleaning. Education, in the welfare state of the 1960s, was a passport out of working class life; or, as my father put it, it was 'a meal-ticket'.

I was embarrassed by this way of thinking about experiences that were full of emotion for me. Reading gave me many selves and none of them wanted, consciously, to be rich. I was drawn to rebellious writers, individualists who struck out alone, condemning or despising society. Getting away was the unspoken objective. I learned from James Joyce in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* that 'exile' was one of the three essentials, along with silence and cunning. Joyce had to leave Ireland behind in order to become James Joyce, the writer. He needed to remove himself from a hampering background. My teachers conveyed this message to us implicitly and explicitly as a general truth. It was not so much that we all had the potential to become James Joyce as that the classroom was a launch-pad. Teaching was conceived as rescue, and conducted with a missionary spirit.

It was in this spirit, as a missionary myself, that I undertook to record the memories of my aunts and uncles and produce what I grandly called a family history. I had the sense that my family was special, or that I was special. By 'family' I meant my father's brothers and sisters, all five of whom lived nearby. I didn't think of my mother and her four sisters who were born and grew up in Athens as 'family' in any formative sense that mattered to me; they were foreign, I was English. Aunt Vi, who was very close to my father and had largely brought him up after their mother died, lived next door to us on one side, and Uncle Tom on the other. Aunt Lou was further along the terrace, Aunt Nell in Bermondsey near my school (she worked at Peak Frean's biscuit factory, whose characteristic custardy smell wafted over the hockey pitch and into our classrooms and corridors), and Uncle Arthur near the Walworth Road. They were a clannish, self-mythologising bunch who gloried in being a certain kind of Londoner: resourceful, knowing, combative. The blitz, the war that ended in 1945 and the Labour government under Clement Attlee that was voted in afterwards, had dealt an extra charge to their cohesion. Their social terrain was the pub. They were cheery, they laughed a lot, and they would sometimes sing. At Christmas, 'Knees up Mother Brown'; on other occasions, 'Maybe it's because I'm a Londoner.' They would say, 'We look out for each other', 'we look after our own', 'if you don't look after your own …' (finger-jabbing, this, accusatory), phrases that fell from their lips as the pints went round and the gins were sipped, along with 'we know how to have a good time', and 'don't let the bastards get you down.'

Periodically, I made notes of the stories I heard of their lives as a family. My father, the second-youngest, was born in 1918 and it was his childhood that captured me; and while he had no skill in story-telling, Vi made up for that. She had a fund of lurid, loving memories of hardship. It was Vi who described to me the 'rabbit-hutch' of three rooms, one above the other, with a communal water-tap in the yard, where they grew up and where their father had set up a cobbler's bench to mend shoes as a side-line to his other work as a casual labourer:

painting and decorating, loading and unloading on the riverside, wherrying. It was Vi who told me about her long-suffering 'genteel' mother and the domestic violence she endured until her mental breakdown and removal to Cane Hill Mental Hospital in 1924. In Spa Road library I found a copy of Charles Booth's survey of the neighbourhood, *Life and Labour of the London Poor*, published in 1902, which actually mentioned the streets she named, and excitedly I told Vi about it. She smiled and gently reproved me. 'We never thought of ourselves as poor, dear.'

Nor did they use the phrase 'working-class'. Organized politics made them wary. When I pressed such questions I got nowhere and felt like an enemy within, as if I had learnt to look through the eyes of the social investigator. I read Maud Pember Reeves who had studied the women of Lambeth, very close to Blackfriars, and wrote up her observations in *Round About a Pound a Week*. Maud Pember Reeves was horrified by what she found: over-crowding, infestations, and an arduous, penny-pinching existence that drained all spirit from the women. She was more horrified still by the women's stoicism. I tried to find out more about my grandmother and her time at Cane Hill, a 'progressive' hospital, but beyond the fact that Nell and Vi occasionally visited, and that she died of heart failure in 1928, I could discover nothing.

It was acceptable to collect stories as a schoolgirl, but family history was viewed by serious historians in the second half of the twentieth century as the province of the amateur, probably cranky, certainly lacking in objectivity. The personal had not yet become political. Nor, when I went to university in 1967, had women yet become reputable subjects, although second-wave feminism was lightly stirring. I was intellectually ambitious, and what I learned from books was a faint disdain that was compounded by what I considered my family's ignorance of their place in the world, their refusal to see themselves as others – the writers of books, the conductors of social surveys – saw them. They showed no sign of wishing to be rescued. The frames of reference I acquired as a student of English literature and English history gave me little help as I puzzled over questions of identity, belonging, affection. I was at a new university, Lancaster, that had reached out to less privileged students and some of my friends were vociferous and unequivocal in their self-identification as working class. They didn't think of education as a way out but as a lever for change. Their certainty unsettled me further. What I heard was a challenge to my credentials: apparently, to northern ears, I didn't sound working class. Apparently, I had neither the mannerisms nor the language. I certainly had the London glottal stop but for formal purposes I'd been trained out of it by hours of recitation at the English-Speaking Union, an organisation our headmistress supported. Perhaps the problem – and it felt like a problem, though I think now it was a convenient way of dealing with my discomfort – was that I was only half English. No matter how thoroughly I wanted to imagine my father and his siblings representing a certain kind of Englishness, my place was queered not only by education but also by Greekness.

I could neither speak nor read Greek sufficiently to consider interviewing my aunts in Athens who spoke no English. My assumption (based on some experience) that they were hostile to intellectual work, that they thought the idea of women taking the lead in mixed conversation, knowing things and telling them to men, was risible and even shameful, was inhibiting. Scorn was their default mode. They would laugh at my notions; there would be no respect for any project. I could put on the mantle of the historian, the social investigator, or even reach back and identify with those lovers of Greece in nineteenth-century England, Hellenophiles who supported Greece in its war of independence against Turkish rule, I could mention Byron, it would make no difference. They would want to know: did I have a boyfriend? When was I going to get married?

These were my mother’s questions too, and it was not only because there was no bed for me at home that during university vacations I was pleased to accept the hospitality of a teacher and her husband who had taken me up. They lived in a book-filled house in Highgate and I often stayed there. A childless couple, ardent about art and cinema, music and theatre, they were kind and generous patrons and I was grateful to them, but their notions of what they were helping me to leave behind occasioned some pain. I could not think such well-read, thoughtful and intelligent people were ignorant; and in truth, if their impressions of my family seemed to have come out of a comic strip that may have owed something to my telling. It was at their dinner-table I imbibed the conviction that writing about yourself, your own experience, should only be done in a veiled way. Anything that could be described as ‘confessional’ was a horror. Sharing my enthusiasm for James Joyce they flattered my ambitions and repeated Joyce’s formulation that the true artist, like God, ‘remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails.’ Distance it seemed, rather than closeness, was the goal.

I continued to accumulate notes over a period of forty years. They were mostly journal-type entries: an account of Sunday dinner at home, a quarrel or two (or twenty), tumultuous episodes, births, deaths, conversations, reflections. I no longer thought about writing a family history; my notes were all about me and I had long outgrown my origins. But slowly in that period family history itself, once so disparaged, attained respectability. More, it took on definitional supremacy: if you presented yourself at a Local Record Office it was assumed you had come to research family history. The internet has made searchers of us all. Meanwhile, the biggest growth area in publishing has been in memoir, the more confessional the better.

In 2006 my father died, and in the grieving, difficult months that followed my mother said something that shocked me. She said there was no reason for her to stay in England. How, I wondered, coping with my own feelings of abandonment, could a mother of six children plus numerous grandchildren and great-grandchildren, say such a thing? She had always been independent, carving out a life for herself amongst other Greeks in London, but this was taking things too far. What did family mean? ‘You all have your own families,’ she said, as if she was someone apart, on the outside, as if we had formed little domestic principalities that excluded her. She had one surviving sister in Athens and toyed with the idea of returning to live with her. Widowhood did not come easily and it revealed the shallowness of the roots my mother had put down into English soil: she had no English friends and belonged to no English institutions. She had come as a war-bride on the arm of a soldier and the soldier had gone.

Paradoxically, she always declared England the only and best place to live. She stayed. Her husband’s generous country looked after her in his stead: she valued her pension and the Freedom Pass she brandished on familiar bus routes that took her to Greek churches in Kentish Town, Holloway, Tufnell Park, Camberwell. She was proud of her ability to navigate London by bus and Tube, but it was strictly limited. She went by landmarks and memory. She had no addresses written down and could not have made her way to any of her children’s houses alone. We went to her. If there was a party, someone fetched her. None of this had seemed surprising while she was a wife but once she became a widow it was – I speak for myself – profoundly disquieting.

When I thought again about writing a family history it was with a much more troubled sense of the ways in which histories and cultures mould families. I didn't want to hear any stories. I wanted someone outside the family – God, perhaps, paring his fingernails – to explain to me the coming together of a slum boy from Blackfriars with a Greek woman who had lived through Nazi occupation and civil war. While it was illuminating to read accounts of Greece by British and American scholars alongside memoirs by people who had chosen to live in Greece or, better still, married Greeks, I could find nothing about Greek women in England that threw light on my mother's experiences, even though a substantial number of Greek women had married British servicemen at the end of the war. I had no way of knowing how far her experiences, and by extension some of mine, arose from idiosyncracies of temperament, collisions of values, accidents of social encounters, fate, folly, will. Nevertheless, I listened harder and more systematically to what my mother told me. We had long conversations – something that had never happened before. I heard important details I hadn't known, secrets, or simply matters whose meanings and significance lay elsewhere. At times my reading led me to correct some of her statements but I learned not to do that; and I found it more profitable, often, to work from the ancient Greeks: Homer, Sophocles, Euripides. We watched *Never on Sunday* in which an American Hellenophile, mockingly named Homer, encounters the real Greek in Melina Mercouri's life-affirming prostitute character, Ilya. We went to the British Museum and gazed at the Elgin marbles.

The pleasure of all this went into what I now began seriously writing, calling it a family memoir and allowing myself every freedom with the genre. The narrative incorporated what I still thought of as my father's family history. The story I told, however, was neither memoir nor history but an urgent, present-day tale of a mixed marriage and quarrelsome siblings. I gave it the title *Not Speaking* because it depicted something very common in families, the 'not speaking' that often follows a falling-out, and might last a lifetime; and because not speaking, or rather not listening and not understanding, had a special meaning for children growing up in a household where two languages were spoken and neither parent had more than a limited command of the other's language.

Everybody has their version of the past but not everybody wants anything from it. What did I want? What made me hold on to this idea of writing about my family? It was obvious that the preoccupations I brought to the project were formed in the culture that formed me and were deeply personal to me. But why the long gestation? And why, when I finally came to write it, did it feel so thrillingly liberating, so exactly what I'd always wanted to write, what I had been born to do? Two things stood out when I pondered these questions, and I don't offer them as answers only as the highlights of random but repeated ruminations. Firstly, I wanted triumph and vindication, I wanted to win the family war. A single memory from childhood encapsulates this: there had been an argument in the tiny living-room we called a kitchen; passions were inflamed; I said something intended to be reasonable; I was told to shut up. 'What do you know?' someone challenged. 'All you know is what you've read in books.' Secondly, I found a comfort I hadn't realised was missing as I let my mother in to my heart and mind. Trying to understand her life in terms of her history rather than my own brought me closer while at the same time it made the gaps and absences, the silences and evasions, more apparent. It was only gradually that I understood how very necessary it had been as a child to turn a deaf ear and a blind eye. But more importantly, the reader in me was vindicated. Through writing I found my way forward and back to the worlds that had been opened to me in books, at once intensely private and public, not more real but as real as the infinitely unknowable, strange, darkness-lit-up-by-flashes, of my parents' lived experience.

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