



# MY FATHER KEEPS THE PM WAITING

Lindsay Camp

*A novel, among other things...*

## About this book

*My Father keeps the PM waiting* is based on the life-story of my father, who died in 2002. It's made up of two main parts:

[My Father keeps the PM waiting \(1970\)](#) is a heavily fictionalised, short-novel-length account of a pivotal week in my father's life; the few days before and after the 1970 general election, in which he worked as a key publicity adviser to Harold Wilson.

[Scenes from My Father's life \(1926-2002\)](#) consists of a series of short pieces based on incidents and episodes from the entirety of my father's life. Again, most of these are heavily fictionalised, though a few are drawn directly from my own recollections of my father.

When I'm writing about a fictional character based, more or less loosely, on my father, he appears as **My Father**; when I am writing about the man I remember, it's **my father**.

If you would like to know more about who my father really was, you can read one of his obituaries [here](#).

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# **My Father keeps the PM waiting**

*A novel, among other things*

[www.myfather.co.uk](http://www.myfather.co.uk)



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**My Father keeps  
the PM waiting  
(1970)**





**Monday**  
**15 June 1970**  
**07:00**



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*My Father is late for an important meeting....*

"What about that useless twat Bonetti, then?"

My Father is 44. Professionally, he is at the peak of his powers, and possessed of the highest expectations. He knows that if all goes well on Thursday - no, better than that, provided things don't go disastrously wrong on Thursday - there is no limit to what he can achieve over the next few years. He is still an exceptionally able young, or young-ish, man. He has left it late, but there is still time - just - to redeem the Golden Ticket conferred on him by that rarest combination of outstanding intellect, charm and cunning. Provided things don't go disastrously wrong on Thursday.

At this moment, though, My Father is unable to enjoy the brilliant prospects that lie before him. It's inhumanly early, and he has barely slept. He feels hung-over, befuddled, and a little weepy. And although he knows he should be making a concerted effort to marshal his exceptional intellectual powers, as well as all his charm and cunning, for the meeting that lies ahead, and for these next few life-defining days, he is in fact lost in a despairing reverie on

the seemingly irresolvable complications in his personal life. Even reminding himself - as he has so often recently - that throughout history men of real distinction have tended to enjoy somewhat baroque arrangements with wives, lovers and children, seems for now at least to have lost its power to slow his heart-beat and steady his nerves. (Even for My Father, it's a little early for a drink.)

More immediately, though, the problem My Father faces is that he has no idea what the cab driver is talking about.

Bonetti? Italian-sounding. Might he, perhaps, be the new Foreign Minister, recently appointed following the latest upheavals in Rome? But no, surely that's Peretti? Or is Peretti Finance Minister? Or, hang on, isn't it Furetti? In any case, it seems unlikely that a cab driver would be quizzing him on Italian politics at this unearthly hour. Unless, of course, the wretched man is of Italian descent, in which case, it's by no means inconceivable that -

"I mean, [that second goal](#) - my mother-in-law could've got a hand to it, and she's in a fucking wheelchair!"

Football! Of course. My Father takes no interest in sport, finding it insufficiently gladiatorial in comparison to politics. But now his mighty intellect clicks and whirs, and retrieves the necessary information. He knows, in a flash, that the driver is referring to England's defeat in the World Cup, currently taking place in Mexico. And, in fact, he realises that he has personally witnessed the match, if not the specific incident, in question.

His teenage sons were watching it, yesterday evening, just before My Father abruptly left the family home:

*My Father (poking his head round the sitting room door): I'm off now, boys. I've got an early start tomorrow.*

*My Father's Sons (neither looking up from the TV): OK. Bye.*

*My Father (noticing they seem despondent): Don't worry, I'll see you soon. Probably be back on Friday.*

*My Father's Younger Son: OK, yeah.*

*My Father (realising his mistake): How's the footer going? Not well?*

*My Father's Elder Son: West Germany have just scored, again - so we're losing 3-2.*

*My Father's Younger Son: And there's only a couple of minutes left.*

*My Father: Oh well, still hope then.*

*My Father loiters awkwardly in the doorway. A couple of minutes pass. The boys groan as the referee blows the final whistle. My Father makes an ill-judged attempt to take his leave on a lighter note.*

*My Father: Fingers crossed for a better result on Thursday!*

*Neither of My Father's Sons responds.*

*Exit My Father.*

\*

For a moment, My Father contemplates replying to the driver in his own blokeish idiom, a skill he acquired self-protectively doing National Service as a public school-educated private soldier serving alongside men of much more limited academic attainment. ("*Your* mother-in-law? Mine could've done a better job than that tosser Peretti, and she's fucking blind!")

But up ahead, My Father can see the disparate particles of pre-rush-hour traffic just starting to coalesce. And, glancing at his watch, he knows he is going to be late. So instead, he says, "Just wonder if we might turn left at the lights, and cut off the corner? Could save a couple of minutes, and I'm in a hurry."

"OK, guv, you're the boss," says the driver, sliding his window shut.

\*

Why, at this point in his life, has My Father not left My Mother?

After all, [they have been married for very nearly 20 years](#) now, so on well over 7000 mornings, his first thought on waking has been related to the urgent necessity of extricating himself from the endlessly recurring slow-motion car-crash that their relationship has always been. (Or perhaps that's the wrong metaphor, since in all My Father's dealings with My Mother, there has always been something more implosive than explosive; a sense of every positive feeling, every warm impulse, every shred of vital energy, being sucked inward and downward, into some fearful unplumbed place of turbid inner darkness.)

It's nearly three years, too, since he met the Woman He Loves - which should, theoretically, have increased his sense of urgency still further. He now has somewhere to escape to, as well as from.

So why doesn't he go? To start with the reason that reflects most positively on My Father, he doesn't want to leave his children. Or, perhaps more accurately, he doesn't want to see himself - or be seen by others - as the kind of father who leaves his children, particularly when they are still young. He has been debating with himself, since meeting the Woman He Loves, how old children need to be before their father can abandon them without attracting excessive censure, or inflicting undue emotional harm upon them. He suspects that his sons - now 16 and 13 - have reached that age, but his daughter is still only seven. Definitely too young. He has been wondering lately if nine might be permissible?

Next, of course, there is the most obvious reason why an exceptionally able man of 44, well placed in his career - and now, somewhat belatedly, on the verge of real success - might not leave his wife for his significantly younger mistress. He doesn't need to; not really. It's true there are aspects of his relationship with My Mother that he has found increasingly hard to tolerate over the years. But to say he can't stand her would be an oversimplification. My Father is a man with a strong sense of his own innate badness, and has always felt there is something deservedly - even correctively - punitive in the way My Mother effortlessly, reflexively,

crushes his spirit, nullifies his hopes, negates his ambitions. At some level, it feels comfortable, familiar, to him.

In any case, My Father has succeeded over the last few years in constructing for himself a life in which My Mother has only limited opportunity to be what his sons would call a "massive drag". He leads, in tabloid parlance, a double life; or, perhaps more accurately, a treble one.

Most weekends, as well as the occasional week-night, he spends with his family, in the Surrey suburbs. Most week-nights - when My Mother believes his bulky frame is uncomfortably curled up on an inflatable mattress, on the sitting room floor of the tiny cramped Tufnell Park flat of his (actually non-existent) colleague and friend Ian - he passes luxuriantly enfolded in the Egyptian cotton sheets that clothe the vast acreage of the bed where the Woman He Loves sleeps beside him, her sharp knees nestled into his rump. (One of the things he loves about her is that, although by no means well-off - in fact, permanently on the brink of financial destitution - she insists on surrounding herself, and those she loves, with the finest, most beautiful, most desirable things. Often, when My Father arrives back in her world after a weekend of pleasure-starved domesticity in Worplesdon, he will find nothing at all in the fridge, but a gorgeous new little wood-cut on the wall alongside it.)

And then there are the weekday lunchtimes, afternoons, and occasional evenings (sometimes it's hard to get away) that he spends with the Other Woman, usually starting in an obscure pub just around the corner from her home, a profoundly depressing studio flat, redolent of ancient sad meals, escaped gas and mouse-droppings, and not containing a single beautiful thing, to which they adjourn in order to perform an act that My Father is increasingly bewildered to remember he once found so compelling. These days, he has to close his eyes, and think very hard of [Jean Shrimpton](#) - partly for erotic stimulus, and partly to prevent the face of the Woman He Loves from rearing up reproachfully before him.

So My Father stays with My Mother because he is able to have his cake, eat it, and have a bit left over for between-meal snacking purposes. But this morning, in the back of this taxi, just starting to wonder if he may need to

vomit (he drank, even by his standards, a LOT last night), he knows this seemingly enviable state of affairs cannot be allowed to continue for much longer. Not least because the Woman He Loves (though ignorant of the Other Woman's existence) shows clearly detectable signs of no longer being willing to tolerate this utterly fucked-up and hateful fucking bloody situation (such as telling him repeatedly, while beating on his increasingly large stomach with her small fists, just hard enough to hurt, that she can't fucking stand this utterly fucked-up and hateful fucking bloody situation).

But on his own account, too, My Father knows that he needs to simplify his emotional life. Just lately, in particular, as the intensity of his working life has risen to vertiginous new heights, he has simply found it too draining.

At a time when he is devoting all of his exceptional energies and intellectual powers to securing a prosperous Socialist future for the country, the demands made upon him, by three women and half a dozen children, have been greater, heavier, more burdensome than one man (there is only one of him, despite what others seem to think) can be expected to bear.

My Father, as so often throughout his life, is feeling sorry for himself.

Ashamed, too. Because he has just failed, miserably, in the first and incomparably less difficult of the two life-simplification tasks he has set himself. Dumping the Other Woman.

On leaving Worplesdon last night, he went not where his heart led, but to her desolate corner of Queen's Park, with the firm intention of bringing an end, compassionately but decisively, to their nine-year liaison. On the deserted Sunday evening train, he muttered aloud what he would say to her; "I think we both realise".... "I'm sure you must feel, as I do".... "something we'll each of us look back on one day with enormous tenderness and warmth"....

But, in the event, his prepared lines (so cleverly calculated to give her a sense of "owning" the painful but necessary decision) went unspoken. As he knew they would, from the moment she opened the front door. She was wearing a bobbly old dressing gown made of some profoundly

unglamorous synthetic material; her hair, wet from recent washing, was surely more flecked with grey than he had ever noticed; and her conjunctivitis had flared up again. On her face, bare of make-up, a shatteringly poignant mix of girlish delight (her Lover, unable to resist an unexpected visit!) and alarm (her Lover, arriving on a Sunday evening for the first time ever, what non-catastrophic explanation could there possibly be for that?).

Whether for joy or terror, she wept. He comforted her. (What else could he do?) He drank, from the bottle of Scotch kept on the kitchen shelf, beside one of her pottery cats, for his visits. And then, her tears dried and some little time elapsed, she knelt before him, as she used to do, so thrillingly, behind the locked door of his office, on evenings when they worked late together, at the very outset.

[Jean Shrimpton](#).... [Julie Christie](#).... [Sophia Loren](#).... [Mary Hopkin](#).... [the girl in the newsagents](#) with the astounding breasts.... Eventually, physically spent and imaginatively exhausted, My Father collapsed into her bed, so different, with its faintly damp yet somehow crackly nylon sheets, from that other bed in North London, where he would so much rather have been. And by then, of course, it would have been impossible to say anything.

And then, of course, he had to get up ridiculously early, to call this taxi - which arrived nearly 15 minutes late. And then, despite his clumping furiously round her flat awaiting its arrival, she was still, rather surprisingly, asleep when he left. (On the three previous occasions they have spent a night together, she has always been up long before him, to prepare his breakfast, as well as her face.)

So, really, in the circumstances, My Father assures himself, there was no way - no humane, decent way - that he could have told her it was over. Was there?

My Father closes his eyes, and screws up his face. His head hurts. But the wave of incipient nausea seems, fortunately, to have passed. He glances at the stack of newspapers beside him on the seat of the cab. He hasn't read them yet, but he knows what's in them. Over the course of his career, he has

developed an uncanny, almost osmotic ability to absorb the content of newspapers and other periodicals simply by picking them up. (Or perhaps it isn't all that uncanny, since, in many cases, he has dictated the relevant articles to their purported authors, virtually word for word.)

The newspapers sit next to him, accusingly. He knows he ought to subject them to a proper speed-scan, to equip himself with the level of detail needed for the meeting that is due to begin - he glances at his watch - in just over 10 minutes. But he can't be bothered. And, in any case, there is something about the papers that is troubling him; something other than the news and comment that today's editions contain.

Of course. It's the threat that they pose to his.... prospects. My Father doesn't dare allow himself even to think of what it is, specifically, that he is hoping for if all goes well on Thursday. But he does expect to be rewarded. And he's aware that now, for the first time in his life, he has probably done enough to make himself a target for intrusive and hostile press coverage of his private life. And that any faint aroma of scandal between now and publication of the New Year Honours List could be fatal to his.... prospects.

So, on the whole, he reflects, perhaps it's just as well that he shouldn't, for the time being, do anything that might tend to disrupt the precarious equilibrium of his current state of affairs, however much the Woman He Loves may fucking hate it.

He glances at his watch again. Just under 10 minutes to get there, and the cab is still only just approaching Marble Arch. Fuck, fuck, fuck. He's going to be late.

My Father picks up the *Telegraph* (best to begin by knowing thy worst enemy), and starts to read at a speed only achievable by a man of truly exceptional intellectual ability....

\*

The driver has switched on his radio now. Through the partition, as he reads, My Father is faintly aware of some tinny jingle insisting on it being [the summertime](#), when the weather is hot....



No fan of popular music (to the extent that he is sublimely ignorant of the current cataclysmic disintegration of The Beatles), My Father is forced to concede the meteorological accuracy of the lyric, however inane. It is fucking hot in the back of the cab, despite the early hour. My Father effortfully levers down the window (he's never interacted well with the material world), but only succeeds in letting in wafts of soupy fume-laden London air. The midsummer sun is already bouncing off the bleached chewing gum-studded pavements, with a brassy glare. Soon the temperature will be up in the mid-80s, as it has been every day for what seems like weeks.

On the whole, although uncomfortable, My Father hopes it will last until Thursday. Good weather equals good turnout. And good turnout equals predictable results. Unless weather can be *too* good? If it's as hot as this on polling day, might vast swathes of would-be Labour voters decide to spend the day lying around in parks and on beaches, guzzling ice cream and sluicing themselves down with gallons of beer and fizzy pop?

My Father fiddles with his tie, and hopes [the PM](#) will be in shirt-sleeves when he arrives at No10. The driver turns up the radio; perhaps he senses how irritating his passenger finds the song:

*In the summertime . . . when the weather's fine  
You got women, you got women, on your mind*

You can say that again, thinks My Father.

\*

Finally, in the last few minutes of his journey, My Father focuses. The papers are good. In fact, it's hard to imagine how, at this point in the campaign, they could be better. Everyone agrees it will be a Labour victory; some predict a landslide - not implausibly given that the most recent polls show a lead in double figures. Ladbroke's are offering 20-1 on the PM staying in Downing Street. My Father is not a betting man, but he knows this represents the nearest thing that exists to can't-lose certainty.

Yet, ranging across a wide smooth ocean of favourable news and comment, My Father's eye is drawn, queasily, to a single tiny islet of doubt; a small throw-away filler piece, at the very bottom of a round-up of pre-election snippets and gossip:

*Let's say, for the sake of argument, that by the time you read this, England have been beaten by West Germany in their World Cup quarter final, on Sunday evening. How much would that affect the national mood? Enough to influence the result on Thursday? We hear there's at least one football supporter - Huddersfield Town's most famous fan, in fact - who takes that remote-sounding possibility extremely seriously.*

My Father, surprisingly, understands this reference. On a late train back from some god-forsaken northern outpost earlier in the campaign, a well-lubricated PM tried unsuccessfully to engage him in sentimental recollections of youthful football allegiances.

A man of deep and lasting loyalties, not least to his home town, the PM proclaims himself [a Terrier](#) till he dies.

\*

"You said Whitehall, guv. Care to be more specific?"

My Father, over these last few weeks, has usually asked to be dropped off just around the corner, and walked the last couple of hundred yards up to that famous front door; partly in order to savour the experience, partly, perhaps, out of a desire not to be seen as flaunting his newly acquired access to the centre of power. But today he is already late, and can't afford to be even a minute or two later.

"Downing Street. Number 10, please."

"Ooh, lah-di-dah!"

\*

Staunch socialist and egalitarian though he is, My Father enjoys being saluted by the burly beef-faced policeman, who pivots on his heel and leans back rather elegantly, to shoulder open the door for him, with an obsequiously murmured, "Morning, sir". My Father wonders if perhaps the regular bobbies are starting to recognise him? And before he is able to suppress the thought, it occurs to him how much better "Morning, m'lord" would sound.

Inside No 10, it is furnace-hot and airless as a well-sealed coffin. The early morning sunlight barely penetrates. From the messengers' subterranean burrow, the smell of the indeterminate stew they keep perpetually bubbling on a solitary gas-ring wafts upwards through the cavernous stairwell, and permeates the building. For a man who has not yet breakfasted - particularly one with a fairly severe hangover - it's the very opposite of appetising.

My Father hurries along the corridor, past the green baize door of the Cabinet room, and up the main staircase, running the gauntlet of the PM's predecessors, whose portraits - almost all abominably bad and lifeless - stare witheringly down on him. Disraeli, for some reason, always seem the most disapproving. ("Four and forty years old, yet scarcely any achievement of real distinction.... in my judgment, a mere huckster and mountebank.")

As he approaches the Campaign Office, he can hear raised voices, one - muffled - instantly recognisable as [Marcia](#)'s.

"You fucking four-eyed weasel!" she's screaming, from behind the door of the lavatory, where she tends to barricade herself at moments of extreme stress. "I'll have your fucking job. I'll fucking bury you. I'll have you out of this fucking place so fucking fast your feet won't touch the fucking ground!"

No need for My Father to enquire about the weasel's identity - or, really, the nature of his offence. Throughout the campaign, the PM's Political Secretary (Marcia) and Press Secretary ([Haines](#)) have been at war, the battleground, almost invariably, privileged access to the PM, which she regards as being hers to dispense or, more usually, withhold at will. My

Father knows, to a near-certainty, that Haines has tried to bypass this fearsome gate-keeper, and been found out.

Haines has, sensibly, made himself scarce. The PM has not yet emerged from his apartment (although, since its front door is directly opposite the lavatory, he must be aware of the altercation, and may well be waiting for it to subside). So only [Peter S](#) - nominally in overall charge of the campaign, but, as so often, a powerless bystander - is standing directly in the path of the boiling torrent of enraged threats, looking as if he might burst into tears.

"She seems a mite peeved," he murmurs miserably to My Father.

"Something to do with the PM's speech for this evening, I suspect. I wonder if maybe you could possibly, er, work your magic.... "

And yes, rather to his own amazement, My Father - who has no supernatural powers, but is a gifted conciliator - has proved able to broker a fragile peace. "Do it for the good of the campaign, Marcia," he cajoles her. "For the Party. For the country. For the PM."

And, eventually, he hears the key turn in the lock, and the door opens a crack....

\*\*\*

**07:45**

### *My Father hates the Fucking Pipe*

The Campaign Meeting is, belatedly, about to get underway.

In the super-heated room, the atmosphere is oppressive; highly charged yet somehow also subdued. Only the core campaign strategy team members are present, but the tiny office - for some reason, the PM's wife's former secretary's cubby-hole has been adopted as the nerve centre of the campaign, in its latter stages - is farcically overcrowded with angry, fearful, perspiring bodies.

The PM, to My Father's relief in shirt-sleeves, has the only moderately comfortable seat; a swivel chair, behind the desk, from which he will lead

the meeting. Marcia is wedged in beside and slightly behind him, white-faced, still trembling with rage, and shooting occasional malevolent glances in the direction of Haines, who stares impassively into the middle distance; the faithful functionary awaiting his master's commands. Peter S, perched on a stool, exudes his usual monkish calm, which those who work with him suspect of being a disguise for permanent barely suppressed panic. [Tommy B](#) seems to be asleep in the corner (and might as well be, since tweaks to macro-economic policy are unlikely, at this late stage, to affect the result on Thursday). And My Father, who has drawn the short straw seating-wise, is uncomfortably folded up on a chintzily-upholstered chair of dollshouse proportions, in front of the desk, and almost certainly below the PM's eyeline - exactly as Haines intended when he manoeuvred My Father into his place.

My Father, though, feels himself to be at something of a moral advantage. Not only is he not late for the meeting, as he feared, but in fact, it's only thanks to him that it is able to start now, 15 minutes behind schedule. And the PM must, he thinks, be aware of this.

\*

The PM calls the meeting to order.

"Marcia.... gentlemen...."

As usual, he pauses here, having secured the attention of everyone in the room, to make lengthy adjustments to the contents and combustion of his pipe. He sucks loudly and spittily through it, several times; tamps unhurriedly; then once, twice, three times, re-applies the terrifying jet of flame emitted by his enormous Zippo lighter.

My Father hates [the pipe](#).

The PM sucks some more, seemingly still not satisfied.

My Father FUCKING HATES the Fucking Pipe. He knows, of course, that it's seen by many as one of the PM's most valuable political assets; a powerful symbol of reassuring man-of-the-people dependability, which also

doubles as a brilliantly effective means of buying time, on the rare occasions when an interlocutor has the PM on the ropes ("For heaven's sake, [Mr Day](#), don't harass the poor man about the trade deficit when he's just trying to get his pipe to draw!"). But My Father also knows - or, perhaps more accurately, is just beginning to sense - that The Pipe may have negative connotations, too; that today, in 1970, an air of reassuring dependability may, increasingly, look fuddy duddy, complacent, square.

The PM is, at last, happy with his pipe. He looks up from it, and around the room, in affable acknowledgement of each team member's presence.

"So," he twinkles, through the smoke, "the best efforts of our soccer players notwithstanding, we have an election to win in three days' time. Remind me what remains to be done?"

As PM-meeting-openers go, this is a classic of its kind. First, the humorously convoluted syntax, subtly tickling the intellect of those present by postponing the arrival of his meaning; and then, of course, the self-deprecating irony of his request for a reminder. The PM never needs to be reminded of anything. His astonishing powers of recall are legendary. If memory were an Olympic sport, he would be a red-hot favourite for gold in Munich, two years from now.

My Father is, despite himself, impressed. He has complicated feelings towards the PM. On the one hand, he can't help thinking well of a man who possesses the wisdom and discrimination to think well of him, as the PM clearly does. (In fact, Marcia has confided that it was the PM himself who suggested drafting My Father into the core campaign team as a late replacement for his long-time publicity adviser [Gerald Kaufman](#), recently departed to launch his own parliamentary career, by fighting a safe seat in Manchester. If true, this is, undeniably, flattering.)

And then, of course, there are the PM's extraordinary political skills. As My Father has now had plenty of opportunity to witness, the man is a formidable operator. Put him in any campaign situation - one-to-one on the doorstep with a recalcitrant voter; [on stage](#), in a packed and not particularly well-disposed meeting-hall; in front of a TV camera, harshly lit, and with a

hostile interviewer intent on dismantling his record - and he simply turns it on; a quicksilver answer-for-anything rat-a-tat delivery, which, by virtue of a certain unflustered playfulness in his tone and his gently flattened Yorkshire vowels, gives him complete command without ever making him seem (worst crime an Englishman can commit) too-clever-by-half.

He is also, My Father would be forced to admit, a notably kind and decent human being - at least in comparison to most other senior politicians. (Impossible to imagine the Chancellor, say, arriving at a meeting with delicious shortbread, baked by his wife, in a Tupperware container, as the PM did the other day.)

On the other hand, to My Father's eyes, the PM has a pouchy shop-worn look about him. It's hardly surprising after six attritional years in Number 10, battered by an almost uninterrupted sequence of frustrations (Northern Ireland!), reversals (the unions! strikes!), and outright calamities ([devaluation!](#)); hounded and pilloried by the right wing press, at every turn; and, for most of his term, reviled by a substantial majority of the electorate. For a man who wants to be loved, it must have been exquisitely painful to find himself the most unpopular PM since polling began. In any case, while still capable of remarkable feats of sustained energy, he looks tired, baggy-eyed, even a little vacant on occasion. My Father suspects that the long plateau of his supremacy, within the Labour Party and the nation's politics, is now behind him. The PM is, to put it bluntly, past his best.

And then there's the question of how good his best really was? Here My Father holds a wholly heterodox view. In the eyes of the world, the PM has always been a prodigy, a phenomenon. Head Boy of his school, an Oxford don at 21, the youngest Cabinet Minister of the 20th century, when barely into his 30s. But, My Father privately wonders, is he really exceptionally able, let alone *outstandingly* able? Viewed dispassionately, the evidence suggests not. The PM's remarkable academic success, his dazzling early career as a statistician in the coal industry, his swift ascent through the wartime Civil Service, even his indecently rapid rise through the lower ranks of the parliamentary Labour Party, can all be seen - should properly all be seen - as the accomplishments of a mind extraordinarily adept at

assimilating information, processing it, and presenting it in a persuasively lucid form. Admirable enough, in its way; genuinely out of the ordinary. But not to be confused for a moment with the originality, command, vision, nuanced complexity of a truly outstandingly able man's intellect.

That Cunt Haines (as My Father thinks of him) jumps in before Marcia has a chance to take control of the agenda.

"Yes, PM, pity about the football. But they were only one goal up, while you, PM, are walking away with this election, according to all the polls."

Whenever That Oily Cunt Haines ladles it on like this, My Father realises, he is in fact congratulating himself on his own achievements in making a massive front-runner of a politician who, just months ago, seemed beyond redemption.

"We still have a lot of work to do before we can be sure of that," snaps Marcia, even less eager than My Father to allow Haines unwarranted credit. And while Haines is firing up a post-sycophancy Senior Service, she quickly outlines the order of business.

"Starting with, general policy focus and attack-lines for these last three days...."

"Fuck that big poof-boy in the arse," mutters Tommy B, without opening his eyes, at exactly the same moment that Peter S says, "Keep turning the pressure up on [Heath](#); he's hopelessly out of his depth."

The PM is tamping and sucking again. Or still. "Well, it's certainly the case that the Leader of the Opposition's shortcomings - particularly those inherent in what passes for his personality - have been cruelly exposed by this campaign. But perhaps we should allow [Mr Powell](#) to complete the demolition?"

"I concur, PM." Who else? That Obsequious Cunt Haines. "We need to be hammering home your virtues - dependability, experience, connection with the common man, and his wife - rather than sniping at Mr Heath's vices."



"Little boyzzz," hisses Tommy B.

All this is perfectly on-message (as no one would have said in 1970) for the campaign. It's true that the Leader of the Opposition is universally considered to have performed disastrously, and equally widely expected to find himself out of a job after the heavy defeat predicted for the Tories on Thursday. It's true that his awkward, oddball persona - his total inability to smile or shake a voter's hand with apparent sincerity - has weighed heavily against him. And it's also true that "good old Enoch", as he is known by at least 50% of Conservative voters, is running an insurrectionary private campaign, based on nakedly racist anti-immigrant rhetoric, which has probably inflicted damage on the "official" Tory platform.

And yet.... My Father suddenly feels a powerful discomfort; a premonitory shiver that ripples through him, a little like the feeling when you read about the symptoms of a terminal disease, and abruptly realise that all of them, without exception, are significantly present in your body.

He knows, in this moment, that this election could very well still be lost.

Obviously, the PM and his closest advisers are complacent; sitting back, conserving their energy, in readiness for weighing the enormous tonnage of votes that will give them their expected crushing victory on Thursday. And why wouldn't they feel that way, in the light of all the available information? But now My Father senses that a shift, as yet barely perceptible, may be taking place. The hapless Heath has, perhaps, just taken on the faintest first tinge of plucky (and unfairly maligned) underdog. The Tories have, over the last few days, begun to concentrate their fire on Labour's greatest vulnerabilities; unruly unions and rising prices. And all that racist nonsense, My Father suspects, is working for them, too; whatever the PM may think, people know that if they favour Enoch's policy of "sending the coloureds home", Conservative is the only productive way to vote.

My Father thinks, uneasily, too, about a phone call he fielded yesterday from [Aitken](#) at the *Guardian*. At the time, it felt like just another off-the-record chinwag with one of the very few broadly sympathetic members of

the press corps. But now, My Father recalls a seemingly innocent aside by Aitken about the quarterly trade figures, due to be released today - and their potential impact on the last few days of the campaign. Did Aitken know something? Could he possibly, My Father now wonders, have picked up a rumour from a mole in the Treasury?

For a moment My Father stares, inwardly, into the abyss. Defeat. Snatched from the jaws of cast-iron nailed-on victory. No enormous boost to his career, as the man whose publicity skills secured the landslide. (The opposite, in fact, since he will for ever be tarnished by association with a failure no one believed possible.) No admiring features in Sunday papers. No peerage ("Good to see you again, my lord").

Meanwhile, the meeting has moved on to the second main agenda-point; the PM's speech this evening. And now the temperature in the room rises still higher. Because this was indeed the cause of the earlier altercation between Marcia and Haines, and resentments are still simmering.

"PM, I hope you've had a chance to run an eye over the talking-points?" Haines is saying.

"Unlike me," hisses Marcia.

Haines's steel-rimmed spectacles flash. "I finished them late - long after you'd left for the day."

"You could've had them sent them over to me."

"I could have, but I remembered the last time I 'bothered you at home' - and how you reacted."

"That was a completely different set of circumstances. I bloody well won't be treated like this, PM?"

The PM looks miserable, cowed - as he does whenever Marcia gets angry, and appeals to him for support, which is often. He tamps and sucks, and rummages for his lighter.

My Father wants to jump to his feet, like an Old Testament prophet, and bellow, "We're going to lose this election if you don't stop behaving like fucking six-year-olds!" (Actually, his powerful newly formed conviction is that they are probably going to lose it however they behave.)

But instead, once again, he plays the conciliator.

"I think perhaps we ventilated that topic earlier?" My Father's voice is a soothing light tenor; his tone is humorous, persuasive. "The important thing, PM, is that you - and Marcia - are happy with what you've got?"

Marcia harrumphs, but seems somewhat mollified. The PM looks gratefully at My Father. "Well, I don't need very much. It'll be a friendly crowd. And provided I remember that we're the Socialists and the Tories are the Evil Capitalists, I don't think I'll go too far wrong."

Marcia still looks deeply discontented, but doesn't seem inclined to pursue the matter. My Father takes advantage of this unexpected lull, to move the meeting on.

"And Marcia, how are we placed with our 'celebrity attendees'? Will we have enough for two full rows, behind the PM?"

"Yes," says Marcia, who often goes monosyllabic immediately post-conflict.

"Good," says My Father, smiling at Marcia with considerable charm.

"Perhaps you and I could go through the list later? To make sure we deploy them to maximum effect?"

"As long as Miss Christie is there," says the PM, roguishly, "I'll be perfectly happy. Though I'd prefer you not to tell Mary I said that."

A notably strait-laced man, not given to lubricious remarks about actresses, the PM is nevertheless somewhat smitten with Julie Christie, since having met her at a recent Downing Street reception.

"Miss Christie has confirmed her attendance," says Marcia, icily.

There's an uncomfortable silence, while the PM pats his pockets, in search of a small chisel-like tool that he uses to dislodge obstructions in the stem of his pipe, at particularly awkward moments. Conversation moves on, falteringly at first, to more detailed discussion of arrangements for this evening's meeting; more of a rally, in fact, with the focus squarely on the PM's famous supporters, rather than substantive matters of policy.

Again, My Father feels a rising tide of panic within him. If he's right about the tightening of the race, the turning of the tide, how can it possibly be a good idea to use this last major meeting of the campaign to indulge in showbiz-back-slapping?

Marcia and Haines are disagreeing, quietly but violently, over what time the PM's car needs to be called for. ("Six fifteen will be more than early enough." "Absolutely. Provided we're happy for the PM to arrive half an hour late, and keep his distinguished guests waiting....")

The PM lays down his pipe purposefully. He is impatient to get onto the main business of the meeting.

"Marcia, gentlemen - since time is short, perhaps we'd better turn our attention to the PPB? Oriel, how have you got on?"

The PM is big on nicknames. Oriel is what he calls My Father. At first, My Father glowed whenever he was addressed in this way. But, over time, he's come to suspect that, while probably affectionate, it may also be intended as a not particularly subtle reminder that the Oxford college he attended was considerably less prestigious than the PM's.

My Father has been working on the Party Political Broadcast over the weekend. In fact, exceptionally, he has been given Sunday off from campaigning, to allow him to concentrate on this. Because these 10 minutes of national television - to be recorded tomorrow afternoon, and broadcast later the same evening - are Labour's last chance to grind the opposition and their useless leader into the dust, before voting on Thursday. (The Tories have their final broadcast this evening, but no one in the room feels they have anything to fear from this.)

All eyes turn towards My Father. Has he, once again, worked his persuasive magic? Will this broadcast play its part in turning a comfortable Labour victory into one of the great historic landslides?

My Father stares miserably at the half-dozen sheets of heavily annotated A4 on his lap. (He has been working from a rough draft provided by Haines and Marcia, editing and revising in his own psychopathic scrawl; throughout a long career mostly based on the written word, My Father never learns to type.) Instinctively aware that his absurd semi-recumbent position puts him at a major disadvantage, he scrambles to his feet. The PM has asked him a direct question; he needs to answer, now.

"I think we're in good order, PM."

He doesn't really, though. He knows now that the PPB is all wrong - and indeed that the whole campaign, for which it serves as a conclusive summing-up, has been misconceived from the start. Too complacently certain of the opposition's weakness. Too triumphalist. Too smugly assured that voters will remember the economic advances of the last few months, rather than the endless catalogue of cock-ups and catastrophes stretching back over the preceding half-decade. And far, far too "presidential" (assuming My Father is correct in his intuition that, like an ammoniac Camembert a day or two past runny perfection, the PM has just reached the tipping-point between electoral asset and liability).

What is My Father to do? There isn't time - and, in any case, he doesn't have authority to suggest it - to throw away the script, and start again. But he's convinced it would be madness to go ahead with what they currently have. How could he, he berates himself, have been so insensitive to the campaign's shifting momentum when he was working on the script just 24 hours ago?

The PM is getting impatient. He gestures with his pipe-stem at the papers My Father is holding. "Perhaps, Oriel, you'd be kind enough to share with us your latest no doubt excellent...."

In the moment, My Father makes a decision to stake all his standing within the campaign team on getting more time to work on the PPB. He can't rewrite it from scratch, but he can tweak, refine, and soften some of its worst excesses.

"PM, I need just an hour or two more to get it exactly right," he says.

"You had all day yesterday," Haines fires back, with venom.

"Yes, but I've had some new interesting ideas, based on feedback from friendly journalists, which I really think we need to incorporate," My Father improvises.

"Which journalists?" asks Haines.

"What kind of feedback?" asks Marcia, less hostile towards My Father, but ever-alert to any possible slight. "I hope you're not intending to change the basic structure I gave you."

"*We* gave you," corrects Haines.

"Of course not," says My Father. "It's only really a couple of small shifts in emphasis that I have in mind, but I don't want to waste everyone's time now, until we have a finished script. I can run it past you both later this morning."

Haines is sneering openly, Marcia looks far from contented. But there's a momentary pause while they wait for the PM to adjudicate.

"All right, Oriel. It's vital we make it as strong as possible. We can give you a little more time to buckle on your crampons and attempt the highest summit of perfection."

My Father feels immense relief, with an afternote of panic. He has his reprieve, but can he do what he intends? Is it possible, working with the materials he has, to craft a broadcast that will win the election, rather than making it more likely to be lost? Even for a man of his exceptional powers?

"But, Oriel," the PM goes on, "let me just hear the opening, to get a feel for the kind of performance you'll be needing from me."

There's no way out for My Father. He's won himself a little more time to save the election, but - short of feigning a heart attack - he sees no way to avoid complying with this direct, and very reasonable, request from the PM.

He shuffles his papers, coughs miserably, then reads aloud: "We open on news archive of crowds of enthusiastic voters...."

"Speak up," interrupts Haines.

"...crowds of enthusiastic voters greeting the PM, as he goes on one of his city centre walk-about. In voice-over at first, the PM sets the scene: 'It has been like this all over the country. People everywhere are feeling a new confidence. They are confident because their efforts have produced solid results. Results of which everyone is proud. Confident and determined. They realise that no Prime Minister in this century has fought an election against such a background of economic strength as we have got today....'"

My Father tails off, wondering how he could ever have written such complete shit. True, he wasn't to blame for the cheering crowds, which were one of Marcia's non-optional suggestions. But the tone! And all that ridiculously exaggerated bollocks about "economic strength".

What's really terrifying, though, is that the room is clearly enraptured by what he's just read. Even Haines can't think of anything negative to say.

"Very stirring," murmurs Peter S, as Marcia mimes a brief round of applause.

"Solid results," parrots the PM. "I think that's exactly what this government has been about. I like it. And if it continues in a similar vein - well, are you sure it needs further refinement?"

Damn, damn, damn. That means My Father won't be able to change the opening - at least, not by more than tiny tweaks to wording.

"Just give me an hour or two," he repeats, grimly.

The meeting starts to wind down. The daily press conference is due to start shortly, in the press room downstairs. But as papers are shuffled, and briefcases opened, there is the sound of fast-approaching footsteps from the corridor, and the campaign office door is pushed open.

"Gerald!" says the PM, delightedly.

"PM!" replies Kaufman, who is wearing some kind of candy-striped yachting blazer, and a straw boater. "I came as quickly as I could. I heard that you might appreciate a little help banging the last few nails into Laughing Boy's coffin!"

"My idea, PM," says Haines. "Gerald's seat is in the bag, so I thought we would get him down from Manchester, for these last few days."

"Excellent notion," says the PM, who is still shaking Kaufman's hand.

"And I thought you could start," says Haines to Kaufman, "by running an eye over the PPB? I'm sure *My Father* would appreciate it. Wouldn't you, Oriel?"

No one but the PM calls My Father this. You bastard, Haines, you fucking, fucking bastard, thinks My Father.

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**11:15**

*My Father has got women, has got women, on his mind....*

My Father is thinking about the backs of the knees of the Woman He Loves. He has known many women, a not unimpressive number of them intimately, but until very recently he has never been aware how much delight is to be found in this under-appreciated cranny of the female anatomy.



He has time to think about the backs of the knees of the Woman He Loves because he is waiting for the revised PPB script, which is being typed - reluctantly - by one of [the Garden Girls](#). (Haines has forbidden either of the two Press Office secretaries from working for My Father, on the grounds that he, as Press Secretary, needs them both to be in a state of perpetual readiness to respond instantly to his many and varied demands.)

My Father has, he hopes, done everything he reasonably could, in the circumstances, with the PPB. Which is to say, not much. He has toned down the more vainglorious claims about the nation's unprecedented economic wellbeing, while smuggling in a couple of incidental references to a stronger economy being a work-in-progress. He has dialled up a passage mocking the Tories' contradictory claims of being able to increase public spending at the same time as reducing taxes. He has cut two out of five references to Socialism (it's not yet a dirty word, but My Father is perhaps ahead of his time in suspecting that it's no longer a vote-winner). And, most important of all, he thinks, he has introduced a new para in which the PM pays tribute to the talent, strength and experience within his senior ministerial team.

The Garden Girls - the typists who work in the large conservatory-like room adjoining No 10's garden - are hierarchical by nature, and do not regard work for a temporary unpaid attaché to the PM's press team as a high priority. My Father's wait continues.

How can he use the time productively? He is alone in the campaign office now - seated, more comfortably, at the desk - the rest of the team dispersed to their various domains around the building. This is their first day largely based at Downing Street since the campaign began nearly three weeks ago. My Father's thoughts turn to his abject performance with the Other Woman, his utter failure to address the matter in hand. Would it be so terrible, he wonders, to do it by post? A bit brutal, perhaps; but it has to be done - and whatever the means of communication, it will hit her hard.

He picks up his ballpoint pen, and starts to write. And once he is past the problem of how to address her (he eventually settles on "Dearest...", confident that his notorious handwriting will make it hard to distinguish

from the "Darling...." that he's used in his infrequent previous written communications with her), the phrases he needs come easily: "I think we both realise".... "I'm sure you must feel, as I do".... "something we'll each of us look back on one day with enormous tenderness and warmth...."

Signing off is tricky, though; but once again, illegibility comes to the rescue. He scrawls a complicated hieroglyph, which could be "Love", followed by his initial, and a single kiss - or, equally well, something more indicative of the change in their relationship status ("With fond best wishes").

He looks at the finished letter; more of a note, really. Can he send it? Will she be able to decipher it (at least, the parts that matter)? Can he bear the thought of how much it will hurt her? (My Father does not enjoy inflicting pain.)

Hurriedly, as if to complete the action before reconsidering it, he folds the paper and stuffs it into an envelope, which he seals and addresses, as legibly as he can. Then, as he pushes open the door to take the letter to the post-tray at the end of the corridor, everything happens at once. One of the messengers - a wizened dwarfish figure with the look of an ancient child - rushes importantly towards him, clasping a manila folder.

"Your documents, from the typists, sir," he murmurs discreetly, as if this might be classified information.

At the same moment, from Marcia's office - the door of which is ajar to aid ventilation - emerges a chilling wordless banshee howl. Even by the standards of the PM's Political Secretary, this seems a melodramatic response. But to what?

My Father glances inside the folder. The script seems to have been accurately typed. Never one for unnecessary physical exertion, he nevertheless covers the 30-odd feet that separate him from Marcia's office at an impressively speedy semi-jog-trot.

He taps on the door, as he cranes his head around it. Marcia, Haines and Kaufman are sitting dumbstruck, in a variety of postures suggestive of

aghast. They seem oblivious to My Father's presence.

"Um, I have the PPB script. I thought we might go through it before...." he tails off, unable to continue in the face of what is clearly some kind of crisis.

"What is it?" he asks.

Still staring blankly ahead of her, Marcia replies. "The trade figures. [The Chancellor](#) of the fucking Exchequer has just shown us the enormous courtesy of letting us know, less than a fucking hour before they become fucking public, that they are FUCKING CATASTROPHIC!"

My Father is at his best in a crisis, provided it's the kind where unfavourable news needs to be presented in the least damaging light possible.

"How catastrophic?" he asks, calmly.

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The next couple of hours pass in a blur of damage limitation. The monthly trade figures, released by the Treasury at 12 noon, are indeed a setback for Labour, showing a deficit of over £30 million, following almost a year in surplus. And immediately, the Tories go on the offensive, with both their leader and the Shadow Chancellor suddenly everywhere, loudly insistent that Labour's so-called economic recovery has been thrown into reverse, holed below the waterline, exposed for the sham it always was.

But, as My Father is quick to see, there is a way of presenting these figures as a blip, resulting from exceptional circumstances - specifically, the purchase for nearly £20 million of not one but two Jumbo jets. And, impressively quickly, the defensive fightback begins, led by the Chancellor, who goes on the World at One and tells [Bill Hardcastle](#) that, "if the Tories in their hopeless and divided plight, believe they can escape from defeat on the wings of a couple of Jumbo jets, they will believe anything". My Father is not particularly keen on the Chancellor's rather fanciful wording (but then, he's not particularly keen on the Chancellor, whom he regards as an

over-promoted near-nincompoop), but he has to admit the message is delivered with a degree of scorn that sounds convincing.

By early afternoon, what can be done has been done. The PM seems remarkably relaxed about the situation (My Father can't decide if this is genuine confidence or weary complacency). And all that remains is to wait and see how it plays in tomorrow's papers.

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**14:25**

*My Father checks his messages, and wishes he hadn't....*

My Father is, technically, on holiday. He has taken three weeks' leave from his job as Director of Information Services at the British Steel Corporation to devote his full attention to masterminding publicity and press relations for the PM, accompanying him on almost every leg of his 6000-mile campaign journey. (My Mother is, to say the least, not thrilled about this, since it means he has only one remaining week of leave for a family holiday - which he has told her will have to wait until "the dust settles" following the election.)

Every day since the campaign began, he has - often with difficulty - found a few minutes to call his office, where his secretary Linda updates him on matters of professional interest, and passes on messages.

He's talking to her now.

"Any word from the Chairman?"

"No, he's away again. On another fact-finding tour."

The Chairman of British Steel has a villa in Tuscany, and finds it necessary to go on regular fact-finding tours in Italy.

"And how is Martin doing? Still keeping on top of things?"

"My impression is that Mr Lawrence is doing an excellent job. The journalists seem to love him."

My Father, who likes to feel indispensable as much as the next man, or possibly a little more, is not particularly delighted to hear his deputy is performing so well in his absence. He wonders briefly if Linda may be teasing him. She's an excellent secretary - punctual, efficient, literate, well spoken - and has been with him for nearly 10 years, accompanying him from job to job. But she gives away almost nothing about herself (as far as her personal life is concerned, all he knows is that she lives with her mother in Surbiton), and what she thinks or feels is still, nearly always, a mystery to him. In particular, her attitude towards the convolutions in his personal life remains entirely obscure.

"Anything else?" he asks.

"Your wife called. Twice. She wanted to know if you would be going home tonight."

Of course My Mother knows My Father won't be going home tonight. There is a general election, the perilously uncertain outcome of which he may still be able to influence, in just three days' time. It's not seriously very likely - and My Mother can't possibly think it is - that he is going to spend any of that time commuting to the seat of power from fucking Worplesdon.

"Could you very kindly call her, and remind her that I told her I'll be staying in a hotel until the election?"

"Of course. But she'll ask which hotel."

"I don't have the details with me. Tell her I'll be in touch tomorrow."

"OK. Oh, and one other call, from (she says the name of the Woman My Father Loves). She wondered if you could let her know what time you'll be back tonight?"

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## 16.15

### *My Father has doubts about one of Marcia's celebrities*

"[Basil Brush](#)?" says My Father. He is sitting beside Marcia in the back of the PM's ocean-liner-like Humber, on the way to Hammersmith Town Hall, where this evening's meeting will take place.

The name sounds familiar, but he can't quite place it.

"He's very popular," says Marcia, a shade defensively, it sounds to My Father. She always insists on using the PM's car, sometimes even when the PM also needs it.

"And really quite entertaining," she goes on. "I thought we could put him on for five minutes between the Foreign Secretary and the PM."

My Father, who is a man with very little time to spare for light entertainment, still can't quite bring this Brush person to mind. Marcia interprets his uncertainty as a need to be further convinced.

"He's actually quite a strong Labour supporter. Well, obviously he himself isn't, but the chap who has his hand inside him is."

A shiver of realisation goes through My Father. Marcia is not known as a woman who responds well to having her political judgement challenged.

My Father tries, with limited success, to keep appalled incredulity out of his voice: "Basil Brush, the glove-puppet?"

"Yes, I thought it might help to lighten the mood, and give everyone a lift?"

My Father thinks quickly. There is only one possible way to head this off, without igniting a major conflagration.

"Have you mentioned this to the PM?" he asks, invoking the only authority that Marcia is usually willing to recognise.

"Not directly."

My Father lets this hang. Marcia will never admit she's wrong, if confronted. But sometimes, rarely, she is capable of recognising her own error, unprompted.

My Father purses his lips, as if there is much he could say, but chooses to keep to himself. Marcia shifts uncomfortably on the plump leather upholstery and sighs heavily.

"Well, I suppose we could stand him down, and perhaps ask [Nicol Williamson](#) to take that slot. He's frightfully passionate. And the PM is a huge admirer."

"I think that might be wise," says My Father, turning to Marcia with a boyish smile. (There is an almost inaudible bat-squeak of flirtation in their relationship, though even My Father would not be rash enough to imagine it can ever be acknowledged.) "Shall we just run through the other confirmed guests?"

"All right." Marcia riffles through her notebook. "Confirmed, front-row guests.... Mary Quant, Alan Bates, Sir Ralph Richardson, Twiggy, Nicol Williamson, Diana Rigg, Glenda Jackson, Charlie Watts, Jean Shrimpton, Terence Stamp, Peter Cook, and of course," she sniffs disapprovingly - "Julie Christie...."

"Good," says My Father, who has few interests beyond politics, and to whom at least half these names mean nothing at all. "And what about the second row?"

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19.25

*My Father is impressed by the PM's sang-froid*

The meeting is not going entirely according to plan.

A number of the celebrity guests - including, catastrophically for the PM's morale, and despite her earlier confirmation, Julie Christie - have been no-shows. Nicol Williamson's brief slot, in between the Foreign Secretary and the PM, has turned out to be a 25-minute ramble, mainly unintelligible but clearly angry, and possibly referring in places to the criminal underfunding by successive governments of the UK's subsidised theatre sector. And, most seriously, the largely invited audience seems to have been thoroughly infiltrated by disruptive elements.

As a result, the intended celebratory tone has not been possible to achieve. In tomorrow's *Times*, the mood of the meeting will be described as stormy. But to My Father, watching the PM speak from the wings, it feels much worse and more chaotic than that; an opportunity to generate positive coverage for the campaign that, at this point, seems likely to degenerate into an incoherent shambles, if not a massive brawl.

To be fair, the PM is partly to blame. Becoming aware during his opening remarks of a sizeable contingent of hostile Tories scattered around the hall, he has chosen to go on the offensive. Ditching his largely anodyne talking-points (the strength of the economy, despite those Jumbo jets, fairness for all, the certain prospect of an ever-brighter future under Socialism), he has launched an incendiary attack on the Conservative record as the ruling-party in Northern Ireland - which he claims is directly responsible for the breakdown of law and order there, and the necessity for the Government to intervene with force of arms.

"There may be a few people here who would prefer not to hear it," he is saying, with considerable force, "but while the rest of our United Kingdom continues to flourish under Labour, one part - the only part where Conservatives are in power - Tory Northern Ireland, has been brought to its knees economically, and stands on the brink of civil war!"

This does not go down well in the room, and for a good 30 or 40 seconds the PM is forced to wait, hands outstretched in a calming gesture, for the hubbub to subside. He seems, My Father notes with grudging admiration, to be enjoying himself; but behind him, his family - Mary, and both his sons and their wives - look as if they would rather be anywhere else on earth.



And behind them, most of the celebrities are looking restless. In the under-populated second row, My Father's eye is momentarily caught by a non-descript middle-aged man, shifting uncomfortably in his seat, with a large case on his lap of the kind that might be used to carry a saxophone.

And then, as the audience finally starts to settle down, the chanting begins. It comes from a small group of burly youngish men in T-shirts, at the back of the room. They're on their feet, swaying, and clapping and stamping rhythmically, to give emphasis to their chant. At first, My Father can't make out what they are saying, but as their volume increases their message quickly gains clarity:

"E-NOCH (stamp-stamp-stamp) WOGS-OUT (stamp-stamp-stamp) E-NOCH (stamp-stamp-stamp) WOGS-OUT (stamp-stamp-stamp) E-NOCH (stamp-stamp-stamp) WOGS-OUT...."

As the stewards move in, other voices around the hall - belonging, apparently, to respectable Tory voters - join in, and for a minute or two, before something approximating to an uneasy peace is eventually restored, there seems a real possibility that a proper riot may be about to erupt.

Oh fuck, thinks My Father, this doesn't feel right; this really doesn't feel right, at all.

In his travelling-case - which did indeed once house a tenor sax - Basil Brush relaxes in preparation for his next speaking engagement, at a late night student debate.

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**21.45**

### *My Father visits the PM at home*

Back at No 10, My Father - along with Marcia and Haines - is invited by the PM to join him for a nightcap in his flat, and to watch the Tory broadcast, which is on after the news. As Marcia pours Scotch, the PM

seems tired but elated. His elderly golden Labrador, Paddy, is asleep on his master's feet.

"Well, I thought that went rather well?"

"Extremely well, PM." Haines, of course.

"I always enjoy campaigning more when it gets a little... combative. I suppose it's the heady whiff of cordite, stirring the old warhorse!"

My Father's feelings are complex. He's gratified, undeniably, to have been granted this first insight into prime ministerial domesticity. At the same time, as he takes in his surroundings - the framed family photos, the lurid plaid rugs on the sofa and chairs, the decorative knick-knacks that carpet every surface, a truly terrible water colour over the fireplace - he is enjoying a scornful sense of aesthetic superiority (he can hardly wait to describe the provincial ghastliness of it all to the Woman He Loves). And he is also still quite shaken by the rancour and barely contained violence of the meeting, and the sense it has given him of a campaign in imminent danger of going off the rails, hurdling the embankment, and plunging into the abyss.

"Pity about Miss Christie," the PM is saying, in a stage-whisper. (Mary has gone to bed immediately upon their return from the meeting.) "But I thought Nicol was very interesting on arts funding. Didn't you, Oriel?"

"Very," says My Father, stirring himself, "though I thought he could have made his point a little more succinctly."

The Scotch is doing its work now, and this gets a small laugh from the company.

"Well, perhaps," says the PM. "But it's certainly something we need to look at after the election. Make a note of it, Marcia."

Don't bother, Marcia, thinks My Father. That isn't going to happen.

Just before 10, Haines switches the TV on, and they settle down to watch the Tory broadcast. At first, there's some jeering and heckling in the room - particularly at the opening sequence, which shows the Leader of the Opposition inter-acting, awkwardly, with crowds of voters ("not really his forte," remarks the PM, whose forte inter-acting with cheering crowds most certainly is). But after the first minute or two, they watch mostly in silence as the broadcast develops its theme of a man not blessed with slick presentation skills, sometimes seen as cold and aloof, but fundamentally serious, substantial, worthy of the nation's trust ("They're admitting he's fucking hopeless," mutters Haines). And then in the last part of the broadcast, Heath himself appears, sitting uncomfortably at his desk, talking to camera with a notable lack of polished fluency, linking national renewal under an incoming Conservative government to his recent victory, as the skipper of *Morning Cloud*, in the Sydney to Hobart yacht race.

"Oh god," groans Marcia, "when's he going to give that a rest?"

When the PM wins the men's singles at Wimbledon, thinks My Father, disloyally - aware that for a serving frontline politician to triumph in a major international sporting contest is an unprecedented achievement, very likely indeed to play extremely well with voters.

As the broadcast ends, the PM relaxes. "Well, nothing much to alarm us there, I'd say."

"Nothing at all, PM," says Haines.

"Although," says Marcia, cautiously, "there may be one or two points there we need to respond to in ours tomorrow?"

"Well, let's leave that until the morning," says the PM, holding out his glass for more Scotch.

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## *My Father narrowly avoids being banished to the sofa*

When My Father's taxi drops him outside the North London home of the Woman He Loves, he's surprised to find the high narrow house in darkness. Usually, however late he is, she will be at the kitchen table, drawing, a glass of wine hardly touched by her pad, ghastly rock music mercifully turned down low, to avoid waking her sleeping children.

He wonders, momentarily, if perhaps she isn't expecting him - but then reminds himself of the message she left earlier. He lets himself in, using the key she has recently conferred upon him. In the hallway, he calls her name, but there's no reply. He climbs the stairs, past the rooms where her children sleep, to the top floor where her bedroom is.

The bedside reading light is still on, and her book is lying open on the bed. The sheets are pushed back, against the heat, and she is lying, sprawled, arms stretched above her head, wearing only a T-shirt ([Hawkwind](#)? My Father wonders what that refers to), very deeply asleep.

On the pillow, on the side of the bed where he sleeps, there is a sheet of paper on which she has written, in her beautiful hand-writing: "If you spent last night with that ghastly woman - EVEN IF YOU DID NOT FUCK HER - you are FORBIDDEN to sleep in this bed tonight! There's a duvet on the sofa downstairs."

For a panicky moment, My Father thinks this refers to the Other Woman, with whom he did indeed spend last night - even if he didn't, technically, fuck her. But how could the Woman He Loves possibly have found out about that? Of course she hasn't, he realises; the "ghastly woman" is My Mother.

And so, with all three women on his mind, as well as a heavy weight of dull conviction that Thursday may turn out to be the most disastrous and disappointing day of his life, My Father sheds his clothes - allowing them to

drop to the floor - switches off the bedside light, and slides into bed beside the Woman He Loves.

Lying in the dark, he remembers that he has eaten virtually nothing all day. But he's so exhausted that sleep easily defeats hunger, and soon he is dreaming uneasily of tomorrow's headlines (***RACE NARROWS! TORIES' LATE SURGE, AS TRADE FIGURES SLUMP! CAN LABOUR STILL SNATCH DEFEAT FROM JAWS OF VICTORY?***)

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**Tuesday**  
**16 June 1970**  
**07:45**



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*My Father's sense of foreboding is not entirely  
assuaged by the morning papers*

The headlines are better than in My Father's dreams; quite a bit better, he thinks, as he sits with the papers spread out before him on the vast expanse of sanded table-top in the semi-subterranean North London kitchen of the Woman He Loves.

He is sipping the acrid black coffee that the Woman He Loves loves, and which he, as her lover, has learned to brew to her demanding specifications, using her ancient and somewhat temperamental stove-top espresso-maker. It's far too bitter for My Father, but, like everything that passes his lips within these four walls, it tastes of love and freedom and becoming the man he was born to be.

He turns his attention to *The Times*, still, in this pre-Murdoch era, a paper of record; a voice more likely than most to influence the course of the campaign, over these last crucial forty-eight hours. And yes, it really could be a lot worse. True, *Trade setback for Labour* is not a banner headline that

anyone would regard as positive press coverage. But for an hour or two yesterday, before My Father went to work on the story, words like crisis or disaster seemed a lot more likely to lead this morning's front pages. And the analysis below the fold by that arrogant prick [Jay](#) (whom My Father hates on the grounds that he is younger, better connected and more successful) is rigorous but far from harsh, describing the trade figures as "erratic" - which delights My Father, because it creates an impression of the nation's finances being buffeted by unpredictable external forces - and broadly following the line peddled so assiduously in that critical first hour after the figures broke, to the effect that they were no more than a blip, a minor setback on Britain's unstoppable march towards the sun-lit Socialist economic uplands.

My Father knows he has done his job well, and quite possibly saved the campaign. But what matters, of course, is whether others - Marcia and the PM, to be specific - know this, too.

Is there any danger that Haines will somehow have managed to steal the credit? No, My Father reassures himself; not possible. He has witnesses! His herculean efforts to frame the story in the least negative way possible (the word spin has not yet entered our political vocabulary) were undertaken in full view of the entire campaign team, as well as everyone in the No 10 press office. No one present could possibly deny it was he, My Father, who led the successful fightback that turned a potential crisis or disaster into a mere setback!

Shove that up your arse, Haines, you duplicitous four-eyed cunt, thinks My Father.

Otherwise, the press coverage is almost all good. No one dissents from the view that Labour are on course for a solid victory, possibly by a landslide; Mr Powell's assault on his party leader from the racist right is still seen as fatally disruptive to the Tory campaign; and there is much speculation about who will succeed the hapless Heath as leader, when he resigns - as he certainly will - on Friday, when the scale of his defeat becomes clear.

But one thing in the papers - not strictly press coverage - bothers My Father. A small ad for Ladbroke's offers 6-1 against a Tory victory; in from 8-1, and

even longer odds, over the previous days and weeks. Like many members of the political class, My Father has a powerful near-superstitious reverence for the omniscience of bookies - who, unlike pollsters and journalists, stand to lose actual cash if they get it wrong.

Luckily, for the sake of My Father's peace of mind, even his all-seeing eye fails to alight on this whimsical enquiry tucked away among the *Telegraph's* letters to the editor: *Speaking of strange reversals of fortune, could it be that Harold Wilson is 2-0 up with 20 minutes to play?*

Above My Father's head, in the upper reaches of the tall narrow house belonging to the Woman He Loves, ill-fitting window frames start to rattle as her three young boys begin their hyperactive assault on another day. Loud shouting, which could be adversarial in nature, or merely boisterous; discordant caterwauling (violin practice: the boys, though young, are all intensely musical); small feet thundering up and down stairs, amplified by the building's cavernous acoustics.

My Father hears nothing. Or perhaps it's more accurate to say he registers nothing. Throughout his life, My Father possesses an unsurpassed ability to block out any distraction that might interfere with the efficient working of his mighty intellect. No one is better able to inhabit a space bodily, while vacating it in every other more important regard.

"I've lost my fucking flute. Have you seen it?"

Gustav, the eldest son of the Woman He Loves, tumbles into the kitchen - having launched himself from the half-landing - looking ridiculously like something out of a Botticelli, with his stratospheric cheekbones and shoulder-length golden curls.

Even My Father is incapable of disregarding such a bluntly direct request for his attention. He smiles. He loves the way her children swear. It feels so grown-up and sophisticated, somehow, for parents to be relaxed about such footling transgressions of social norms. In any case, who says kids shouldn't swear, or express themselves in any way other way open to adults? Apart



from that ghastly shrivelled crone [Mary Whitehouse](#), and her fascistic followers.

"No, sorry. Do you need it for school?"

"Of course I fucking do. Why else would I be looking for it?"

This is probably taking freedom of self-expression a little too far for My Father's tastes. But before he can calibrate his response, the Woman He Loves has also appeared in the kitchen, looking - well, not beautiful exactly (objectively, she is far from being one of the most attractive women My Father has been involved with), but utterly captivating; tousled (her hair looks in need of a wash, in fact), still wearing nothing but the Hawkwind T-shirt, drowsy-eyed (she is most emphatically not a morning person) yet unmistakably crackling with anger.

"He's lost his fucking flute," she tells My Father, her intonation suggesting that this is an inconvenience roughly on a par with, say, unexpectedly losing a general election that you were confidently expected by absolutely everyone to win.

"Yes, he did mention that."

"So? What you are doing about it? Why do you assume - why does *everyone* assume - that I have nothing better to do than search the entire house, from top to bottom, for Gustav's fucking flute? How can you possibly think that when you know I have an exhibition opening in less than two weeks?"

"I don't think that, my love," says My Father, emolliently. "I really don't." [He loves it when she gets angry](#) like this. Her anger is so big and cartoony and readily identifiable. So easy to ignite and extinguish, too. And so, so different from what he has been used to in his relationship with My Mother, where rage takes many forms, almost all of them long-simmering and not infrequently hidden behind a smile.

"Let me help you look," he says.

"Help me?" she snaps back, "I don't want you to fucking *help* me, *My Father*, I just want someone in my life, just for once, to take some responsibility and not leave everything, every last bloody thing, to me."

My Father loves it when she calls him by his surname. So chic and metropolitan, somehow?

"Where did you last see it?" he asks Gustav, responsibly.

"If I knew that, it wouldn't be fucking lost, would it?"

A generalised search of the tall narrow house ensues. The younger two boys, Caspar and little Pablo, appear and make various breakfast-related demands. Consuela arrives and starts vacuuming - which causes Attlee, [the geriatric golden Labrador](#), to bark dementedly. In the hope of calming him, the Woman My Father Loves turns on the radio, [which doesn't help](#). The house becomes cacophonous. My Father, poking around under the boys' beds, briefly reflects on why he enjoys this kind of domestic turmoil here, whereas he has always hated it at what he still thinks of as home, with My Mother and their three children.

Eventually, the flute is found - underneath My Father's newspapers on the kitchen table. All eyes turn to the Woman He Loves, rather like a crowd at a bonfire party waiting to see whether a firework will bathe the night sky in brilliant fire, detonate with shattering volume, or fizzle damply out.

For a moment, she puts her hand over her mouth, as if to suppress a scream. Then she snorts, and splutters inelegantly, expelling particles of snot and larger fragments of the piece of toast she has been chewing. My Father is enraptured by the way the Woman He Loves laughs, as if nothing in the realm of human experience could possibly be funnier.

When My Father's taxi arrives, she comes outside, to see him off. Over these last couple of weeks, they have actually spent more nights together than usual, because My Father has been accompanying the PM on campaigning day-trips, returning to London late, then leaving again early the following morning - making it unfeasible to sleep in his own bed, at home in the Surrey suburbs. But now, as the campaign reaches its

conclusion, they face a long separation. My Father opens the cab door, and throws his briefcase and his old and disreputable canvas overnight bag (he is not a man who pays attention to accessories) onto the back seat. As he turns to face the Woman He Loves, she does a thing he likes, stepping onto his feet and cradling her hands behind his head. She isn't tall, but like this, with her face upturned, their noses touch.

"I can't bear it," he says. And for once, his words are entirely free of guile or calculation. He can't bear the thought of being apart from her. What he feels, if the chemicals flooding his cerebral cortex at this moment could be analysed scientifically, is virtually identical to the emotions he experienced taking leave of his parents before boarding the steamer that would take him to [prep school in England](#), at the age of nine.

"You can. We will," she says, fiercely. "But not for much longer."

"Mm." My Father's assent to this sounds less than whole-hearted.

"I mean it, *My Father*," she says fiercely, pressing her weight down on his feet. She is small but muscular, and surprisingly heavy. It hurts. "After this is over, you have to tell her. We must become real. "

"I will."

"You will. Or..." She lets this hang, but My Father is perfectly clear about the ultimatum being presented to him. Either, once the election is won, he leaves My Mother in short order, and fully immerses himself in this North London quarter-life he has been living for so long. Or he follows the example of so many discontented married men before him, by vacating the field of love and valour, and scurrying back into the emotionally desolate security of his suburban burrow.

My Father says nothing, but nods obediently. She kisses him on the mouth. "Now go and win us the election, my brilliant man," she says. The "us" here, he knows, is used in the Lady Macbeth sense, referring to what she and he as a couple stand to gain from victory on Thursday. And he feels a warmth he has never known before, being with a woman who loves him,

and believes in his exceptional abilities, and truly wants him to be happy and successful (which for My Father are the same thing).

"I'll do my best," he says, disentangling himself from her, and climbing into the oven-like cab. Another blazing day of this sweltering campaign has begun.

\*

In the cab, on the way over to [Lime Grove](#), My Father thinks miserably about his wife and children, starting their day in Worplesdon without him. He tries, briefly, to persuade himself that he has been absent so frequently of late that he will barely be missed when his membership of the family unit is officially terminated, as it must be very soon now.

He blinks exaggeratedly, screwing up his whole face, once, twice, as if to wipe the unbearable mental image of his abandoned family - but only succeeds in replacing it with another, no less troubling, of the Other Woman opening his letter. She knows his handwriting, of course; but he never writes to her, so as she scrabbles at the envelope with trembling fingers, she must, surely, know what's inside? In which case, it hardly matters what he actually wrote, does it? Though, anyway, he reminds himself, she leaves for work early, so almost certainly won't receive his letter until she gets home this evening.

A third unwelcome thought invades My Father's mind, causing him to experience a sudden surge of nausea, and a moment of vertiginous terror like a man stepping through lift doors to find only fresh air under his feet.

6-1! As of today, the all-knowing bookies no longer regard a Tory victory as a hopeless long-shot....

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**09:50**

*My Father loses control of the PPB*

Uncharacteristically, My Father arrives early for the pre-production meeting, which is due to start at 10. Just as well, it turns out, as the BBC's Lime Grove studio complex is not, as he imagined, a single large building, but a baffling Escher-esque labyrinth, navigated via miles of drab industrial corridors on multiple levels and half-levels, linked by winding steel staircases. Even the liveried functionary designated to conduct My Father to Studio G - a grizzled elder who has presumably worked here for decades - seems unsure of the geography.

"Sorry, sir," he says, spinning on his heel, having fruitlessly tried to open a locked door. "Think we might have taken a wrong turn back there...."

A minute or two later, he tries another door, successfully this time. "Lead performer's dressing room, Studio G," he announces, with a note of triumph, as he ushers My Father in.

Marcia and Kaufmann are sitting alongside each other, facing an enormous mirror surrounded by bare light-bulbs. They have a faintly conspiratorial self-satisfied air, with perhaps just a whiff of caught-in-the-act about it.

"Ah, *My Father*," Marcia greets him, brightly. And he knows immediately, from the way her eyes flicker away from him towards Kaufmann, what has happened. They have stitched him up.

She waves a sheaf of A4 at him. "You're going to like this," she says.

My Father holds out his hand, knowing for certain that he is not going to like this, at all.

"Geraldo has done a little work on your brilliant script," she begins. "He's made just a few small - very small...." Momentarily, she falters here, unable to decide between "improvements" and "refinements".

"Tweaks, dear boy. Mere tweaks!" jumps in Kaufmann, who is wearing a relatively sober midnight blue suit today, albeit with a paisley-patterned cravat.

My Father looks at the typescript he's now holding. Marcia has a soft spot for Kaufmann, but she only calls him Geraldo when their goals and desires are perfectly aligned, and the bond between them at its most unbreakable.

"Tweak-ettes!" says Kaufmann. "If that's the word for a teeny-weeny word-massage!"

"All right," says My Father, resignedly. "Let me read it."

My Father sits on a battered chaise longue, the only available seating in the dressing-room where the Prime Minister of Great Britain and Northern Ireland will shortly prepare to record the broadcast that may define the nation's future. He reads, fast. And yes, it's exactly what he expects. The intro, approved by the PM at yesterday's meeting, remains intact - with the addition of a couple of fairly effective sentences in defence of the trade figures, lifted directly from My Father's rearguard action yesterday. Otherwise, Kaufmann has simply excised all trace of My Father from the script. The country's economic strength (despite the trade figures) is once again the envy of civilised nations around the globe. Socialism, as the indispensable engine of growth with social justice, seems to crop up in nearly every para. And the PM is restored to fully presidential, if not dictatorial, status, with no mention whatever of a senior ministerial team sharing the burdens of leadership.

As he reaches the end (which is terrible - some complacent shit about everyone facing an important choice on Thursday, with no indication about what the right choice might be), My Father glances up to find Marcia and Kaufmann watching him, expectantly.

"Well?" says Marcia, in a tone intended to convey that she confidently expects his response to be positive, but utterly failing to do so.

My Father sighs. He knows he should fight, for every sentence, every word, every comma that's been lost. He knows the election - and his own brilliant career prospects, not to mention the nation's future - could depend on it. And yet, he feels a terrible lassitude. Looking at Marcia and her beloved Geraldo exchanging glances, he knows this battle has been fought and won

before he arrived. In an instant, My Father decides to conserve his remaining energy (he's fairly robust physically and mentally, but this campaign has been the most exhausting experience of his life) for a fight he has a chance of winning.

"It's fine," says. "It's good. Just a couple of tiny suggestions...."

And My Father makes a couple of suggestions that, to the relief of Marcia and Kaufmann, really are tiny, and made only for face-saving purposes. And so the script is finished, and Marcia takes it off to phone into No 10, for Haines and the PM to give their final approval. And My Father and Kaufmann, left alone together, take important papers from their briefcases, and study them intently, and make the occasional marginal note, and say nothing to each other.

"Are there phones?" My Father asks, eventually.

The PM isn't due to arrive until 11, and there are calls My Father should be making.

"Next door," grunts Kaufmann, wasting none of his famous charm on My Father.

Out in the corridor, it's not immediately obvious where "next door" might be. Expanses of blank wall stretch in both directions. Choosing left, My Father eventually comes to double doors, which he nudges open to reveal a cavernous studio, at the far end of which a group of long-haired young men with guitars are singing a song if possible more inane than the one about the weather being hot. ("Lo-lo-lo-lo-la!" croons the one with longest hair, repeatedly, over the racket made by the instrumentalists.) Withdrawing, unnoticed, My Father thinks for a moment of his elder son, a talented bass guitarist, far more dedicated to making a career as a rock musician than to studying for the A-levels he is currently sitting. Without consciously registering the thought, My Father makes a lightning-quick calculation to the effect that by the age his elder son is now, he himself had not seen his own father (or any other member of his family) for nearly five years, being separated from them because of the war.

Behind the correct door, My Father finds a smaller less starry dressing-room, in which there is a trolley mounted with two telephones, provided for the Prime Ministerial party. He is conscious that he has promised to call My Mother, but he can't face it now; he'll do it later, from the hotel. Instead, he calls his office.

"Nothing much, yet," Linda reports. "I've put a couple of meetings in your diary, for when you're back next week, but nothing you need to worry about."

Back next week! My Father's leave ends on Friday, the day after the election, so he will indeed be back at his desk on Monday. But at this moment, with everything - absolutely everything that really matters, now and for the rest of his life - in play, to be lost or won, over the next few days, the idea of returning meekly to humdrum daily routine seems a bizarrely implausible scenario, like a butterfly carefully reinserting itself into the cocoon.

"Aitken hasn't called?," he asks. "[Beloff](#)?" These are his two most well disposed journalists, both of whom have provided him with priceless insights - particularly into Tory strategy - during the campaign.

Linda is employed by British Steel, and theoretically prohibited from playing any part in My Father's political life; but over the years, this boundary has become increasingly permeable.

"No, neither of them."

Glancing at his watch, he realises they are almost certainly still in the Tory press conference, which was scheduled later than usual this morning. What are those bastards saying? What desperate last roll of the dice are they trying? My Father would give almost anything to know.

"OK, I'll catch them later. Or if either of them calls, you can give them this number..."

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11:45

## *My Father still hates the Fucking Pipe*

The recording is not going well.

Even before getting started, there has been a dispute over make-up. This being the first broadcast by the PM to be transmitted in colour, a new palette is needed, particularly as, after nearly three relentless weeks on the campaign trail, the Prime Ministerial complexion is pallid, going on pasty. The PM himself seems unconcerned, but Marcia is outraged by the clownish colours applied, and a protracted negotiation is needed to arrive at a slightly more muted compromise, acceptable to all. There have been technical issues, too - namely a whimsical autocue that insists on going at its own pace, racing ahead of a comfortable reading speed, or dragging behind, at random.

But by far the biggest impediment to rapid progress is the fact that the PM is clearly off his game. The most brilliantly accomplished political performer of his generation is fluffing everything. Again and again, he stumbles over words, and has to retake. For the opening sequence, where the PM's voice is heard over the footage of adoring crowds greeting him on his travels, this is merely tiresome, since parts of numerous takes can fairly easily be edited together, to create a flawless one. But, after that, for nearly nine long minutes, the PM must talk directly, confidingly, to camera, laying out for each individual viewer, each voter, the reasons why electing a Tory government on Thursday would result, inexorably, in economic disaster and national perdition. On a good day, he might very well do this in a single take; but this is, emphatically, not a good day - and, as My Father coaches and cajoles him from the control room ("That was brilliant, PM - but let's just do it once more, from the top of the para"), the PM becomes increasingly irritable ("If it was - and I quote you, Oriel - 'brilliant', why, may I ask, do we need to do it again?").

Slowly, almost imperceptibly, the PM's fabled professionalism begins to clank and grind into gear, and the process of recording becomes a little less

torturous. Nevertheless, it's decided - by Marcia and the BBC producer, a pimply youth who looks about 19 to My Father - that the Pipe is needed.

My Father groans inwardly. The fucking Pipe! He knows instinctively that it's wrong; that whatever positive connotations the Pipe once conveyed are now more than cancelled out by the image of a dense swirling cloud enveloping the PM's head. But My Father has to concede that the Pipe will almost certainly help to relax the PM, as well as providing useful cut-aways (*CU hands of PM briefly tamping; CU pipe rests in ash-tray*), to assist in the construction of the final continuous master-shot.

Eventually, with time running out (the PM is on a very tight schedule today), the final sentence - total shit! - is recorded. The PM, released from the studio, comes into the control room to watch the near-complete broadcast. He's looking pleased with himself now.

"How was I?" he enquires. "Not too pink, I hope - and I mean that in an entirely non-political sense."

"You were fabulous, PM," says Kaufmann. "As ever."

"Exactly the right colour," murmurs My Father, who feels called upon to say something. "You were very good indeed, PM," he adds, realising more is required from him.

But the PM is distracted, and barely registers his response. "Where's Marcia?" he asks.

My Father, who has been tightly focused on the PM's performance, hasn't been conscious of her absence from the control room.

"She had to take a call, PM," says Kaufmann, who misses nothing.

"Then we'll have to wait for her before we watch the broadcast," says the PM, discontentedly. It's odd that Marcia's angry disruptive energy is such a source of comfort to him, but he always becomes fretful when he is separated from her.

"I'll go and chivvy her," says Kaufmann. "If I do say so myself, I give good chivvy!"

But before he can move, or My Father can vomit, the door swings open and Marcia surges in like a warrior queen, riding a wave of righteous fury. Suddenly, the airless room's limited supply of oxygen seems to have been replaced by liquid fire.

"Well, they've done it," she remarks quietly. As she pauses for effect, everyone freezes, imagining whatever it is they fear the worst if this campaign should still somehow, despite all those reassuring opinion polls, go disastrously wrong. My Father pictures himself back in his dingy office at British Steel, wrangling endlessly with minor civil servants, without a peerage or any prospect of advancement, facing a long grey slog towards retirement, still shackled to My Mother and condemned to live out his life in suburban mediocrity.

"Those fucking Tory bastards have hit us with devaluation!"

It's as bad as they feared. Not quite as bad as, say, incontrovertible evidence coming to light that the PM is [a Russian spy](#) (the security forces are still working on that), but very, very bad indeed. And yet there is also a sense of inevitability about what is happening. After all, thinks My Father, as soon as the immediate panic starts to subside, why wouldn't the Tories - hopelessly behind in every poll, rapidly running out of time before the day of reckoning, facing imminent electoral obliteration - launch their last remaining missile? In fact, the only real question is why they haven't done it sooner. Faced with a government claiming economic success, what possible reason could the Tories have for leaving it until now to draw the attention of the British public to the PM's responsibility for the country's greatest economic humiliation of modern times - and the strong possibility of it being repeated if Labour should win on Thursday?

The PM alone seems unflustered. In fact, there is suddenly something invigorated - roguish even - about him. For the smallest possible subdivision of a second, My Father allows himself to entertain the thought that perhaps the PM actually wants to lose on Thursday. But no, surely it's more

likely that this is his legendary love of hand-to-hand political street-fighting awaking within him, and stirring the blood in his veins.

"Marcia, what have they said, exactly?"

"I have it here, PM." She gestures with her pad, which is covered in shorthand hieroglyphics. "It's just a one-page hand-out - which they gave out after their press conference, because they were too fucking cowardly to say it out loud in front of the cameras."

"Let's do this in the car." The PM is all decisive focused energy now; incredibly different from the weary, slightly woozy elder statesman of an hour ago. "*My Father*, we'll need you with us. Geraldo, you stay here and finish up the PPB."

Geraldo! The PM just used Marcia's pet name for Kaufmann, to soften the blow of leaving him behind! The PM values *My Father's* advice more highly than Kaufmann's!

In *My Father's* world, no one ever really succeeds unless someone else fails.

\*

In the Daimler, on the way back to No 10, the PM remains on commanding form. By the time they have picked their way through the roadworks slowing Shepherd's Bush to a crawl, he has assimilated the content of the Tory hand-out, and is dictating his response, fast and fluently. Marcia, leaning forwardly awkwardly with her pad on her knee, is clearly struggling to keep up - holding up her left hand from time to time, in a slowing gesture. *My Father*, who, in the hurried departure from Lime Grove, has somehow got himself between the PM and Marcia on the back seat, has little to contribute, though the PM does throw him the occasional sideways glance, looking for his approval of a phrase or sentiment. Each time, *My Father* screws up his face judiciously, and nods.

The PM's tactic is offensive defence; a ferocious assault on the Leader of the Opposition's character, and the lack of judgment and patriotism he has

displayed by recklessly talking down the British economy, for the sake of squalid party political advantage.

"He is willing...." says the PM, putting his hand on My Father's arm, in a wait-till-you-hear-this way, "... to put at risk the strength of sterling, the economic security of Britain, employment, and the standard of living of our people in a last desperate throw to win votes."

Despite himself, My Father is impressed. This is very well judged; aggressive, righteously indignant even, but not hysterical or flustered-sounding. It feels like a grown-up remonstrating with a toddler who has tried to kick his shins.

"I couldn't have done better myself, PM," says My Father, humorously, but meaning it.

"High praise, Oriel. High praise indeed."

\*

Back at No 10, Marcia hurries off upstairs to type the press release, and get it into distribution. The PM disappears into his flat, presumably to root out [his wife](#), who will, reluctantly, be accompanying him on the final trip of the campaign, due to depart very shortly.

My Father, with 20 minutes or so to kill, considers racing out for a sandwich. He has had no lunch, and should be hungry. But in fact the dull ache in his stomach has much more to do with anxiety than appetite. He suspects he would throw up if he tried to eat. He thinks of calling My Mother, but only for a moment. There is nowhere at No 10 where he can be sure of talking privately, and he definitely doesn't want an audience for that conversation. So instead, he puts in a quick call to his office, and asks Linda to pass on a message to My Mother, to the effect that he will call her without fail this evening. And then he dials the number of Aitken's direct line, at the Guardian. To My Father's relief, he's back in the newsroom now.

"How bad?" says My Father, without preamble.

"Bad."

"As in...." My Father is going to say "we lose on Thursday?", but can't bring himself to pronounce the words. Aitken understands him, though.

"Maybe. Maybe not. But, at the very least, there's been a shift in momentum."

"We've got it under control," says My Father, and he briefly outlines the content of the press release, quoting the PM's "putting at risk the strength of sterling" sentence from memory.

"Not bad," says Aitken, not sounding particularly impressed. "Should be enough to get him back in."

"Should be?"

"Probably will be, with the polls like they are. But let's just say it's a bloody good thing it's on Thursday. By next week...."

"You really think that?"

"I think I do. There's just a sense that Heath has got the wind in his sails. So to speak."

"But that won't be your line?"

"Of course not. We'll have to cover the devaluation thing, but we're treating it as a scare story - we were, even before you gave me the "unpatriotic scoundrels" angle.

My Father is somewhat reassured by this, and moves to wind up the call.

"So, are you coming up north with us?"

"Not sure. Might get up there tomorrow, but they want me here today - so I'll wait and see how things look in the morning."

There is nothing sinister in itself about the fact that the only Labour-leaning broadsheet wants its best political writer to focus on the Tories in these last

48 hours before polling begins - at least, that's what My Father tells himself, as he puts down the phone. But it doesn't feel right to him; it doesn't feel right at all.

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**15:30**

*My Father accompanies the PM on what could be his final trip as PM*

As the PM comes down the main staircase, with his wife clinging to his arm, it seems as if the entire staff of No 10 has gathered in the hallway, to see him off. Mary, in a lavender suit, wears a patterned scarf jauntily knotted at her throat, at odds with her air of bravely borne suffering. (She only accompanies her husband on his campaign travels because it is judged to cast a negative light on the bachelor Heath's lack of a female consort.) Behind them, the PM's bagman Bill, a colossal ex-Marine, carries a large suitcase and a couple of smaller pieces of luggage.

The mood of the assembled company is hard to gauge. There is applause, and a few shouts of "Good luck, PM!" and "All the best for Thursday!". This is, after all, the last time the No 10 team - civil servants, secretaries, Garden Girl typists, messengers, postboys - will see their boss and his wife before the election, which most of them confidently expect him to win. But there is also, My Father senses, something faintly elegiac in the air; a shared knowledge that this could, depending on the vagaries of the democratic process, be the end of something; a final farewell; the bringing down of the curtain on a political era.

The PM is almost certainly attuned to this, but, typically, chooses to make light of the occasion.

"Chop, chop, back to work everyone! We have an election to win; you have important jobs to do; and we will all be back here on Friday, ready for the next five years. Well, maybe Monday; we'll give ourselves the weekend to recover!"

His words are greeted with renewed and more enthusiastic applause, which carries the PM and his travelling companions - Marcia, Kaufmann, and My Father, as well as Mary and Bill - through the front door and out onto Downing Street, where two cars await them.

The press is out in force (though no TV cameras, My Father notices), and questions are shouted. "The Tories claim you'll have to devalue again - what's your response, PM?" "Still expecting a landslide, PM?" "Looking forward to seeing more of your husband after Thursday, Mary?"

Normally, the PM would enjoy this kind of cut and thrust, but today he has a train to catch; so - as Bill holds open the door of the Daimler for him and his wife - he has to content himself with smiling and waving.

My Father, about to get into the second car, feels something wet on his vast dome of exposed forehead. For a moment, he is puzzled, and glances upwards. Rain! The first to fall on a campaign that until now has unfolded under cloudless skies.

\*

On the train to Manchester, the PM does something My Father has never seen him do before. He sleeps. Just north of Watford, his chin tips forward onto his chest, and well before Nuneaton he has slumped sideways, allowing his head to rest, a little awkwardly, on Mary's shoulder. The finest political mind of its generation is at rest.

My Father, sitting opposite with his back to the engine, wonders briefly if he should try to wake the PM, by coughing discreetly or rummaging noisily in his briefcase. But, in fact, there is very little work to be done at this stage of the campaign, every speech, every contact with the press, every unscripted exchange with the great British public having now been repeated ad infinitum, and committed to memory. One of the PM's most remarkable talents is his ability to say the exact same words for the hundred-and-tenth time as if they have just sprung newly minted from his imagination. My Father decides not to disturb him.



Instead, he watches the PM sleep. Mary has closed her eyes, too, and may also be asleep. They have, both of them, been kind to My Father, and he feels a real fondness towards them. But it strikes My Father how very... ordinary they look. Like the nice elderly couple you might strike up conversation with when sheltering from the rain in a seaside café.

As quietly as he can, My Father gets up and opens the door of the Prime Ministerial compartment, then steps into the corridor. He shuffles the bucketing length of the train to the buffet car where, with impressive self-restraint, he buys not a large Scotch (or even an odourless large vodka), but a cup of tea and an unappetising pork pie of uncertain vintage, which he wolfs down leaning on the counter.

Returning to his seat, he finds the PM still sleeping, his mouth now hanging open in imbecilic fashion. Mary is unquestionably asleep, too. And it seems to be contagious, because both Marcia and Kaufmann also appear to be dozing. Why, My Father thinks long-sufferingly, should he be the only one to use this journey time productively? He has worked just as hard anyone on this campaign, and he is tired, too. And, in any case, the only really worthwhile thing he could be doing is talking to journalists, trying to rub the sharpest edges off the Tories' devaluation scare - and unless someone has found a way to install a phone on board an InterCity express (My Father is not technologically minded, but he's pretty sure they haven't), that isn't a possibility open to him.

My Father closes his eyes. But instead of darkness descending, uneasy visions arise. In the first scene projected onto the backs of his eye-lids, he sees the Other Woman arriving home from work, and finding his letter concealed under the Brentford Nylons catalogue on the doormat, in the ineffably depressing hallway of the shared house where she lives. Next he sees My Mother, in the airy high-ceilinged kitchen of their spacious suburban home, angrily preparing food for the children she has borne him, while paying absolutely no regard whatever to the telephone on the wall, which she would, in any case, very probably be too busy to answer if it were to ring. And now this vision in turn is replaced by the Woman He Loves, hard at work in her studio, tongue folded back - enchantingly! - onto

her upper lip in concentration, as she makes final tiny adjustments to one of her extraordinary deranged landscapes, which, My Father feels certain, will turn the art world upside down, when her exhibition opens in two weeks' time.

Why, he asks, himself despairingly do the first two have to exist? He doesn't - of course he doesn't, he's not a monster - wish My Mother and the Other Woman dead. But oh, if only they had never been born, so that he could have met the Woman He Loves spotless, unencumbered, free! How, in the name of everything that is good and fair, can it be right that his one true path to lasting happiness in life should only have opened before him when he was labouring under intolerable burdens, entangled, ensnared, enfeebled by the consequences of wrong turnings taken years, decades earlier? Why can't My Mother and the Other Woman just . . . cease to be? And, as he is thinking this, he is aware that if his wish were to come true, his children would disappear from the face of the earth, which would make him unhappy, as well as reflecting very badly indeed upon him as a person (a father who cancelled his children!), although it also occurs to him, before he can prevent the thought from taking conscious shape, that if his children had never been born, he wouldn't miss them or feel himself to be in any way to blame for their non-existence.

And eventually, feeling weary, self-pitying, guilty, and sad - an amalgam of emotions he will endlessly refine and perfect throughout his adult life - My Father disappears into a long tunnel of sleep.

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**20:05**

*My Father rather wishes he hadn't invented the  
"presidential walkabout"*

"Socialist.... SCUM! SCUM! SCUM!"

The rain that fell briefly on the capital earlier in the day has not travelled north, and it's a sultry airless summer evening. On the unlovely streets of

Oldham West, the second most marginal constituency in Greater Manchester, burly men brandishing placards with Tory slogans are jostling for position with Labour supporters, and other unaffiliated members of the public - and easily out-shouting them.

The PM and his wife, who have been conveyed here directly from the station, have just emerged from their car, and, though protected by a phalanx of Party officials and police officers, seem in real danger of being submerged in the swirling mass of humanity. If My Father, trailing miserably in the PM's wake, had ever stood on the terraces at a well attended football match, he would be finding something familiar about the crush of bodies, the noise and sense of incipient violence. He hates this aspect of campaigning - surprisingly perhaps, since he has some claim to being the person responsible for introducing [the presidential-style walkabout](#) to British political life.

The format of this innovation is always the same. As they have been here in Oldham, the PM and his wife are set down by their car at Point A in a busy urban environment, then make their way on foot slowly towards Point B, pausing to exchange pleasantries (or, in Mary's case, smiles) with members of the voting public, and to shake as many hands as possible. Babies, if present, can expect to be kissed, or chin-chucked. Prolonged discussion of Labour Party policy is not encouraged, and effortlessly cut short if an interlocutor shows signs of persistence ("They insist I keep moving," the PM has become adept at saying, over his shoulder, "but I hope you will read our manifesto, which covers the important issue you raise!"). Arriving at Point B, the PM makes a pithy seemingly improvised speech, and shakes a few more hands before being bundled back into his car.

"Labour, Labour, Labour - OUT, OUT, OUT!"

The Tories in the crowd are now getting some organised chanting underway, but the loudest individual voices can still make themselves heard.

"You're a disgrace to this country - we won't let you bankrupt Britain!"

"Haven't you done enough damage already? Typical bloody Yorkshireman!"

"Heath is going to fuck you on Thursday!"

To this last, the PM can't resist responding, luckily at a volume only audible to the handful of electors nearest to him: "I rather think he would enjoy that more than I would."

Of course, it's not unprecedented for a politician to interact with voters in a more-or-less spontaneous way; but until now, no party leader has made this type of interaction central to their electoral strategy. The plan, instigated by My Father, has been to play to the PM's exceptional strength in creating an easy rapport with ordinary voters - while casting a withering light on the Leader of the Opposition's hopelessly frosty and uncomfortable demeanour, in similar circumstances.

It's widely judged to have been a successful strategy. But, as the campaign has advanced, so the care-free spontaneity of the PM's walkabouts has become harder to manufacture. In particular, the large friendly crowds that greeted the PM on his travels have been infiltrated by ever-increasing numbers of hostiles; to the extent that now, on this steamy Lancashire evening, it feels as if the nation's elected leader is not just unwelcome, but could even be in physical danger.

The PM, to do him credit, is unfazed. Someone - probably one of the local Party people - has handed him a megaphone, and his head and shoulders suddenly appear above the level of the crowd, as he steps onto a thoughtfully provided box.

My Father, who has become hopelessly separated from the PM, is unable to follow what he is bellowing into the megaphone, but - from the little he can make out - it's clearly not one of his well-practised standard mini-stump speeches.

"...Tory friends sound very well lubricated.... enjoy yourselves now.... no reason at all to celebrate on Thursday evening..... no sign of your leader, here in Oldham....too busy fighting off Mr Powell and his storm-

troopers..... promise you this..... would be a vote for economic chaos, lost jobs and higher prices!"

This is met with loud cheers from the friendly part of the crowd, temporarily drowning out the enemies of Socialism. The PM - for the first time in days, it strikes My Father - looks energised, impish, elated. Unlike his wife - cowering nearby under the protection of Bill, who has a meaty forearm draped over her shoulder - he is enjoying himself.

My Father hates the PM for this. Walking (sometimes literally) in his shadow these last three weeks, the faithful self-effacing aide has continually measured himself against his boss - persuading himself that, in many respects - intellect, command of language, understanding of historical context, even detailed grasp of policy - he and the PM are equals; or maybe even that the comparison favours him, My Father. But here, out on the streets, amid the hurly burly, when the adrenalin pumps and politics bears no resemblance at all to a parlour game or an academic discipline, the PM is in a class of his own.

My Father hates the most outstanding political performer of his generation [for being better at politics than he is.](#)

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21:55

*My Father enjoys a rare tête-à-tête with the PM*

"Ah, Miss Rigg. We enjoyed meeting her, didn't we, Mary?"

Back at the hotel, [The Avengers](#) is just finishing as Marcia turns on the TV in the PM's suite, in time for the PPB.

"You did," says Mary, tartly. She is much less subdued now that campaigning is over for another day. It also helps that Bill - who has segued into another of his multiple roles, as Prime Ministerial butler - has poured her a very large medium-sweet sherry.

"Pity about Miss Christie, though," the PM can't quite prevent himself from saying.

"And now a broadcast on behalf of the Labour Party," interrupts the continuity announcer, in timely fashion.

Kaufmann has scuttled back to his constituency, so it's just the PM's core travelling campaign team assembled here to watch the potentially decisive broadcast, less than 36 hours before polling begins. The PM and his wife are on the sofa; Marcia has the only armchair; and My Father is less comfortably seated on an upright dining chair, a little behind the others. Bill hovers in the background like a gigantic potentially lethal Jeeves.

The broadcast starts; and yes, it is exactly the one they made earlier at Lime Grove. Stirring music, ecstatic crowds and the PM in voiceover, "It has been like this all over the country..." Nothing, in the intervening hours, has occurred to alchemise their ponderously leaden production into televisual gold.

For the next 10 minutes, they watch in near-silence - broken only by an occasional grunt of assent or affirmation ("Yes, good" when a point comes across well; "That was absolutely fine", when one of the sticky parts of the PM's performance passes off non-calamitously.) Only My Father winces throughout; at some points so visibly that he has to put his hand across his face, as if listening with rapt attention and blocking out all distractions from the PM's words.

Seen and heard here, in this weird parody of a domestic family setting (the PM and Mary as Mum and Dad, Marcia and My Father the teenage kids), the broadcast is even worse than he feared. Partly, it's the script. *"Voters realise that no Prime Minister in this century has fought an election against such a background of economic strength as we have got today."* How did they let that through? What possessed them to think that, with [those trade figures](#) on every front page, they could get away with making such a grotesquely overblown claim? But it's not so much the content as the tone that fills My Father with foreboding, physically present in his body as an increasing pressure just below his rib cage, as if someone is slowly inflating

a balloon in his abdomen. In the passages where the PM is aiming to sound reassuring, like a trusted family doctor calming the parents of a sick toddler, there is no issue at all; nobody does that better than the PM. But where is the uplift? Where is the sense of a man of destiny, with a vision of a better future? Where are the dynamism and positive energy that are going to get lukewarm Labour voters off their sofas (or, given the weather, out of their deckchairs) and into the polling booth? Of these My Father can discern no trace.

The broadcast ends, and there is applause - from Marcia and Mary, then Bill, and finally My Father, who joins in just in time for his hesitation not to be noticeable.

"Well?" says the PM.

"Excellent, PM," says Marcia. "I think we have conclusively cooked the Tories' goose." She would almost certainly express this sentiment much more colourfully, if not for Mary's somewhat inhibiting presence. "So much more inspiring and to-the-point than all that.... nonsense about the Leader of the Opposition's sailing boat!"

"Top notch, PM," opines Bill.

"What about you?" the PM asks My Father. "After all, you put the words into my mouth."

My Father isn't having that pile of shit pinned on him.

"Well, not entirely, PM. Gerald played a big part.... but overall, I'm very happy with it. I don't think there's anything more we could have done."

Except make a broadcast that would have actually improved our chances of winning on Thursday, he thinks.

Mary, who has been suppressing yawns, retreats to the bedroom, closing the door behind her; and, rather surprisingly, Marcia takes this as her cue to retire, too. It's unusual for her to choose to leave a room with the PM in it. She switches off the TV before she leaves.

"Anything else, PM?" asks Bill, clearly intending to follow them.

My Father realises he's about to left alone with the PM, something that has never happened before.

"Perhaps I should...." he says, making as if to get to his feet.

"Nonsense, Oriel. You'll stay for a nightcap."

This is closer to a command than an invitation. And while Bill performs his final duty of the evening, by topping up their glasses, My Father moves to the armchair vacated by Marcia, so that he is sitting alongside the PM.

They both drink.

"What did you really think?" says the PM, as soon as Bill has left the room.

My Father is taken aback. For one so powerful, the PM can sometimes be surprisingly perceptive.

"I thought it was good."

"Good? Not very good - or excellent, as Marcia put it?"

My Father can't get out of this now. He has to say something thoughtfully critical of the broadcast, but not devastatingly so.

"I thought we lacked a sense of urgency." His use of the first person plural is intended to convey that he attaches no blame to the PM.

The PM considers this, but doesn't share My Father's concern.

"Well, in my view, you hit the nail on the head - our 'solid results' versus the Tories' pie-in-the-sky promises of spending more and taxing less. My performance may have been a little lacking compared to an Olivier or Gielgud - or a Williamson - but your words would have been hard to improve upon."

"It was partly Gerald," My Father again feels compelled to remind him.



The PM smiles on him benignly. "Take a tip from a very old campaigner, Oriel: when you're offered a compliment, accept it. And don't let some other bugger take all the credit!"

My Father laughs, with appropriate modesty. "Hardly 'some other bugger'!"

"No, of course, Gerald is a fine wordsmith, but certainly no better than you."

My Father can't help feeling a bit patronised by this. Wordsmith! It sounds crudely artisanal; a fashioner of sturdy paragraphs, and perhaps the occasional sparkling sentence or phrase. By this point in his life, he has always hoped to be recognised as something more than that; a coming man, a political thinker and do-er of real substance; a potential holder of high office (if not an actual holder of high office).

"Thank you, PM," says My Father meekly. And for a few moments, they sit in silence, as the Scotch they are both drinking performs its restorative function. The more-than-half-empty bottle of Teacher's stands on a coffee table, by the PM's knee. My Father feels a lot drunker than he should. For the duration of the campaign, he has greatly reduced his intake of alcohol, thereby, it seems, proportionately increasing its impact.

The PM has a benevolent air about him, too.

"So, after our great victory on Thursday... what next?"

For a second or two, My Father fails to comprehend what this question refers to. And then, when it dawns on him that the PM is enquiring about his future plans, he feels a brief surge of panic. After all, he can hardly respond openly and honestly, which would mean saying something like, "Well, PM, I'm very much hoping you will confer a life peerage on me in the New Year's Honours, or, at the very least, that you will see to it that the next by-election in a safe seat falls into my lap, and that, in either eventuality, I will be in your Cabinet, or at the very, very least a junior minister, by this time next year."

So what can he say? What should he say?

"Well, PM, I have a family to support..." he starts, unconvincingly, his objective, as far as he has one, being to remind the PM that he is working on the campaign in an unpaid capacity. "But I very much hope that, whatever happens, I'll be able to continue to be of service to the Party, and of course, to you."

"I'm sure you will," says the PM, leaning forward to pat My Father's knee. "And of course, you're absolutely right; family is *always* the most important thing."

My Father wants to cry. That wasn't what he meant, at all! He definitely doesn't want the PM to think that he considers his family (in any case, which family?) more important than his political career. But the PM is following his train of thought.

"I couldn't have done any of this without Mary," he says, raising his glass as if to toast her, but drinking instead. "I know her lack of enthusiasm for this wicked world we move in has sometimes been seen as a hindrance to my career. But nothing could be further from the truth. It's knowing she is always there - steadfast, keeping the home fires burning, if you'll excuse the cliché - that has allowed me to forge ahead and prosper in my chosen profession." He ends with a self-deprecating smile; he has just used language appropriate to a modestly successful country solicitor to describe the most brilliant political career since the war.

And now My Father doesn't just want to cry; he desperately wants to confide, to confess. The PM is so good and kind and wise. My Father wants, almost more than he has ever wanted anything in his life, to tell him everything there is to tell about the Woman He Loves, and how she makes him feel that he is capable of anything, and loves him in exactly the way that he has always needed to be loved. And perhaps if he did, the PM - so good, so kind, so wise! - would be able to advise him on how to escape from his current desperate entanglements, without causing harm or offence of any kind to anyone. In particular, he would greatly value the PM's guidance on the matter of how best to inform My Mother of her immediate

redundancy in her role as partner, helpmeet, lover (though not as principal carer for his children).

But suddenly, from one sip of Scotch to the next, the PM's face has crumpled, and the most powerful personage in the land is an old man who needs his bed. The sofa is low, and he makes heavy weather of getting to his feet.

"Well, Oriel, we need our rest, for one last heave to secure our landslide, tomorrow!"

\*

Back in his own more modest room, on the floor below the PM's suite, My Father thinks how much - how very much - he would like another drink. Of course, he could call room service, but he knows this wouldn't be a good idea, with an early start and a long final full day of the campaign ahead of him.

It's far too late now to call My Mother who, even when not boiling with rage and resentment, considers any phone call received after 8pm almost certain to bring news of a fatal accident. And so instead, he changes into his pyjamas, and calls the Woman He Loves who he knows will be happy, however late it is, to hear his voice; and she is, and so he tells her how much he loves her, and she tells him how the preparations for her exhibition are going, and they almost entirely avoid talking about the campaign because she knows, without him having to say so, that it's not a subject he wants to discuss, and he tells her again how much he loves her, and then he says: "I wish I was in bed with you."

And she says, "I wish you were, too. But soon, very soon, we'll be real, and then we'll go to bed together every night, for the rest of our lives."

And he emits a low sigh, which she takes to be assent, and now a few more loving but inconsequential things are said, before My Father falls asleep with the receiver still pressed against his ear. And now, after listening to his breathing for a minute or two more, she does, too. Which means that until

she wakes up needing a pee almost four hours later, their love is being charged at the iniquitous hotel rate of sevenpence a minute.

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**If you are enjoying *My Father keeps the PM waiting*,  
please do [share it with a friend](#).**

**Wednesday**  
**17 June 1970**  
**06:59**



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*My Father experiences overwhelming relief and soul-crushing disappointment, in quick succession*

"So, while undeniably regrettable in certain respects, I genuinely believe it will prove to be in everyone's best interests."

Calmly and rationally, yet kindly, My Father is explaining to My Mother why, after very [nearly 20 years of marriage](#), he has decided he must put their union asunder. They are in the airy high-ceilinged kitchen of their home in Worplesdon. The conversation is going surprisingly well.

My Mother requires clarification. "Everyone's?"

"Well, yours as well as mine, I mean. I honestly believe you'll be happier without me."

"What leads you to that conclusion?"

"The obvious fact that our needs and wishes have become increasingly incompatible. In particular, I have a strong desire to live in London, while

you are happier here in Worplesdon."

"But that has long been the case. I see no reason why we shouldn't continue to lead largely separate lives, while remaining married."

My Father unveils his most compelling argument. "But that, I feel strongly, would be unfair on you."

"Unfair on me? How so?"

"In my view, it would clearly be unreasonable of me to expect you to 'keep the home fires burning' (for some reason this phrase feels resonant to My Father) indefinitely, while I range freely in the great world, unconstrained by domestic obligations."

My Mother seems persuaded by this. She looks sad, but resigned. "Well, if our marriage is indeed over - which I profoundly regret - there are at least two things that console me."

"I think I know what the first is." My Father prides himself on [his empathy with women's feelings](#).

"As you suspect," says My Mother, "it's that we do not have children. Just imagine how difficult they would find it if their parents were to go their separate ways; how painful and disruptive it would be in their young lives."

My Father nods his fervent agreement. "And your second consolation?"

"That no third party is involved. To lose you because of a fundamental incompatibility in our preferred modes of living is galling, but for you to be lured away by another woman would be intolerable."

"As you say, if that were the case, though fortunately it isn't, you would be fully entitled to feel...."

My Father is interrupted by the phone - of modern design, purple, mounted on the wall alongside the kitchen corkboard - starting to ring.

He knows it could be Aitken, who has his home number. Or possibly Beloff. And yet, instead of answering it, he lightly flexes his knees - once, twice, three times - and effortlessly propels himself through the open French doors into the garden... where his momentum continues to carry him upward, until he is looking down, like a hovering bird of prey, not just on his own garden but on those of his neighbours... and then higher still, into the downy white clouds, which look so invitingly soft and cool and pillowy that he wants to lay his frazzled head upon them.... so very like a pillow....

As My Father slowly surfaces, the sun already seeping under the curtains of his hotel room, his mind and body, and his entire being, are gorgeously suffused with relief. He's done it! And, after all the agonising and prevarication, it really wasn't so bad, after all. In fact, it could hardly have gone better.

And then, less than an instant later, his sense of wellbeing is swept away by a mighty crashing incoming tide of despair. He hasn't done it! It still has to be done! And, in the waking world, where he definitely does have children, and where there certainly is a third party, what he still has to do remains a nightmarishly difficult proposition; impossibly difficult he would say, if he didn't know that all his future happiness, everything he desires and aspires to in the remaining years he has upon this planet, depends upon his detaching himself from My Mother, publicly, definitively, and very soon indeed.

The phone is still ringing. Groaning, My Father rolls heavily onto his side, to reach for the receiver, on the bedside table.

"Good morning! This is Sandra on reception, with your 7am wake-up call."

"Thanks," grunts My Father.

"Cheer up, love," says Sandra, detecting the misery in this monosyllable. "It's another stunner of a Manchester morning."

For some reason, Sandra's cheerfulness and the warmth of her Mancunian vowels bring into My Father's mind the thought that something of value may, in fact, have been imparted by his dream. Perhaps he *can* leave My

Mother without making any incriminating reference to the Woman He Loves?

After all, My Mother has doggedly remained oblivious, over many years now, to all My Father's [wanderings from the marital straight-and-narrow](#). Never once, when he has returned home with lipstick, metaphorically or sometimes literally, daubed about his clothing and person, has she chosen to challenge him. Never once has she directly questioned whether all his abrupt disappearances to make urgent phone calls to journalists were what they purported to be. Never once has she seemed to doubt the existence of Ian, the kind colleague upon whose uncomfortable sofa My Father has so often been forced to sleep, after working late.

Of course, she'll have to know about the Woman He Loves one day. Well, fairly soon; the Woman He Loves is insistent that their relationship must become "real", as a matter of urgency. But perhaps not quite yet, thinks My Father. Perhaps the transition from suburban *paterfamilias* and salaryman to metropolitan lover and *homme politique* can be managed in stages, to lessen the inevitable pain and disruption for all concerned? He really thinks he might be able to get away with it, at least for the first few months.

"Thanks, Sandra," says My Father, a little of the relief seeping back into his system. "Thanks very much indeed."

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**07:25**

*My Father is reluctantly impressed by the PM's ability to multi-task*

In his suite, to which My Father is admitted by Marcia, looking surprisingly tiny in her stockinged-feet, the PM is seated at a small table eating the first of a pair of soft-boiled eggs, while making notes on a typescript document, and talking - via a phone clamped between his shoulder and ear - to [the Home Secretary](#), who will be handling this morning's final press briefing of the campaign, back at Transport House.



He seems in ebullient mood.

"It's all-out attack, Jim. No holds barred. Not a backward step. Do I make myself clear?"

As he listens to the Home Secretary's response, the PM somehow manages, by means of an endearingly sweet boyish smile and some quite complex improvised sign language, to greet My Father and convey to him that he should help himself to any of the unappetisingly congealed breakfast items laid out on the coffee table.

"Good," he says, into the phone. "Let's hear what you've got. I have *My Father* with me, so speak up."

The PM, who is holding the phone in a more conventional manner now, cocks his wrist, so that the mouthpiece is pointing roughly in My Father's direction.

"Well, I think it all comes down to this sentence, PM," says the Home Secretary, clearly but tinnily. "To doubt the value of your own currency, as the Leader of the Opposition did yesterday, is just about the most heinous thing you can do."

"Heinous?" repeats the PM, making eye-contact with My Father.

"Maybe 'despicable'?" suggests My Father. "Otherwise excellent, Home Secretary."

The conversation meanders on, with no further pressing need for My Father's input. He pours himself a cup of coffee - lukewarm, oddly meaty-tasting, so utterly dissimilar from the heady throat-scouring brew that goes by the same name in the home of the Woman He Loves. He turns his attention to the papers, which are spread out on an otherwise unoccupied sofa.

Again, they are not as bad as he has feared.

Naturally, the Tories' devaluation scare is on every front page, except the ever-loyal *Mirror's*. But the righteous anger of the PM's defence, particularly the accusation of economic treason, has obviously gained some traction, and the coverage is surprisingly even-handed. ("The Tories launched their final pre-polling day offensive, raising the grim spectre of devaluation...."; "Labour responded furiously, with a strong personal attack on Mr Heath....")

Overall, coverage of the latest opinion polls predominates - and this My Father finds much more worrying. No one is predicting a Tory victory; the speculation all relates to the scale of their defeat. One poll gives Labour a lead of nearly 9%, which would leave the PM wielding a majority of around 150 on Friday morning. Yet at the other end of the spectrum - the totally terrifying, blood-freezing, panic-attack-inducing end - another poll puts the Labour lead at just 2%, bringing a Tory victory well within the margin of error.

The PM has finished his call now, and gets up to pour himself more tea. (His plebeian choice of morning beverage has long since been noted by My Father, with mild contempt, and added to the bulging file of evidence against him.) Looking over My Father's shoulder, he comments approvingly on the only other story to make the front pages.

"Good old Enoch! Still fighting the good fight, on our behalf, right up until polling day!"

The fight in question is non-metaphorical. A rally in Mr Powell's Wolverhampton constituency, which started in celebratory mood in honour of his 58th birthday, is reported to have ended in a mass brawl, after hecklers chanting "Sieg Heil!" were ejected from the hall by stewards, and set upon upon by some of the West Midlands' brawnier guardians of racial purity.

My Father arranges his face into a wry smile, and grunts affirmatively. Can the PM really be so obtuse as to believe that the current upsurge of extreme anti-immigrant sentiment, orchestrated from within the Tory party by Mr Powell, is clearly and unequivocally to Labour's electoral advantage? It's

almost 20 years since [My Father last went door-to-door canvassing](#) (in Birmingham, coincidentally, not so far from Wolverhampton), but he will never forget how easily - even then, in the earliest days of mass immigration from the Commonwealth - the staunchest life-long Labour voters could be seduced by any kind of xenophobic rhetoric. Right now, My Father feels certain, good old Enoch is the Tories' most potent last minute vote-winner, regardless of the disunity within the party that he embodies.

Marcia has her heels on now, and the energy in the room abruptly changes, as she calls the campaign team to order, announcing that the cars will be outside in 20 minutes.

Rather in the manner of a squadron leader briefing war-weary bomber crews, she reminds them of the day's key objectives. The programme she outlines consists of a lightning-fast tour of three more marginals, followed by the last major event of the campaign, a lunchtime meeting at the Metro Vickers factory in Trafford Park; then, in the afternoon, a visit to Kaufman's (rock-solid Labour) Ardwick constituency, before heading to the PM's traditional general election base at [the Adelphi Hotel](#) in Liverpool, and a final evening meeting at the Empire Theatre. The schedule, she impresses upon them, is very tight indeed, and only achievable if all members of the campaigning team conduct the day's business with iron discipline, and refrain entirely from "effing around" or "blathering on" or any other form of time-wasting activity.

Still adding the finishing touches to the speech he will deliver at the lunchtime meeting, the PM does not give the impression of a man fully focused on what he is hearing.

"Happy, PM?" Marcia asks, pointedly, as she finishes.

Not looking up, the PM only waves a distracted hand in assent.

"I said, 'happy PM?'" This quite sharply.

The PM lays down his fountain pen, penitently, and gives her his full attention. "Blissfully, Marcia," he says, and seems to hesitate before

deciding to go on. "Except I can't help feeling that we could be using the final day of the campaign to more positive effect."

My Father groans inwardly. He knows what the PM is referring to. In the latter stages of the campaign, he has repeatedly urged that, instead of focusing their efforts on Labour-held marginals, they should go on the offensive, targeting safe-ish Tory seats, which he believes could be winnable. Marcia knows this is what he means, too.

"PM, I thought we had settled this," she begins, sternly. But for once, the PM interrupts her. He seems suddenly energised by the thought of taking the fight to the Tories in their gin-and-Jaguar heartlands.

"No, Marcia, we may have discussed it, but I am still unable to see the point of spending the little remaining time we have in constituencies that are more likely to be devastated by an earthquake on Thursday than to return a Conservative Member of Parliament!"

"Shoring up the base, PM" snaps Marcia. "It's simple electoral common sense."

"Not if the polls - even the least optimistic ones - are to be believed," he replies. "Why shouldn't we be a little more ambitious? We can afford to be! Why don't we pop over to Crosby, or Wavertree, or even [Southport](#), and see if we can stir up a Socialist uprising among the blue rinses?"

For a moment, Marcia lets this hang in the air, which crackles and thrums between them. Their eyes lock; hers incandescent, his - what, mischievous, apprehensive, cowed? My Father unconsciously compares the quality of her anger with that of the two most important women in his life, noting how she deploys silence almost as effectively as My Mother, but combines it with the imminent threat of volcanic eruption that he finds so strangely adorable in the Woman He Loves.

"Are you seriously suggesting, PM, that we should just tear up today's itinerary, let down countless thousands of our most loyal supporters who are expecting to see you, and swan off to Southport, where there would be every possibility of your being lynched?" Marcia says this with the

heroically self-restrained calm of a reformed psychopath willing himself to leave the newly sharpened meat-cleaver on the kitchen counter.

Will the PM back down? Or will he insist on following his political instincts - widely acknowledged to be among the finest ever possessed by anyone - by taking the campaign off-piste, and into enemy territory on this its final day?

Very different from the PM's, My Father's reading of the polls puts him firmly on Marcia's side of the argument. If Labour are to win on Thursday, the base, he believes with terrified conviction, urgently needs not just shoring up, but reinforcing, bolstering, fortifying, buttressing, and surrounding with barbed wire and sandbags.

To My Father's relief, the PM gives way, as he almost always does when Marcia is in this mood.

"Shoring up the base it is," he murmurs, raising his right hand to his forehead, in something resembling a salute. And he shuffles off towards the bedroom to root out Mary (who is absorbed in composing [a new poem](#)), in preparation for what My Father suddenly realises could well turn out to be their last ever day's campaigning.

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**08:35**

*My Father's Younger Son is maliciously disbelieved by his schoolfriends*

Because it is Wednesday, when Form 2 Alpha have double Music after lunch, My Father's Younger Son is arriving at school with [Van der Graaf Generator's new album](#) tucked under his arm. If interrogated under the influence of a powerful truth-drug, he would be forced to admit that this belongs to his elder brother, and that he himself has only listened to the opening track on side one, which he found disconcertingly bitty, discordant, and frantic-sounding, and not really to his taste at all. But for the purposes of this afternoon's Music Appreciation session, it is currently his favourite

album; something of an acquired taste, perhaps, but, once properly understood, a magnificent densely textured epic of jazz-infused "progressive" rock, which makes most other contemporary music look gauche and infantile. He hopes that Mr Husband - the weedily effete and ineffectual teacher who has introduced these bring-your-own sessions in a desperate attempt to prevent his lessons cartwheeling into anarchy - will agree to play [After the Flood](#), the 14 minute anthem that closes the album, in its entirety. My Father's Younger Son has been practising some faces he will make while listening, and he intends to say the "magnificent densely textured epic" thing, as the closing mellotron chords fade out.

Cautiously skirting the combatively contested fourth form football match at the upper end of the playground, he finds his three closest friends - Webber, Kirkland and Atkins - already sitting on the low wall alongside the CCF hut, where they congregate before Assembly. Kirkland, My Father's Younger Son notices immediately, is cradling a blue plastic carrier bag containing an album, which, from the protruding top inch or so of the sleeve, he strongly suspects to be by [The Groundhogs](#).

My Father's Younger Son goes on the offensive. "Blues rock! Ace!" he says, ending on a curious gurning head-waggle, which is this friendship-group's invariable code for "direct opposite". They seem recently to have entered a phase in which withering sarcasm - verbally and/or visually expressed - is almost the only mode of communication available to them.

"Yours?" enquires Kirkland, in his precocious baritone. Unlike his milky-breathed pre-pustular friends, he is one of those 13-year-old boys who resembles an only-slightly scaled-down replica of a full-grown man.

My Father's Younger Son rotates his album which, unaccountably, he has been holding front cover inwards.

"Van der Graaf Generator?" For an instant, Kirkland is non-plussed by the name, which means nothing to him outside the context of a recent Physics lesson. But the sleeve's florid artwork is a give-away.

"Oh, *progressive!* Not tedious at all!" It's his turn to do the gurning head-waggle now.

"At least they can really play their instruments."

Kirkland isn't having this. "Oh come on," he splutters, too outraged to be sarcastic, "have you even heard McPhee's solo on [\*Rich Man, Poor Man\*](#)? I mean really *listened* to it?"

By way of reply, My Father's Younger Son closes his eyes, bends his knees, and awkwardly mimes an ecstatic Guitar Hero posture, encumbered by the album he is holding. "Widdly, widdly, widdly, widdly, widdly, widdly, widdly, weeeeeee!" This is his scathing approximation of the amorphous torrent of notes that pour from the strings of the most admired exponents of blues rock guitar, such as Tony (TS) McPhee.

This catches the attention of Webber and Atkins, who have been comparing their Latin homework. Amused, they add a few widdly widdly wees of their own. Kirkland fails to see the joke. But, sensing that his advocacy of the virtuosic musicianship to be found within his preferred genre is doomed to fall on deaf ears, he abruptly changes his point of attack.

"So what's your Dad up to today, then?"

Now it's My Father's Younger Son who is unamused. But all three of his friends - suddenly united against him - are enjoying themselves.

"Celebrating mass with the Pope?" says Webber.

"Training the astronauts for the next Apollo mission?" suggests Atkins.

"Touring with Simon and Garfunkel?"

"Helping the Queen choose new curtains at Buckingham Palace?"

If this has the air of a well-rehearsed comedy routine, that's because it is. Over the last few months, and particularly during the period of the election campaign, My Father's Younger Son's friends have richly entertained themselves by finding satirical new ways of expressing their disbelief that

My Father is a key adviser to the PM, and a regular visitor to Downing Street.

Perhaps, by now, My Father's Younger Son's dogged and unwavering insistence has, in fact, convinced them that this implausible-sounding story is true. But he has made the fatal mistake of allowing them to see that their incredulity wounds him. So naturally, their professed disbelief has only become more unshakeable. And their pleasure in returning to the subject has grown, day by day.

But today is different. Today, My Father's Younger Son is going to settle the matter once and for all, and wipe those stupid mocking smiles from his so-called friends' faces. Because today, in addition to the new Van der Graaf LP, he has brought something else to school: irrefutable documentary proof that what he says about My Father and the PM is true.

Unruffled by his friends' continued mockery ("Practising for Wimbledon, with Rod Laver!"; Playing the villain in the next Bond film!"), he puts down the album carefully, leaning it upright against the wall, and opens his briefcase. But, at the very moment his hand reaches into it, the bell rings for Assembly, and Kirkland, Webber and Atkins break off in mid-jibe, to gather their things and head inside.

My Father's Younger Son's moment of vindication will have to wait until later in the school day.

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**09:25**

*My Father is requested to lend the PM a trifling sum  
- Bolton West (Labour, majority 4,917)*

The final day of the campaign has begun in lacklustre fashion. Here in the Manchester area's third most marginal Labour seat, it's too early for a satisfactory Prime Ministerial walkabout. The crowds of factory and office workers who formed a Lowrey-esque tableau on these streets an hour or two ago have disappeared now. The few passers-by - early shoppers and



harassed-looking mothers propelling pushchairs - are easily outnumbered by the PM's party, which has been swollen by the arrival of the local MP, accompanied by his wife (by no means an electoral asset in My Father's eyes), his agent, three or four nonentities from the Party's regional office, and a small police contingent. To further skew the balance between professionals and public, an unimpressive knot of journalists and photographers, none of whom My Father recognises, stand around, looking bored, smoking and drinking from flasks (thermos and, in a few cases, hip).

As the campaign team departs from Point A, which is the Co-op, the supreme political campaigner of his era is reduced to accosting pedestrians hurrying by, trying to avoid eye-contact. Mary, who has a low embarrassment threshold, discreetly detaches herself from her husband, and wanders off to look in shop-windows. And when the PM does eventually succeed in engaging a member of the local electorate, the woman - advanced in years, pushing a shopping basket on wheels - turns out to be staunchly Tory.

"You know, filling that basket will take a bigger bite out of your hubby's pay-packet, if your lot win!" twinkles the PM.

"I'd pay twice over, to be rid of you!" she snaps back.

He only laughs at this, apparently with real amusement, and murmurs "Touché" - which strikes My Father as deeply telling. He's never seen the PM allow anyone, let alone a civilian, to have the last word before.

By the time they reach Point B (in this case, the Town Hall), the temperature is rising, and jackets are coming off - though the PM has so far obstinately refused to remove his. My Father can feel sweat trickling down between his shoulder blades. And there is something resembling a crowd awaiting them, including a fairly sedate group of Tories (it's still too early for anything in the way of fervour) brandishing home-made placards, (Labours broken promises!, BETTER DIE THAN DEVALUE!!!).

As the PM mounts the Town Hall steps, someone hands him a microphone, which turns out to be non-functional. He briefly blows and whistles into it,

before counting to 10 in Latin. The Tories, becoming aware of the technical hitch, take heart and start heckling ("It doesn't bloody work - just like your government!"). And then the PM does something really unexpected. Instead of waiting impatiently for someone to fix the problem, or grabbing a megaphone, or simply raising his voice to make himself heard, he shrugs and passes the microphone resignedly to My Father, who is at his elbow.

"A bakery!" he remarks, looking across the road. "My wife is very partial to a jam doughnut. Oriel, do you possess sixpence?"

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**10:30**

*My Father is present at the birth of the photo-opportunity - Bury and Radcliffe (Labour, majority 4,471)*

In the Manchester area's sixth most marginal Labour seat, the temperature is considerably higher, in every sense. The sun is up, and the crowds have come out now. And as the PM and his party approach Point B (the local TGWU office), it's clear his supporters are heavily outnumbered by highly vocal opponents. There is chanting ("What do we want? Labour OUT! When do we want it..."), jostling (though luckily a significant police presence has now materialised, and formed a protective phalanx), and egg-throwing (so far inaccurate).

To the surprise and consternation of his team - they are, after all, on a very tight schedule - the PM grabs Mary by the hand, and ducks into a fishmonger's. The gentlemen of the press are quickest to respond, following him inside *en masse*. By the time My Father manages to gain entry, the PM is behind the counter, wearing a white trilby which he has borrowed from the proprietor, and holding aloft a large fish - possibly a haddock - for the benefit of the cameras.

Above the whir and clack of their motor-drives, the PM can only just be heard making some remark about his Conservative opponents having had

their chips, and perhaps also being in for a battering.

This may not, in fact, be the first time a senior politician has adopted a frankly foolish pose, while wearing some garment associated with the world of honest toil, in order to deflect attention from a point of weakness. But it's from today that this manoeuvre becomes a mandatory component of every well conducted campaign.

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**10:45**

*My Father's Younger Son is denied the vindication he craves*

"Well, I for one am *completely* convinced," says Webber.

"Me too," says Atkins. "More than completely. Totally. Utterly. Unreservedly."

"I think I speak for all of us when I say we're sorry we doubted you," says Kirkland, gurning and waggling.

My Father's Younger Son's friends still don't believe him! He has produced his incontrovertible documentary proof, and after giving it a cursory glance, here they are.... unhesitatingly controverting it.

"What makes it so convincing," elaborates Webber, "is that it definitely couldn't be a fake."

"No, quite impossible!" agrees Atkins.

It's Kirkland's turn to say something satirical, but he's just taken a large bite out of a pork pie (it's break-time, and the boys are in their form-room, finishing what they didn't eat of their packed lunches on the way to school), so he only raises his hand, palm outwards, to indicate that he will have something to delight them, as soon as his mouth is empty.

"But you can *see* it isn't fake!"

Once again, My Father's Younger Son can't prevent himself from saying what he really means. And to make matters worse, his voice - which won't start to break for another six months or so - sounds wobbly and shrill, almost as if he's on the brink of tears.

His friends all gurn and waggle, but say nothing.

"How could I possibly have faked it?"

He picks up his documentary proof, which just a couple of minutes earlier he slammed down triumphantly on the desk, like a gambler unfurling the hand that will break his opponent's heart.

"I mean, look at it..." he falters, holding it out to them.

They do. It's an A5 sheet of notepaper. In the top left corner, there's an embossed coat of arms, above the legend Prime Minister; in the top right, a simple address, in quite complicated Gothic script: 10 Downing Street, Whitehall. And underneath, handwritten quite legibly, there is a message: For *My Father's Younger Son*, with my very best wishes.... followed by the PM's signature.

"How could I possibly have faked it?" he asks again, with a detectably imploring note.

Kirkland has finished his mouthful now. "With one of those printing kits kids get given," he says matter-of-factly, doing a palm-slap-to-the-forehead gesture they use to mean "too obvious to be worth saying".

This is clearly an absurd suggestion. It's true the PM's message could easily be a forgery, but the headed notepaper - stiff, imposing (despite its modest size), expensively produced - could not, realistically, be anything other than what it purports to be. My Father's Younger Son knows this. And he knows that his friends know this. In which case, they must also know it is a thousand times more likely that his story about My Father being an adviser to the PM is true, than that a 13-year-old schoolboy from Worplesdon has somehow managed to obtain access to the Prime Ministerial stationery

cupboard. Yet Kirkland, Atkins and Webber - My Father's Younger Son's three closest friends - are immovable. It's more fun not to believe him.

But not that much fun. As, with trembling hands, My Father's Younger Son tucks his documentary proof back into his briefcase, they have already lost interest, and started chucking pellets of bread and empty fountain pen cartridges at each other.

Why does his friends' disbelief upset My Father's Younger Son so badly? Partly, certainly, because of its heartlessness. But more, perhaps, because it seems so unfair. For years now, My Father has been in retreat from his children's lives. His increasingly rare visits to the family home are brief, and unsatisfactory for all concerned. (Sunday's, for example, consisted of him arriving too late for lunch, then closeting himself in his study for a couple of hours, before emerging to conduct a short *sotto voce* dispute with My Mother in the kitchen, immediately followed by his abrupt departure.) Anxious and sad by nature, [My Father's Younger Son keenly, though barely consciously, regrets the absence of a reassuring paternal presence in his life.](#) So is it unreasonable of him to expect that, by way of compensation for what he has lost, he should enjoy a little bit of reflected glory, a smidgen of prestige by association? ("He may not want to be my Dad any more, but at least he's on first name terms with the most powerful man in the land!") Is that really too much to ask?

It seems it is.

Kirkland comes over and puts a consoling hand on his upper arm. "Hey, *My Father's Younger Son*," he says sympathetically, though just loud enough to be heard by Atkins and Webber, "I hear Cassius Clay is looking for a new sparring partner!"

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**11:20**

*My Father sees further evidence that the PM is in end-of-term mood - Stretford (Labour, majority*

3,365)

"WIN-STON!" - stamp-stamp-stamp - "WIN-STON!" - stamp-stamp-stamp  
- "WIN-STON!" - stamp-stamp-stamp - "WIN-STON!" - stamp-stamp-  
stamp....

Outside Point B (a Methodist chapel) in Manchester's most marginal seat of all, a large, well organised yet rowdy group of Tory supporters is making it difficult for the PM to present his case to the local electorate. More than five years after the death of our Greatest Statesman, their raucous chant would seem inexplicable if not for the fact that the Conservative candidate here is none other than the *Telegraph* columnist and right-wing firebrand [Winston Churchill](#), namesake of his rather more renowned grandfather.

Normally, this would present the PM with the most gaping of open goals. ("If it wasn't so funny, it would be tragic that our great wartime leader shares his name with your pathetic pipsqueak of a candidate!") But again, he chooses instead to fold his tent, bringing his well-worn speech to a premature conclusion, before engaging in a bit of banter with one of the bobbies protecting him - which concludes with the PM wearing the policeman's helmet, and waving his arms as if to direct traffic, for the benefit of the cameras.

To My Father's surprise, Marcia - whose attention would usually be fully focused on the PM at this point in proceedings - materialises at his shoulder, and murmurs confidentially, "Good to see him so relaxed this close to polling day."

There is, perhaps, a faintly imploring note in her voice, which seems to imply she would appreciate confirmation from My Father that the PM's lack of stomach for the fight can somehow be viewed in a positive light.

"Very good," he replies, automatically. Not gurning and wagging, as he certainly would if he were familiar with that convention.

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13:15

*My Father's spirits are somewhat lifted by a successful meeting*

"Well, I think that went about as well as it could have done, don't you?" remarks the PM confidentially, to My Father.

They are enjoying post-meeting beer and sandwiches in the AEU Convenor's office at the [Metro Vickers factory](#) in Trafford Park. (The beer is from a [Watney's Party Seven](#), the sandwiches are ham and pickle. There is no vegan option.) The room is crowded, with the PM's entourage, at least a dozen Union officials, and a couple of secretaries to pass around the sandwiches. (Marcia is the only other woman present.) The windows are open for much needed ventilation, and the noise of the five-thousand-strong crowd outside, slowly dispersing, in no rush to get back to work, is impossible to ignore. They sound in elevated spirits, a few hundred at least singing the PM's name, in the manner of the somewhat larger crowds that congregate on Saturday afternoons at the neighbouring football stadium.

"Sorry?" says My Father, failing to catch the PM's words above the background noise.

"I said, I thought that went well?" the PM repeats, louder.

"Very well," says My Father. And this time, he means what he says. This final major event of the campaign has been a triumph for the PM. He has made light of the tricky outdoor conditions (his speech has been delivered from the trailer of a lorry in the aerodrome-like car park of this gargantuan industrial complex). For the benefit of the press, who have been present in force, he has succinctly but savagely assaulted the Leader of the Opposition for his shamelessly self-interested devaluation scare ("anti-British and derogatory to sterling"). And he has not only held the crowd in the palm of his hand; he has, metaphorically speaking, affectionately tickled each and every one of them under the chin. He has even taken the minor risk of reminding this gathering of hard-bitten Mancunian working men that his allegiances lie on the wrong side of the Pennines ("like the greatest batsman

in England, [Geoffrey Boycott](#), I intend to go on and on!"), and they have laughed indulgently, and responded with a few affectionate cat-calls.

"Very, very well indeed, PM," repeats My Father, more emphatically. And, as the PM smiles in acknowledgement, and raises his glass, My Father is struck by the transformation in his appearance. Suddenly, he looks 10 years younger than he did earlier this morning. His eyes seem clearer, his skin smoother and less sallow, his hair more lustrous. With the love of his people coursing through his veins, the PM glows and preens like a perfectly prepared racehorse parading around the paddock, before the off.

Surely he can't lose tomorrow, My Father allows himself to think, for what will turn out to be one last time.

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**14:45**

*My Father is highly unlikely to taste My Mother's latest cake*

In the airy high-ceilinged kitchen of her substantial family home in the Surrey commuter-belt, My Mother is about to bake a cake. The French doors are open onto the airless garden, where the afternoon sun continues to scorch the parched lawn, but inside it's comfortably cool; and, to add to the air of summery serenity, the Radio 4 afternoon play is burbling unthreateningly away to itself in the background. Although My Mother has made this cake many times before, she has her old dog-eared exercise-book of favourite recipes open on the table.

*Pre-heat the oven to gas mark 5...*

Watching her make her preparations - slamming down bags of flour and sugar on the melamine worktop, twisting the bowl of her Kenwood mixer into place with enough force to snap a bull mastiff's neck - you might think she is angry. But nothing could be further from the truth. Angry? Whatever should she be angry about?



No, what My Mother feels is disappointment - and for multiple reasons. To begin with, she is disappointed because she knows, even before she has baked it, that no one will eat her cake. It's one that, until quite recently, her children would have fallen upon like ravenous locusts; a rather ingenious variation, of her own devising, on the classic Victoria sponge, involving the addition of a generous portion of chopped stem ginger, and half a pint of Rose's Lime Cordial. These days, though, none of them is remotely interested in cake, however delicious.

***Thoroughly grease two 8-inch sandwich tins, and line with baking-paper.***

My Father's Elder Son, who has just finished his A levels, only emerges from his fetid bedroom when those of his friends who have passed their driving tests pull up outside the house in ancient Hillman Imps and Triumph Heralds, and raucously hoot their horns to summon him. And when he does stay home, he doesn't trifle with snacks, preferring to sustain himself with gargantuan fry-ups, which he assembles with impressive speed and precision, cracking eggs on the edge of the pan one-handed. My Father's Younger Son - a sombre unsociable boy, who leaves the house only to take part in various sporting activities - is much more often present, but even more narrowly focused gastronomically than his brother, his diet consisting almost exclusively of toast spread dangerously thick with Marmite. And My Father's Daughter, not yet nine, is already incubating an eating disorder; unconsciously aware that, for her gender, food is a richer source of anxiety than of nutrition, and that eating it with any sign of appetite or enjoyment (even at her age) is frowned upon.

***Cream together 1/2lb Stork and 1/2lb caster sugar, in lovely new Kenwood mixer!***

As for My Father himself - well, it's a long, long time since he touched any of My Mother's cakes. And how *very* disappointed she feels when she remembers - as she does now - how, in the early years of their marriage, he seemed to be permanently hungry; invariably delighted to wolf down anything prepared by her, even her less successful culinary experiments.

My Mother is aware that the powerfully pervasive disappointment she feels now is not entirely cake-related. It's also fed by a much deeper rooted and more unsettling sense that the role she has played within her family - so conscientiously, and for so many years - is no longer valued or appreciated by anyone. The beds beyond number she has made! The fevered brows she has soothed with dampened flannels! The meals she has cooked! The lifts to friends' houses (many of them quite distant) she has provided! The (thrice) repeated pain and indignity of childbirth! None of this seems to count for anything, any more.

Of course, My Mother knows that teenagers are rarely to be relied upon for thanks, or even unspoken gratitude. And she supposes that her children are no worse than other people's, in this respect. But it is.... disappointing to be treated so thoughtlessly by them, just the same.

***Add four eggs, 1/2lb self-raising flour, 1 tsp baking powder and a teacup of Rose's Lime Cordial to the creamed sugar....***

My Mother's most profound disappointment, though, is in My Father, for his gradual, now almost complete, withdrawal from family life. She is tempted to think of this as a betrayal, though she realises that might bring her perilously close to feeling a wholly redundant anger towards him. But, with the best will in the world, she can't find a way of seeing his actions as anything other than a clear-cut case of breach of contract. This life they live now, the one that has come into being slowly, insidiously, over the last four or five years, is, most emphatically, not what she imagined she was signing up to, in those hilariously distant-seeming early days of their relationship.

***Mix, at slow speed, until you have a smooth soft greenish (!) batter....***

Of course, from the start, it was understood between them that she was happy to relinquish her career, in order to focus all her energies on her no less valuable role as home-maker and family-builder-in-chief. Meanwhile, it was equally well accepted by both of them that My Father - the exceptionally able young man, of limitless promise - would turn his extravagant talents to a career in business, rising steadily, winning regular promotions and pay-rises, acquiring executive perks such as an expense

account and perhaps a corner office.... while, crucially, always leaving work in time to be home to put the children to bed. And for the first decade or so of their marriage, My Father proved able, with only the very occasional wobble or slip, to walk this tightrope.

As her Kenwood continues to throb purposefully, My Mother remembers, almost dreamily, how devoted a husband and father he was at this period; putting on a funny croaky voice to call the office, pretending to be sick, on days when she was under-the-weather and in need of looking after; shepherding the children to the park on Sunday mornings, to let her have a lie-in; never once missing a school parents' evening.

Now.... that era has vanished utterly, as if erased from history. My Father has become a different man. Over these past few years, all his devotion has melted away like a dusting of late-April snow, as the demands of his professional life have increased remorselessly. His career has become an all-consuming monster, which can seemingly only be satisfied by his near-constant absence from the family home, and his total abstention from the performance of all marital and paternal duties. And even when My Father does deign to spend a few hours under the same roof as his wife and children, he is almost always absent in spirit; too busy, too important, too distracted, to be fully - or even partially - engaged in dull suburban domesticity.

***When the mixture is ready, stir in a generous handful of chopped stem ginger....***

And now this wretched election! My Mother can barely contain her disappointment when she thinks of My Father's renewed immersion in politics. Of course, she can see why he was so pathetically excited on being summoned to Downing Street, around 18 months ago, to discuss press strategy. Any man (men are such children!) would be thrilled to be interrogated by the Prime Minister on his particular little area of expertise.

And of course, My Mother shares - no one more staunchly - My Father's political beliefs. In fact, she would say that, since they first met, as fellow-members of the Labour Club at Oxford, it is she who has shown the more

fervent, more unswerving commitment to international Socialism, as the one true path to the betterment of the working man. My Father, she remembers with grim disappointment, didn't even vote in the last election, having arrived home late and worse for wear on polling day, following his monthly lunch with the ad agency.

***Divide the mixture between the two tins, and smooth with a spatula or back of a spoon....***

But this ridiculous, reckless decision he has made - without any consultation with her - to give up three weeks of precious family time, to act as an unpaid (unpaid!) adviser on a campaign that Labour were clearly going to win anyway, without any help from him.... well, why on earth would he do that, when he already has a successful career of exactly the kind they both decided would be best for him, and for their (as yet non-existent) family, around the time they were married? How could such a brilliant man behave so *stupidly*?

My Mother hasn't registered a word of the radio play, but now, as the three o'clock news follows the pips, the headlines have her full attention: "*On the final day of campaigning before tomorrow's election, most opinion polls are still predicting a comfortable Labour victory, though there are some signs of a last-minute narrowing of the gap between the parties....* "

Really, thinks My Mother. Really? How awful it would be if defeat were still to be snatched from the jaws of victory. For him and also, of course, for the country. How hard it would hit him. She doesn't know for sure, because he hasn't confided in her, but she strongly suspects that, in the event of the predicted Labour victory, he is planning to use his role in the successful campaign as a springboard for reviving his long abandoned ambition to achieve high elected office. How desperately sad it would be for him if instead, his reputation in political circles were to be tarnished for ever by association with a horrible unexpected galumphing failure.

***Bake for around 20 minutes, until (greenish!) golden....***

As My Mother closes the oven door, she is surprised to hear the front doorbell ring. She very rarely has visitors at this time of day, and the Jehovah's Witnesses have called quite recently. She hurries out of the kitchen, brushing flour from her skirt and briefly checking her appearance in the hall mirror. Through the frosted glass of the front door, she can make out a blurred female outline, though not one she recognises.

She opens the door. And no, it isn't anyone she has ever met before. But the woman who is standing there, on the doorstep of My Mother's home, seems to think they know each other. At least, she sees no necessity to introduce herself.

"We need to talk," she says. "May I come in?"

\*\*\*

**15:30**

*My Father fears the PM may accept a rock bun -  
Manchester Ardwick (Labour, majority 8,023)*

"More lapsang souchong, PM?" says Kaufman, who is wearing his candy-striped blazer again, over what looks like cricket attire.

"No, thank you, Gerald," says the PM, from his deck-chair.

The PM and his party are taking tea in the large well-tended garden belonging to one of Kaufman's more affluent supporters.

"In that case, a rock bun, perhaps?"

For a moment, My Father thinks the PM is going to accept this offer. It's pleasantly cool where they are sitting, in the shade thrown across the lawn by a large willow tree. There is a low hubbub of conversation, from a small gaggle of local Labour supporters invited to meet the PM, and a slightly louder humming from the numerous bees at work in the flower-beds. The deckchairs are surprisingly comfortable.

But My Father's fears are without foundation. The PM has started to haul himself effortfully to his feet. "Thank you again, Gerald. But, delightful as this part of your constituency is, and much as I would like to linger among your charming supporters, I have a timetable to which I must adhere. Or Marcia will be scolding me!"

Marcia and Kaufman both laugh at this.

"As if I would dare to scold you, PM," says Marcia, glancing at her watch.

\*\*\*

**15:25**

*My Father's Younger Son misses his chance to impress his classmates with the sophistication of his musical taste*

As the guitar of Tony TS McPhee howls and whines its way towards a climax, while the Groundhogs' mighty rhythm section thunders and booms beneath, like a pile-up between multiple HGVs laden with high explosive in an underground car park, a certain amount of tentative seated head-banging breaks out towards the back of the classroom, where Form 2 Alpha's Music Appreciation session is in progress.

Eventually - though not before hopes have been raised and dashed by three or four false endings - the cacophony subsides into silence, and Mr Husband (who has a passion for Schubert's Lieder) leaps forward to lift the stylus, before the next track can begin.

"Well, thank you very much indeed, Kirkland, for delighting us with that," he says, unable to keep the disdain out of his voice. He hurries on, in the hope of forestalling retaliatory heckling. "Would anyone care to comment on their response to the piece?"

This provokes snorts of derisive laughter from the rear two rows of desks. Piece! The poncey little poof just called *Rich Man, Poor Man* by the

Groundhogs a "piece"! He'll be wittering on about tempo, and cadenzas, and harmonic modulation next.

Feigning unconcern, as he is forced to do dozens of times in every teaching day, Mr Husband raises his voice to make himself heard. "Well, in that case, let's move on. Who else has a disc for us?"

My Father's Younger Son is acutely aware that there is only just time for the class to listen to *After the Flood* in its entirety (interrupting it would be unthinkable), and for him to say the "magnificent densely textured epic" thing, before the bell signalling the end of the school day. And four or five of his classmates still have unplayed albums on their desks in front of them, so he knows he urgently needs to attract Mr Husband's attention if his is to be chosen. But now that the moment has arrived, a lassitude creeps over him. His arms, one of which he would need to raise immediately, lie heavy and lifeless before him. And somehow, he no longer feels any of his earlier certainty that demonstrating the superiority of his musical taste to his classmates will bring him any satisfaction, or serve to raise him in their esteem. Suddenly, everything - absolutely everything, even progressive rock - seems dark and unforgiving and futile to him.

And so Form 2 Alpha's Musical Appreciation session concludes with two shorter pieces, by a quartet named [Blodwyn Pig](#) and the up-and-coming young American composer and instrumentalist [John Denver](#).

\*\*\*

## 16.55

*My Father finally gets around to calling My Mother, but chooses an inopportune moment*

In her airy high-ceilinged kitchen - which is now filled with acrid black smoke, only slowly dispersing through the open French doors - My Mother is trying very hard not to weep. She swallows once, twice, three times, but the constriction in her throat refuses to budge, as does the prickly heat behind her eyes.

Her cake is a charred ruin, retaining not even the faintest tinge of green. The two tins stand smouldering on the cooling rack. The oven continues to belch smoke. My Mother screws up her face tightly, as if to prevent moisture from seeping out. She feels that if she allows even a single tear to trickle down her cheek, there may be no end to the inundation.

The moment passes. She exhales heavily. She is not going to allow a mere baking mishap to defeat her. She will start again, and make the best Lime and Ginger Sponge she has ever made. True, nobody will eat it, which is disappointing. But she, My Mother, will - unlike certain other members of her family - have faithfully discharged her obligations. She will not be to blame if a situation should arise in which cake is urgently required, and there is no cake. She will have betrayed no one.

Donning oven-gloves, My Mother carefully picks up the super-heated remains of her first cake and, using a wooden spoon, shovels them down her new waste-disposal unit, which chugs and growls hungrily as it consumes them.

The air is clearing now. My Mother checks her ingredients, and finds that she has enough. (She is a little low on Stork, but she is fairly sure she has read somewhere that's it possible to use butter instead, if absolutely necessary.) She flips the page in her old exercise-book, to return to the beginning of the recipe, and then sets to work with the scouring pad to return her elderly cake-tins (received as a wedding-present almost exactly 20 years ago) to serviceable condition.

A few minutes later, while she is creaming together the margarine, butter and sugar, she hears My Father's Elder Son come in, and head straight upstairs to his room (she can instantly distinguish any member of her family by their footsteps on the stairs). It's unusual for him to be home before My Father's Younger Son. It almost certainly means that he will be going out again shortly with his friends, and has returned to change and wash his hair, before one of them calls by to pick him up. It's possible he shouts a greeting as he passes the kitchen door, but if so, it's lost in the whirr and thrum of her Kenwood.



A little later again, the phone rings. Uncharacteristically, My Mother ignores it. She tells herself this is perfectly sensible, since she has cake mixture on her hands, and, in any case, the call will very probably be for My Father's Elder Son. But she's well aware the real reason she doesn't want to answer the phone is related to the sense of dread within her. It's a feeling she has lived with for as long as she can remember, but recently it's become much stronger, and more physically present in her life; as if she has a toxic gaseous bubble lodged in her abdomen, slowly but inexorably inflating, day by day. And today, since the doorbell rang an hour or so ago, it feels as if that bubble has ballooned in size, and become lethally unstable, to the point where it seems certain - very soon now - to explode, with devastating consequences. Surely, all it would take is one more incursion on her precariously maintained equilibrium....

The phone continues to ring. My Father's Elder Son doesn't answer, presumably because he is taking one of his epic 30-minute showers. And then it occurs to My Mother that it could be My Father's Younger Son, who has cricket nets after school on Wednesday, and sometimes calls from the station for a lift, when he's more than usually tired.

Humming casually, she snatches up the receiver.

"Hello?"

She hears only emptiness, and then a dialling tone. The caller must have hung up, momentarily before she answered. She resumes humming. Her main feeling is relief that she doesn't have to speak to anyone; but, nothing if not conscientious, she is also aware that My Father's Younger Son may, at this moment, be resigning himself to walking the three-quarters of a mile home from the station. (Wouldn't it be useful, she thinks in passing, if there was some way of knowing who had called, in a situation like this?)

\*

In his room at the Adelphi Hotel in Liverpool, where the PM's party has just checked in, My Father is puzzled by his unanswered call. At this time of day, he would expect My Mother, and at least two of his children, to be at

home. (My Father's Daughter is, in fact, having tea with a friend.) His strongest feeling is relief that he doesn't have to speak to My Mother, closely followed by frustration. He knows he must speak to her, imperatively, today. Not, of course, that he is planning to have The Conversation with her. That will have to wait until the weekend, he supposes (though this prospect seems unimaginably distant, there being the little matter of a general election, on which depend all My Father's hopes and schemes for the remainder of his life, standing between now and then). But he needs, urgently, to lay the foundations for The Conversation. He needs - somehow, miraculously - to find words that will provide My Mother with a degree of reassurance that all is well between them, so that she will be as amenable and receptive as possible when he finally sets out his proposals for the next phase of their family life. The one in which he leaves his wife and children, but definitely doesn't go to live with his mistress. At least, not straight away.

My Father sighs. He still has around half an hour of R&R, as Marcia calls it, before the evening's campaigning begins. He will try calling home (he stumbles uncomfortably over the word as he thinks it) again before they leave for the PM's Huyton constituency.

He picks up the phone, to call the Woman He Loves. But again, he is out of luck. In the basement kitchen of her high narrow home in North London, the phone rings unanswered. In this case, he is not particularly surprised. The boys are probably at their respective music lessons; Consuela doesn't come on Wednesday; and the Woman He Loves must still be at her studio, where she does not permit modern telecommunications to impinge upon her creative process. He'll call her again at bedtime.

\*

A little later, as My Mother is spooning the new mixture into the clean tins, the phone rings. This time she doesn't hesitate. My Father's Elder Son is probably still in the shower. My Father's Younger Son may need a lift. My Father's Daughter may have broken her arm playing on her friend's trampoline. Humming in a notably relaxed manner, she picks up the receiver.

"Hello?"

"It's me. I'm really sorry I haven't called - "

"That's all right," she cuts him off in mid-apology.

"But the campaign has been completely - "

"I'm afraid I can't talk now. I have a cake in the oven."

This is, strictly speaking, not true. But she is about to put the cake in the oven; and, surely, it's entirely reasonable that she should want to avoid any possibility of being distracted, after what happened to the last one?

"OK, I'll try to call again la- "

"That's perfectly all right," she says, brightly, using her hand to cut the line more quickly than she can replace the receiver.

\*

A little later, with all the smoke now cleared and a delicious gingery aroma wafting around My Mother's high-ceilinged kitchen, she hears My Father's Younger Son come in. He, too, disappears upstairs with no more than a grunt, possibly of greeting, as he passes the kitchen door.

"I'm making a cake!" calls out My Mother, gaily, after him. "Your favourite - ginger and lime! Ready soon!"

No reply. She remembers how My Father's Younger Son used to love scraping the mixing bowl whenever she baked. She swallows hard, and screws up her face as tightly as she can. Not a single tear.

Now, how long has her cake been in the oven?

\*\*\*

**22:15**

## *My Father still struggles to understand the appeal of association football*

Not for the first time, My Father finds himself bewildered that so many serious and intelligent people can take such an obsessive interest in a group of men, much less well educated than themselves, chasing a ball around a rectangle of muddy grass. No sooner has the weary campaigning party straggled back into the presidential suite at the Adelphi than the PM has switched on the TV, so that he and his companions can enjoy a match between [West Germany and Italy](#). This seems, as far as My Father understands, to be some kind of sequel to the contest his sons were watching on Sunday. He wonders briefly if, back at home - the word seems more jarringly discomfoting every time he thinks of it - they are watching this one, too.

(They aren't. My Father's Elder Son is sitting cross-legged on the floor of the garden annexe belonging to a friend's house, which serves as a rehearsal room for the band he's in. A dense narcotic fug hangs over the circle of his countercultural contemporaries of which he forms part - most of whom, like him, will shortly be applying to Oxbridge. My Father's Younger Son, who has school in the morning, is already in bed, where he is listening to [John Peel](#) on a transistor radio, and trying to persuade himself he is enjoying the drunken crooning of [Kevin Ayers](#).)

The match is in its early stages, but Italy are already a goal up, which seems to please the PM. "Come on you Eyeties!" he exclaims when he sees the score. "We can't let those Krauts get through to the final after beating our boys so luckily!"

My Father is appalled; not by the ethnically derogatory language, but by the fact the PM cares so much about this match, when it can have no possible bearing on tomorrow's result. Whatever damage may or may not have been done to Labour's prospects by England's defeat, surely whether West Germany or Italy win today can make not the faintest difference at the polls?

And yet, My Father reflects, football does seem, inexplicably, to be much more effective than politics in arousing a passionate sense of allegiance, at least in this benighted part of the country. He thinks of the meeting they have just attended. The PM was warmly received by a fullish house at the Empire Theatre. After 20 years as a local MP, by far the most successful ever to represent the city, he has been awarded a kind of honorary Scouser status. And in his speech, the PM played, skilfully as ever, on the strength of this bond. He teased his audience repeatedly, including shamelessly recycling the Geoffrey Boycott gag, which had gone down well at lunchtime. He theatrically tossed aside his notes (which, in any case, he has barely referred to since the earliest days of the campaign), in order to address such old friends in a more intimate and unmediated manner. And he veered off into brisk and well informed analysis of local political issues (some crackpot scheme to pour public money into "regenerating" the docks for the benefit of middle-class incomers was given a brief but thorough drubbing).

All in all, it was an entirely successful performance. Yet the response of the crowd to the PM seemed cool, even frosty, compared to the bedlam that broke loose when he introduced two beefy young men, apparently representative of the city's best known football clubs. They were wearing contrasting scarves - one [red and white](#), the other [blue and white](#) - but otherwise, they seemed fairly interchangeable to My Father; tightly shirted, bulky of thigh, luxuriantly sideburned. To the crowd, though, they were antithetical gods, each adored and despised by approximately 50% of those present. For a few moments, as they stood alongside each other, waving sheepishly, unsure what else was expected of them, it seemed possible that a riot might be about to break out between the baying factions. But then the PM stepped forward and shook each of them by the hand, before pulling them together, and raising their hands above his head, like a boxing referee declaring a draw, at which the entire crowd howled and stamped and clapped in unified approval, for what seemed like quarter of an hour.

Of the several hundred people in the auditorium, only My Father - and of course Marcia - were focused on the PM, as this scene played out. So the chances are, My Father thinks, that no one else was conscious of the

ineffable weariness emanating from him, the detectably valedictory note in the way he works the crowd; the sense of a master-politician, just past the very apex of his powers.

Now, a couple of hours later, the fatigue is almost overwhelming. On the TV, the match seems to have reached some kind of intermission, and men with impenetrable accents are discussing what has occurred so far, as well as what they expect to happen when play resumes. Slumped on the sofa alongside Mary, who is knitting, the PM is having difficulty keeping his eyes open, and repeatedly jerks his head upright, almost spilling the tumbler of Scotch that he is cradling to his stomach in his right hand.

"Well, it's past my bedtime," says Mary, in the forlorn hope that her husband may take this as his cue to retire. In 40 odd years of campaigning, the PM has never been the first member of his team to call it a day.

"We'll just enjoy watching our German friends taste defeat," he replies. "And then we'll all get an early night, to be ready for what tomorrow brings!"

My Father's spirits plunge to new depths. First, there's the clearly implied command that all the PM's team must see out the rest of this ghastly football match, when all My Father wants to do is get back to his room and call the Woman He Loves. And then, much more disturbingly, there's that fatalistic "what tomorrow brings". Twenty four hours from now, the first results will be coming in. And for the PM, My Father realises, they - and everything that follows from them - are in the lap of the gods.

\*

"And now, to conclude our evening's entertainment," murmurs John Peel conspiratorially, in his finest faux-Liverpudlian, "I think we might treat ourselves to something epic from Van der Graaf Generator's rather fine latest platter...."

Before the portentous opening Hammond organ chords of *After the Flood* can be joined by the parping sax and multi-layered acoustic guitars, My Father's Younger Son has switched off his radio. He is tired. He wants the

day to end. He is not even completely sure any more that he prefers progressive to blues-rock.

\*

The football is almost over. It has, apparently, been a good match, and the PM has perked up considerably. As the final seconds tick away, with Italy still a goal to the good, he is sounding a lot more positive than he was earlier.

"Well, Marcia, gentlemen, a most satisfactory result. As I am sure we will also be saying tomorrow night!"

"Schnellinger!" screams the TV commentator, whom anyone but My Father would recognise as [Kenneth Wolstenholme](#). "They thought it was all over... but it *isn't* now!"

This, for some reason, causes the PM to splutter, mirthlessly. West Germany have scored. Which, My Father assumes, means the match is a draw, and honours for this spectacularly dull and protracted contest will have to be shared. The football equivalent of a hung parliament, he supposes. Definitely not the desired result tomorrow, but better by far than the utter unmitigated catastrophe of defeat.

"So," says the PM, rubbing his hands together, resigned but resolute. "Extra time!"

\*

By chance, it is almost exactly at this same moment that the England team - bleary-eyed and, in many cases, extremely drunk after a 14-hour flight from Mexico City, via JFK - are pushing their baggage trolleys into Arrivals at Heathrow.

Behind the barrier, a meagre crowd awaits them; a couple of dozen die-hard fans, and a minimal press contingent. As the players appear, there is a ripple of applause, and a few consolatory shouts. A solitary hand-made banner reads, 'PROUD OF YOU BETTER LUCK NEXT TIME'.

With the exception of [Gordon Banks](#), who waves and smiles ruefully at the fans, the players shuffle by without making eye-contact. Considering this is a team that went into the World Cup as defending champions, and widely expected to retain the trophy, the mood remains surprisingly forgiving and free from rancour.

In fact, there is only one less-than-friendly voice, which makes itself heard - a *sotto voce* mutter - as Banks's semi-final understudy somehow allows his BOAC hold-all to slip from his trolley, and fall to the floor.

"You useless wanker, Bonetti!"

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**Thursday**  
**18 June 1970**  
**05:30**



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*My Father unintentionally visits the birthplace of the Beatles*

My Father is lost in Liverpool. He has spent the night near-sleeplessly, sweating and thrashing in his steamy hotel room, with the bedclothes thrown off, beset by nightmarish waking visions of triumphant Tories celebrating their unexpected victory. (In one short interval of fevered semi-sleep, the Leader of the Opposition has actually been present in the room, wearing a yachting cap, and dancing a hornpipe at the foot of My Father's bed.) Not long after 5am, he has given up on sleep, pulled on yesterday's discarded clothes, and gone down to the Adelphi's Brobdingnagian marble lobby, in search of newspapers. Finding none available yet, he has ventured out onto the streets - and, within minutes, lost his bearings. Now, looking for an open newsagent on Church Street, he has no idea where he is in relation to the hotel. My Father possesses not even the most rudimentary sense of direction.

Something else he lacks is physical coordination. Bearing right into Houghton Street, he cuts a shambling disoriented figure, his veering

locomotive style not greatly different from that of the occasional drunks he passes, making their way home after extended Wednesday night celebrations. (Unlike most people, My Father does not skirt round these potentially problematic fellow-pedestrians, being barely aware of their presence.)

But what is My Father thinking and feeling as this day of all days begins, the 16,111th of his life, and by far the most significant to date? It's the day that will determine whether, ultimately, he will know himself to have been a Success or a Failure. (In theory, he understands that there can be degrees of success; that one man's success may be another's failure; that a failure may sometimes turn out, years later, to have been a kind of success. But, in practice, for him it is binary.)

If the entirety of My Father's mental activity at this moment may be considered as a sandwich, the upper slice of bread is a conscious strand of thought relating to political history. Has there ever, My Father is asking himself, been a general election day hotter than this one promises to be? (He has just walked past a temperature display outside a jeweller's that reads 67F, and there is still well over an hour until the polling stations open.) And if the answer is no, is there, above a certain temperature, a reversal of the law stating that good weather means high turnout, which is to the advantage of incumbents?

Anchoring the sandwich, the lower slice of bread is, oddly perhaps, composed of sad and remorseful feelings about the Other Woman. If any logic applied, My Father should be pre-occupied by the state of his relationship with My Mother; his failure to speak to her since the weekend; the urgent necessity of finding a way to manoeuvre her into The Conversation, the one that ends with him closing the door of the family home behind him, never to return. Or he might equally well be enjoying a reverie about the Woman He Loves, and the new life - luminous, love-drenched, real - they will soon be living together. But no, it is the Other Woman - a bit-part player in the drama of My Father's life - whose face he sees.

To be more accurate, it's the face she possessed when he first met her - what, nine years ago now; never beautiful, but fresh, notably soft-skinned, wide-eyed, pleasing. And now he sees, super-imposed on that image, an updated version; features essentially unchanged, but blurred by the passage of time, and softened by disappointment. All those endless days waiting for her married lover to call, and nights aching for him to be beside her in bed, have left their mark. My Father can't help being aware that, now in her early 30s, the Other Woman does not retain much of what originally drew him to her. There is something - he hates himself for even thinking it - faintly frumpy about her these days.

He pictures her waking, soon now, on the second morning of her life without him. He sees her puffy-eyed, weeping the day's first tears, re-reading his letter for the umpteenth time, unconsolated by the giant poster of that ghastly Welsh singer on the wall behind her bed. And he wonders if, having given the best of herself to someone who barely wanted anything from her, she will ever find a decent unencumbered man to love her. And he knows she won't, because in My Father's philosophy a decent man is only one who hasn't been found out yet. My Father thinks, Poor Other Woman! And then he thinks, Poor me! Being driven to cause her such pain - and quite possibly wreck the rest of her life - by the irresistible urges and desires that a truly exceptional man has no choice but to live with!

And inside the sandwich? The filling is a vast inchoate meaty sludge, mainly composed of longing and fear. Longing for the prizes that will shower down upon him - the plaudits (*the man who really won the election!*), the advancement (**SURPRISE CABINET APPOINTMENT**), [the recognition](#) ("good to see you again, m'lord") - provided things don't go disastrously wrong today.

And fear - gnawing, gut-clenching, bowel-loosening fear - that, despite what even the most pessimistic polls say, things *will* go disastrously wrong today.

Still no sign of a newsagent. My Father peers down a dingy alley. As far as he is aware of his surroundings, Liverpool - proud Socialist city though it is - seems to him like a depressing shithole. An illuminated sign momentarily

catches his eye, vertically stacked letters reading [CAVERN](#). Some kind of night-club, My Father supposes, or possibly a subterranean wine-merchant. In any case, not a source of newspapers.

\*

My Father's luck changes. Entirely at random, his feet propel him in a loop - along Broad Street, then right into West Street - that takes him back towards his hotel, via a newsagent, which seems to be open, despite the early hour.

Inside, a heavily built woman with implausible platinum blonde hair is unbundling and stacking newspapers.

"You're too late, chuck," she says, barely glancing up from her task, almost as if she was expecting My Father to enter at that moment.

"Sorry?" says My Father.

"You missed it. It was yesterday!"

"Yesterday?" My Father repeats, bewildered.

For a moment, he assumes she must be talking about the election, and perhaps trying to make some political point. But what could it possibly be? Maybe something about the result being so boringly predictable that it might as well have taken place already?

"The wedding!" she says, smiling patiently, as if explaining something obvious to an idiot child.

What wedding? What in Christ's name is the wretched woman talking about. She's obviously making some kind of joke, but what the fuck is it?

"I'm sorry," says My Father again, shaking his head, defeatedly.

"Well, you're not telling me you put on that clobber to slip out for ciggies?"

My Father looks down at himself. He is wearing what he wore for yesterday's campaigning - a dark suit, white shirt with discreet grey stripe, blue tie, black lace-ups - though, to be fair, the tie is only loosely knotted, and he isn't actually wearing socks. At last My Father, that exceptionally able man, gets the joke: for this part of Liverpool, at this time of day, he is overdressed - comically so!

My Father laughs (in situations like this, he is a good sport), and says, "Actually, I slipped out for newspapers."

And, keen to avoid further potentially unintelligible banter, he quickly and efficiently starts to assemble his daily pile of national titles.

"No FT?" he asks.

Now it's the newsagent's turn to be mystified.

"Efty?"

"Financial Times?"

"Norrilot of call for that round here, chuck!"

"Never mind," says My Father, already delving in his trouser pocket for change, and scanning the front page headlines, one of which - in *The Guardian* - jumps out at him: ***Powell "wins over" Labour voters***

Before he has even left the shop, he has the gist of the story. The quotes are there because it's Enoch himself, claiming that large numbers of staunch Labour loyalists will vote Tory today, in support of his boldly principled stand on immigration.

Bastards! thinks My Father. Don't they realise what this means to me?

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**06:30**

*My Father's Daughter is also an early bird*

The school in the village that My Father's Daughter attends is doing service as a polling station today, so she has a day off - which is good, because she doesn't like going to school. She used to like it, when she was younger, but now she always feels sad when she's at school, and a bit sort of scared, although there's nothing to be scared of. And sometimes she cries, and has to go and sit in the school office, with Mrs Birchall the secretary, who smells funny and gives her fruit-gums, which she doesn't like. And a few times her Mum has had to come in the car to get her and take her home.

So My Father's Daughter should be happy today, with no school. But she isn't. She still feels sad and a bit scared - well, actually, more than a bit scared - which is why she has woken up so early. And now she is lying on her back with the quilt pulled right up to her nose, hoping that [Sasha and Paul](#) won't realise she's awake.

She knows she is being silly about Sasha and Paul. Because she loves them: they are her favourite dolls. In fact, they are the only dolls she still plays with, because they are more grown-up than the kind of babyish dolls she used to like, when she was little.

But what if she isn't being silly? What if they really are Autons? They do look very similar, with their perfectly smooth faces and blank expressions and lovely thick hair. And if they are Autons, when are they going to come to life, and slide back their fingers, and turn their hands into death lasers, like the other ones did?

Of course, the other ones - the ones she saw on television - were disguised as shop window dummies, so they were a lot bigger than Sasha and Paul. But Sasha and Paul could still have very small death lasers hidden inside their smooth plastic hands. And maybe right now they are standing at the foot of her bed, gazing blankly ahead, waiting for her to get up, with their death lasers at the ready?

My Father's Daughter screws up her eyes tightly, hoping she may be able to go back to sleep, and postpone this possibly fatal encounter. She wishes, wishes, *wishes* she had never watched [Doctor Who](#).

\*

My Father's Daughter misses My Father. Pulling her quilt up even further so that it covers her completely, she wonders when she will see him again. For a moment, her fear of the Autons is displaced by another less fully formed anxiety that has been troubling her, vaguely and intermittently, for a long time now. Who is it Daddy talks to on the phone, in that funny soft voice, when Mummy is out shopping, or in the garden?

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**09:55**

*My Father accompanies the PM to the polling station, although there is no good reason for him to do so*

Electoral silence has fallen. From 7am, when the polls opened, the campaign has been officially over. Everything My Father can do to influence roughly 40 million of his fellow citizens eligible to vote today, has been done. All that remains for him now is to wait, in agony, for the verdict of this unimaginably vast horde of - almost to a man and woman - political *ignorami*. (My Father, when he thinks about it, is appalled by the caveman's club of a blunt instrument that is parliamentary democracy.) And yet here he is crammed into the back of a Triumph Herald with Marcia, being driven by a ginger-haired youth from the local Party to [the PM's constituency](#), in order to watch the PM and his wife enter, and shortly afterwards exit, the polling station.

There is really no good reason for My Father to do this. Or almost no good reason. Although active campaigning is forbidden at this stage in proceedings, there are potentially still one or two final opportunities to get Labour voters off their arses, and into the polling booths. In particular, My Father is keenly aware, the footage of the PM and Mary arriving to vote will be seen by millions on news bulletins throughout the day. The PM can say nothing "political" to the media today. But every word he utters on camera could, potentially, make a difference - if it nudges just one voter, in

one hyper-marginal constituency, into scrawling an X next to their Labour candidate's name. Which is why My Father has briefed the PM on what to say ("Lovely weather for voting!"), and also, since words are only one form of communication, on his appearance (jacket on!). In both cases, the intention is to underscore the message that a little drop of entirely benign British sunshine is no reason whatever to stay at home.

Alongside My Father, Marcia is uninhibitedly enacting last minute adjustments to her make-up, as if he weren't there. She clicks her tongue behind her teeth repeatedly. She seems pre-occupied.

My Father wonders whether he dares raise his worst fear with her. (That's to say, his worst fear as far as the next half hour or so is concerned.) It's that the PM, on leaving the polling station, will light the Fucking Pipe. He might. It's very much the kind of moment - surrounded by a friendly crowd, but with nothing to say - when he would be likely to deploy his most successful and comforting political prop. But please, not today! My Father feels a marrow-deep certainty that the very worst way the campaign could end is with a final image of the PM sucking and puffing away like a provincial bank manager.

"The pipe," murmurs My Father.

Although this is uninflected, Marcia recognises it as a question. By this stage in the campaign, communication between them is almost telepathic.

"I did mention it," she says, glancing up from her mirror.

"And?"

"I think he took my point."

"You think he did?"

"Well, he didn't make a firm commitment to leave it in his pocket."

"But he understood that it wouldn't work?"

"I think so. We'll see."



The car, driven with verve and enterprise until now, slows as they come into Huyton. Drably suburban and respectable, in comparison to the louring city centre, this eastern fringe of Liverpool has been the PM's constituency for ever. Literally. in 1950, when the seat was first contested, he won it by a few hundred votes. And since then, he has increased his majority at every election, to over 20,000. Today, he could perfectly well have chosen to send his supporters a postcard from a Caribbean beach, urging them to vote for his Communist opponent, and still been certain of gaining a comfortable victory.

Instead, he and his wife will very soon be arriving to cast their two votes - which, like many millions of others around the country, will make not the slightest difference to the result. And, as the car pulls up outside the Parish Church Hall polling station, My Father knows he is about to witness this entirely pointless act, entirely powerlessly.

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**10:45**

### *My Father is unable to vote in person*

My Mother is also on her way to vote. Earlier, she almost decided not to bother, because she doesn't feel at all well this morning, which may have something to do with the three large gins-and-Dubonnet that she swallowed in quick succession before going to bed last night. But here she is, hauling on the steering wheel of the family's vast boat-like Rover, to coax it into the small car-park on the village green, opposite the school attended by My Father's Daughter. She feels very sick, and very, very disappointed, but she will not be accused by anyone of neglecting her duty. Already this morning, she has cooked breakfast for her two teenage sons this morning (despite retching at the smell of black pudding), and completed her regular Thursday shop at Sainsbury's in town. Now she will fulfil her obligations to democracy.

As she pulls on the handbrake, she allows her head to slump forward, and rest on the cool steering wheel. But only for a moment. She is here to vote.

And although it will make not the slightest difference to the result (voting Labour in [Guildford](#) is as futile as voting Conservative in Huyton), that is what she is going to do.

Inside the assembly hall, My Mother is surprised to find that traffic is very light. Just one of the row of six polling booths is occupied, and there is only a single voter (a woman she vaguely recognises from the village) ahead of her in the queue for ballot papers. If she felt well enough to think about it, she might conclude that turnout looks like being low; or that in a commuter village like Worplesdon, most residents are likely to vote either early or late.

Stepping forward when her turn comes, My Mother presents two polling cards to the poll clerk, a military-looking type with leather patches on the elbows of his tweed jacket. He briefly studies them, and scans the electoral register, then glances up at her.

"You're voting on behalf of your husband today?"

"That's right. He's away, for work," she explains, unnecessarily.

"So.... this is yours," says the man, handing over the first of two ballot papers. "And here is his."

My Mother retreats to the sacred privacy of the polling booth, instinctively choosing the furthest from the only other one that's occupied.

As she lays the ballot papers on the counter, hers on top of his, a thought comes into her head. Or is it there already? Is it, in fact, the reason why, some weeks earlier, she has taken it upon herself to arrange My Father's proxy vote, after reminding him of his failure to support the Party in the last election? Could she, even then, have been contemplating the possibility that now shimmers and gyrates before her so alluringly that she suddenly feels a little woozy? No. Certainly not. Because what reason would My Mother have had, back then, to consider such a categorical act of war? After all, at that time, when she applied for My Father's proxy vote, she was still a happily married woman. True, there were.... frictions between her and My Father; fairly minor differences about how they should order their lives

together. And a certain amount of entirely justifiable disappointment on her part about his decision to put his own selfish political ambitions before the best interests of his family. But these, surely, were little bumps in the road, easily smoothed out by marital partners committed to shared goals and life-long fidelity. So no, it's quite impossible that she planned in advance what, suddenly, she knows she is about to do. It simply wouldn't have made sense. Not until yesterday, and the cake disaster. And the unexpected visitor who caused it.

Perhaps because of tiredness (like My Father, she hardly slept last night), but more likely because she is breaking in new contact lenses, her vision is a little fuzzy round the edges - and the names on the ballot paper swim in and out of focus:

**HOWELL, David - Conservative**

**SMITH, Patton - Labour**

**WALTON, Michael - Liberal**

She picks up the stubby black pencil, and prepares to make her mark. But can she go through with it? My Mother is Labour to the soles of her feet, in a way that perhaps seems surprising, in view of who and what she is at this point in her life.

At 41, she is a Home Counties Housewife. She has not pursued a career, choosing to dedicate her life to home and family. She lives in spacious and well appointed house in Worplesdon. She drives an enormous boat-like Rover. Her high-ceilinged kitchen is equipped with a state-of-the-art German waste disposal unit. And she sees herself, above all, as someone who has, almost miraculously, risen clear of her humble beginnings; one of the élite few tough and talented enough to have successfully tunnelled their way out of the bleak Northern badlands where she grew up, to emerge, blinking, in a sunlit Southern middle class utopia. Which, you would be prepared to bet good money, should make her a Tory? But no, by a historical quirk, she is and always will be on the other side. In her impressionable teens at the time of Labour's 1945 landslide, before winning her way to Oxford the year the NHS was born, she belongs to a generation for whom the smartly aspirational posture is to lean, heavily, to the left; a

time when the most exceptionally able young men dedicate their careers to building a Socialist future for Britain, just as ardently as their 1980s counterparts will pursue ingenious new ways of making money make money.

So now, here in Worplesdon, where she has constructed for herself exactly the kind of life she envisaged during the long painful early years of her metamorphosis, it feels profoundly wrong that she is about to vote Conservative. As the pencil hovers over the paper, she imagines that some kind of benign Socialist force-field is repelling it, rearranging the oxygen molecules in the air to divert her hand towards the safe haven of the Labour candidate's tick-box. But why *shouldn't* she vote Tory? It will make no difference to the result, either here in this constituency, or nationally. And, of course, he will never know what she has done. Unless she tells him. Which, at this moment, she thinks she just might. In fact, she bloody well will. Because she is bloody.... angry. There, she's said it. She is not disappointed - she is bloody, bloody angry that he has betrayed her. And with that woman! So ordinary-looking! And that makes it even worse somehow. My Father hasn't betrayed My Mother, and their family, and everything that matters in their lives, for some [Jayne Mansfield](#)-like sex siren. The stupid stupid bloody man has allowed himself to be seduced by some ordinary-looking woman in a cardigan, who wouldn't get a second glance from anyone if she turned up looking like that to collect a child from school. No, My Mother is not going to stand for that. His betrayal, she tells herself, is a thousand times worse than this one. And she bloody well will tell him about it next time she sees him, which presumably will be tomorrow.

One of the officials - the same one who gave her the ballot papers - has approached, to a respectfully non-intrusive distance.

He coughs politely, and says, "Is everything all right, madam?"

What does he mean? She supposes she must have occupied the polling booth for longer than regulations allow. She inhales deeply, and focuses on the task in hand.

"Perfectly," she says.

The force-field seems to have dissipated. Quickly and decisively, she marks her X next to **HOWELL, David - Conservative**. And then she does the same on behalf of My Father.

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### 11.30

*My Father could perfectly well go home, but chooses not to*

Needless to say, within seconds of emerging from the polling station, the PM is patting himself down, in search of lighter, tobacco pouch and Pipe. As My Father feared, the conditions are overwhelmingly conducive. The sun, scampering up the cloudless sky towards its midsummer zenith, is already warm enough to discourage exertion, if not yet actively soporific. And the mood in the crowd outside the church is unmistakably end-of-term-ish. The decent-sized contingent of press and TV people, just as much as the PM and his party, know that their job is done. They have followed this sweltering, but otherwise unmemorable campaign, from boring beginning to foregone conclusion. Now the ante-post favourite is coasting home, and for them, it is strictly a dog-bites-man story. Similarly, for the civilian members of the throng, the heat (apart from the literal kind) has gone out of the situation. They love the PM here, and they are happy to catch a close-up glimpse of him and his wife, who are, sadly, very rarely able to get away from Downing Street these days. But, aside from a few desultory shouts of "Five more years!" and "Give us a poem, Mary", they feel no urgent need to engage in political discourse.

So the PM, unable to do much more than wave and allow himself to be photographed, puffs contentedly on the Fucking Pipe, as he slowly makes his way - shepherded by Bill - back to his car. (Though My Father notices there is not actually any smoke, which means that at this moment, the nation is led by an oversized toddler sucking on a dummy.)

And now My Father becomes entirely surplus to requirements. Because the PM and Mary - with a good 12 hours on their hands, before the results start coming in - are setting off on a tour of the constituency, with the aim of shaking as many hands as possible. This may add a few more entirely unnecessary votes to the PM's majority, but is of no interest at all to the media, who have downed tools for the day, and fled back to Liverpool and its plethora of welcomingly shuttered and coolly sepulchral drinking establishments. So there is, officially, no further possibility of publicity, and therefore nothing for My Father to advise on. Nevertheless, he tags along.

Why? Most obviously, because he has nothing else to do. He could, theoretically, go home to his wife and children - or, much more tempting, to the Woman He Loves, and her children. But of course, he isn't going to. The PM may have no further need of his advice; but My Father's desire to be by the PM's side, at the hour of his predicted triumph, is as absolute and irresistible as the primal drive that tugs the Atlantic salmon back to its spawning ground, or draws a newborn baby to the breast. My Father needs to be there in the room this evening when people are saying "Congratulations, PM", because otherwise how can the PM turn to him and say, "I owe it all to you, Oriel", or "Thank you very much, but this is the man you really should be congratulating", or "I may have won this election, but the man standing alongside me is the true architect of Labour's great victory, and I intend to name him my new Chancellor, and designated successor, first thing tomorrow morning!"

The PM and Mary have decided to abandon the car, and start their tour of Huyton on foot. At the wheel of their huge black Humber, Bill will tail the couple in slow motion, ready to scoop them up at the first sign of fatigue or violent insurrection. Accompanied by a skeleton entourage, they make their way through the dingy but far from desolate main shopping parade, which seems to be populated exclusively by loyal Labour voters who couldn't be happier to bump into their local MP and his lady wife. A startling proportion of these the PM greets warmly by name. True, he has represented this constituency for 20 years, My Father reflects, as he trails purposelessly in the PM's wake, but if this does not actually involve occult powers, it remains a truly astounding feat of memory.

Finding his way unerringly, his grasp of local geography equally impressive, the PM calls by at two more polling stations - a Methodist meeting room and a WEA college - to shake the hands of voters going in, and to pose for photographs with Party workers. His smile and easy warmth never falter. Mary seems relaxed, too, bathed in the waves of unforced affection that wash over her and her husband as they continue their pre-triumphal passage through his domain. A single fresh-faced young police constable stays close to them, alertly scanning the suburban streets for any threat to their security. But none exists. Even the vertiginous mid-day sun seems suddenly to have mellowed, casting a pale golden glow over the scene. As the PM pauses to ruffle the hair of a little boy holding the hand of his rather pretty smiling mother, a hush falls, and it seems to My Father as if the blaring voices of the campaign, the sniping and petty point-scoring, the gut-churning tension, the sour-tasting early mornings and acrid smoke-filled late nights, the barging and jostling, the contorted faces, and the pervasive sense of English violence barely suppressed, have all melted away.

He wouldn't be able to explain why, but, for a moment, My Father wants to weep.

\*

A little later, as the constituency tour continues, My Father finds a role, though not one to which he is well suited. The PM and his small entourage have been set down on one of the bleakly windswept though fairly kempt council estates that fringe the more aspirational parts of Huyton. Here, as the PM's progress continues, young lads on Chopper-style bikes - bunking off school, or liberated for the day by the election - are making a nuisance of themselves. They are not malevolent, or politically motivated; and they are probably no more than 10 or 11 years old. But they are bored, and once the boldest of them has ridden past, as close as possible to the PM and Mary, hands free, gesturing obscenely, and shouting what sounds like, "Fuck your big fucking arse!", there is no possibility that the other members of the group won't join in the fun.

The young copper, who is now the only police presence, chooses to ignore these fundamentally harmless annoyances. Bill, who would frighten the boys so badly they wouldn't leave home for a week, is waiting in the car, a little distance off. So it falls to My Father to wave his arms in a shooing motion, and say as firmly as he is able, "Come on, lads, you've had your fun, that's enough now" - which makes the boys cackle and renew their verbal assault, with increased enthusiasm.

"Shove it up your bum, PM!" yells one.

"Shove it up the Missus' bum!" howls another.

Thank god there are no cameras, thinks My Father.

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### 13.30

### *My Father is not invited to join the PM for steak and chips*

At lunchtime, as tradition dictates, the PM and Mary take a break at the Wheatsheaf Inn on Station Drive, where they will eat rump steak (medium well) and chips, and drink half-pints of shandy, in the company of the PM's constituency agent and his wife, and no one else. For a man of such exceptional intellect, adherence to this custom seems surprisingly superstitious. But the PM has eaten this meal, at this pub, in this company, every election day since 1955, and he has increased his majority on each occasion. Which may or may not be coincidental, he would twinkle, if challenged.

So now My Father's usefulness to the PM really is at an end, though luckily, in terms of staying busy, Marcia has one last task for him. Driven by the ginger youth, they are on their way back to the hotel, where My Father will help her prepare for the end-of-campaign press party.

\*



Arriving at the Adelphi, where the massive vaulted lobby somehow manages to exude a damply depressing chill despite the outdoor temperature and an absence of air conditioning, Marcia disappears to make phone calls, having first commanded My Father to meet her at Reception in an hour. My Father wonders briefly whom she is planning to threaten, and with what. (Marcia hardly ever makes a phone call that does not involve a degree of menace.)

He thinks about lunch. It is, after all, lunchtime - and he knows he should eat, because he has a long evening, and night, ahead of him, with little prospect of refreshment, aside from victory champagne, and perhaps the odd bowl of cheese and onion crisps (the PM's favourite). But, very unusually for My Father, he feels no hunger. Quite the reverse, in fact. His mouth and throat are dry and tight, and his stomach - usually rock-solid under a sustained daily assault, from two-if-not-three-bottle lunch through to stiffish pre-bed nightcap - has a bubbly unstable air, punctuated by occasional jabbing cramps.

Open to the counter-intuitive possibility that the best cure for these unfamiliar symptoms might be a light lunch, with perhaps a single glass of rosé (which, of course, does not count as alcohol), My Father traverses the lobby to the restaurant. Peering in, from the colonnaded vestibule, he sees it is deserted - or very nearly so. A single table, around the half-way line in the football-pitch-sized room, is occupied by a lone female luncher. A depressed-looking waiter in a stained jacket materialises at My Father's side.

"Sorry, sir," he says, without a hint of apology, "the kitchen has just closed."

Normally, My Father would take issue with this. It is only a few minutes after 2pm, and as one who spends his employer's money in restaurants almost daily, he is never slow to express dissatisfaction when they under-perform. But on this occasion, weary and digestively challenged, he lets it pass. In any case, the waiter has already scuttled off, leaving no one for My Father to complain to.

He is about to turn away, when he becomes aware that the restaurant's sole customer is waving to him. At 44, My Father is obliged to hold menus at extended arms' length, but his long distance vision is still excellent. It's Beloff, he realises, and hurries over to speak to her, smiling warmly. My Father is charming with journalists, particularly female ones.

"I'd ask you to join me, but I'm almost done," she says, gesturing at the table, on which a bowl of profiteroles, virtually untouched, is waiting to be cleared, alongside an empty half bottle of red wine, and an overflowing ash-tray.

"In any case," My Father smiles, "the kitchen is closed. Lunch is eaten early this far north!" Beloff is only a few years older than My Father, but she cuts a formidable figure in her profession, and is also homely, so he stops short of flirting with her.

"So, what do you think?" she says.

Damn! This is, of course, the question My Father is dying to ask her, but she has beaten him to it. He will have to give some kind of answer before he can find out what she thinks; whether the leading political journalist of her generation takes the view that all My Father's ambitions and aspirations for the rest of his life will be accelerated, or annihilated, by tonight's result.

"Well, we're pretty happy with the way it's gone," he says, as nonchalantly as he is able. "And the polls are still looking good, so.... "

She looks at him appraisingly as he tails off, as if she is expecting more. But he says nothing, so she has to prompt him.

"You were happy with the way you dealt with their devaluation thrust?"

"Happyish. We took on water, but it didn't sink us. We're fairly confident we're still on course for a decent majority - say 55 or 60."

"I certainly hope we are," says Beloff, arching one of her rather heavy eyebrows.

"Why do you say that?"

"Because I've just written my piece for Sunday, explaining the reasons for almost exactly that result, and I would be seriously inconvenienced by having to rewrite it!"

\*

Meanwhile, in the well manicured saloon bar of a country pub a couple of hundred miles away, Aitken is just finishing the second of the two pints of bitter that constitute his normal working lunch. He has not, after all, travelled north to report on the end of the campaign from the PM's home turf. He possesses nothing like Beloff's weight of experience, but some finely tuned professional instinct, some pricking of his journalistic thumbs, has been telling him for the last day or two that it is here in the Leader of the Opposition's Bexley constituency that the biggest story of this election is waiting to be written.

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14:57

*My Father is, thankfully, unaware of voting behaviour in key marginals, at this precise moment, around the country*

The country lies stunned under the unrelenting heat of a perfect June afternoon. In grimy industrial cities and picturesque fishing villages, in busy market towns and somnolent suburbs, on grouse moors and council estates, at bus-stops and on beaches, at Trent Bridge where [Notts are batting against Surrey](#) and on the grass courts at Roehampton where the Wimbledon qualifiers are in progress, in school playgrounds and national parks, in cars on roads made tacky by melting tarmac and on trains delayed by super-heated points, on petrol station forecourts and in prison yards, in restaurant kitchens, hospital wards, supermarkets, architects' studios and sheet metal fabricating workshops, people are mopping their brows, removing unnecessary layers of clothing, attempting to cool themselves

with impromptu fans, holding cold drinks soothingly to their foreheads, and complaining, in different registers, about the weather ("Warm enough for you, vicar?"/"Fuck me, it's *too* fucking hot, if you know what I mean?")

Some, at this very moment, are also voting - though, as My Father has feared, fewer than at any previous election this century. And of that depleted active electorate, fewer still are voting in seats that have even the remotest chance of changing hands.

Let's do [a very rough sum](#). Around 29 million votes will be cast today. The polling stations will be open for 15 hours, or 900 minutes. So if we take the current minute - from 2.57pm to 2.58pm - as typical of the entire day, we can say that around 32,000 voters will be making their mark over the next 60 seconds. And if we take into account that only around 80 of the 630 constituencies being contested today could conceivably be won and lost, that means there are just over 4000 citizens voting now with any possibility of affecting the nation's future. For the other 28,000, popping their folded ballot paper in the box has no more purpose than flushing it down the loo.

And what of the 4000? How many, in the polling booth, at this precise moment, are saying to themselves: "I've voted Labour man and boy, but sometimes I look around, and I don't recognise this country any more."?

How many are remembering devaluation, and determined not to allow such a national disgrace to be repeated, which it very well may be if this shower are re-elected?

How many are grudgingly giving credit where it seems to be due: "That boat race the Tory boy won? Hats off to him, I say!"?

How many are under the mistaken impression that [correct voting procedure](#) involves putting an X next to the name of the candidate you most dislike?

How many are ruefully reflecting, "They're all the same, all in it for themselves, so what difference does it make?"?

How many are thinking, with real regret, "I'm sorry, but someone's got to say it. And Enoch is the only one who's got the guts!"?

How many have, in fact, just voted Labour, only for their baby to vomit on the ballot paper, and then felt too embarrassed to ask for a replacement?

How many just hate that Fucking Pipe?

Too many, My Father's roiling guts and bowels are telling him, at this precise moment. Far, far too many.

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**16:15**

*My Father helps Marcia prepare for a possibly premature party*

"You don't think this will look like counting our chickens?" says Marcia, anxiously.

"No," lies My Father, who definitely does think that holding a party before the success that it is intended to celebrate may look just a shade complacent. "Definitely not. I'm sure people will understand that we are just thanking the press for their hard work following our campaign, not claiming victory."

"So no champagne?"

"God no," says My Father, who - playing to his strengths - has taken charge of ordering the drinks. "That really would look like chicken-counting. But we do have some very nice wine." He is emptying giant packets of cheese and onion crisps into bowls, so he nods with his head in the direction of a couple of cases waiting to be unpacked. Dubious about the quality of wines likely to be available in Liverpool, he has done a deal with the hotel allowing him to ship in his own, from [his regular London supplier](#).

"Two cases?" says Marcia, sceptically. "For journalists?"

"There are four more outside," says My Father. "And they really are good - particularly the Pinot Grigio."

"Pearls before swine!" says Marcia, in a rare attempt at humour.

"Well, for the real swine, we've also got beer."

The beer and crisps are paid for by the Party of the working man. The wine is a donation from the PM's unpaid press adviser. Throughout his life, My Father will take pleasure in sharing his usually expensive pleasures with others. He is a generous and hospitable man.

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**19:20**

### *My Father's children watch Top of the Pops*

Unsurprisingly, given their ages (16, 13 and 7), My Father's children rarely spend time together. In fact, they hardly ever find themselves in the same room. One exception occurs regularly on Thursday evenings, when they congregate to watch [Top of the Pops](#), as they are doing now. Even in this moment of communion, though, they inhabit worlds that barely brush against each other.

As the gurning bespangled figure of Jimmy Savile introduces this week's show, with mirthless gurgles of laughter and nothing but contempt and calculation in his eyes, My Father's Elder Son does not look up from today's new *Melody Maker*, which is open on his lap. Each week, he reads it in minute detail, but today a full page ad listing the line-up for [the Isle of Wight Festival](#) ensures his more than usually rapt attention. Jimi Hendrix! The Who! Free! Emerson Lake and Palmer! Ralph McTell! It sounds completely unmissable; but his brow furrows as, alongside the musical cornucopia on offer, he contemplates the logistical challenges he will need to overcome if he is to be present at this epoch-making event. Like, how will he get his parents' permission to hitch 100 miles, in order to spend an entire weekend in a lawless drug-crazed hippy paradise? (Answer: he won't; he will have to lie.) And even trickier, in view of the fact that he owes every penny of his allowance for the next two years to various friends who

contributed to the cost of his new bass guitar amp, how will he raise the £3 he needs for a ticket?

Over the next 40 minutes, only once does My Father's Elder Son glance up at the screen for more than a few moments, when Fleetwood Mac tear into the opening chords of [The Green Manalishi](#). They are a band that inspire mixed feelings in him. Having seen them at the [Gin Mill club](#) in Godalming a while ago, when he thought they were pretty heavy (though nowhere near as good as Chicken Shack), he now suspects them of having sold out and gone commercial, a compromise that he feels can only end in failure and well deserved obscurity for the band.

My Father's Younger Son struggles, as ever during this period of his life, to reconcile what he likes with what he feels he should like. In this case, the latter category is represented by Fleetwood Mac, who possess flowing locks and pull agonised faces, as they coax howling feedback and crashing distorted chords from Gibson Les Pauls. Much more to his taste, though he would die rather than admit it, is a cheerily chirruping number by Herman's Hermits, which comes with the very significant added advantage of a dance routine by [Pan's People](#), who this week are dressed, for no apparent reason, as sexy schoolteachers. (My Father's Younger Son is, of course, in love with Dee Dee, only dolts and morons preferring the more obvious charms of Babs.)

My Father's Daughter is not really paying any attention to the TV. She is still thinking mostly about Sasha and Paul. And now, sitting on the sofa between her brothers, she is almost sure she was being silly about them earlier. In any case, she has been rather brave and shut them up in her old toy box, which has a real lock, with a real key. She has pushed the toy box into the corner of her bedroom, as far as possible from her bed. And so far, there has been no sign of Sasha and Paul trying to shoot their way out with their death lasers. So all the indications are that they are not, and never actually were, Autons. But there is something about the man who is now singing that she finds faintly troubling. It's not the song, which she rather likes (something about saying goodbye to Sam and hello to Samantha). It's

his perfectly smooth face and blank expression and lovely thick hair. Could he be sending some kind of coded message to Sasha and Paul?

"Jesus Christ," murmurs My Father's Older Son, "I didn't realise [Cliff](#) was still alive."

Soon enough, the programme draws to a close, with the traditional chart countdown. (The new number one is *In the Summer Time*, which will retain the top spot for the next six weeks.) Before the continuity announcer can remind viewers that coverage of today's election results will begin at 10.25 here on BBC 1, My Father's Older Son has picked up the new TV remote, which is attached to the set by a bulky cable, and snapped down the big blue Off button. He has friends to meet soon, and a rendezvous with a well supplied guy called Bilbo later, and will not be following the Nation's Big Decision tonight. Neither will My Father's Younger Son, who has a history test tomorrow, and is planning to put in another solid hour on the Corn Laws, before getting an early night. Neither, of course, will My Father's Daughter, who is already up well past her bedtime for a school night.

Perhaps if My Father were here to witness this scene, he would feel a surge of relief at seeing how successful he has already been in extricating himself from his children's emotional lives; how little his most urgent and thrilling concerns matter to any of them; and how easy it should therefore be for them, very soon now, to accept him in a new role, still committed to their upkeep and wellbeing, but no longer claustrophobically resident under the same roof as them. Or then again, perhaps he wouldn't.

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**21:25**

*My Father is partly responsible for damaging the PM's toe, luckily not seriously*

Oh god, My Father groans inwardly, glancing at his watch, can it really still be more than half an hour until the polls close? On this hottest day in human history, time has passed - for him, at least - glacially. In particular,



these last few hours seem to have been impossibly protracted, to the extent that his recollections of what occurred at, say, 5pm have the hazy vagueness of memories from early childhood.

The party, as far as My Father can remember, went well. The gentlemen and lady (Beloff gave a good account of herself) of the press glugged down My Father's unnecessarily good wine, along with every other drop of alcohol on offer. The PM, buoyed by the love of his constituents, circulated masterfully - squeezing an elbow here, remembering [the football team](#) supported by a journalist there. And even Marcia made a visible, if not entirely convincing, effort to charm. The mood was quietly, cautiously positive; a tone captured to perfection by the PM in a few extemporised words of thanks to the assembled company. Despite his self-deprecation, no one hearing him can have doubted they were in the presence of the country's next Prime Minister.

Except My Father. His head, by this point, is aswirl with hopes and fears, fantasies and forebodings. And though the party was unquestionably a success, one absentee strikes him as by far its most prophetic feature. Aitken. My Father hasn't run into him over the last couple of days, but now it's certain. Aitken never misses out on free alcohol: the fucking bastard didn't follow the campaign north.

Now, party over - and press departed in search of further refreshment - preparations are being made for a much smaller and more select gathering. Here in the PM's suite, his inner circle, supplemented by a few highly favoured journalists, will watch the early results come in, before he and Mary head off to the count in Huyton.

Still buzzing around hyperactively, though grey with fatigue, the PM himself is directing operations.

"Here, Oriel, we need to shift this sofa. Give Bill a hand."

The sofa in question is a substantial piece of furniture, possibly Victorian in design, though contemporarily garish in upholstery. It needs to be moved through 90 degrees, to facilitate TV viewing, and despite its bulk, My

Father feels persuaded that Bill could flip it round with one hand, unassisted. But the PM wants his best team on the job, so My Father squares up to one end of the sofa and prepares to shove.

"No, no!" admonishes the PM. "That will ruck up the carpet. We need to lift it." And, matching the action to the word, he bundles Bill aside and squats to get a hold on the underside of the sofa's frame.

"PM, I'm not sure that's...." rumbles Bill, who has shifted many heavy objects in his time, and feels quite strongly that the PM's method is ill advised.

But the PM is already straining to get the sofa off the ground, and disregards Bill's misgivings. "Lift, Oriel, put your back into it, man!"

My Father, whose physical gifts are in inverse proportion to his mental powers, bends and attempts to mimic the PM's stance. But somehow, he stumbles forward, shoving the sofa - which has surprisingly fluid casters - towards the PM, who loses his grip and is powerless to prevent his foot being run over.

He lets out a yelp of pain, and starts to hop around the room, apparently in agony. There is a moment of appalled silence, and then, "God, I'm so, so sorry, PM!" gasps My Father, mortified.

The PM has returned his wounded foot to the floor now, and is experimentally putting weight on it. With his usual kindness, he is quick to reassure My Father.

"Don't perturb yourself, Oriel, I was entirely to blame. Though there are countries where you might disappear and never be seen again for that!"

Everyone laughs, mostly with relief that the PM is not seriously injured, and will not be spending election night in A&E. My Father is not a superstitious man - not in the least - so he sees absolutely no significance in this unfortunate incident. And by the time the commotion has subsided, Bill has flipped the sofa round one-handed, unassisted.

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22.05

## *My Father's worst suspicions are confirmed by the early results*

If we could ask My Father now to look back and name the single worst hour of his life, this one - starting just after 10pm on Thursday 18 June 1970 - would surely be his choice. Of course, there would be other contenders. Waking up in his prep school dormitory on his [first Christmas Day far from home](#), at the age of nine, perhaps. Or reading the note from his tutor informing him that, contrary to all expectations, he has been awarded only an upper second. Or, much later, receiving the diagnosis of [the cancer](#) that will slowly and painfully kill him. But none of these, for the man My Father is, would compare with the long drawn out agony of the next 60 minutes or so, which, even as he is living them, have the fevered runaway-train quality of the most disturbingly lucid nightmares.

The PM and his favoured companions - around a dozen people in total - are, of course, watching the BBC's election night coverage. (They could, in theory, have chosen ITV, where David Frost is in charge of proceedings, but this is an occasion of national importance.) The PM and Mary are seated on the repositioned sofa, with Marcia, rather awkwardly, alongside Mary. My Father has managed to secure one of several further chairs, arranged around the TV, leaving three or four members of the party to mill around restlessly, briefly perching on other furniture, or shifting uncomfortably from foot to foot, in the background. Bill stands by the door, at ease, but alert, as if expecting gate-crashers. Everyone has a drink, and most - it seems from the dense blue-grey fug - are smoking.

The mood in the room, as [Cliff Michelmore sets the scene](#) in the BBC studio, is subdued but broadly positive. And why shouldn't it be? The campaign, despite a few inevitable hiccups, has gone well. The PM's performance, across all arenas, has utterly demolished that of the Leader of the Opposition. And the polls have consistently shown Labour on course for a comfortable victory.

But from the very start of the programme, it seems to My Father that every on-screen indication is designed to cast doubt on the accuracy of the polls, and eat away at his remaining confidence that everything he longs for in life will be delivered to him by tonight's result.

The BBC election night studio is a huge futuristic barn, bathed in a glow of pastel shades, and populated by (exclusively male) experts seated at separate consoles on multiple levels, coolly consulting vast computerised displays, like the crew of an intergalactic space cruiser. In contrast, the outside broadcast material from around the country is largely black and white, and both looks and sounds like a despatch from an earlier far more primitive period of our national history.

Live from Trafalgar Square, where crowds are gathering, cub reporter [Desmond Wilcox](#) is conducting stilted vox pops with deferential members of the lower orders, the first three of whom declare themselves Labour supporters - before revealing, one after another, that they have not actually voted today. My Father feels as if he has been kicked in the stomach. This is exactly what he has feared: the fucking proles haven't bothered to fucking well turn out and vote.

Back in the studio, psephologist [Robert McKenzie](#) is providing some degree of reassurance, with calculations showing that, averaged out, the latest (wildly varying) polls still give Labour a 4.3% lead, for a majority of around 70 seats. But this is immediately followed by a report, from out there in the real world, on a BBC innovation; something called an "exit poll". Conducted in Gravesend - described as the country's most ordinary constituency - this gives the Tories a narrow victory, with a swing of 4.4%.

"Rubbish," mutters the PM, beginning to pat his pockets, "you're never going to get honest working people in this country to tell you how they have actually voted. 'Exit poll', my foot!"

To this, there are murmured affirmatory responses from around the room (Quite so, PM! - Couldn't agree more! - Complete nonsense!), but none

from My Father, who feels a horrible confidence in the supernatural accuracy of this new method of predicting election results.

And now the first firm news on turn-out comes in. It's right down, compared to the last election, by as much as 6%; unquestionably bad news for Labour, the studio experts unanimously agree.

"But how many constituencies is that based upon?" enquires Marcia, loyally.

The PM grunts in agreement, but he is sucking on his unlit pipe now.

And the worst hour of My Father's life is about to get much worse. As 11pm approaches, the BBC pundits are gripped by the excitement of the race to declare the first result. It is, they tell each other, between Salford West and Cheltenham, two compact constituencies with crack counting teams.

Who will win? For a few minutes, this entirely meaningless contest somehow seems to eclipse the election itself. Will it be Salford West? Or will it be.... *hang on, something's happening in Cheltenham.... we can go over, live now, to . . . no, sorry, false alarm, I'm hearing they are still three minutes away in Cheltenham.... so, back to Salford West, where, as you can see, there is frenetic activity....*

In the end, as the two favourites battle each other down the home straight, an unfancied outsider comes up on the rails, and nicks it, by the shortest of heads.

### [Guildford.](#)

Incredibly, it is My Father's own home-constituency that wins the race to declare the first result of the 1970 general election. Of course, as he watches the returning officer sprint to the microphone, still in his shirt-sleeves to save the two seconds it would have taken to slip on his jacket, My Father is unaware that he himself has voted Tory today. But he knows, on the level of deepest instinct, that what is now unfolding is all wrong; that for Guildford - the town whose orbit he must very soon escape - to win this victory is, somehow, a portent of the darkest, most ominous kind.

"... so Mr Howell has been elected," the returning officer is concluding, clearly delighted with his own personal victory.

The figures for the candidates' votes have passed My Father by in a blur, but from the studio, one of the electoral pundits provides a chilling voice-over to the scenes of Conservative celebration in Guildford Civic Hall: "If the whole country behaves like Guildford, that would be a 4% swing to the Conservatives, and that would mean, more or less, a dead heat between the parties.... "

To say My Father's heart sinks as he hears this would be an understatement; every organ within his body turns to lead and plummets downward like a sack of bricks tossed down a liftshaft. The "exit poll" was, as he foreknew, bang on!

Everyone turns to the PM, to see how he will react. He is in mid-tamp, supremely unconcerned.

"One swallow...." he says, pausing to do a bit of experimental sucking, "does not, I believe it is widely acknowledged, make a summer."

Everyone, including My Father, is desperate to be reassured by this (Of course not, PM! - Let's wait and see! - Much too soon to draw conclusions!). And of course, what the PM says is true: as, back in the studio, one of the experts is saying, a single result proves nothing; there is still a long way to go before anyone will know, with any certainty, how this election will play out. And even if the nation has voted like Guildford, My Father tries to tell himself, a dead heat is not a defeat.

But now, within a minute or two of the Guildford result, it's over to Cheltenham, where the Tories have won with a 6% swing. And now, it's over to Salford West, where Labour have just hung onto a supposedly safe seat, despite a 5% swing to the Conservatives. And now, it's over to the BBC's new computer, which calculates, on the basis of the three results so far, that the Tories are on course to win the election with a majority of around 50 seats.

And now the air goes out of the room. No one breathes or moves - except Mary, who puts an unmistakeably consoling hand on her husband's forearm.

"There's still a very long way to go," says the PM, but there is no conviction or comfort in his words.

And now a computerised caption appears on screen:

## **LADBROKES OFFERING 2-1 AGAINST LABOUR**

And now My Father knows all hope is lost. The bookies are never wrong.

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**01:15**

### *My Father's world collapses around his head*

My Father is back in his own room. The PM has departed for Huyton, where his result is expected imminently. Only Mary, Marcia and Bill have accompanied him. There is no conceivable reason for My Father to have gone with them. All is lost. Nothing can be done. My Father is drunk, and getting drunker.

The hour following the worst hour of My Father's life has turned out to be the second worst. What has made it just a little less bad than its predecessor is that, by the time it starts, all hope has been extinguished. The Tories are going to win, comfortably. But there has still been horror upon horror for the PM and his elite team to absorb and withstand. At around 11.45, Enoch Powell's victory in Wolverhampton South West, with a 9% swing, goes off the top of the BBC's swingometer, which only allows for a maximum of 6%. A little later, a distinguished commentator, referring to the early results, describes this as the most startling electoral upset since the War. And intermittently, throughout, senior Labour figures have appeared on screen, white-faced and dead-eyed with shock, confidently asserting that these highly unrepresentative results will be swept away by a mighty torrent of victories for Socialism, as the night progresses.

My Father, lying on his bed, swallows more whisky, and tries to think of the Woman He Loves. But her face won't come into focus. And his imagination is even less capable of conjuring up the feeling he has when he is with her; the sense of having arrived in a place of safety, after so many years roaming, alone, through a dark and dangerous world. Why can't he find his way to that place now, when he is in such urgent need of shelter? Because in My Father's mind it is impossible to disentangle being successful from being worthy of love. Tonight, he has failed in the most public and painful way possible. How could anyone love him? How could anyone feel anything but contempt for him?

My Father drinks more whisky. And now he drinks some more. And now he drinks some more.

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**04:05**

*My Father takes a wrong turn on his way to the bathroom*

My Father is not, in any meaningful sense, awake. But he is aware, at reptilian brain level, that he urgently needs to piss. And somehow he has succeeded in levering himself out of bed, and into an upright position, where he is now swaying gently, as the room buckets and whirls around his head. He is wearing only his vest, which proved too clingily complicated to remove when he finally undressed about an hour ago.

If he were capable of rational thought, My Father might well be wondering whether he will piss himself or vomit first. But, not being so, he allows blind instinct to propel his lurching body in the direction of the bathroom, where the outcome of this contest will all too quickly be decided.

But the bathroom isn't there. Groping his way, arms outstretched, across the darkened room, his hands meet only smooth uninterrupted wall where the door should be. And now, shards of consciousness returning in response to this setback, My Father shuffles crab-wise to his right, keeping his hands to



the wall, certain that by this means he must eventually locate the errant bathroom.

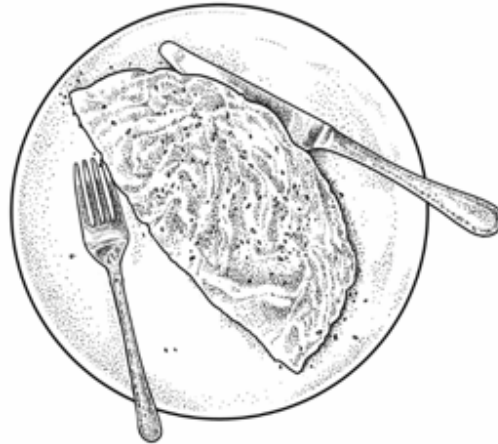
A door! And just in time, because My Father is within seconds of releasing a mighty tide of piss and/or vomit. He wrestles briefly with the handle, surprised to find it so resistant. He shoulders his way through.... and is immediately assaulted by a cacophony of light. The heavy door slams shut behind him, with a decisive click. He is in the brightly lit fourth floor corridor of the Adelphi Hotel. He slumps to the floor, clamping his hands over his eyes to protect them. The vast reservoir of urine seeps, and then floods, forth, quickly forming a fragrant Teachers-scented puddle around his semi-recumbent form.

But this isn't the worst hour of My Father's life, or even the second worst. In fact, if we could ask him now to look back over his life and give a ranking to every hour he lived, this one might score surprisingly highly. Because now, on this catastrophically bad day for My Father, something good happens. Out of the shattering light, a human figure materialises, and someone stoops, and puts surprisingly strong arms around him, and cradles his head, and strokes his remaining hair, and says, "My god, what a fucking awful state you're in! Let's get you cleaned up, and into bed, shall we?"

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**If you are enjoying *My Father keeps the PM waiting*,  
please do [share it with a friend](#).**

**Friday**  
**19 June 1970**  
**08:20**



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*My Father, for once in his life, does not read the papers*

So devastating is My Father's headache when he wakes that it takes him several seconds to become aware the Woman He Loves is in bed beside him, and then at least another minute to register that this is inexplicable. Yet there she is; sleeping, on her back with her arms thrown upward in apparent surrender, and the sheets pushed aside to reveal a T-shirt promoting something called [Gentle Giant](#). (Possibly a brand of sweetcorn, My Father's mighty brain suggests, through the fog of incomprehension and pain that envelops it.)

My Father knows a lot about hangovers. And this one he has already identified as belonging to the merciful kind that insulates the sufferer from the reality of his situation - not, sadly, blotting it out entirely, but making it seem distant, soft-focus, of second order importance. So now My Father knows that the Woman He Loves is in bed with him, and that the election - the one that Labour couldn't possibly fail to win - is lost. And yet these two pieces of knowledge do not, for the time being, surprise or trouble him

unduly. *It is what it is*, My Father might be telling himself, consolingly, if that gleaming nugget of popular philosophy were not still several decades from being unearthed.

Could he, though, be hallucinating? For the briefest of moments, it seems possible. If the Woman He Loves cannot, in objective reality, be here with him, could the unlosable election, in objective reality, still be hanging in the balance? Might there, after My Father retired for the night, have been an astonishing turnaround, with the evening's strong swing to the Tories abruptly reversing itself in the small hours, unleashing a torrent of bizarrely unaccountable Labour wins across plush suburbs, geriatric seaside resorts, and feudalistic farming constituencies?

My Father groans, with pain both physical and existential. Loud enough to cause the Woman He Loves to stir, clear her throat phlegmily, and fart, quite loudly. She is not an hallucination. The election is, definitely, lost.

\*

When the Woman He Loves wakes a little later, the first thing she says to My Father is, "I'm so sorry. I'm so, so sorry" - as if she is responsible for the late rightward swerve by the people of Britain that has resulted in the most astounding electoral upset of the 20th century. And then, as she did a few hours earlier in the corridor, she cradles his head in her surprisingly strong arms, while My Father weeps, and weeps, the luxurious tears of the beloved.

"Do you want the television on?" she asks, when his sobs eventually start to subside.

He holds out his hand - palm outward, fingers spread - in the rough direction of the TV set, like a vampire warding off a garlic-infused daybreak. And then, for the first time since he awoke to find himself in this sensory padded cell, he tries to speak, not very successfully:

"What.... why....?"

Perhaps surprisingly, the Woman He Loves is able to interpret this.

"I came, as soon as I knew. Because I didn't want you to be alone."

He is still gaping goldfish-style, occasionally shaking his head, as if to disperse the fog it contains. So she explains further: "After the first few results, I jumped in the Volvo, and drove. Like the wind - did it under four hours!"

"But.... how did you....?"

"It was easy. I told them I'm your wife - which is basically true - and they gave me a key. And then I came up to surprise you, and found you rampaging around the hotel, naked."

Far away, in the land of pain and confusion where he is currently resident, My Father registers that, in the real world, he has drunkenly embarrassed himself. And that, by her extraordinary efforts on his behalf, the Woman He Loves appears to have saved him from much more extreme embarrassment.

"Was I really?" he asks, with his first semblance of coherence since waking.

"You were," she smiles, stroking his forearm. Her hand is small, with ragged bitten nails, and encrusted with blobs of dried oil paint.

He inhales deeply, as if to steady himself, and looks her in the eye.

"How bad?" he asks.

Again, she knows exactly what he means.

"Very. Somewhere between 30 and 40."

And with that concise summary of the result of the 1970 general election - in fact, the Tories end up with [a majority of 31](#) - they enter into an unspoken pact that will prohibit them from making any mention of politics, for the rest of the day.

"Come on," she says, coaxingly. "We're not going to get a drinkable cup of coffee here. Let's go home."

A little later, as they leave My Father's room - the Woman He Loves having packed his bag, and helped him dress - they stumble over the bundle of newspapers that awaits him on the mat.

The Woman He Loves makes as if to scoop them up.

"Leave them," he murmurs, certain they contain nothing that will ease his pain.

\*

Meanwhile, in Downing Street, packing is already well underway, the PM having arrived at No 10 at around 7am. In his political office, Marcia is imperiously directing operations. In the PM's flat, he and Mary - assisted by both their sons - are bundling their personal possessions into packing cases. No one expected to be doing this today, and there is an air of dazed disbelief - exacerbated by lack of sleep - that permeates the building, as its elected occupant prepares to be ejected, and replaced within the next few hours.

Later in the day, a large crowd will assemble outside, eager to hector and jeer the departing PM, and anyone associated with his now despised government. But for the time being, Downing Street is deserted and eerily quiet. Through the open window of the PM's flat, mournful music can faintly be heard. It's [\*The Carnival is Over\*](#) by the Seekers, which his younger son Giles plays, over and over, on the Dansette which sits beneath a bare patch on the wall, where a treasured landscape of the Scilly Isles has hung these last six years.

\*\*\*

**08:45**

*My Father's three children have mixed feelings about the greatest electoral upset of the century*

"So, that went well," says Kirkland.

"Brilliantly," agrees Atkins.

"He must be over the moon!" says Webber.

My Father's Younger Son is at a loss. He has just arrived at school, to find his three best friends sitting on the wall by the CCF hut, awaiting him. But what are they talking about?

"Your dad!" Kirkland clarifies. "He must have played a blinder."

"Helping the PM lose like that," says Webber.

"When everyone said he was definitely going to win!" says Atkins.

They watch My Father's Younger Son, to see how he will react.

"But, you said.... but you didn't...." My Father's Younger Son is too upset to be capable of forming a sentence.

His friends laugh, good-naturedly. They are amused by his gasping outrage, but mostly by their own audacity in abruptly switching their line of attack. Until yesterday, disbelieving My Father's Younger Son was a rich source of comedy. Today, believing him is more fun.

Or maybe they can have it both ways.

"So what next for your dad?" asks Kirkland. "Helping to make sure England get stuffed in the next World Cup, too?"

\*

My Father's Elder Son has double Private Study before break this morning, so he is still in bed, asleep - despite My Mother's attempts to lure him downstairs with offers of breakfast. But how will he feel about the election, when he finally rouses himself? Conflicted, perhaps.

Of My Father's children, he - at a precocious 16 - is the only one who has any idea at all of what My Father has been doing during his long absences over the last few months, and how much the outcome of the election

matters to him. On the other hand, My Father's Elder Son regularly buys, and occasionally reads, [Socialist Worker](#), and considers himself a man of the authentic left. As such, he naturally takes the view that a victory for the PM's compromised and capitalistic brand of So-Called Socialism would be no victory at all for the workers. And, conversely, that an unapologetically right wing, quasi-fascistic Tory government would be far more likely to hasten the revolution.

My Father's Elder Son stirs briefly, but doesn't wake yet. When he does, this clash between family loyalty and political allegiance is unlikely to trouble him for long, on this sunny Friday morning. His band have a gig tomorrow night at Shere Village Hall, and [Duster Bennett](#) is playing the Gin Mill on Sunday.

\*

My Father's Daughter is back at school today, and for her, the only really significant result of yesterday is that she feels she has gained a decisive advantage over Sasha and Paul, and their Auton masters. They remain firmly locked in the toy box, from which there has emerged not a peep. She is a kind girl, and she is slightly concerned about whether they can breathe in there. She feels she had no choice but to lock them up, but she doesn't want them to die. In any case, the threat they (probably) pose has been nullified, at least for the time being.

She is still feeling sad, though. On the way to school in the car just now, she asked My Mother when My Father will be home. And My Mother's only reply was to laugh, in a way that sounded sort of cross and miserable, and then start talking about something else.

My Father's Daughter wonders if, after assembly, she might have to go and sit with Mrs Birchall.

\*\*\*

**10:30**

## *My Father sleeps the sleep of the dead on the way back to London*

My Father is asleep in the passenger seat of the battered Volvo belonging to the Woman He Loves, as it closes on London at impressive speed, for a car so venerable. (One of the things he loves about her is how fast - recklessly, even - she drives; so different from the way My Mother cautiously pilots the Rover through the winding Surrey lanes, peering anxiously over the steering wheel, her right foot permanently hovering over the brake pedal.) His head is thrown back, and to the side, in a way that looks deeply uncomfortable. But although the Woman He Loves pokes him a few times with her elbow, in the hope of shifting him to a more practical sleeping posture, he doesn't budge. And soon, she judges he must be soundly enough asleep for her to risk switching on the radio.

She is just in time to catch all but the very opening of [the PM's interview](#) with David Dimbleby, from No 10. Even through the tinny car speakers, he sounds ratty and exhausted; about as cheerful and receptive to probing questions about the reasons for his defeat as might be expected from a man in late middle age who has just lost his job, and only managed a couple of hours' sleep.

"Is there - I must ask you this, PM - " enquires Dimbleby, nervously, "anything about the campaign that you would have done differently?"

The Woman My Father Loves holds her breath. How will the PM answer this? It's a question that is going to be asked relentlessly over the coming days and weeks - how to explain this inexplicable defeat? - and what the PM chooses to say now will play a crucial part in shaping how this discussion plays out. Will he throw My Father to the wolves? Will he blame the much commented upon style of his campaign for his shocking electoral failure?

"No, I don't think so," replies the PM, wearily. "It's too early to say, of course, but all the indications are that the issue was people not voting."



She lets her breath go. Thank god, low turnout seems to be the scapegoat!

\*

In the sitting room of her spacious high-ceilinged family home in Worplesdon, My Mother is watching the interview on TV, feeling a bit like a boy who has killed a dove with his catapult. She knows there is no factual basis for believing that her two vengefully-wielded votes have been directly responsible for Labour's defeat. And towards the haggard snappily defensive figure on her screen she has no warm feelings, holding him largely to blame for rekindling My Father's ridiculous political ambitions - and completely to blame for his prolonged absence, since the start of the campaign. Yet she is unable to rid herself of a sense that the moment she - Socialist in every corpuscle - voted Tory (twice!), the profound elemental wrongness of the act must have jolted the earth from its axis, and set off some kind of chain reaction, encompassing every imaginable evil consequence. Including, she suddenly feels certain, the imminent final disintegration of her marriage.

With her eyes still fixed on the screen - where the PM is berating the nation's housewives for allowing themselves to be taken in by Tory promises of lower prices - she registers nothing that is happening there. Her thoughts are entirely pre-occupied with what will transpire when My Father finally returns to the family home, which she assumes will be later today, or, at the very latest, tomorrow. (She has a vague mental picture of him having to pack up his office, and take leave of his team, before departing from No 10 - whereas, in fact, My Father has been a solitary stranger in the PM's residence, camping out in any unoccupied corner, unsupported and unresourced.)

She is aware that, whenever it is, she must - must, imperatively, without delay - confront him. Now that she knows what that horrible dull dowdy woman told her, it would be impossible to postpone it any longer... unless, of course, the woman was lying. Which she perfectly well could have been. It's true that, at the time, when she suddenly appeared on the doorstep in that extraordinary way, the story she told about her supposed relationship with My Father - full of elaborate circumstantial detail - seemed plausible.

And when she wept, and clenched her fists, and closed her eyes like that, My Mother did not doubt for a moment that she was telling the truth. But, looking back on it now.... well, My Mother suddenly finds herself a lot less convinced.

Could My Father really have been entangled, for years, with that pathetic creature? Isn't it just as likely - more likely, in fact - that she was playing some kind of cruel hoax upon My Mother? Or, more likely still, that the poor woman was simply deranged? A former junior employee of My Father's, who, perhaps, had fantasised about some kind of illicit liaison with him, before, inevitably, being rebuffed - and now intent on avenging her wounded pride, by doing him and his family harm? This seems so likely to My Mother as to be almost certainly a complete and entirely satisfying explanation for that bizarre and upsetting episode on Wednesday afternoon.

She will, of course, still tell My Father about it. It has, after all, been a significant event in her life, of the kind that spouses routinely share with each other. And if her surmise about the wretched woman is correct, My Father may wish to take appropriate action against her; a restraining order, perhaps. But, in any case, it no longer feels like a ticking bomb about to explode under her life, with terrifying destructive force. Perhaps it's something they may even, one day, be able to laugh about together.

On the screen, the PM is in denial, too. Pressed by Dimbleby to concede defeat, he refuses. He will not officially acknowledge that the election is lost until the tally of seats - quite a few of which are still being counted - confirms a clear overall Conservative majority. For another hour or two at least, he will remain PM.

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**14:00**

*My Father understands, in his heart, that the Woman He Loves will not be denied*

My Father is still asleep, but now in the bed of the Woman He Loves. Punctilious housekeeping is not among the attributes that make her so perfect in his eyes, and the bedding is frowstily redolent of her. If My Father were less deeply unconscious, he would be hungrily breathing in great lungfuls of her lightly fermented essence. But My Father sleeps on; partly because these last three weeks of the campaign have been incomparably the most exhausting experience of his life, and partly for reasons of escapism. Friday the 19th of June 1970 is a day he has no desire at all to face.

While he has been asleep, a tidal wave of evil has swept the length and breadth of the land. The Tories have won every seat they expected, many they optimistically targeted, and a few in which they knew they had no chance and fielded joke candidates. Socialism does not stage a late fightback. The polls have, simply, been wrong, from start to finish. (All except the BBC's new-fangled exit poll, which seems at this point to have predicted the eventual result with astonishing accuracy.)

From the moment it opens, the stock market soars. At around 11.15, the FT index is reported to be up by 27 points, the biggest single movement ever recorded. On the currency markets, sterling throws its weight around, like a playground bully. In the single smoke-filled room in Bermondsey that accommodates the *Socialist Worker* editorial committee, a collective decision is reached on the new issue's front page banner headline, ***REVOLUTION: IF NOT NOW, WHEN?***

At 2pm exactly, with a comfortable victory in Aberdeenshire West, the Tory seat total reaches 316, confirming their absolute majority. The PM, true to his word, promptly acknowledges defeat, and asks permission to visit the Queen, to tender his resignation. A smooth and efficient hand-over of power will be somewhat delayed by the fact that she is, at this moment, taking part in a carriage procession down the home straight at Ascot. But her Private Secretary lets No 10 know she will return to Buckingham Palace in time for tea, for which the PM is invited to join her.

\*

Around 5pm - coincidentally, almost exactly the time the PM receives the call summoning him to the Palace - My Father finally wakes. Cautiously, experimentally, he levers himself up, to sit on the edge of the bed. How does he feel? Less bad than you might think. He is, we should remember, an accomplished drinker. [Since his early teens](#), he has probably been drunk on more days than he has remained sober, so his body has become accustomed, if not immune, to the effects of excessive alcohol. And this hangover is more than 12 hours old, so rapidly losing its disruptive power, like a hurricane now downgraded to a tropical storm.

He stands, and takes a few deep breaths, looking at himself in the vast full length mirror opposite the bed of the Woman He Loves. He is naked (since their [first night together here](#), he has never worn anything in her bed), and not a particularly prepossessing sight; his hair, comically dishevelled, stands up in wispy tufts; his belly, matted with black hair, is large and starting to be a little pendulous; his legs, noticeably paler than the rest of his body, are scrawny. But what causes him to screw his eyes tightly shut, as if in pain, and turn his head away, is not his physical appearance (My Father is notably lacking in vanity). What My Father has just glimpsed in the mirror is the thing he dreads beyond all else. [Failure](#). A man of outstanding promise, no longer young, who has just missed his best and almost certainly last chance of achieving anything worthwhile in life.

Blinking viciously, as if to banish that vision, he snatches up a silk kimono belonging to the Woman He Loves, and drapes it round his shoulders, then shuffles off in search of her, and the comfort he has never found in anybody else. Her boys have been picked up from school by their unsatisfactory father, who has them for the weekend, so the tall narrow house is empty, and he can hear music - clangourous, discordant, hideous - drifting upstairs from the basement kitchen.

He finds her sitting at the table, a vast expanse of scrubbed pine, drawing on a pad open before her, and drinking coffee. Seeing him, she reaches behind her to turn the music down, to near inaudibility.

She stands, and opens her arms. They embrace. And for a long moment, neither of them speaks.

"So," he says, eventually.

"So," she replies.

"So," he says again. This is a kind of joke between them, obscure in origin, but possibly a satire on the limitations of language, in the face of heightened emotion.

"Coffee," she says, and breaks off to pour him a small but extravagantly potent cup.

He sips it, sitting beside her. Its concentrated bitterness shrivels the inside of his mouth and throat, but it tastes of love to him. She picks up her pencil, and continues to draw, her left hand still resting on his knee. Today's papers are on the table, at the far end, where she has unthinkingly put them. But he doesn't even glance in their direction. Instead, he watches her draw, trying to guess, like a child, what the blizzard of intersecting lines and smudges will resolve itself into. She glances at him from time to time, as if gauging what he needs from her, and whether there is anything she can say that will be of comfort to him.

Then, after a few minutes, she says, decisively, laying down her pencil, "So. Come on. You look gorgeous in that, but we need to get you dressed."

She stands, and holds out her paint-encrusted hand for him. He takes it obediently, and she leads him upstairs.

\*

About 20 minutes later, My Father - washed, dressed, but (very unusually) not shaven - is leaving the house with the Woman He Loves. They turn left out of the front door, hurrying past the house of the Celebrated Polymath, before crossing the road, heading towards the tube station. The Award-Winning Foreign Correspondent, who lives opposite, is approaching on his bike, but My Father and the Woman He Loves only wave, and continue on their way. (Normally, they would be eager to engage with their

distinguished neighbours, but today My Father can't face the inevitable commiserations and rueful where-did-it-all-go-wrongs.)

They walk northward up Camden Road. She clings, with both hands, to his arm, in a way he likes. (So different from My Mother's schoolteacherly hand-holding.) It is hot, and overpoweringly humid. A busy North London Friday evening thrums and thunders around them. And yet, for both of them, there is a sense of being alone, together, in a state of isolation; a place where the sights and sounds surrounding them can be seen and heard, but have no real substance or significance.

"Where are you taking me?" he asks.

"Can't you guess?"

"Tell me."

"Come on!" She tugs on his arm, as if to hurry him towards their unknown destination. But although My Father loves the Woman He Loves, he is not in the mood for games.

"Tell me," he says again.

"I'm taking you to my studio," she says. "Everything's ready now. Well, very nearly. I want you to see it."

Of course, My Father has seen her work before. The walls of her house are covered with her paintings and drawings. But until now, her studio - where she has been creating and curating her first proper exhibition - has been a sanctum, its location secret. This feels momentous, and for a moment, My Father is unsure how to respond.

"Come on," she says, tugging on his arm again. "It isn't far from here."

\*

"So, a bit of a cock-up, Prime Minister?"

"I'm afraid it was, Your Majesty."

"What went wrong? You seemed so confident beforehand."

"Well, it's rather soon to say, Ma'am. But I think I was badly advised. Or, at least, chose to take bad advice."

"On the style of your campaign? I heard Mr Dimbleby asking you about that earlier."

"I meant on the timing of the election, Ma'am. I think the result might have been different if we had left it until the autumn, when the strength of the economy would have been more evident."

"But some commentators thought you were a little.... *presidential*, PM?"

"Perhaps. I hope you didn't feel I was treading on your toes?"

"Not at all, Prime Minister. Well, only a little!"

"In any case, Ma'am, I am here to tender my resignation to Your Majesty, which I do with my deepest respect and gratitude.... "

\*

My Father and the Woman He Loves walk on, through Kentish Town, and as she turns right into a tree-lined residential street, the first ponderous drops of rain fall, detonating on the pavement, causing it, almost immediately, to release its heady sun-baked [fume-infused fragrance](#). Neither of them is wearing a coat, but the rain is warm and feels benedictory. They laugh, and only slightly quicken their pace.

"We're here," she says, peering into her shoulder bag, for her keys. They are standing outside a tall narrow North London house, not notably different from her own.

Inside, the hallway is dark and cool, and hung with tapestries of Indian aspect. She makes to lead him upstairs, but before they can begin their ascent, a figure appears from one of the ground floor rooms, presumably the

house's owner; a tiny woman, with the prematurely wizened features of an heroic lifelong smoker, and a cloud of fairly-obviously-dyed black hair.

"Hello, you," she says, with evident warmth, to the Woman My Father Loves, before transferring her attention to him. "And hello, *My Father* - for I assume it is none other?"

Normally, at this moment in his life, My Father would not wish to be introduced to anyone. But, in this instance, he faces a dilemma. Because his lack of inclination to make polite conversation is counter-balanced by the fact that the tiny woman is an extremely famous best-selling novelist, and [My Father's lust for distinction](#) and celebrity knows no bounds.

Luckily, the Woman He Loves takes charge, barely allowing him to shake hands before ushering him upstairs, explaining to her friend (which is what the Famous Novelist clearly is, though My Father cannot conceive of keeping such an illustrious friendship secret) that they are on important business, and pressed for time.

"Don't mind me, you young lovers," rasps the Famous Novelist. "I only live here."

At the top of the house, up three flights of stairs, My Father and the Woman He Loves come to a door, which she pushes open, standing aside to let him enter the room first. He is in her studio. It's a large converted attic, running the entire length of the house, which would be flooded with northern light, if not for the fact that the rain is now beating down on the skylight windows, from a louring dark violet sky.

He looks at her, unsure what she wants from him, but she only holds out her hand, in a help-yourself gesture. And so he looks at her paintings, which fill the room - some wall-mounted in sequences, as they will be hung in the gallery; other canvases, not yet framed, piled up against each other; one unfinished, still on her easel. They are landscapes, of varying sizes, and falling into two distinct groups. Most are of Wiltshire, where the Woman My Father Loves has, for years, spent her weekends, in a cottage in the grounds of the vast house belonging to her friend the Distinguished Theatre



Director. A smaller but still substantial group depict the Tuscan *campana*, where she passes her summers. To My Father's non-expert eye, there are some that seem familiar, but many more that he assumes are new, which seem to have an even bolder, more urgently kinetic quality. My Father loves her art; is unable to imagine anything more beautiful to the eye, or stirring to the soul.

She comes and stands beside him, then takes his hand and leads him to the far end of the room, where there is a small concealed alcove. In it, hang four portraits - of the Famous Novelist, the Celebrated Polymath, the Distinguished Theatre Director, and My Father.

She looks up at him, to see how we will respond. Satisfyingly, for her, he is dumb-struck. For the first and probably only time in his life, he is rendered speechless and breathless by the power of visual art. He feels as if he has been punched in the stomach by God.

First, of course, there are the pictures themselves. She has never painted portraits before (or, if she has, he has never seen them), and these are extraordinary. Small in scale, they seem to pulse with their subjects' creative energy. My Father, the wordsmith, lacks the vocabulary to describe them. But, if pressed, he would say it looks as if she has painted multiple portraits of each sitter before somehow overlaying them upon each other. Instantly recognisable as likenesses, the three well known faces seem to swim in and out of focus, oscillating between extreme familiarity and disconcerting strangeness.

And then there is the fact of her having chosen to include My Father in this company. He is enough of a realist to recognise that, in the eyes of the world, his achievements do not qualify him to occupy the same wallspace as the Famous Novelist, the Celebrated Polymath, and the Distinguished Theatre Director. Today of all days, he - the Publicity Adviser Who Lost the Election - is aware that his unlimited potential remains unfulfilled. But she believes in him. The Woman He Loves (who must know that these portraits will be the main talking-point among visitors to the fashionable Cork Street gallery where her exhibition will be) has not hesitated to make a public

declaration of her complete and unwavering faith in his exceptional capacities.

Lastly, there is the way she has shown him. No, the way she has seen him. Although My Father is quite tightly framed, he is recognisably sitting in her subterranean kitchen. He is glancing up from a newspaper, looking out from under his increasingly luxuriant eyebrows, directly into the lens (he remembers her taking the photos now), and his gaze is suffused with need, and longing, and love. Somehow, she has seen in him everything he ever has been, emotionally; [the permanently hungry boy](#), thousands of miles from a home he will never return to; [the young man](#), avid to believe ambition and achievement can satisfy the endless yearning within him; [the man he was when he met her](#), drunk, desperate and frighteningly close to admitting defeat; and the current work-in-progress version of himself, the man he is now becoming, if he can only resolve the conflict between love and duty still tearing him apart.

As he gazes at himself, she puts her arms around him, and presses her body into him, hard.

"So," she says, again. And this time it's somewhere between an interrogative and an imperative.

What she doesn't say is, and now, my love, you cannot doubt I see you, and know you, as no one else ever can, and you have found your home, and we must cease this trifling and become real, so that the life we are going to make for ourselves together can begin. But My Father understands, in his heart as well as in his mighty brain, that the Woman He Loves will be denied no longer.

\*

Later, My Father and the Woman He Loves sit at her kitchen table, sharing a herb omelette that she has thrown together in seconds. There is no bread, or accompanying salad, because she has been far too busy with her exhibition to shop. But it's the first food to pass My Father's lips in what seems like weeks, and like everything she has ever cooked for him, it tastes

not just better than anything similar he has eaten before, but delicious to a previously unimaginable degree.

\*

The now Ex-PM and his wife are also having eggs for supper - though, in their case, soft-boiled with soldiers. They are in the butler's sitting room at [Chequers](#), which the new PM has generously loaned them for a few days, because they have nowhere else to go.

Their sons have returned to their families now, and the staff have been given the weekend off, in honour of the election. So they must fend for themselves. They could, if they chose, be eating in the ceremonial dining room, which is roughly the size of Wimbledon's Centre Court. But on this day of defeat, the most brilliant politician of his era and the woman he loves feel more comfortable here, below stairs.

\*

Later still, in the master bedroom of her high-ceilinged detached home in Worplesdon, My Mother gulps down a handful of Seconal. In the now unlikely event of My Father returning home tonight, she is determined that he will find her sleeping peacefully.

\*\*\*\*\*

**Saturday**  
**20 June 1970**  
**11:40**



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*My Father calculates the possible refund on his season ticket*

My Father is good at mental arithmetic. And right now, gazing sightlessly out of the train window, as the south London suburbs slide by - Raynes Park, Berrylands, New Malden, Surbiton - he is engaged in a calculation. If he paid £389 19s 6d for his annual season ticket at the beginning of November - and he is fairly sure he did; My Father is good with money, too - how much might he be entitled to by way of refund, if he cashes it in now? At first sight, it looks easy. If he rounds it up to [£390](#), all he needs to do is divide by three - since he has had near-as-dammit eight of the 12 months paid for. Which would mean a refund of around £130; definitely worth having. But My Father - who is also good with small print - is almost certain that refunds on annual season tickets are not made on a *pro rata* basis, instead diminishing with every month that passes. He suspects he will be lucky to get 15% back, which of course would come to a little over £60. Still a sum not to be sneezed at; enough to take the Woman He Loves for a weekend at that idiosyncratically run little hotel in Devon she likes so

much. But what if the refund were only, say, 13.5%? What, exactly, would the amount returned be then?

My Father is doing hard sums to distract himself from the very much more difficult task that lies ahead of him today. Ending his marriage to My Mother. Well, perhaps he doesn't actually have to do it today. But the Woman He Loves has made it clear he will not be welcome in her tall narrow house - or indeed in her wide fragrant bed - until he has definitively unencumbered himself of My Mother. She has not presented this ultimatum explicitly. But she has driven him across London, to see him onto his train at Waterloo; and, in taking leave of him, she has whispered, fiercely, "Real. Now." And then she has pressed her index finger against his lips, hard, to signify that the only response acceptable to her requires action from him, not words.

And so here he is, on this achingly familiar journey from [Waterloo to Worplesdon](#) - which, he quickly calculates, he must have made roughly 3200 times - on his way to commit an act of emotional demolition. He is going to blow up a family. He imagines he must feel a little like a terrorist smuggling a lethally charged briefcase into a crowded café; certain that his cause is righteous, but appalled by the necessary carnage he is about to unleash.

Is his mission really so terrible, though? Perhaps he is being melodramatic? Marriages, after all, break up every day - many of them as long as his, or even longer - without fatal consequences. His children, it's true, are younger - particularly My Father's Daughter - than they would ideally be, at this transitional moment in their lives. But they will survive; children are famously resilient. And he will still be their father. In fact, he tells himself, he may well be a better father to them - kinder, more engaged, more interested in their hobbies, and so on - once he is no longer linked to them via his failed and toxic relationship with their mother. For a moment, he imagines himself taking his daughter to Hamley's, or standing on the boundary at one of his younger son's cricket matches, exchanging knowledgeable comments with other parents ("Looks like it's doing a bit out there?"), or even attending one of his elder son's "gigs" (preferably

accompanied by the Woman He Loves, who will be able to advise him on correct etiquette at such events).

But it's no good; the ticking from the briefcase is getting louder, drowning out My Father's attempts to soothe himself. He feels, as he has felt so often throughout his adult life, in danger of being sucked down below the surface of a swirling sea of sadness (oh what a terrible thing!), guilt (oh how can I do such a terrible thing?) and self-pity (oh why do I have no choice but to do such a terrible thing?). He feels, more strongly still, that he needs a drink, before he gets home. And how incongruous that last word sounds to him, as he thinks it. He supposes that the spacious detached family house in Worplesdon that he owns must once have fulfilled that role in his life, but the only place on earth where he can now imagine feeling at home is in the immediate vicinity of the Woman He Loves, wherever she happens to be.

The train's brakes [tighten and take hold](#), as it approaches Woking. For a moment, My Father considers breaking his journey here, for refreshment. But even in his current desperate state of alcoholic depletion, the prospect of walking the desolate streets of Woking in of search of a drink is just too grim to contemplate. A better idea occurs to him. He'll stay on the train until Guildford, where he knows a pub or two. He won't drink much. Just enough to take the edge off. Just enough to stop him experiencing quite so intensely all the emotions that every second of the 44 years he has lived and breathed and walked the earth has resulted in him feeling at this moment now. He is pretty sure a couple of drinks, maybe three, will do it.

\*

My Father has been proved correct! He is sitting in the almost deserted lounge bar of the Jolly Farmer, where he has just completed his third drink (well, his third proper drink; his three large Scotches have been accompanied by a similar number of glasses of a surprisingly decent Côtes de Provence rosé, for purely thirst-quenching purposes), and yes, he does feel a lot better.

In fact, he allows himself a small rueful grin as he remembers the terrible state he was in, so recently, on the train. But, really, why? Now that he is

thinking calmly and logically again, the situation seems much more manageable. What he needs to do, he realises with dazzling clarity, is control the flow of information; something he has done successfully countless times in his professional life. My Mother must be made aware, immediately, that he will no longer be even semi-resident in Worplesdon; but, for the time being, there is no requirement at all for her to know about the Woman He Loves, whose existence can be introduced into the conversation, incidentally, incrementally, over the coming weeks and months. Maybe by Christmas - which seems impossibly distant - My Mother will know he has left her for another woman. Or, wait a moment, perhaps by then it will be possible to present the Woman He Loves as a recent arrival in his life; someone he has met, and become involved with, since his relocation to London, back in June? In any case, the line, for now, is that My Father and My Mother are separating because their preferred lifestyles have become incompatible and and, more specifically, because the pursuit of his career goals requires him to be (temporarily at least) London-based.

It's true there are certain practical difficulties in maintaining this position that will need to be overcome. Like, where will he tell My Mother that he is living? Spending the odd night on Ian's sofa-bed has served him well, but he probably shouldn't expect her to believe that he has moved in permanently with his non-existent colleague. Such niggling details can wait, though! He will come up with something plausible-sounding, as and when required. He has lied to My Mother throughout their marriage, so it seems uncontroversial to him that he should continue to do so as their relationship enters this new disaggregated phase.

But what does bother him is the knowledge that he will also have to deceive the Woman He Loves. Because her clearly stated aim ("Real. Now.") is fundamentally irreconcilable with his newly devised strategy of gradual disentanglement. She must believe that he has severed ties with My Mother; and she will only believe this if she is satisfied that My Mother understands she has been replaced as My Father's official consort by her, the Woman He Loves. This will, of course, soon be the case. But for the duration of the transitional period that My Father now envisages, he will have no choice

but to protect the feelings of the Woman He Loves by concealing certain aspects of the situation they regrettably find themselves in. He feels sad that he will have to do this - the love between him and the Woman He Loves has been so pure and true until now - but certain there is no other practicable option. And he's pretty sure he can get away with it. After all, how is the Woman He Loves ever going to know what passes between him and My Mother?

\*

Two or three drinks later - certainly not more than four - My Father feels he is ready to go home, and do what needs to be done. He is definitely not drunk, but he does feel more resolute, more sure of himself, less fearful of consequences, than he did earlier on the train.

Returning to the station, he finds he has just missed the 4.24, which means he will have to wait almost an hour for the next Worplesdon train. So he takes a taxi. It will cost him the best part of three quid, but he knows he needs to take advantage of the can-do spirit he is currently imbued with, while it lasts.

In the taxi, nosing its way through Guildford's unexpected light-industrial suburbs, figures once again flit through his consciousness - specifically, 20 and 24 - though this time, he is not immediately aware what it is they quantify. 20? 24? What could they mean? Twenty-four, he supposes, must be the train he has just missed. And 20 could, of course, be today's date. But what's significant about either of them? And what do they have to do with each other?

And now it comes to him. My Father is good with dates. He never forgets a birthday. He could tell you what day of the week the Armistice was signed. And yet somehow, until this moment, it has eluded him that on [the 24th of June](#) - in four days' time - he will have been married to My Mother for 20 years. It's their 20th anniversary! And, far from planning to whisk his wife away to some romantic spot in which to celebrate this milestone, he has spent today concocting a scheme for ending their marriage, without her knowing it.



A crushing weight of guilt and despair descends upon him, pinning him to the back seat of the taxi. How has his life come to this? How can a man so good and kind and generous-spirited and exceptionally able be about to commit an act so cruelly despicable? And, worst of all, how can his memory - that mighty organ, widely renowned for near-supernatural retentiveness - have let him down so badly? He has no answers.

"Say when, chief," says the taxi driver, slowing down as they near their destination.

"Just up here on the right," murmurs My Father. "Opposite the white gates."

\*

## 17.10

### *My Father feels like a stranger in his own home*

My Father has lost his keys (My Father has never not lost his keys), so he goes round to the back garden, and lets himself in through the kitchen door, which is always open. Inside, he senses immediately that he is alone in the house. Of course, it's possible that My Father's Elder Son is upstairs in his room, absorbed in translating the passage of Tacitus that he has to hand in tomorrow. Or that My Mother is in the sitting room, enjoying Iris Murdoch's latest with a cup of tea. So My Father calls out, "Hello? It's me!" But he has lived here for nearly 10 years, and there is something in the quality of the silence that tells him he won't receive any response.

He doesn't. And now My Father stands in the high-ceilinged kitchen of the spacious family residence that belongs to him, wondering what to do next. It occurs to him that My Mother may have deliberately vacated the house, to ensure his home-coming goes unwelcomed, unremarked. But he dismisses this possibility on the grounds that he has given her no warning of his arrival. (Wrongly. My Mother has made complex deductions about his likely movements, and, based on these, arranged for herself, and their children, to be out as much as possible over the weekend.) He supposes

(rightly) that she may be watching My Father's Younger Son play cricket, as he does on Saturday afternoons in summer.

Leaving his canvas hold-all on the kitchen table, he crosses the hall into the sitting room. My Mother's current book (not Iris Murdoch, but Elizabeth Bowen) is on a side-table by her favoured armchair, but otherwise, there is little evidence of family life. On their infrequent forays from their own rooms, My Father's Sons generally raid the kitchen for food, or watch TV in the playroom. Little used, this sitting room is large and airy, and filled with sunshine on a June afternoon. Yet to My Father, today, it seems dingy and depressing. The art on the walls - a seascape, some irises in a vase, an old drawing of My Mother by her Talented Younger Brother - is laughably bad; the furniture looks both careworn and garish; the carpet pattern vulgar. My Father thinks of the tall narrow house inhabited by the Woman He Loves, every *objet* and item of decor curated by her, and wonders how he could ever have endured living here.

My Father needs a drink. He must not, on any account, be drunk whenever My Mother returns. But, equally, he needs to remain topped-up, if he is to give a good account of himself in their preliminary skirmishes. He has no intention of embarking on The Conversation about their future as a family until tomorrow, when they will have the entire day before them. But he fully expects My Mother to go on the offensive from the moment of their reunion. My Father strides purposefully upstairs, in search of the bottle he keeps in the drawer of his desk, in his study overlooking the garden.

He sits at his desk, surrounded by Himalayan mounds of unprocessed paperwork - My Father does not keep a tidy workstation - and drinks exactly the right amount. And then he shuffles into his daughter's bedroom, which is next to his study, where he sits down on the bed, alongside her Gonk and Threadbear, a geriatric teddy she has inherited from her older brothers. On the wall is a selection of dinosaur posters, not far off life-size. And, if My Father knew it, Sasha and Paul are still gasping for oxygen in the toybox at the foot of the bed.

He wonders where his beautiful daughter is. Presumably with My Mother, wherever she may be. And now, perhaps for the first time, the sadness of the

situation he finds himself in really grips My Father by the heart. He must, as an urgent imperative, start a new life with the Woman He Loves. No less unequivocally, he needs to break free from My Mother, whom he no longer loves. (Did he ever? His head aches and spins with the effort of trying to remember the early days of their relationship, when he knows, for a historic fact, that he considered himself happy.) But his children! His poor children! And especially his poor, poor not-yet-9-year-old daughter! No one could accuse My Father of not loving his children. And he has no difficulty at all conjuring up images of happy times he has spent with them, admittedly mostly in the fairly distant past. He sees himself bathing his infant daughter in a yellow plastic tub, while she chuckles and tries in vain to grasp bubbles with her fat little hands; playing in the garden with all three of his children, dousing them with a hosepipe so thoroughly that their squeals and shrieks of laughter are almost painful; teaching his sons to play Pontoon, the only useful skill he acquired during National Service. He *was* [a loving father!](#) No, he *is* a loving father! So [much more loving than his father was](#) to him! And yet here he is, with his hand on the detonator, about to blow up their lives. He has failed, utterly, catastrophically, in his family life just as he has failed, horribly, publicly, in his professional life. My Father weeps.

With his head in his hands, he slumps sideways, pushing Threadbear aside, and allowing his head to rest on his daughter's cool pillow. Perhaps he has drunk just a little too much. With the tears still dribbling down his cheeks, and into his ears, My Father goes to sleep.

\*

Some time later, My Mother returns with My Father's Younger Son, who is depressed because he has bowled poorly, and goes straight up to his room. My Mother finds My Father's hold-all on the kitchen table, and calls out to him in greeting. Receiving no answer, she swiftly and methodically searches his bag. It contains nothing obviously incriminating. Only clothes, and a loose toothbrush. But what isn't in it tells a story. Because if My Father has now returned to the bosom of his family after a period of enforced absence, why hasn't he brought at least three more suits that are no

longer in his wardrobe upstairs, not to mention half a dozen shirts and most of his underwear, which are also missing? And where is his washbag?

Torn between terror and an unfamiliar feeling which may be rage, [My Mother hums](#) calmly to herself as she moves through the house, in search of My Father.

She finds him, still asleep in their daughter's room, her Gonk nestled up against his face.

"Good heavens," she says, loudly and cheerfully. "How honoured we are - you're finally home!"

\*

The evening passes in a bizarre simulacrum of domestic normality. My Mother has a very different conception of the big conversation that needs to take place, but, like My Father, she has scheduled it for tomorrow. So, until then, difficult topics - anything relating, however tangentially, to My Father's three-week absence or his plans for the future - are off-limits, and My Mother will be forced to fall back on her virtuosic mastery of the art of filling dead air with words.

"Do you think you will be well enough to eat supper?" she asks My Father, solicitously, when he eventually emerges from their daughter's room, and trails downstairs to join her in the kitchen.

"When have you ever known me not well enough to eat?" he says, adopting a jocular tone that has never previously played any part in their relationship. "And anyway, I'm not unwell, just tired."

This is dangerous, because his fatigue is due to his exertions during the campaign, which must not be spoken of. So My Mother says brightly, "Why don't you have a bath, while I get supper. And don't worry about clearing up all the mess. I'll do it. I've had plenty of practice."

"That would be nice," he says, dead-batting her reference to his well-deserved reputation for leaving the bathroom looking like a typhoon-

ravaged flood-zone.

A little later, they and My Father's Younger Son sit uncomfortably round the kitchen table, sharing a [Vesta chicken curry](#) that she has prepared. My Mother is talking about My Father's Daughter, who, very unusually, is staying the night with a schoolfriend, just around the corner.

"Goodness knows how she will cope," says My Mother, with maternal concern. "She cried all morning, so of course I told her she didn't have to go through with it unless she was quite sure she wanted to. She insisted she did. But she went off looking like a wet weekend, clutching her little bag - which reminded me of when I was evacuated, of course. I do hope it goes well. I'm half-expecting to get a call in the middle night, from that awful woman - Sadie's mother, I mean. It's all really rather heart-breaking, but I do hope it will be good for her confidence!"

What My Mother doesn't mention is that it was her idea for My Father's Daughter to spend this almost unprecedented night away from home, and that she has pushed the scheme through against strong resistance from all parties, because she knows My Father will be looking forward to seeing his youngest child.

The curry is gloopy on the plate, claggy in the mouth, and supernaturally salty. They eat it warily, feeling like gastronomic pioneers. My Father, heroically, does not open a bottle of wine. My Mother turns her attention to My Father's Elder Son, who has left earlier in the day to prepare for his band's gig tonight.

"Goodness knows when he has time for any school work," she says, glumly. "He's always playing that wretched guitar, or off practising with his friends."

One thing My Mother and My Father agree on is their elder son's limitless academic potential, and the threat posed to its fulfilment by his obsession with music.

My Mother goes on, "I talked to that dreadful little squit who teaches him Latin, at the most recent of many parents' evenings that you have been

unavoidably prevented from attending, and he was in despair about his grade next year. No chance whatsoever of an 'A', he said. So no chance of him doing Greats, if he goes on like this."

She says this with relish, because she knows My Father's biggest regret is his own failure to read Greats (Latin and Greek) at Oxford, an intellectual challenge he shirked in favour of the far less prestigious study of Modern Greats (Politics, Philosophy and Economics). He craves redemption through his brilliant elder son.

"Well," he corrects her, "it'll depend on the impression he makes at interview. If they like him, they'll make him a low offer."

"We'll see," she says, on an ominous descending inflection; a way she has of bringing an unsatisfactory strand of conversation to a resoundingly downbeat conclusion.

My Father's Younger Son, who is a fussy eater, is looking miserable, and redistributing his food around his plate, in the hope of making it appear he has eaten more than he has.

"You look as if you've found sixpence and lost a shilling, as my grandmother used to say," My Mother tells him, unanswerably.

He says nothing.

"Go on," she says, with weary resignation. "Go and make yourself a Marmite sandwich. We'll pretend we haven't noticed. Go on, you must be hungry after playing cricket. Go on!"

He doesn't move, or speak. But My Mother is relentless.

"Of course, I know why you are sunk in gloom. It's because you think you bowled badly. But you didn't - I know that for a fact. I talked to Mr Williamson while you were bowling. I asked him why they kept on hitting the ball all over the place, when you were trying so hard. And he told me that it was nothing to do with you bowling badly; it was just one of those days when the other school had all the luck. He told me he was quite sure

that you would bounce back, and be better for it! So, you see, it wasn't anything to do with you bowling badly."

My Father feels he should step in. But all he can think of to say is, "You know, this stuff really isn't so bad. Indian food is very 'in' in London right now."

"Well, you'd know about that," snaps My Mother.

My Father's Younger Son lays down his fork as quietly as possible, and leaves the table to make himself a Marmite sandwich.

\*

After supper, My Mother and My Father's Younger Son watch TV together in the playroom. She hands him the remote control, which she hasn't yet learnt to operate, and invites him to choose between the *Val Doonican Show* on BBC 1 and *A Man Called Ironside* on BBC 2 (she does not approve of ITV). The remote rattles like a burst of machine gun fire, and My Father's Younger Son has made this difficult decision. In tribute to the Beatles, at this moment of their disintegration, the becardiganed Irishman is crooning a medley of their hits: *All My Loving* segueing into *Paperback Writer* into *Lady Madonna* into *Yesterday*. My Father's Younger Son lacks the historical perspective to understand that he is witnessing the death of the 1960s dream, but knows what he sees on the screen is unspeakably sad.

My Father has already escaped to his study, taking with him the newspapers, which he has managed to avoid until now, as self-punishment. He will read every word of news and editorial before he lies down to sleep on the divan next to his desk, which is where he has passed every night he has spent in this house within living memory.

\*

Later, while My Father sleeps deeply, My Mother lies awake on her side of the marital bed, poised on the lip of the central trench excavated by his much greater weight, over many years. She has not taken her usual nightly

Secondal, because she is half-expecting the phone to ring. Well, perhaps more like three-quarters-expecting.

\*

My Father's Daughter is not asleep either. Less than half a mile away, in her friend's pony-themed bedroom, she is in the upper bunk - which Sadie has kindly allowed her to have - wishing she was safe at home in her own bed. She wants to go to the loo, but doesn't dare get up (and can't remember where the loo is, anyway). She wants a drink of water. Her tummy hurts, and she feels sick. She wants to cry.

She knows she is being silly - very silly indeed - but she wants to call her mummy and ask her to come and take her home. And her mummy said she could ask Sadie's mum to do that, if she felt sad or scared. But she doesn't dare ask Sadie's mum, who is probably asleep. And she knows somehow that if she did, it would make her mummy sad.

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**Sunday**  
**17 June 1970**  
**09:35**



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*My Father and My Mother discuss the future of their marriage*

"Tarry awhile, my lord. I would'st have speech with thee!"

Oh fuck, thinks My Father, not that! Since their earliest days together, when she was studying English Literature at Oxford, My Mother has made a habit of lapsing into mock-Shakespearean at times of heightened tension between them. It's an affectation My Father has come to hate - and fear, too, because it invariably means she is about to say something that she is unable to utter in her own voice. Normally, in recent years, his response has been simply to ignore her; to give her absolutely no encouragement. But today, he is keenly aware that a deeply uncomfortable conversation - the most uncomfortable he will ever be party to - is exactly what he needs to initiate. So instead of taking his coffee (Maxwell House - so nasty and unsophisticated!) and escaping to his study, as he was planning to do, he sits down diagonally

opposite her at the kitchen table, where she has been having breakfast, and says, through gritted teeth:

"Speak on, my lady."

And so it begins, the conversation that will determine the course of their future lives. Each of them is prepared for it. In My Father's case, he has been imagining, in detail, what they will both say when this moment comes, for many months; and for years before that, he has buffed and burnished phrases and whole sentences for use in a situation of exactly this kind. And, of course, he is a renowned wordsmith, acknowledged by his peers to be one of London's most highly skilled purveyors of persuasive language. Yet, when it comes to dictating the course of this coming colloquy, My Father knows he is no match for My Mother.

Throughout her life, in any situation that can be foreseen, My Mother knows exactly what she intends to say. These days, for the vast majority of daily interactions, she no longer needs to give this conscious thought. She has in her head an extensive library of standard scripts ready for use, with a minimum of on-the-spot adaptation, at a moment's notice.

When the milkman makes his monthly visit for payment, for example, she will always start with surprise at seeing him ("Good heavens, that time again already?"), before making a comment, personalised to him, about the weather ("I don't envy your job on days like this!"), before glancing at the bill he gives her, and remarking positively on the excellent value that milk represents ("that's really not a lot when you think how good it is for young bones!"), before enquiring, as she hands over the cash, about after his family ("and I hope the little one is thriving?"), before, as he gives her change, cutting the conversation short with one of three egalitarian-sounding excuses ("something boiling on the hob/kitchen floor half-cleaned/youngest in bed with a sniffle and in need of hot drink").

And then there are less routine encounters - like the one she is about to have with My Father - which require a more bespoke approach, with meticulous and highly detailed pre-scripting. In either case, though, her goal is the same: to extinguish any possibility of spontaneity; to nullify any attempt on

the part of her interlocutor to make a genuine human connection; to head off any twists or turns in the conversation that may threaten to take it towards an unexpected destination.

"I'm so sorry about . . . that," says My Mother, directing her gaze towards the Sunday papers, spread out carelessly on the table.

Bizarrely, they have fallen open in such a way that all the most apocalyptic post-election headlines are clearly displayed, forming a kind of montage. Words like **CALAMITY, DISASTER** and **HUMBLED** jostle with more thoughtful questions, such as **WHAT WENT WRONG?** and **Where next for sorry Labour?**

"You must be so desperately disappointed?" she continues, with warm concern.

Does My Mother feel the faintest qualm of conscience about weaponising the election defeat that she has, in a very small way, helped to bring about? Perhaps, in purely political terms, she does. Her allegiance to Labour is an important part of the person she has become, and can't have been lightly cast aside. But what she felt in that polling booth on Thursday - an overwhelming need to wield her vote *against* My Father's withdrawal from family life, *against* his ridiculous renewed political ambitions, *against* his betrayal of everything they have built together - was a hundred times more powerful than her loyalty to the People's Party.

My Father hasn't spoken yet, but already he feels control of the conversation starting to slip away from him. All he can do in response to My Mother's opening thrust is try to depersonalise the disappointment a little.

"Well, of course, we were all hugely disappointed."

"And it was so *completely* unexpected?"

My Father can only bring himself to grunt affirmatively at this.

"*Everyone* was so sure we were going to win," My Mother goes on - her use of the first person plural shameless, in the circumstances.

My Father's mind is racing now. How can he bridge from here to a calm and kind exposition of the reasons why he needs to leave his family? Even to a man of his exceptional abilities, it doesn't seem possible.

"Not everyone," he says. "In the last week so, there were definite signs. Particularly when they went for us on devaluation - "

"And the Tories were so hopeless, weren't they? Everyone said so. Which must make it so much worse?"

And now, like a chess player foreseeing inevitable defeat half a dozen moves ahead, My Father understands exactly what My Mother is doing. She is administering a punishment beating with the Failure Stick. Partly, of course, in retribution for his past misdeeds. But, equally clearly, it's also pre-emptive; a strong and unequivocal statement that from now on, he will be on a much shorter leash, as far as extra-curricular political activities - and anything else not strictly essential to his role as family breadwinner - are concerned. My Mother is bringing My Father to heel.

This is disastrous, My Father realises. Because if he is not going to tell My Mother about the Woman He Loves (and he definitely wants to postpone that revelation for as long as possible), how can he make a case for his relocation to London that isn't based on the absolute necessity for him to pursue his career from a position close to the seat of power? And if he is now, officially, a useless defeated drudge, what career does he have to pursue? Why shouldn't he spend the next 20 years commuting, brain-dead, to his dull job, from Worplesdon? My Father knows he must counter-attack, now.

"We were all hugely disappointed," he repeats, in a more resolute tone. "But we're pretty confident this government can't last. We'd certainly be hoping for another election fairly soon. Maybe within two years."

There is some truth in this. Along with many pundits, My Father believes the new administration, with its fairly slender majority, will be short-lived.

And it has occurred to him, too, that there will probably be a few safe Labour seats up for grabs very soon, as senior backbenchers, faced with a thankless spell in opposition, consider their career options. (The peerage route to high office, he realises, even in his more optimistic moments, is no longer open to him.)

"Really?" says My Mother, with enormous solicitude. "And if that should turn out to be the case, I suppose the Ex-PM would certainly want the same team running his campaign?" Again, as she speaks, her glance rakes the newspaper headlines.

My Father, as so often throughout their marriage, is left almost breathless by how vicious she can be. But he knows he can't back down.

"Well, I think there's actually a good chance he might. And hardly anyone is blaming the campaign for what happened on Thursday. But in any case, I'm not sure that's the role I would want for myself, next time."

Surely My Mother is now obliged to ask what role it is he envisages for himself? But no, she is giving My Father nothing. She just repeats "Next time" in a lightly amused and slightly quizzical tone that conveys pitying contempt for such self-delusive thinking, and picks up the *Sunday Times*, which is open on ***LABOUR'S DOOMSDAY!***

So far, the conversation has gone almost exactly as My Mother expects. But now she makes her first mistake. She allows herself a moment to enjoy her success, and perhaps to plan her next move. (She knows exactly what she wants: firm assurances from My Father that his involvement in politics has been conclusively terminated by his humiliating failure on Thursday. But is he ready to give them, or does he need to be softened up a bit more first?) In any case, her brief pause allows My Father to wrench the agenda away from her, by means of a flagrant non-sequitur.

"Which leads me onto something I need to tell you. Something very difficult, I'm afraid...."

And now, barely pausing for breath, to prevent My Mother interrupting, My Father delivers his own prepared script. Calmly and kindly, he explains to

her that, after much reflection, he has decided that, for the time being at least, he needs to be London-based, for pressing career reasons. And that he recognises this will be very difficult for her, although she will surely acknowledge that their needs and wishes have, over a long period, become increasingly incompatible? And that, though it may sound paradoxical, he has reached the conclusion it would be unfair on her to continue as they are now, living separate lives under the same roof. And that, although it may be - no, will be - hard on their children, it goes without saying that he will continue to meet all his paternal, and financial, responsibilities. And that, in fact, he believes he may become a better father, when freed from the confines of a suburban lifestyle that no longer suits him. And that he is very sure that, however she may feel now, she will come to share his belief that this reorganisation of their lives will be of benefit to everyone. And that he intends to implement this difficult decision he has reached with immediate effect.

Connoisseur of dire prognostications and worst-case scenarios though she is, My Mother has not foreseen this. As she listens to him, all the breath leaves her body. She feels as if she has been kicked in the stomach, by a horse. Can her husband really be telling her that he is leaving her?

"But where will you live?" she asks, weakly.

"Well, I've asked Ian if he can put me up for a few nights. But of course I can't camp out on his sofa for long, so I'll probably look for a studio flat."

Damn! He didn't want to tell this lie. At least, not yet. But there was no avoiding it; and now, of course, My Mother is going to ask follow-up questions. Where will the studio flat be? How much will it cost? What will be the sleeping arrangements when the children visit him?

But before she can speak, the phone rings. And this time, it's My Father who is eager to answer it. Sunday morning phone calls are nearly always from journalists. And he suspects this may be Aitken, in search of material for his Tuesday column, which will no doubt dissect the reasons for the PM's defeat.

My Mother, for once in her life, barely responds to the phone. She is staring ahead of her, eyes unfocused, like someone who has just received a heavy blow to the head.

Taking advantage of this, My Father murmurs, "Do you mind?" and leans back in his chair to bring the phone within reach.

It isn't Aitken. It's My Father's Elder Son, in need of a lift. Rather a long distance one. He is by a roundabout on the A303 just outside Andover. It's a long story, but after last night's gig, he and some friends decided to visit Stonehenge to celebrate the Summer solstice. And then one thing led to another. And anyway, now he is on his own, with his bass guitar, which is bloody heavy, and he has been trying to hitch for hours, but no one is stopping. And it's miles to the nearest station, and anyway he doesn't have any money, and he needs to get back in time to see Duster Bennett later, so he wonders if there's any chance at all....

My Father goes. He feels he doesn't have any choice. My Mother is in no fit state to drive. And, in any case, the timing of this emergency call - seconds after he has been piously declaring his determination not to shirk his paternal responsibilities - makes it imperative that he should go to the rescue.

\*

His mission goes smoothly. The Sunday traffic is surprisingly light. And My Father and My Father's Elder Son make their rendezvous without difficulty at a roadside Little Chef, where My Father's Elder Son recovers from his ordeal by putting away a gargantuan [Olympic Breakfast](#).

On the return journey, My Father's Elder Son falls asleep in the passenger seat almost as soon as My Father starts the engine. My Father never knows what to say to his sons, so he is relieved there is no need to make conversation. Instead, as the boat-like Rover glides serenely homeward, through a sunlit Hampshire - and then Berkshire - afternoon, he has time to reflect on his earlier exchange with My Mother.

On the whole, he is satisfied with how it went. He has now done the dauntingly difficult thing he needed to do: he has made her aware that he is leaving her. True, he hasn't been entirely transparent with her about his reasons for doing so, or about his new living arrangements. And of course she hasn't had a chance to respond to what he has told her, because of the timing of My Father's Elder Son's cry for help. But he feels he has acquitted himself reasonably well. He has put his cards - well, most of them - on the table. And he has set in motion the process by which he will bring one chapter in his life to an end, and begin another happier, more successful one.

He wonders what My Mother's next move will be.

\*

When My Father eventually arrives back at the spacious family house in Worplesdon that is no longer his home, he finds My Mother restored to normal functioning. Which is to say that towards My Father's Elder Son, she is jocular and brittle ("An impromptu trip to Stonehenge, how delightful! For everyone except your family!"); and towards My Father, cool and brisk. She has decided to treat his relocation scheme as an absurd whim, which it is probably wiser for others to indulge, until such time as he comes to his senses.

"Well, I'm sure you will be wanting to get back to your sofa-bed in Kilburn? Ian will be expecting you! I suppose you'll be catching the 6.20?"

For a moment, My Father is completely wrong-footed. He has returned braced for a resumption of their earlier conversation, picking up at the point at which it was interrupted. Specifically, he has prepared himself for her rebuttal; a forensic demolition of his arguments in favour of their separation - starting with the obvious weakness of his claim that he currently has career goals that necessitate his urgent relocation to the capital. What career goals? What career? But, in his absence, she seems to have fast-forwarded through all the cut and thrust, jab and parry, that he has envisaged. And instead, here she is, offering him a chance to walk away, right now. But can he take her up on it? Does he owe her, his wife of very nearly 20 years, a



more detailed explanation of the reasons for his desertion? And has he done enough to make the break with her - potentially, at least - definitive? If he leaves now, will he be able to look the Woman He Loves in the eye, and tell her it's done?

The door of the cage stands open. If he hesitates for another moment, it may slam shut.

"Yes, that would be good," he says, looking at his watch. "I think I've got time."

"Don't worry," she says. "I'll give you a lift."

My Mother has decided to call My Father's bluff.

"Daddy," says My Father's Daughter, who has appeared in the kitchen doorway while her parents have been talking.

He holds out his arms to her, and she runs into them, nestling her head against his stomach.

"Come on," says My Mother, to My Father. And to My Father's Daughter, "Your father has a train to catch. He has important work to do in London. On a Sunday evening."

My Father strokes his daughter's hair. How can he leave her?

"When will you be back?" she says.

What reply can he give her?

"Very soon," he says softly, meaning you are my daughter and I love you and I intend to do my best to continue be the father you need me to be though at this moment I have absolutely no idea how that will work or when I will next see you.

"We'll see," says My Mother.

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18:05

*My Father is given a lift to the station by My Mother*

It's only 10 minutes' walk to the station, so My Father has no real need of a lift. But My Mother has insisted. She feels she has responded skilfully to the shocking news of his intended desertion, and gained a decisive advantage by her tactic of supportive compliance. But there is still one subject she needs to raise with him. And now, as she applies all her strength and weight to coaxing the Rover's ponderous tonnage out of Willow Drive and into Poplar Avenue, she addresses it as directly as she is able.

"By the by, sire - thy saucy whore hath honoured me with visitation, some days since!"

My Father's blood turns to liquid nitrogen in his veins. His saucy whore? What the flaming fuck is she talking about? He has absolutely no idea. But he is instantly certain that nothing good can come from this line of conversation. He flails around for something non-self-incriminating to say.

But My Mother has planned this bit of dialogue down to the last comma, and the next line is hers.

"Your mistress! Your fancy woman! Your bit on the side!"

Sometimes My Mother gets stuck, linguistically, in the late 16th century. But on this occasion, having established the topic, she has returned immediately to the present day.

"She turned up on our doorstep just the other day, and invited herself in - as bold as brass!"

Until this point, her eyes have been fixed on the road ahead. But now she glances sideways to see how My Father reacts to this. He is too stunned, and horrified, to be aware that she is looking at him in a way that seems more amused than accusatory. His mighty brain is working at the limits of its capacity, trying to impose order on the information she has presented to him. Could the Woman He Loves really have done this? Surely not. But

then again, she can sometimes be - and it's the one of the things he loves about her - reckless, impulsive, volatile. So no, it's definitely not impossible to imagine her feeling frustrated by his slow progress in escaping his marital ties, and deciding to take matters into her own hands. He can picture her slamming her way through the ancient Volvo's gears *en route* for Worplesdon, hunched over the steering wheel, eyes blazing with righteous revelatory wrath. But if she did take it upon herself to end his marriage, why didn't she warn him?

"And then she sat down in our sitting room, and told me all about your long relationship, and how you'd told her she was the only woman you'd ever really loved, and promised her - hundreds of times, she said - that you would leave your wife to be with her!"

How to respond to this? Panic-stricken, My Father is weighing up his options. Can he simply deny what the Woman He Loves has told My Mother? Or, if not, is there some mitigating plea he can enter? Perhaps he should "come clean" by admitting there was, in the past, some illicit relationship with this unexpected visitor to their home, now long over? But wait, My Father realises, surely the best thing to do would be to simply confess? My Mother will have to know about the Woman He Loves, and fairly soon. So why not acknowledge that his attempts to spare her feelings, at this stage of their separation, have failed, and bring things to a decisive conclusion right now? Suddenly, knowing this to be the correct option, My Father feels a surge of relief. The job he has dreaded has been done for him. All he needs to do is say to My Mother the words he now hears himself articulate:

"I'm so, so sorry I didn't tell you sooner, but I thought it would be...."

But this sentence, wherever it's heading, has no place in the conversation My Mother considers herself to be engaged in.

"Of course, I didn't believe her," she says. "Not for a second! Such a mousey little thing! Definitely not scarlet woman material!"

"No, really," My Father protests. He can't let this chance to make a clean break slip through his fingers. "I'm so sorry, but what she told you is completely - "

"But I thought I should tell you, because I wondered if you might want to report her to the police?"

"No, I'm trying to tell you, she's - "

"Assuming you know who she is, of course? I thought perhaps a former colleague who had become unhealthily obsessed with a much older married man, which I know does happen?"

My Father folds. He knows from long experience that when My Mother has decided on a course of action, or an interpretation of events, there is no force, human or supernatural, capable of making her budge. My Mother believes she has received a visit from a madwoman, possibly with some tenuous historical connection to My Father. And nothing is going to change her position on that.

"Here we are," she says brightly, as she pulls into the manicured forecourt of Worplesdon station. "And just in time."

"Thanks," says My Father, getting out of the car. And then he adds, "I'll call you," because he feels he has to say something.

"That reminds me," says My Mother. "Does Ian still not have a phone?"

"No," says My Father. "Still no phone."

And so their marriage ends.

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**18:45**

### *My Father resists temptation*

On the train, My Father feels sick with shame and remorse. Last Sunday evening, when he made this same journey, everything in his immediate

surroundings, and his entire world, seemed lambent with possibility. Everything he had ever wanted in life - love, happiness, success, recognition, wealth - was not just within his reach, but positively hurtling in his direction. Now, just seven days later, everything seems dull and tarnished. And it's all because of him. Of course, he knows he isn't personally to blame for Thursday. The PM might well have lost even more catastrophically without him. But, despite his exceptional powers, there was nothing he could do to avert disaster. And now his professional reputation stands in smoking ruins. As for how he has handled this... transition in his personal life, My Father bows his head, and raises his hand to massage his luxuriant eyebrows. But nothing can soothe the sense of failure that grips him. He has lied to everyone who loves him, including his children. (When he left just now, he said nothing about the reasons for this departure.) And even when he has tried to tell the truth, he has failed, utterly.

What makes him feel saddest at this moment, though, is his sense that even the safe haven of his love for the Woman He Loves has been polluted. Yes, he finds her lack of restraint appealing, exciting even. But he's shocked by what she has done - and, to be honest, quite pissed off with her. How could she possibly have justified to herself sending him off on the train to face My Mother, without telling him about her visit? What was she thinking? And now, how is he supposed to tell her that My Mother has simply refused to believe her story? And therefore that the most basic precondition for their becoming "real" - the ex-wife knowingly dumped - has not been met? He realises, of course, that this will not be possible, and that he will have to lie to the Woman in Loves. And lie in detail, too, because he knows she will interrogate him about exactly what transpired between him and My Mother; the precise terms on which they parted, and dissolved their partnership. The Woman My Father Loves is not one to be satisfied with airy reassurances.

Of course, My Father is desperate to spend the rest of his life with the Woman He Loves. But, at this instant, it strikes him, with sudden force, that what he really wants, right now, is to be with the Other Woman. He pictures her opening the door to him, as she did just seven days ago. She would be so happy - and surprised - to see him. And being with her, in her drab but really quite cosy flat, would be so uncomplicated! She would pour him a

Scotch, from his special bottle, and run him a bath, with scented oils. And she would ask nothing of him. Nothing at all, beyond the pleasure of spending a few precious hours in his company. Perhaps he should call her when he gets to Waterloo, just to alert her to his imminent arrival - and allow her time to make herself look nice?

But, even as this thought is crossing his mind, My Father knows he is not going to call the Other Woman. Because it would be a bad thing to do. Morally wrong. Unkind. It's less than a week since he brutally terminated their liaison, by post. He knows that only a terrible human being would reactivate her feelings towards him, just for the sake of one night of undemanding comfort, between nylon sheets. And My Father is not a terrible human being. Just a bad man. Which is to say, according to [My Father's world-view](#), a man.

\*

When his train pulls into Waterloo a little later, My Father hurries along the platform and across the concourse, to the row of phone booths behind W H Smith. The call he makes is not to the Other Woman, or the Woman He Loves, but to a small hotel, just off Holborn, that has accommodated him on a number of occasions in the past on nights when he has missed the last train, or claimed to have done so. They have a room. He will stay there tonight. Starting his new life with the Woman He Loves - not yet entirely "real", but becoming so - can wait until tomorrow.

\*

In the Aztec Stadium, in Mexico City, just over 107,000 people suck in their breath as [Pelé rises at the far post](#), and hangs suspended in mid-air for several seconds, just long enough for his forehead to meet the ball, crossed in from the left, with astonishing force, and direct it downwards past the flailing Italian goalkeeper.

In the butler's sitting room at Chequers, the Ex-PM - who, like all football lovers, has switched his allegiance to Brazil following his own team's elimination - punches the air.

In the playroom of the spacious family home in Worplesdon where My Father used to live, his sons react with similar enthusiasm. Neither of them will notice for several days that he has gone.

\*\*\*\*\*

**Monday**  
**22 June 1970**  
**09:35**



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*My Father decides, very unusually, to walk to work*

Predictably, the weather has finally broken, just in time for [Wimbledon](#), which starts today. As My Father leaves his hotel, the sun is shining, but in a watery uncommitted way, and the soul-sapping heat and humidity of the last few weeks have seeped out of the atmosphere. It's a cool and breezy June morning, with the smell of rain in the air, and something almost autumnal about it. No empty cabs in view, My Father decides, very unusually, to walk to work. (My Father is not a fan of unnecessary physical exertion.)

How does he feel, as he turns into High Holborn, and takes his place in the ebbing tide of late-arriving office-workers? Much better than he did last night. The prospect of returning to work, he finds to his surprise, is a lot less depressing than he has expected. It's true, of course, that his exceptional capabilities will never find their fullest expression in the publicity department of a nationalised industry. But, after the vicious and unrelenting hurly burly of three weeks on the campaign trail, the immediate prospect of



spending a little quiet time behind his impressively large desk, in his cosily carpeted corner office on the sixth floor of British Steel House, is by no means unappealing. He needs, he tells himself, a short period of recuperation, before setting out again, refreshed, in pursuit of those glittering prizes. My Father's French is schoolboyish, but from somewhere, the phrase *Reculer pour mieux sauter* pops into his mind.

As for the events of the weekend just past, this morning My Father is feeling cautiously positive. All the doubt, despair, and self-recrimination of last night have melted away. Well, not quite all. He is still keenly aware, of course, that freeing himself from My Mother, and finding new geographically distanced ways of meeting his paternal responsibilities, are massively intractable challenges. He still feels a bit cross with the Woman He Loves, too, for her reckless attempt to accelerate the disintegration of his marriage - though now his anger towards her has an indulgent, even tender, flavour to it. Imagine her loving him so much that she felt driven to do such a thing! And his calculating mind sees a tactical advantage in her misdemeanour.

Perhaps it will allow him to be more open with her about the reality of the current situation, and the necessity for her to regard the destruction of his family as a work-in-progress? Of course, she mustn't know that My Mother has simply refused to believe that she has been replaced in My Father's affections by her recent unexpected visitor. But it might be possible, he speculates, to come up with some kind of true-ish version of events, in which, for example, My Mother knows that he has left her for the Woman He Loves, but not that they will be living as man and wife in a tall narrow North London house. Or, if not that, some other story that will soften the sharp edges of reality, and make his life a bit easier.

My Father does not feel care-free, exactly. But this morning, walking to work under a London sky alive with scudding clouds, he is invigorated by a sense that today, at last, his real life is about to begin.

\*

Sitting at his impressively large desk, twenty minutes or so into his first day back at work, My Father is in rather less buoyant spirits. He has drunk a mug of coffee brought to him by Linda (too milky, like each of roughly 5000 coffees she has made him over the years). He has riffled through his overflowing in-tray: literally nothing of interest, or requiring immediate action. He has cast an eye over his phone messages, and ringed in red a few that will need a response from him, once he has eased back into the swing of things. And he has tried, unsuccessfully, to get Aitken on the phone - which has reminded him sharply that, deprived of close proximity to power, he is a figure of greatly diminished news-value. Suddenly, the restorative benefits of his escape from the lunatic pressures and slavering dog-eat-doggery of high politics seem less enticing.

"You're wanted upstairs at 10.30," says Linda, who has appeared at his side, without noticeably entering the room, in a disconcerting way she has. (My Father sometimes wonders if her highest professional goal is to keep her boss off-balance.)

"Upstairs?" he repeats. "On a Monday?"

The Chairman of the Corporation has his office - or, more accurately, suite of offices - on the floor above. It's unusual for it to be occupied in the early part of the week, or indeed towards the weekend.

Linda smiles, but says nothing. She's been tactfully silent about the election, too, since he arrived this morning, behaving towards him exactly as if he hasn't been away.

"Any idea what it's about?"

"Corby," says Linda. "At least, that's what Penelope thought." (Penelope is the Chairman's all-knowing PA.)

"Ah, Corby," he says, without enthusiasm.

He has, of course, been following the situation at the [Corby steelworks](#) over the last couple of weeks, as it has evolved from a small-scale work-to-rule in support of the union's pay-claim to something very close to an all-out

shutdown. Now it looks as if he will have to roll up his sleeves and join the fray. My Father sighs heavily. He is only 20 minutes' walk from Downing Street, but it feels a million miles away.

"Another coffee?" asks Linda, sympathetically, preparing to dematerialise.

\*

"Ah, *My Father!* Not quite the triumphant homecoming you imagined, I'm afraid?"

The Chairman is wearing tweeds, a sure sign he does not intend to stay in the office for long - an impression reinforced by the fact that he is also swishing a golf club to and fro, experimentally.

"No, Chairman, not at all what I had in mind," says My Father, ruefully.

My Father doesn't know how the Chairman voted on Thursday. He looks every inch a patrician High Tory, but he has chosen to head a nationalised industry, rather than run a merchant bank, which may say something about his politics. In any case, he is well disposed towards My Father, and his manner now is brisk, but broadly sympathetic.

"And now, to make matters worse, I'm going to lob Corby at you!" He mimes tossing a hot potato in My Father's direction.

"I was hoping it might have been resolved by now."

"Sadly not," says the Chairman. "And we're taking tons of flak. Have you seen the *Mirror*?"

My Father is surprised by this. When has the Chairman ever read the papers? Or shown the slightest interest in the management of what is really quite a routine story?

Of course, he has seen the *Mirror*.

"They've laid it on a bit thick," he says, "but I think Martin has handled it pretty well, in my absence."

"Well, I'm putting it firmly in your hands, now that you're back," says the Chairman. "We need some more favourable headlines. Perhaps you should toddle up there, and get a sense of the mood, on the ground?"

"Go to Corby?" says My Father, unable to hide his astonishment. Apart from anything else, he has not the faintest idea where Corby is.

"Up to you, of course," says the Chairman, who seems already to have lost whatever interest he had in the subject, and is swinging his sand wedge again. "I know you'll do what needs to be done. I've every confidence in you."

My Father takes this to mean his audience is at end, and makes to leave. "Thank you, Chairman," he says.

But before he has crossed half the vast acreage of carpet between him and the door, the Chairman remembers something.

"Oh, *My Father*, almost forgot! Rather a tricky subject I need to raise with you...."

My Father knows immediately that this - whatever it turns out to be - is the real reason for the meeting.

"Whispers from the DTI. Very much off the record. But my sources there are telling me this lot are going to push - hard - for denationalisation. ASAP!"

"Well, that comes as no great surprise," says My Father, who is well aware that the new Tory government abhors public ownership, and looks upon nationalised industries such as British Steel roughly as a hungry fox regards an unguarded chicken coop.

"No," says the Chairman, "but I'm afraid this may. The strong rumour is that the new Minister sees your position as untenable. And I have that from a source *very* close to the Minister."

"My position?"

"Yes, I'm afraid they don't much fancy having such a formidable opponent right under their noses. You can see their point, I suppose."

This is kindly put by the Chairman, but what he's telling My Father is that their new political masters will not permit a key supporter of the deposed regime to remain in a position where he can attempt to interfere with their plans.

"But no immediate panic," the Chairman goes on. "It'll take a while for the dust to settle after the election. So you can give yourself a little time, to look around, and find something suited to your talents - which, as you know, I greatly admire and value."

So, although the Chairman will be sorry to lose him, there is nothing he can do about it. My Father will, very shortly, be needing a new job.

"Thank you, Chairman," says My Father again, wondering whether 'a little time to look around' means months or weeks.

\*

Back at his desk, My Father is thinking about lunch. He finds this reassuring. If he were really devastated by what the Chairman has just told him, he wouldn't be contemplating which of his favourite restaurants to visit on his first day back at work, and which journalist to invite, would he? And no, he genuinely isn't upset, though he is a little more surprised than he should be. Of course, in a general sense, he has realised that his position as a high profile Labour operative will count against him under a Tory government; but it really hasn't occurred to him that bundling him in front of a firing-squad will be among their most pressing priorities, on taking power. Quite flattering, in a way. [The Gay Hussar](#) perhaps? No, stupid idea! Much too political, so soon after the election. (He doesn't want to find himself at the next table to that sanctimonious prick [Wedgwood Benn](#), and have to listen to him sounding off about how Labour would have won if only they had been a touch more Trotskyite.) Maybe Bertorelli's, then?

The phone on his desk chirrup, in a way that means it is Linda, rather than an outside call on his direct line.

"You have a visitor in Reception," she says.

"Who is it?" says My Father, who isn't expecting anyone.

"I think you should go down," says Linda, with what My Father recognises as disapproval.

"OK, thanks," he says, putting the phone down. It can only be the Woman He Loves! He has assumed their reunion will take place later today, after work; but how like her to turn up here now, unexpectedly! He's a little scared by this; but mainly, what he feels as he hurries down the stairs - for once, My Father does not wait for the lift - is the purest exhilaration. At last, he and the Woman He Loves are going to be together without the shadowy figure of My Mother looming perpetually, wraith-like, between them.

It isn't the Woman He Loves.

For a moment - seeing her from behind, as he approaches the seating area in Reception - he thinks it is. The hair is roughly the right colour and cut. But, as he comes alongside her, he experiences the perplexity of seeing something that directly contradicts what his brain has told him to expect. Sitting there, staring ahead of her unseeingly, is the Other Woman. She looks haggard, as if she hasn't slept - or attended to her toilette - in days. She is not crying, but in her face there is plenty of evidence that she has wept many tears, recently. When she sees him, she smiles bravely, while also seeming to flinch, like an ill-used dog expecting a beating. My Father is appalled to see her here. At his place of business! To do him justice, though, the strongest feeling that surges through him is shame, for having reduced her to this pathetic state - closely followed by compassion for her evident misery.

Luckily, apart from a couple of uniformed commissionaires behind the desk, there is no one else in Reception. My Father sits down next to the Other Woman, turning his body sideways to shield her from the view of anyone leaving or entering the building. And he is about to tell her how sorry he is for the way he has treated her, when she says, "I'm so sorry. So,

so sorry. I can't believe I did that. But I was so desperate, I felt I had to do something!"

Can't believe she did what? It occurs to My Father that this is the second time in two days that he has had absolutely no idea what a woman is talking about. What the fuck is it that she can't believe she did? And why is she apologising to him?

"I know it was wrong of me to go there," the Other Woman is saying, the words starting to flow with the relief she feels at confessing. "But I just wanted to see her for myself. And for her to know that I exist. And to make her understand that I'm not just some 'bit on the side'. And that I love you just as much as she does, or even more!"

As she speaks, realisation dawns on My Father - surprisingly slowly, for a man of such outstanding intellect. It wasn't the Woman He Loves who visited My Mother on Wednesday, it was the Other Woman! Of course it was! Of course the Woman He Loves would never have done such a reckless and stupid thing! How could he possibly have persuaded himself that she might?

The Other Woman has grabbed his hand in both of hers, in a supplicatory manner. Her nails are catastrophically bitten, almost to the point of non-existence. And now the floodgates open. "Can you ever forgive me?" she is saying, through her tears. "I can't bear to lose you, and to think of you hating me."

My Father puts his free hand on top of hers. "Come on," he says, gently, pacifyingly, getting to his feet, "I'll buy you a coffee."

And, still trying to shield her from view behind his body, he shepherds her out of the building and across the road to Renato's, where he is relieved to find there is no one he recognises.

\*

My Father and the Other Woman drink coffee together, for one last time. She cries, and he tries, with limited success, to console her. She says more,

a great deal more, about how much she loves him, and what he has meant to her, and how she has always dreamed that one day, despite all the obstacles in their path, they would be together. And, listening to her, My Father understands, for the first time, that for this woman - so peripheral to his life, so much the cherry rather than the cake - he has been the moon and stars, her first thought on waking in the morning, her last at night. How has he failed to comprehend this? How has he been able, for all these years, to behave towards this suffering human creature as if she were little more than a device for the relief of his boredom and *ennui*? My Father hates himself. And, as he tells her so, and that he will never forgive himself for how he has treated her - particularly the letter - she once again takes his hand, and squeezes it sympathetically. She can't bear to see the Man She Loves looking so sad.

\*

A little later - after the Other Woman has left, still weeping, but less torrentially, to catch a bus back to work - My Father sits drinking yet another coffee, and wondering what to do next. Lunch with a journalist seems less appealing than it did earlier. And then there's Corby. Does he really have to go up there? (Or is it down there?) Surely not; a couple of phone calls to key parties will be more than enough to give him the background he needs to go to work on massaging the coverage over the next few days.

And now, of course, his thoughts turn to the Woman He Loves; not guilty, after all, of sabotaging his marriage - which is probably for the best, on balance. He likes, and is excited by, her unpredictability, but he suspects that making a life with someone capable of random acts of extreme emotional violence might become wearing over time. On the other hand, the moral high ground no longer belongs to him. She has nothing to apologise for. And neither has she succumbed to an overwhelming desire to be with him. At this moment, the Woman He Loves is elsewhere; free, distinct, autonomous; living a life in which he plays no part.

\*



Back in his office, having closed the door for privacy, My Father calls the Woman He Loves. He has no pride; he needs to be with her. The phone in the tall narrow North London house rings, and rings, unanswered. My Father is unsurprised by this; he knew it was unlikely she would be at home at this time of day, so soon before her exhibition.

He grabs his hold-all from under the desk, and hurries out of his office.

"Off to Corby," he informs Linda, without breaking stride, as he passes her desk.

"Corby?" she says. "Really?"

"No need to book me a ticket. I'll deal with that at the station."

"When will you be back in?" she asks.

But My Father doesn't hear, or doesn't seem to.

\*

In the cab on the way up Eversholt Street, the driver is keen to engage My Father in conversation.

"What about Brazil, then? Fantastic, eh?"

Brazil? What is the wretched man talking about? My Father assumes he must be referring to that country's many attractions for visitors; its natural beauties, exotic wildlife, colourful carnivals, and so on. But then it strikes him that he has read something recently about the unexpectedly strong performance of various South American economies. Might that possibly be the topic under discussion? It seems unlikely, though it can't be entirely ruled out. In any case, My Father feels the safest course is simply to agree.

"Yes, really fantastic."

"And that last goal! [Sublime](#), or what?"

Football; of course! Why does everyone always want to talk to My Father about a subject he finds so entirely devoid of interest? Particularly today, when all his thoughts and feelings are fully engaged in matters of the very highest consequence.

"One of the sublimest I've ever seen," he replies, as warmly as he can, before abruptly bringing to a close this passage of conversation, by saying:

"Just wonder if we might turn right up here, by the school? Could save a couple of minutes, and I'm in a hurry."

\*

A couple of minutes sooner than might otherwise have been the case, the cab is pulling up outside the Famous Novelist's house in Kentish Town.

As he rings the doorbell, My Father is gripped by a combination of intense emotions that he has never previously imagined could co-exist within him. Excitement, tinged with terror, jostles for space with resounding certitude; soaring exaltation mingles, and almost merges, with something vertiginous; he feels a little as if he is falling from a great height without yet knowing for certain whether he can fly.

The Famous Novelist opens the door, and peers at him over the top of her spectacles. Notoriously spiky, she is regarding him benignly.

"Aha, the soon-to-be-disencumbered married lover!"

Preoccupied though he is, My Father is gratified to learn that the Woman He Loves has been confiding in a Booker Prize winner, spoken of by some good judges as a potential Nobel Laureate.

"Go on up," says the Famous Novelist. "You know where she is. And I'm pretty sure she won't mind being disturbed by you!"

\*

My Father climbs the stairs to the studio at a measured, deliberate pace. At the top of this staircase, behind the white-painted door now coming into

view, a new life awaits him. It's one that promises to be everything he has desired, for as long as he has consciously thought about such things. A life in which nothing he wants or needs will be withheld from him. A life of loving and being loved by a woman who believes in him. He wants this life more than he has ever wanted anything. But, in these final few seconds before it begins, he almost fears it, too.

[Loud music](#), a discordant yowling to My Father's ears, is coming from the studio, so - conscious that the Woman He Loves is probably unaware of his presence - he taps on the door, then pushes it open. For a fraction of a second, he sees her, lost in concentration on her work, before she registers the intrusion. Her face is upturned, pressed close to the canvas she is working on (she is adorably short-sighted), making minute adjustments, with the tip of her tongue curling up to within millimetres of her nose.

Perhaps the fear My Father feels is that, in this moment, he will see her differently. [In the novels he has published](#), men yearn for women only until they possess them; male desire is doomed to die at the instant of its gratification. But no, here she is - entirely available to him, as he is now to her (well, almost) - and she remains what she has always been, the Woman He Loves.

With a visible effort, she detaches her attention from the painting, and transfers it to My Father, who is still lingering, liminally, on the threshold. He notices that her paint-beflecked artist's smock is, in fact, an old shirt of his. Her gaze, when it finally locks onto him, is penetrating.

"So," says the Woman My Father Loves.

"So," replies My Father.

"So," she says again. "Are we real now?"

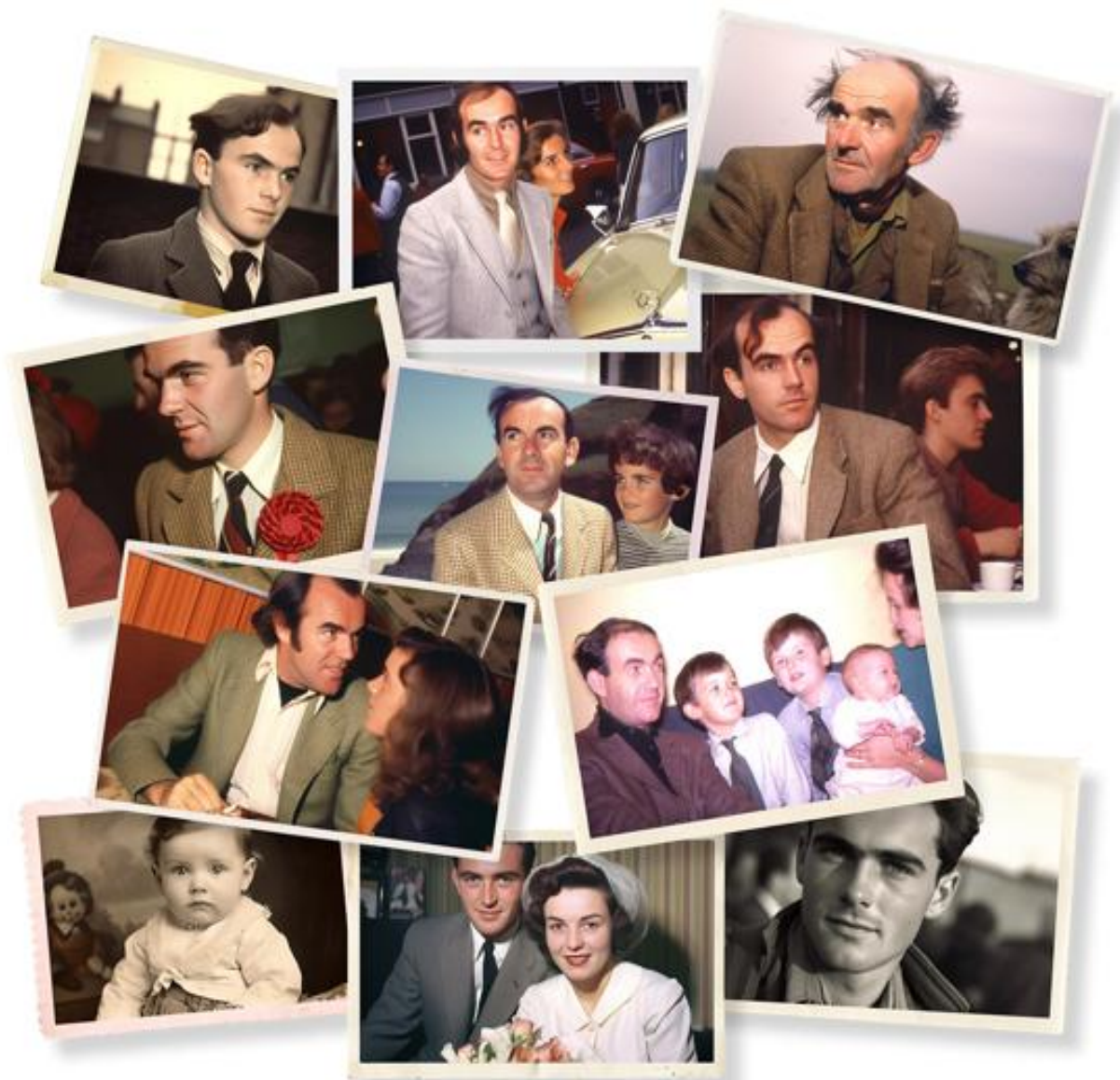
They aren't yet, not entirely. But they will be. And over the rest of their lives together, the love they share will be the best of both of them, the most successful enterprise either will undertake, and my father's only ennoblement.

\*\*\*\*\*

If you are enjoying *My Father keeps the PM waiting*,  
please do [share it with a friend](#).







**Scenes from  
My Father's life  
(1926-2002)**





# **My Father spends Christmas with the Arbuthnots**

## **25 December 1940**

---

Rain bombards the windows of Arbuthnot's House. Christmas this year is not white, but dank, sodden and utterly joyless. On the plus side, the foul weather - which seems to have set in not just for the day, but permanently, as if it intends to continue for the duration of the war - makes it unlikely the German bombers will leave their bases in northern France until the festivities are over.

And such festivities. Mrs Arbuthnot has torn colourful pages from ancient magazines, and made them into paperchains, with which she has draped the otherwise sludgily colourless sitting room. Mournful carols seep tinnily from an ancient gramophone. And Mr and Mrs Arbuthnot have exchanged gifts (pipe cleaners for him, a tortoiseshell hair slide for her), in blatant disregard of the official War Council advice not to waste precious resources through needless seasonal extravagance.

My Father, far from his family on Christmas day, has received no gift. (His parents have, in fact, arranged for a book token to be sent to him, but its non-arrival counts as one of the lesser disruptions of wartime life.)

My Father is 14. He is spending Christmas with his house-master Mr Arbuthnot and his wife because he has nowhere else to go. Meal-times aside, he passes the days revising for the exams that will follow when school resumes in January, in the tiny, bare box-room that has been allocated to him, which forms part of the House's largely deserted servants' quarters. (The Arbuthnots have just one remaining maid, a slow docile woman of indeterminate age called Ellen, who seems literally unaware of

My Father's existence, despite occupying a slightly larger box-room on the same landing, and sharing an antiquated loudly clanking lavatory.)

On one or two occasions since the holidays began, Mrs Arbuthnot has attempted, with no real conviction, to encourage My Father to leave the house, and take a bracing winter constitutional in the school grounds. But My Father - who has grown up in a warm climate, and is, in any case, a physically lazy boy - has not found this a tempting prospect, and has preferred to lose himself in his well-thumbed Latin primer, as the most effective means of getting through the interminable days.

Now, however, it is a meal-time - and time for not just any meal, but Christmas dinner - and My Father is seated at the Arbuthnots' dining room table, tie carefully knotted and tweed jacket recently brushed, hair slicked down with water, waiting for Mr Arbuthnot to say grace.

My Father wishes he were at home, pulling faces at his two younger sisters, trying to make them laugh, to the stern disapproval of his parents, seated formally at either end of the table. His eyes feel hot and uncomfortable in his head.

Ellen plonks down a serving dish in front of him. The vegetables it contains have been boiled to unidentifiable mush. There is, to My Father's surprise, a chicken; the school's attempts at wartime self-sufficiency include keeping a small amount of livestock, one of whose number has been sacrificed to Mr Arbuthnot's Christmas feast. But it's a pathetically small scraggy fowl, which barely seems worth carving to My Father. He thinks longingly of Ibrahim's celebrated lemon chicken with almonds, a bird on an altogether more heroic scale, borne in from the kitchen with great solemnity, atop a small mountain of fragrantly spiced rice. My Father is almost as moved by this thought as by the absence of his family. His stomach - permanently aching with hunger, in these deprived times - surges within him, and his mouth fills with saliva.

Mr Arbuthnot, who teaches Classics, lowers his head, and mutters: "Quidquid nobis apositum est, aut quidquid aponetur - "

Oh for god's sake, thinks my famished father, what's wrong with Benedictus benedicat?

" - benedicat Deus haec Sua dona in usum nostrum," Mr Arbuthnot drones on, "necnon, nosmet ipsos in servitium Suum, per Iesum Christum, Dominum nostrum".

And at last he is finished, and the meal begins.

There is nothing at all to delight the discerning diner, but the food - thanks largely to the School garden's success with root vegetables - is plentiful, for once; and My Father, who will perhaps always remain more of a *gourmand* than a *gourmet*, eats like an under-nourished boy with no certainty about when his next square meal will be.

There is nothing to drink but water, which may partly explain why conversation falters - though My Father, head down over his plate, barely notices. And soon, the festive meal descends into near-silence, broken only by the clink of cutlery, and the distant mewling of a small infant. Glances, heavy with meaning, are exchanged by Mr and Mrs Arbuthnot. An acute observer might possibly interpret these as indicative of a disagreement over parenting best practice. Correctly; Mrs Arbuthnot is gripped by a first-time mother's instinctive desire to tend to her distressed baby; Mr Arbuthnot is reminding her, wordlessly, that he is firmly of the view that no child, whatever its age, is ever improved by the reckless and precipitate indulgence of its wishes.

Mrs Arbuthnot wriggles miserably. The baby - Nigel, nearly 12 weeks old - is crying more loudly.

"Alec?" She looks imploringly at her husband, making to rise from the table.

"Susan," he replies, with a sternly upward admonitory intonation that compels her to sink back onto her chair.

How do Mr and Mrs Arbuthnot feel about playing host to My Father, this Christmas? Certainly not enthusiastic. On his side, there is resignation; he

sees it as a wearisome responsibility pursuant upon his recent unexpected promotion to House-master. (Perhaps not entirely unexpected. Although Alec Arbuthnot is a sickly specimen - so myopic as to be practically blind, asthmatic, and partly lame through childhood polio - he is one of the very few remaining members of the school's teaching staff under the age of 50, and in possession of a wife; this last not quite a mandatory requirement, but considered highly desirable in a man taking charge of the physical and moral wellbeing of around 90 adolescent boys. He is, in fact, 26 - though he hopes that smoking a pipe and sprinkling his speech with Latin epithets make him seem older.)

For her part, his wife - who is 23, but with the unformed, whey-faced pallor and protuberant bones of a teenager - feels far from hospitable towards My Father. She is too exhausted to be capable of active hostility; little Nigel seems permanently enraged or distressed; and, unable to feed satisfactorily from a bottle, he rarely sleeps for longer than 20 minutes. Her breasts are swollen and sore, and continually spout milk, to her considerable embarrassment. And her husband, like her son, is also angry and unhappy for most of his waking hours, for which he seems to hold her exclusively responsible. Motherhood is not going well for Susan Arbuthnot, and while My Father makes few demands upon her, the last thing she feels her home lacks is a miserable-looking pubescent boy, moping around under her feet, day after day.

The baby is howling now, achieving impressive decibel levels for one so small.

"So how is the Latin vocab coming along, young fellow?"

She is aware that, although her husband is listlessly attempting to engage their young guest in conversation, his eyes are still fixed upon her, alert for any sign of maternal weakness. It is, she notes miserably, still nearly two hours until Nigel's next scheduled feed.

"Not bad, sir." My Father is reluctant to talk more than strictly necessary, when he could be eating.

"Because that was what *wather* what let you down last half, wasn't it?"

Mr Arbuthnot is unable to pronounce the letter r; it is one of the lesser reasons why My Father, like all the boys in his form, feels a bottomless contempt for this pompous but essentially harmless young man. His pathetic attempts at gravitas, his limp, his non-combatant status, and his complete inability to maintain any semblance of order in class are other, more significant factors in the universal derision that he attracts.

"Yes, sir," replies My Father.

Mrs Arbuthnot twists and twitches in her seat, looking towards the door, as if trying to gauge the probability of being able to escape, without being rugby tackled by her husband.

"You're an able young fellow, *extwemely* able, in my estimation. It would be a shame - a *cwyng* shame - to let yourself down for want of a few hours *scwutinising* vocab. Wouldn't it?"

"Yes, sir," replies My Father, "a crying shame".

The razor's edge of his hunger now somewhat blunted, he allows himself a small satirical fling at his host and House-master. His face gives nothing away. Mr Arbuthnot strongly suspects, but cannot be certain, that he is being treated with disrespect by his young house-guest. Later in life, this ability to communicate obliquely - to hint at one thing, while saying another; to proclaim loyalty while implying a willingness to betray; to tease and tantalise and intrigue - will serve My Father well professionally; much better than anything else he learns at school.

But what of My Father now, at this very moment, just after 2.30 pm on Wednesday 25 December 1940? What kind of 14-year-old boy is he? What - apart from the probability that he misses his home and family, and that he is good at Latin (he will fairly soon gain a Classics scholarship to Oxford) - can we say about him that amounts to more than guesswork?

What, for example, is his day-to-day life at this second division English public school actually like? Is he popular? Is he bullied? Or a bully?

Based on what we know, it seems likely that he is none of these things, to any marked degree. He is certainly no athlete, and neither does he possess the obvious charisma or reckless flamboyance that are the other characteristics which boys tend to admire in each other. As for being bullied, it's true he is an academic high flyer, but - unlike his House-master - he isn't burdened with any of the physical signifiers of socially maladjusted swottiness. And by now, he must possess the beginnings of real charm, too; an unshowy ability to make himself likeable, when it's in his interests to do so. And being a bully? The least plausible of these possibilities. Throughout his life, My Father will never show any predilection or talent for obtaining his ends through force or threats. His methods are altogether more subtle. So, while violence is not his *métier*, we probably can imagine him orchestrating a whispering campaign against an unpopular classmate.

Little Nigel is in a frenzy now. As babies do, he has frightened himself with the vehemence of his own cries, and is screaming with all the force his tiny lungs can muster, in pure terror.

His mother can bear no more. She pushes back her chair and gets to her feet, eyes demurely lowered as if hoping to make herself invisible by not seeing others. But if that is her stratagem, it's ineffective.

"Susan, do NOT go to him!" hisses her husband, with extraordinary *sotto voce* venom.

She hesitates, in her place. A wracking sob escapes her.

"If you leave this *woom*, Susan, I *pwomise* you there will be consequences."

My Father is appalled by the scene he is witnessing, though the two participants are almost entirely oblivious to his presence. But as Mrs Arbuthnot stands there, her shoulders heaving as she tries to control her tears, he can't help noticing her breasts. (One thing we can say with certainty about My Father at this point in his life is that, in this respect at least, he has the interests of a typical 14-year-old boy.)

And as he tries, unsuccessfully, to avert his gaze from the altogether captivating spectacle of her agitated *embonpoint*, something strange happens. The front of her pale blue muslin dress - exactly where his eyes are fixed - suddenly darkens, as if - well, My Father thinks, it almost looks as if Mrs Arbuthnot's bosom has been drenched with water. From inside her clothes.

She sobs again, pulls her cardigan protectively across her chest, and bolts for the door.

For a moment, her husband is non-plussed, and continues to sit slack-jawed, in his place at the head of the table. His wife can clearly be heard running up the stairs, to the nursery above. Spurred, finally, into action by her insurrection, he rises with what he hopes looks like ominous calm to his feet, clamping his pipe masterfully between his jaws, and limps painfully out of the room in pursuit of her.

My Father is left alone, with what's left of his Christmas dinner.

He clears his plate. He eats the remaining roast potatoes and carrots, from the serving dishes. He picks up the chicken carcass, which has been stripped bare, and sucks the bones.

Upstairs, the baby is still crying, though a perhaps a shade less hysterically, and My Father can hear the muffled sound of further angry words being exchanged by his hosts.

My Father doesn't know what to do. He considers retiring to his room, but doesn't want to vacate the dining room if there is still any possibility of Christmas pudding being served.

He sits, and waits. He wishes he were at home. His stomach is full, for the first time in months, but he feels a vast resounding emptiness inside him.

He looks around. Something on the sideboard catches his eye. A decanter, containing a dark liquid. Sherry, he supposes. My Father empties his water glass and takes it across to the sideboard, where he fills it from the decanter, very nearly to the brim. Close up, the liquid looks even less alluring;

muddy-coloured and viscous. My Father raises the glass to his lips and drinks it down, not fast but steadily, as if taking an unpleasant medicine and not wanting to prolong the ordeal. (My Father was right, it is sherry; an indescribably filthy British blend, originally decanted - then tasted, and judged unfit for human consumption - by Mr Arbuthnot's predecessor as Head of House, shortly after the Abdication.)

My Father sits back down at the table. He feels different, better. He must, he supposes, be drunk. It is, as far as he can tell, a state clearly preferable to not-drunk.

He fills his glass again with water from the jug on the table, then takes it, a little unsteadily, to the decanter, which he fills to roughly its original level. Though drunk, My Father is still capable of clarity in thought and action.

The carriage clock on the mantelpiece measures the passing of the winter afternoon. Outside, December darkness starts to fall. Mr and Mrs Arbuthnot do not reappear, although the baby has finally stopped crying. My Father allows his head to slide forward onto the table, where he cradles it in his arms.

Christmas pudding does not appear to be on the cards.

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# **My Father campaigns unsuccessfully in Solihull Monday 20 February 1950**

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My Father lifts the heavy door-knocker, and lets it go - hard enough to be heard, but not so forcefully as to sound threatening - hoping that no one is at home. He knows this is unlikely. At this time on a sub-zero winter evening, most people in this part of suburban Birmingham will have little reason to venture out. Supper, or tea, or whatever they call it, will soon be on the table.

He's out of luck. Immediately, his knock is met by a staccato volley of barks and snarls, followed, more faintly from within, by a woman's voice, trying half-heartedly to hush the dog ("for heaven's sake, Roger, leave it be!"). And then, through the door's frosted glass panel, one of the residents of 26 Blenheim Drive - Labour voters at the last election - looms into view.

My Father hates canvassing. It's not that he despises ordinary people for their astounding political ignorance, or that he doesn't enjoy the opportunity to listen to their concerns, and try to help them understand how Labour's programme for the next parliament will infallibly satisfy all of them. It's just that trudging through ankle-deep slush, in shoes that leak, knocking endlessly on the doors of people who, almost without exception, would seemingly prefer to welcome the Black Death into their homes, is such a godawful fucking dispiriting soul-crushing optimism-destroying way of spending two-and-a-half weeks of your life. And such an ineffective, potentially counter-productive, means of kindling true Socialist conviction in the hearts of the electorate!

He breathes in deeply, shakes his head, as if to clear water lodged in one of his ears, and - at the very last second - arranges his face.

The door opens a few inches. The householder is looking up at him, from a semi-crouching position that she's adopted in order to restrain Roger, an overweight but still quite useful-looking bull terrier, who is now emitting a continuous menacing low growl.

"Mrs Henson?" says My Father, with a winning smile, heroically at odds with how he feels.

The woman, who is wearing a hat and what My Father judges to be some kind of house-coat, cuffs the dog's distended snout surprisingly hard, temporarily silencing it. She could, he thinks, be anywhere between late-30s and mid-60s. She doesn't return his smile.

"Well?"

"I'm *My Father*, your Labour candidate. I called round to say I hope I can rely on your vote on Thursday."

"Thursday?" She repeats the word as if it refers to an unfamiliar concept, not of any particular interest to her.

"In the general election. I know you and your husband voted for my predecessor . . ."

Damn, thinks My Father, should he have used that word? Will it have made him sound out of touch, uncomradely? A toff?

"Your what?"

Fucking hell, it did! "I know you voted Labour in the last election, when it was Mr Jenkins - and I'm hoping you will again on Thursday, for me?"

To My Father's surprise, since most dogs are instinctive Tories, Roger seems to have decided this unexpected evening visitor is essentially harmless, and now slinks off to his basket under the hall table, where he continues to eye My Father and rumble quietly, like a semi-dormant

volcano. Freed from the task of restraint, the householder surveys My Father candidly, taking in the details of his appearance for the first time.

"How old are you?" she asks, with a glimmer of genuine interest.

My Father is not yet 24, which makes him the youngest of nearly 650 Labour candidates standing in the election. But he's far from over-awed by his lack of seniority. In fact, he sees it as an asset. He sees himself as part of a new wave of exceptionally able young men, moulded by the war, their egalitarian instincts and Socialist principles forged by it, ready and waiting to bring renewed vigour and vision to the challenge of taking forward the very real and transformative achievements of the Labour government, now showing signs of running out of steam, having been elected five years ago.

"Old enough," replies My Father, who has been asked this question before, "to know that we will all win through together under Socialism, with a Labour government!" (This is a reference to the manifesto, *Let Us Win Through Together*, all 5000 words of which My Father can recite by heart - though there have been disappointingly few opportunities to do so, during the campaign to date.)

"You look about the same age as my Derek. Twenty six he is - no, I tell a lie, twenty seven. It was his birthday just last Wednesday. "

My Father continues to smile, having temporarily lost the power of speech, as well as the will to live. His exhausted brain spins and whirs, but he can think of no riposte to this, no elegant way of bringing the conversation back to Labour policy, and the urgent need for the country to trust Mr Atlee and his team to continue with the great national reconstruction project they have so impressively begun. He just wants to go back to his extraordinarily depressing digs, where the black mould is almost visibly advancing across the walls, and go straight to bed. But he knows he can't leave while these two votes - he assumes, rightly, that the householder and her husband will come as a package - remain unsecured.

He mentally scans the manifesto, searching for something to say. Derek is presumably her son? Some link perhaps to the government's excellent

record in assuring full employment, for our nation's young people....

Of course, My Father doesn't expect to win on Thursday. No one expects him to win on Thursday; this is a safe Tory seat. It's true that his predecessor as candidate, [Roy Jenkins](#), ran the Conservative incumbent quite close in 1945; but this is a very different election, the euphoric post-war appetite for change having been fairly thoroughly extinguished by five years of extreme, gnawing austerity. Also, My Father is quick to point out, the boundaries of the constituency have been redrawn, to exclude two large council estates, rich in nothing but potential Labour voters.

No, My Father is perfectly clear that for him, "victory" on Thursday means a solid safe-pair-of-hands performance: an absolute minimum of 10,000 votes is the target he has set himself. And if he can only achieve that eminently realistic goal.... well, then there is no end to the ascending he envisages for himself. He thinks of that little tick Jenkins - quite able, but an utterly repellent human being - presented with a safe by-election seat just a couple of years after fighting Solihull, and now (bizarrely) seen as a rising star of the parliamentary party. He thinks of that bumptious creep [Wilson](#) - supposedly outstandingly able, though My Father has never seen real evidence of this - recently appointed a Cabinet minister at just 28. Provided he doesn't fail horribly on Thursday, My Father sees absolutely no reason why he shouldn't go on to match, and then outdo, either of his two near-contemporary comrades. (To say My Father sees life as primarily a competitive struggle against others similar to him is like saying a hungry fox views an unguarded farmyard full of chickens as probably worth a visit.)

"I'm nearly twenty four," he says, miserably.

"Nearly twenty four?" For the first time, there is perhaps a hint of something maternal in the householder's voice (throughout his life My Father is good at making women feel sorry for him). "Are you married?"

"No, but I am engaged." Exhausted and demoralised as he is, My Father retains enough political instinct to avert the danger of allowing himself to

be seen as a single man, or worse, a confirmed bachelor. "And we're getting married soon."

This is true, but My Father's head swims and a mild-but-distinct wave of nausea surges through him as he says it.

My Mother is in her final year at Oxford, and they plan to marry as soon as she graduates in June. But My Father has been having grave doubts. Suddenly, she seems so different from when they met, less than two years ago. Of course, it was her looks that first attracted him - and she's still stunning, though he's not keen on her new hairstyle, a severe blue-stocking bob. But her voice has changed beyond recognition, as she has chipped and chiselled away at her accent, while lowering the pitch by a good half-octave. And somehow what she says sounds different, too. Less amusing, less compliant, more critical. My Father hasn't yet noticed (though perhaps he senses it) that whenever My Mother expresses an opinion, it's a negative one. She seems "nervy" (her own word) nearly all the time now, and when she's cheerful, there's a brittle quality to her mood that makes him feel he has to be constantly vigilant about what he does and says.

My Father needs to bag these two votes. If he can just do that, he's going straight home, via the pub. He gathers himself for one final titanic effort.

"Mrs Henson," he twinkles, effortfully, "much as I would love to talk about my wife-to-be, I'm here to listen to you, and to answer any questions you may have before voting Labour on Thursday!"

"I don't think so, duck," she says, quite kindly.

"You don't think you have any questions?"

"Husband says we didn't ought to have [kicked Winston out](#) last time. Says we should give him another chance to get the country back on its feet."

"But that's *exactly* what Labour has been doing over the last five years," says My Father, much too emphatically. "Rebuilding our nation after the war, renewing the strength of our industry and business, while taking good care of the working man."

"Says we didn't treat him fair after what he did for us in the war."

My Father's debating skills have won him admiration at Oxford during his recent term as Chairman of the Labour Club.

"Well, I mean no disrespect at all to Mr Churchill, but treating people fairly has never been a strength of his party. Take Labour's [new Health Service](#), for example - which the Conservatives tried to prevent us from building.... "

"He was a hero in our darkest hour."

"... and which they will certainly destroy if they win the election on Thursday.... "

"Husband says Winston's the man to get us out of a tight spot."

My Father sees a way out of this impasse.

"Is your husband here? Might I be able to speak to him?"

"Oh no, duck, he's in St Mary's. Just had his gall bladder out. Been off work poorly for months, he has. But doctor says he'll be good as new!"

My Father aches to seize on this, and destroy his opponent's position by pointing out that, if not for Labour's welfare state, her husband would almost certainly be dead by now, leaving her destitute.

But instead, he says, "I'm very pleased to hear that. Please do give him my best wishes for a speedy recovery. And if you change your mind before Thursday, I would be honoured to receive your vote."

"Sorry," she says, "but husband says Winston deserves another chance."

As she closes the door on My Father, he notices the dog is now sound asleep. Roger doesn't even feel he's worth growling at.

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*Friday 24 February, 1950*

Just after 4.30am - earlier than expected - the Returning Officer mounts the stage. The count has been uncomplicated. The atmosphere in the hall is surprisingly tepid. There are a few dozen Tories milling around, mostly in blazers and twin-sets, some of them politely drunk in anticipation of the result. But almost all the small crowd of younger noisier Labour activists have seeped away since the count got underway, and it quickly became clear that no upset was on the cards.

"I, Albert Miller, the Acting Returning Officer for the Solihull constituency, hereby give notice that the total number of votes given for each candidate at the election of twenty third February 1950, was as follows.... "

My Father is standing next to his Tory opponent, an Ealing Comedy crusty colonel-type, with a luxuriant moustache. My Father is wearing the slightly less shabby of his two tweed jackets. (He does still have his demob suit, but it's ill-fitting and scratchy - and, in any case, suits are not Socialist.) He is limp, bleached-out with fatigue. He looks older than 23, and somehow, simultaneously, younger.

"Lindsay, M.... twenty five thousand, seven hundred and fifty eight."

My Father has done the maths. Assuming a 75% turnout (which would be slightly up on 1945), around 35,000 votes will have been cast in total. If that's roughly accurate, and his opponent has secured over 25,000 of them, then his own target of 10,000 votes is looking very hard to achieve . . .

*"My Father.... eleven thousand, seven hundred and forty one."*

My Father is swept by relief, and crushing disappointment. He's lost. He's failed. But almost 12,000 votes is really not bad at all. Almost two thousand votes more than his target - though roughly three thousand fewer than he was secretly hoping for. (And around six thousand down on the amazing shock-result victory for Labour that lay just beyond his secret hopes.)

".... and that Michael Lindsay has therefore been duly elected as Member of Parliament for Solihull."

My Father shakes his opponent's hand, and mutters something perfunctorily gracious. He tells himself he's all right. He has come through unscathed. His potentially brilliant political career remains on track. He could still, if the stars are aligned and absolutely everything falls into place, be entering Downing Street in 25 years from now. Or even 20. (How far off 1970 sounds!)

My Father looks around the room, but sees not a single friendly or familiar face. He feels that all he wants to do is go home, though he doesn't know where that might be.

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My Father has hardly slept, but he's up and shaved, and feeling quietly pleased with himself. He's achieved exactly what he came here to achieve, or perhaps a little more.

And the morning news of the election is, on balance, good, from My Father's point of view. Counting continues in many constituencies, but all the indications are that Labour will retain power, though with a much reduced majority - which will cast a more flattering light on his own performance. Another landslide, or even a decisive victory, would have made his (almost) 12,000 votes look a lot less commendable.

Still chewing a leathery piece of toast, he hurries across the road to the phone box opposite his digs. Luckily, it's unoccupied, so he's able to call My Mother, as arranged, at 8am. He shoves in his coins exactly as the second hand on his watch sweeps up to 12, and she - poised by the phone-booth opposite the pantry in her college, still in her dressing-gown - snatches up the receiver almost before the phone has rung.

"Well?"

"Almost twelve thousand."



"My brilliant husband!" she says. She has taken to calling him this, pre-emptively. "That's absolutely marvellous."

"I'm fairly pleased.... " he says, prompting her to provide further affirmation.

My Mother loves My Father. No one thinks more highly of his outstanding intellect, or desires more passionately to see him achieve all his political ambitions. Yet she too has plans and schemes, and is far from sure that being the wife of up-and-coming backbencher - even a future Prime Minister - is compatible with the kind of comfortable semi-rural domesticity she has in mind for herself. A husband reliably home in time to put the children to bed most evenings sounds very much more appealing.

"What was the turn-out?" she asks.

"Not sure yet, but it must've been high. The Tory got over 25,000."

"So that means your share must have been.... "

"Roughly thirty per cent. A bit less."

"And I've forgotten, what did little Woy get, last time?"

She knows. They both know. They have done the all the electoral calculations together.

"Well over forty per cent - closer to forty five," he says, reluctantly.

"Well, that's not so much more. I'm sure the Party will be very happy with thirty, aren't you? I'm sure everyone will agree that my brilliant husband has done marvellously well."

My Father sighs. He definitely liked My Mother better before she lost her accent. [They will be married](#) in just over four months from now.

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# My Father appears unexpectedly at one of my therapy sessions Towards the end of 2002

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It's around six months since My Father died, so I'm surprised when he materialises. And even more so by his appearance. He looks a lot better than last time I saw him, in the hospice. He looks much younger. In fact, he looks about the same age as I am now, which is 45.

My therapist, Bernard - a big bald bearded man with a faint lisp that makes him sound insightful - seems to be expecting him. He pulls up the Empty Chair, so that it's at a right angle to his and mine, and gestures for My Father to sit. For a long moment, no one says anything.

Me: *(to Bernard)* What the holy fuck is he doing here?

Bernard rubs his hands together, and raises his eyebrows, mischievously; he prides himself on bringing a certain playful quality into the therapy room.

Bernard: Well, we can explore that. But perhaps I should start by thanking Your Father for being with us today. It can't have been easy.

My Father seems disorientated. He is looking down at himself - his clothes, the backs of his hands, his body generally - like a man waking up from a coma and wondering not just where, but who he is. His hand goes to his head, presumably to check the whereabouts of his hairline.

Me: *(definitely not taking it well)* For fuck's sake! What.... how did....

Bernard: *(enjoying my discomfiture)* All right, just a tad reluctantly, I will explain, a little. You've been talking to Your Father by means of an Empty Chair in almost every session since he died. I thought it would be good to have him here in the flesh - so to speak.

Me: But how -

Bernard: Let's not get bogged down in the "how". What I can tell you is that this is strictly a one-time thing, so we have.... (*glancing at the clock behind me*).... just over 45 minutes to work with Your Father, live - so, also, to speak!

Bernard twinkles playfully.

My Father shakes his head a couple of times, as if to clear his vision. He breathes in deeply, and lays his hands flat on his knees. He speaks in a monotone that suggests he is making an effort to remain rational and calm.

My Father: Where am I? Why am I here?

Bernard: Well, as I understand it, because you consented to my request to join us. I'm not entirely familiar with how the procedure works, but I know you were given a choice.

My Father: You're some kind of shrink?

Bernard: If you mean a psychiatrist, no. I'm an integrative, humanistically-orientated psychotherapist, who *occasionally* teeters over into a Gestalt modality. And your son is my client.

Me: Why is he.... (*gesturing in the direction of My Father's appearance*)?

Bernard: You mean, why is the age he is? Well, when I arranged this, it turned out I had a choice - and I thought it would be most interesting if he was the age you are, so that you can talk as.... peers.

Me: (*feebly*) You had a choice?

Bernard: I hope you're not going to waste the entire session repeating things I've said?

My Father has crossed his legs, and is jiggling his right foot rapidly - something he does throughout his life when he is bored or impatient.

Me: I was just interested in the process of ordering up a recently deceased parent to attend a therapy session; the options available - "as at time of death".... "prime of life".... "just starting to lose marbles"....

Bernard: (*mock-stern*) As I said, let's make good use of the time we have with Your Father. What do you want to say to him?

Me: Well, thank you, I suppose.

Bernard: Thank you? Should my sarcasm sensors be quivering, just ever-so slightly?

Me: No -

Bernard: (*cutting me off*) Tell him, not me.

Me: (*to My Father*) No, I meant that entirely sincerely. I'm very grateful to you for being here today - and for having been such an excellent role model.

Bernard: Still quivering.

My Father: Role model? Sounds like psychiatric gobbledegook.

Bernard: (*unable to restrain himself*) Please! *Psychotherapeutic gobbledegook....*

Me: OK then, jargon-free, I'm very grateful to you for having shown me so clearly what kind of man - what kind of father - I didn't want to be.

Bernard: So [a negative role model](#)? (*To My Father*) How does that impact you?

My Father: Impact me?

Bernard: How does hearing that affect you? How does it make you feel?

My Father: Surprised. Puzzled. A bit pissed off.

Bernard: (*delighted*) Good!

My Father and I both glare at Bernard.

Bernard: What? I'm happy with how this going - so shoot me! (*Sensing that neither his client nor their guest shares his upbeat mood; to me, more seriously*) Perhaps you'd like to be more specific about what Your Father did that made him such an excellent negative role model?

Me: It was more what he didn't do.

Bernard: To him, not me.

Me: It was more what you didn't do. You were never there.

My Father blows out his cheeks, in exasperation.

My Father: That's a bit of an exaggeration.

Me: You were never there when it mattered. When I think back to things that happened in my childhood, you're not there in any of my memories. You never-

Bernard: Can we agree to eschew "You never" and "You always"? They're hardly ever productive, and almost invariably unhelpful.

Me: (*grudgingly*) When I think about my childhood, my overwhelming sense is that you were absent - you just weren't around to do the stuff that dads are supposed to do. I can't remember you ever watching me play cricket or rugby, for example. Or picking me up from a friend's house. Or taking me to buy a pair of school shoes. Or teaching me how to use tools.

My Father: "The stuff that dads are supposed to do"? Who's doing the supposing there?

Bernard: Valid point. I think you're suggesting that the assumptions we make about things like parenting are culturally, and historically, specific?

My Father: I wouldn't have put it like that, but it's certainly true that nobody supposed my father would be around to wipe my nose, or watch me play

hopscotch, when I was a child. Even if he'd wanted to, which he wouldn't have done, it would have been difficult for him, since from the age of nine, I was at school here and he was in Palestine.

Me: So you're saying that because you didn't see much of your father -

My Father: [I didn't see him at all](#) - once the war started. I was here, he was two thousand miles away - and the sea between us was swimming with U-boats.

Bernard: (*calculating*) And let's see.... you would have been 13 when the war started - (*turning to me*) almost exactly the same age you were when Your Father left Your Mother?

My Father: That may be true, but it's a ridiculous parallel to draw - global cataclysm versus mundane marital bust-up in suburbia.

Me: (*sulkily*) It wasn't mundane for your children.... but anyway, your point is that because your father played virtually no role in your life, for whatever reason, I didn't have any right to expect anything different from you?

Bernard: "Man hands on misery to man, it deepens like a coastal shelf.... "

Not getting [the reference](#), My Father and I both look at Bernard, puzzled.

Bernard: Larkin. Ghastly misanthrope, but sometimes quite perceptive. (*He zips his mouth, and then splays his hands towards us, in a "you carry on" gesture.*)

My Father: No, I'm not saying that. With you, I was nothing like how my own father had been with me. I changed nappies. I got up in the night. I told bedtime stories. I wanted to be involved in your life.

Me: I don't remember any of that.

My Father: That doesn't mean it didn't happen.

There's a pause, while this sinks in.

Bernard: How does it feel to hear your father saying that - telling you he was a loving parent; that he did want to be involved in caring for you?

Me: It's of no value to me, because I don't remember it. Either it didn't happen -

My Father: It did.

Me: .... or it did, and then at a certain point, he got fed up with being a half-way decent father, and virtually disappeared from my life. And maybe that hurts more - having had a father, who then decides that, actually, now that he knows what the job entails, and what his children are really like, he's got better things to do than waste his time on fatherhood.

My Father: It wasn't like that.

Again, silence falls. I am staring at my hands, sulkily. My Father is jiggling his foot furiously and looking around him, as if wishing he was anywhere else on earth. We seem to have reached an impasse.

Bernard: Well, what *was* it like?

My Father: It was a different time....

Me: I think we've established that.

My Father: But I don't think you understand how different it really was. We just didn't have the choices that you've had - I mean about how to live our lives. Women like your mother didn't want careers, they wanted babies - and once they had one, that was it - their working lives were over, done, finished. So, whether men liked it or not, we had to go out and -

Me: Oh for god's sake, you're not expecting me to believe that you were forced into putting your career first, against your will - that you'd rather have been at home baking fairy cakes with your kids, instead of carousing round London in the swinging 60s, buying boozy lunches for Cabinet ministers and trying to shag their research assistants?

My Father can't prevent a nostalgic smile from flitting across his face.

My Father: Well, there may have been [a bit of that](#). But what mystifies me is why you *didn't* want the same thing. We were all - my generation, I mean - so driven to -

Me: Men of your generation, you mean.

My Father: We were all hugely ambitious - but not just for ourselves; for the country, too. After the war, and then building our careers, we wanted to make things better, and we believed we could. I never saw any of that in you. You were so complacent, so domesticated - so tame. You just wanted to earn enough to live comfortably -

Bernard: Just to clarify, is the "you" here your son, or him and his generation of men?

My Father: Both. You seemed happy to stay at home with your family, to be a "house husband". And your generation couldn't be bothered to build on our achievements. Just look at the mess we're in now.

Me: Hang on, when is "now"? Do you mean today, in October 2002? Or "now", when you were the same age as I am, which I suppose would have been . . . late 1971?

Bernard: (*putting his hands over his head, as if to protect himself*) Whoah, let's not even go there! Once we go down that rabbit-hole, I'm not sure we could ever extricate ourselves. And anyway, I think this is all getting a bit too.... socio-historical; I'd much rather keep it on a feelings level.

My Father: (*scornfully*) A feelings level?

Me: (*goaded by this*) Yes, you know, feelings; nasty inconvenient things that can cause all kinds of complications, if you let them - but basically unimportant, uninteresting, of no value.

My Father: You forget [I was a novelist](#); an *acclaimed* novelist, widely admired for what I think one critic called my "withering perspicacity in



regard to modern relationships between the sexes". I couldn't have been that if I was really uninterested in feelings.

Me: Don't remind me how much I hate your novels.

My Father: *(smoothly)* That's a pity because I rather like your children's books. What's that one about the pig that thinks it's an owl - or is it the other way around? Anyway, it's sweet.

Bernard: So.... anyhoo, gentlemen.... what I'm picking up is that *(to me)* you feel angry and sad because your father was never a warm and reliable paternal presence in your life.... and that *(to My Father)* you also feel angry, and unfairly criticised, because you did your best to be a good father - and certainly a better one than your own father had been to you - within the constraints you were working under?

My Father and I both sit and glower.

Bernard: What does it feel like to be properly angry with each other?

My Father: Properly angry? *(He seems amused by the idea.)*

Bernard: You find that funny?

My Father shrugs, as if unwilling to get into this.

Bernard: Well, we would say - here, in this room, in 2002 - that there's nothing improper about feeling anger; that sometimes it's the most appropriate emotion to experience, and one that needs to find an appropriate outlet. Anger is nothing to fear, or be ashamed of!

My Father makes a very expressive face - one which I also make myself - that involves pulling the corners of his mouth down as far as they will go while raising his eyebrows to their highest extent. It means, roughly, "Uncomfortable with the way this is going; get me out of here."

Me: *(looking at Bernard, as if to say "Now do you see what I'm up against?")* Oh, for fuck's sake....

Again, no one has anything to say. Bernard is sitting with his hands on his knees, looking from me to My Father, and back again. He would call this "holding the space".

Me: *(eventually)* Do you want to know the main thing I've felt since you died?

Bernard: I think you're going to tell him, anyway....

Me: Nothing at all. I haven't felt anything. At first, I kept expecting the grief to kick in. Or maybe the anger. Or maybe the regret you're supposed to feel when someone dies and you realise that now you'll never be able to tell them all those things that you always wanted to say to them. But.... nope, nothing at all, not a sausage. And you know why that is?

Bernard: Again, I'm pretty sure you're -

Me: I suddenly realised a few weeks after you died: it's because I'd already done my grieving, when you were still alive. I pre-grieved - years before you died, when I eventually allowed myself to accept that you were never going to be a proper father to me. That you didn't want to be one. That you weren't capable of being one.

Bernard: *(seizing on this)* You weren't only incapable of being a proper father to your son; you didn't even want to be one. How does it feel to hear him say that?

My Father: I'm tempted to say it makes me "properly" angry.... but it wouldn't be true. It makes me feel guilty; crushingly guilty - which is how I've felt for almost every moment of my adult life - at least, since [the day I married your mother](#), knowing, quite certainly, that at some point I would have to leave her. I tried so hard to stick it out - mainly for you. But when I finally left her - when I was the age you are now - *(he looks down at himself)* - the age I am now - after 20 years of marriage - you can't begin to imagine the sense of liberation I felt; the sense of dragging myself out of a vast all-consuming pit of negation and despair, where I'd been floundering, hopelessly, for all that time. It was like being born; emerging into the daylight; starting a new life.... and however unfair it may have been, you

and your brother and sister were part of the life I was escaping from. I couldn't take you with me -

Me: Hah! As if you wanted to!

My Father: Even if I had wanted to, I couldn't have taken you with me. But I didn't want to, because I was in love - properly in love, for the first time in my life - and I needed to dedicate myself to that love; immerse myself in it; be rescued by it.

Me: Ah, the redemptive power of a good woman's love, for even the most desperately bad man - I seem to remember coming across that in one of your novels. Or, hang on, maybe in all of them.

My Father: I'm sorry, I really am. I felt so terrible about it, but it was like being washed away by a tidal wave - too powerful to resist - I needed to be with her - and you - well, you were part of a life that would've killed me if I hadn't got out when I did. You were part of her - your mother - part of what was trying to drag me back down.

As he finishes, My Father allows his head to slump forward, perhaps to avoid meeting my eye. He seems to be staring morosely at the backs of his folded hands.

Bernard: So you - and your siblings - were part of that vast vortex of despair that Your Father had to escape from, in order to be healed and become truly himself? *(Bernard prompts me when I don't respond)* And now he lives with the crushing guilt of having made that escape.... *(Realising what he's just said)* Well, maybe that's badly phrased - now he *experiences* the crushing guilt of having made that escape....

Me: Yeah, he was always good at guilt. "Boo-hoo, poor me! Look how badly you've made me behave!" But that's worth precisely nothing to me. It wasn't then, and it isn't now.

Bernard: *(quietly)* I'm thinking of what you said about having "pre-grieved". Isn't that sadness I'm hearing now?

I don't reply. I sit looking at My Father, whose head is still bowed. I wonder how closely we resemble each other. He's balder, and heavier, and his eyebrows are more pronounced than mine. But otherwise, we're strikingly similar; no DNA test required to establish paternity. I wonder how I would have lived his life; and how, from this point on in my life, I will live mine. And I wonder if somehow, before the end - which will come about as a result of prostate cancer in my mid-to-late-70s, if heredity is any guide - I will find a way of being reconciled with this handsome, clever, sad, childlike man in the Empty Chair opposite me. Although I can't see his face, and he makes no sound, I wonder if he may be weeping.

Me: All I ever really wanted was to feel that you -

But now something strange is happening to My Father. At first, it's barely perceptible; a kind of flickering around his edges. He seems unaware of it, and starts to tell me something.

My Father: But I always -

The flickering intensifies, and now his entire body becomes unstable, insubstantial, provisional. He seems to be dematerialising before my eyes. His speech is rapidly fragmenting, too, though he seems to have something he wants to communicate.

My Father: But I always - but I always - but I alw - but I - but-but-but-but....

Bernard: Damn, we're losing the connection. They warned me that might happen....

Me: The connection?

Bernard: Well, I'm not exactly sure of the technology involved - but I was told he might not last the entire session.

The Empty Chair is empty once again, although a ghostly echo of My Father's voice can still be heard, but-but-butting, as if from somewhere on the far side of the universe.

At last, My Father's voice fades away completely, and [there is silence](#).

Bernard: I'm afraid that's probably it - I don't think we'll get him back, do you?

Me: (*shell-shocked*) Probably not.

There's a long, long pause.

Bernard: (*brightly*) Well, we still have almost half an hour...

He leans forward in his chair, and does the mischievous hand-rubbing thing again.

Bernard: So, I wonder where you want to go from here?

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**If you are enjoying *My Father keeps the PM waiting*,  
please do [share it with a friend](#).**

# **My Father is licked by two dogs**

## **October 1926**

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My Father is asleep in the shade of rampant bougainvillea, which cascades from the dazzling terrace walls. It is hot, even for this part of Palestine at this time of year. His nurse Mahveen is sitting nearby, sewing. But as the noonday sun hammers down, her head droops chestward, and her work drops from her hands into the basket by her feet.

My Father is alone, untended. It gets hotter. And now he stirs in his Moses basket, waving his hands around distractedly in front of his face, as if cleaning invisible windows, and emitting lamb-like bleats. He's not distressed, yet, but there is certainly the beginning of agitation in the way he moves his head from side to side.

Mahveen is snoring gently. (My Father has not been sleeping well lately.) It gets hotter. My Father becomes more agitated. The bleats start to take on a more urgent tone. Still Mahveen is undisturbed. And then my father feels something soft and wet on his fingers. It tickles. He likes the way it feels. He laughs. And now the soft, wetness engulfs his face. My Father laughs harder. It is the funniest, most surprising, most pleasurable thing that has happened so far in his young life.

In a paroxysm of joy, he grabs the dog's nose, grips, and squeezes. He loves the dog. He doesn't want to let it get away. The dog yelps, finally waking Mahveen, who hastily shoos it off, and wipes My Father's face with the edge of her hijab. She is still quite new to the job, but she is fairly sure that her mistress - My Father's mother - would not wish her baby to be bathed in the saliva of an old black Labrador.

"Ayisha!" calls My Father's mother, who has just returned from playing cards with the other English ladies at the club (who do not, by any means

consider that description to apply to her, the Lebanese wife of an American somewhat inexplicably employed by the British civil administration),

"Ayisha, bring the baby in, you stupid girl. It's much too hot!"

Mahveen sighs, as she lifts My Father from his cot. It is almost five months since she replaced Ayisha as My Father's nurse.

The old dog, whose knees have gone, collapses in the shade, as if shot, and closes his eyes.

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Nearly 70 years have passed, and My Father is walking on Primrose Hill, with another old dog that he loves; also a Labrador, though this time a dirty yellow.

My Father is tired, and sits down on a bench. As he looks out across Regent's Park, bathed in the pinkish glow of a winter sunset, the dog - which is as near to blind as makes no difference - licks his hand, diligently.

The dog crouches and deposits an immense steaming pile of turds on the footpath, next to the bench. Rising to continue his walk, My Father doesn't even consider clearing it up. (Primrose Hill, he would claim, if pressed, is almost entirely composed of dog faeces, so what possible point could there be in tackling such an incalculably tiny part of the problem?)

My Father walks slowly, effortfully, after the dog. His left hip is riddled with arthritis, and will very soon need to be replaced.

The dog walks slowly, painfully, too. It will also very soon need to be replaced.

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# **My Father spends the night at the home of the Woman He Loves**

## **October 1968**

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My Father feels as if he is breathing aerated gold. Every object within his field of vision, every piece of furniture, every picture on the wall, every item of clothing on the mounded coat-rack by the window, seems suffused with a warm unearthly radiance. Every sound - the hum of the fridge, a 59 bus slowing down as it passes the end of the road, the voice of the Woman He Loves, who seems to be asking him something - is supernaturally seductive and pleasing to the ear. And oh god, the scent of her, and of the dog that has the astounding good fortune to live with her, and of his own damp overcoat; he realises he has never had a functioning sense of smell until now. He knows that none of his senses has ever really, properly, worked until this moment.

And how has My Father entered this new world, this parallel universe of wondrously heightened sensation? Through the window! A bit like entering Narnia through the wardrobe, he thinks, delighted by his own delicious quickness to see the similarity.

My Father is in the half-basement kitchen of the looming terraced house belonging to the Woman He Loves. He is visiting her at home for the first time. He has just arrived by cab, and after briefly blundering around outside - homes in this part of North London being unencumbered by anything as suburban as house-numbers - he has seen her, sitting at the kitchen table, drawing. And she has beckoned him in . . . through the window, which, she explains, she uses for her everyday comings and goings, in preference to the front door.

This seems wholly delightful to My Father. As does the very notion of a semi-subterranean knocked-through kitchen, which he has never



encountered in the Surrey commuter-belt, where he lives.

"Would you like a drink?" is what the Woman He Loves is saying to him.

Would My Father like a drink? Of course he would! So she pours lengthily, from a large plastic bottle into a tall glass tumbler. Wine from a plastic bottle! Served in a socking great tumbler! Again, My Father is delighted beyond measure.

For a moment, My Father and the Woman He Loves are a little awkward with each other. They stand in her kitchen holding their drinks like strangers at a party. My Father experiments with glugging red wine from a tumbler. Successfully! It's like drinking from a wine glass, but with a greater volume of wine. The moment passes.

"So this is where you live," he says.

"Is it how you imagined?"

How *has* My Father imagined the home of the Woman He Loves? The truth, he realises, is that he has made hardly any effort to do so. Over these last eleven-and-a-half months since they became lovers (he'll never forget the date; it was the day after [devaluation](#)), the time they have spent together has, for him, been very largely a shining continuous present. Of course, she has told him about her childhood (unhappy), her work (creatively fulfilling but unremunerative), her children (loveable but insanely demanding), her dog (loveable but malodorous), and her husband (unloveable, unmitigatedly unsatisfactory, and soon to be her ex-husband). But, to be honest, he's let it wash over him, along with her plans for the future - all of which are problematic, revolving as they do around his leaving My Mother, in order to begin a new life with the Woman He Loves in a Cornish fishing village, a Tuscan farmhouse, or indeed this North London terrace.

For My Father, at this point, she - the Woman He Loves - is nothing as mundane as another person, with desires, dreams, uncertainties, anxieties of her own, but a kind of walking miracle; an assemblage of perfections, put together, presumably by some beneficent universal life-force, for the sole and exclusive purpose of making My Father feel whole, happy, fully

himself for the first time in his life. He does. And what other explanation can there be?

"I'm not sure what I imagined," he admits. "Except that it would be beautiful, like you."

She looks around, humorously. The kitchen possesses a degree of bohemian shabby chic, and a couple of the water colours are good. But the room is on the cavernous side; in fairly urgent need of redecoration; more shabby, objectively, than chic. Not really beautiful, by any criteria.

"Would you like to see the rest? Or are you hungry? I threw some chicken in a casserole."

[Is My Father hungry?](#) Of course he is! For as long as he can remember, there has always been an aching void inside him, a permanent, clenched, gnawing appetite, which can never be fully satisfied.

"Ravenous," he says, "but not for chicken. I'd love to see the rest - particularly your bedroom". (He is, incidentally, delighted with her choice of verb: "threw" chicken in a casserole!)

She holds out her hand to him. For a small woman, it's a surprisingly large hand, with catastrophic nails, chewed to oblivion. It seems to him the very essence of female manual perfection. He can't imagine how arms could possibly reach a more beautiful conclusion.

She leads him upstairs. She is wearing something floral and floaty, yet also somehow clingy. Her body is not as spectacular as some he has seen, but in some sense - in its being, corporeally, her - it too is perfect, unimprovable. He follows her into the enormous high-ceilinged ground floor sitting room, where she pulls him towards a massive dark maroon crushed velvet sofa. She turns, throws herself into his arms, and clasps her strong dancer's legs around his waist.

"I'll show you my bedroom later," she says. "We've got all night."

And they have. She has offloaded her three young boys on her sister, boarded out the dog, temporarily expelled the unsatisfactory soon-to-be-ex-husband, who has been squatting in the attic since the irretrievable breakdown of their relationship almost three years ago. They have the place to themselves, and the whole night ahead of them.

My Father and the Woman He Loves fuck on the sofa.

She is not a particularly expert lover. She possesses no rare or exotic sexual accomplishments (certainly not compared to the mousy typist My Father was seeing before he met her). But she fucks as if her life depends on it. As if their lives, entwined now and for ever, depend on it.

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Later, My Father climbs out through the kitchen window (which is harder than stepping down from ground level), and pops around the corner to buy Scotch.

Also, to find a phone box so that he can call My Mother, with some barely semi-plausible story about a crisis at the office, a long evening's work still to be done, and a kind offer from his colleague Ian to spend the night on his sofa, in Kilburn.

My Mother believes not a single word.

When he gets back, the Woman He Loves is in tears. She's not sniffing discreetly into a handkerchief, or even suppressing sobs behind her hand, but howling piteously, her face upturned, collapsed, snot-streaked, like a grief-stricken toddler's. The casserole, which has been bubbling away on the stove, has dried out and burnt, to the point of inedibility.

Also, she knows - somehow - that My Father has called My Mother.

"You've been talking to that ghastly bloody woman, haven't you?" she gasps, shoulders heaving.

He momentarily considers lying, but decides against. To the Woman He Loves, My Father is transparent. She knows him, sees him, as no one ever has before.

So instead, he comforts and cajoles; he enfolds her in his arms, and murmurs something apologetic and exculpatory, into the fine blonde hair on the top of her head. He is aware that reasoning with her - pointing out that "that woman" is his wife, and would certainly report him missing to the police if he simply failed to return to the family home - would not be a fruitful approach. And, in any case, he is in no particular hurry for her rage to pass. Soon enough, he knows, her wracking sobs will have turned to raucous self-mocking laughter.

And this - as perhaps My Father is hazily aware - is truly why he is here this evening. He has fucked other women before. He has had relationships with other women before. He has, he supposes, loved - and been loved by - other women before. But all that has always seemed to him conditional, transactional, even adversarial; a chess-match contested by two more-or-less evenly matched players, each intent on a different outcome, each essaying various gambits, offering up sacrifices, trying to foresee the other's next-move-but-one, in pursuit of victory. With the Woman He Loves, there is no games-playing, no concealment, no pretence of any kind. Every emotion she feels is real, intense, fully experienced, and broadcast uncensored. And to his astonishment, he's discovered that he loves this. He loves the rawness and epic scale of her emotions; their mutability. He loves never having to guess what she's feeling, or pre-empt what she might be about to feel. He loves knowing - although it also frightens him - that here, beside this woman, is where he belongs; his home, the place where, at last, he can feel loved.

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A little later again, calm restored, they sit at her kitchen table, drink more red wine poured from the plastic bottle, and also Scotch, and eat some delicious black olives, with a hunk of stale bread - which are the only food, apart from the incinerated remains of the casserole, in the house.

Olives for supper! With nothing but a hunk of stale bread! Impossible for My Father to imagine a more delightful meal.

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# **My Father marries My Mother on the day before the Korean War begins**

## **24 June 1950**

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My Father is vomiting in the downstairs cloakroom of his parents' home. For once, it isn't alcohol-related. Perhaps it's something he's eaten. Five years since the war ended, food is still desperately short; and My Father, perpetually hungry, has been known to take a chance on an elderly bacon rasher, or some unidentifiable leftovers shoved to the back of a pantry shelf. Or perhaps, more likely still, it's sheer panic: a rebellion of the guts and bowels brought on by the knowledge that today his life changes, for ever. Today - in just over two hours' time, in fact - he will marry My Mother.

He retches feebly, inconclusively. Still half-kneeling with his right arm tenderly encircling the lavatory bowl, he wonders if the worst may now be past. Or maybe, it occurs to him, it's just about to begin.

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Across the hallway in the kitchen, where the gassy reek of over-cooked vegetables has permeated every floor-tile and work-surface, My Mother is making cream, or something that approximates to it. She has taken a large can of Carnation evaporated milk, and plunged it into boiling water, where she will leave it for 20 minutes - after which, she will whisk the contents to stiff peaks, to be served later at the Wedding Breakfast with fruit salad from another (unboiled) can.

As she works, My Mother hums, in a manner that may sound care-free and happy. And why shouldn't those be her feelings? She is about to marry a man she loves, and who brings to their soon-to-be-sealed union every quality she could wish for in a husband. At just-turned 24, My Father is good-looking, kind and brilliantly clever; currently unemployed, it's true,

but an exceptionally able young man of the greatest promise, who will undoubtedly prove to be the all-competent provider she wants as a life-partner and father of her children.

At first sight, it may seem surprising that this - finding a man to take care of her - represents the height of her aspirations. The first member of her family to go to university, she has just completed her Finals at Oxford; she is beautiful, and built like a runway model; and although not yet 23, she is by no means deficient in terms of personality (measured as the capacity of an individual to change the temperature of a room). She could, perfectly plausibly, be contemplating a glittering future for herself.

But this is 1950, when for a girl from a dowdy Manchester suburb to get to Oxford is an achievement remarkable enough to require no sequel. And in her own case, My Mother feels this to be particularly true. Since leaving home nearly three years ago, she has expended every atom of energy she possesses to make herself what she is today. She has changed her appearance, her voice, her accent, her posture, her walk, her ideas, her political views, her laugh, her style of dress. Yet despite her efforts - or perhaps because of them - she has never, for a single moment, been able to relax and enjoy her achievements.

And this is why [My Mother hums](#). She hums - at almost all times when she is awake, and not talking - to soothe herself, to drown out the incessant chirruping of her anxieties, and the low remorseless thrumming of the dread she feels that her past will reclaim her; that the life she has left behind, and the home she has escaped - where her desperate mother now nurses her father in his final illness - will somehow reach out and draw her back in.

The Carnation, still at a rolling boil, has done its 20 minutes now. She fears (with some justification) that removing it from the water may cause the can to explode, to devastating effect. It's a risk she isn't prepared to run unsupported.

"Husband, dearest!" she calls. "Haste thee to my succour!" (She has recently started addressing My Father in mock-Shakespearean, to humorous effect she imagines.)

There is no immediate response.

"Husband, mine? Hie thee hither, betimes!"

My Father appears in the doorway, still wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. This Shakespeare thing makes him deeply uncomfortable, but sometimes, usually when he feels in the wrong (which he nearly always does), he plays along with it.

"What wouldst thou, fair lady?"

Quite often, she gets stuck in the late 16th century for hours on end, but on this occasion, the pressures she feels in relation to her bridal responsibilities jolt her back into the present day.

"The cream," she says, indicating the pan. "I was rather hoping you might take charge of it. We have so much to do before the Register Office."

"I can ask my mother to help," he says, using a tea towel to pick up the pan, then carrying it to the sink to drain. (She loves how competent he is!)

"I'd much rather you didn't. She needs to rest."

"She wouldn't mind. Really. I think she'd rather like to be asked."

"No." This quite sharply. "We'll get on and do as much as we can ourselves, then if we need her help, we'll ask her later."

This wedding of My Father and My Mother is not a traditional one, for a number of reasons - among them the fact that My Father's mother has recently had a minor heart attack, and been advised to avoid undue excitement. The terminal decline of My Mother's father has less direct impact, because he is lengthily dying far away in Manchester, but of course it casts a shadow that would make bacchanalian revelry hard to enjoy. And then there is the homelessness and unemployment of both My Father and My Mother. This explains why they are currently (temporarily) living rent-free here in his parents' large gloomy under-furnished Edwardian villa on the suburban fringes of South London - and also why they are now acting in



clear contravention of the tradition dictating that bride and groom should not lay eyes on each other before the ceremony.

As a Socialist, My Father rather approves of this; an unashamedly unconventional non-bourgeois wedding seems entirely appropriate for a man in his position. He needs to be married, for the sake of his political career, and My Mother will make exactly the kind of photogenic wife that local constituency parties go mad for when selecting candidates. But the last thing he needs on his CV is a Tatler-style Society Wedding of the Year, casting doubt on the sincerity of his commitment to the struggles of the working man.

My Father turns on the tap, to sluice the super-heated can with cold water. While they wait for it to be cool enough to open, he and My Mother get to work on the other components of the Wedding Breakfast. He slices bread thinly, and spreads it with margarine; she applies fish paste to bridge rolls, and snips mustard and cress to mix with hard-boiled eggs and salad cream. He carves slices from a glistening pink block of luncheon meat. And, rather to his own surprise, My Father finds he is enjoying this; being in the kitchen, with his almost-wife, performing mindless food-related tasks together. Perhaps, for a moment or two, he reflects that this kind of dull but benign domesticity is something he has never really experienced before, having spent much of his childhood, and all his adolescence and early adulthood in institutions of varying kinds ([boarding school](#), [Army](#), Oxford college); something that, without knowing it, he has always craved.

My Mother stops humming and asks him: "Was there any post this morning?" Exceptionally, this being her wedding day, she was in the bath when it arrived.

"Nothing interesting."

"Nothing from BTA?"

"No," he lies. The letter from the British Travel Association is in his jacket pocket.

"Perhaps we asked for too much?" she says, a quaver in her voice. My Mother cries a lot during this period of her life. My Father puts down the knife, and prepares to comfort her, a role at which he has become exasperatedly adept.

My Father's career plans could not be clearer. He aims to be Prime Minister, or at least in the Cabinet, within 25 years. Or maybe 20, if all goes well. More immediately, he will train as a barrister (he's already eaten his dinners at Inner Temple), while he waits for a winnable seat to come up. My Father has, just a few months before his wedding, [contested a safe Tory constituency](#) - and performed well enough, he thinks, to have realistic hopes of something much juicier at the next General Election, which should be fairly soon, given the government's unsustainably small majority. Financially, it's going to be very challenging indeed, but a man of destiny has to be willing to make sacrifices (up to and including remaining dependent on his parents for rather longer than would ideally be the case).

My Mother supports My Father in his ambitions. Whole-heartedly, and unreservedly. No one believes more fervently in his exceptional abilities, or in the urgent necessity of his using them to forward the cause of Socialism, in the nation's interest. And yet - well, not "and yet" really, because that would imply a reservation where none exists; and *as well*, she feels that an intellect as formidable as My Father's needs to be fed, stimulated, occupied; and that while he is, unavoidably, in something of a state of limbo, waiting for his legal and political career to gather momentum, he could usefully and enjoyably deploy his extraordinary talents dabbling in some other more immediately remunerative line of work.

So she has been making job applications on his behalf. Originally, the rationale for this related to My Father's "execrable scribble", as they laughingly refer to his appalling handwriting, which they agree would be unlikely to make a favourable impression on a potential employer. But over these past few weeks, My Mother has taken complete charge of the application process; scouring the papers for suitable-sounding openings, composing letters, signing and despatching them, often without My Father's knowledge.

He has no idea, for example, that he has just completed applications for a job as a Trainee Assistant Manager of a large commercial laundry in Peckham, and another as Deputy Director of Schools for the London Borough of Merton.

The first of these is not, My Mother realises, an opening that will really stretch one of the most able young men of his generation. But it would allow him to "keep his engine ticking over" as she puts it, and to earn enough for them to move out of his parents' house. For the second, on the other hand, he may seem at first sight to lack the necessary weight of educational experience, but My Mother's faith in My Father is unshaken by any such mundane consideration; extraordinary people, she would contend, possess the potential to achieve extraordinary things.

"Pum padda-pum padda-padda pum-pum...." My Mother, tears now dried, is humming again as she cuts tomatoes into quarters, and lays them on well washed lettuce leaves.

My Father thinly slices cucumber. How does he feel about her attempting to alter the course of his career? Strangely, perhaps, he rather likes it. True, it's problematic - or likely to become so - that she is determined to secure him employment that would quickly become incompatible with the pursuit of his true ambitions. (He could, in the shortish term, combine a not-very-demanding job with his Bar studies; but as soon as he has a constituency to nurse, it would be out of the question.) But for My Father, whose sense of abandonment by his family would be impossible to exaggerate, the feeling the someone really cares what happens in his life - to the point of being prepared to intervene forcefully in it - comes as a delicious novelty. He feels like a desert newly irrigated by the power of her unwavering attention.

In any case, he doesn't have to go along with her plans. At any point, he's free to slam on the brakes. He has, propelled by her, submitted a number of job applications (although he doesn't realise how many). He has even attended a couple of interviews. But if he is offered a job - as, in fact, he now has been, by the BTA, despite his attempt to forestall that possibility by demanding more money than they were prepared to pay - no one can force him to accept it.

Absorbed in their work, neither of them notices My Father's mother enter the kitchen. She is a small, squarish figure, built like a scrum-half, with an improbable frizz of orange hair, which she imagine allows her to pass for an English lady. Wrongly, as in terms of both features and accent, she quite strongly resembles her near-contemporary [Golda Meir](#), later to be Prime Minister of Israel.

My Mother is first to register her presence. Despite having now lived under the same roof for several weeks, she is yet to resolve the problem of how to address her very-soon-to-be mother-in-law. Using her first name is out of the question; "Mrs" seems over-formal; "mother" or "mum" unthinkable. But sometimes - and this is one of those occasions - something more than a bald "you" is required. Under pressure, My Mother opts for her default style of diction.

"How now, my lady?" she enquires.

My Father's mother looks at My Mother, but does not respond. She is unsure, at this point, what to make of her almost-daughter-in-law, though inclined to take a dim view. She talks so much, and says so little that seems to make any sense.

"Mother," says My Father, "how are you feeling today?"

She shrugs and sighs heavily, casting her eyes heavenward, in a manner that suggests the answer to this enquiry is so unequivocally negative as to be unworthy of articulation. She advances painfully on the kitchen table, where the food is laid out, and reaches out a hand to pincer a slice of luncheon meat between index finger and thumb.

"Out There, this we give to the dogs."

My Father laughs. His mother disapproves of almost everything in this country. She is relieved to have escaped the daily threat of violence that scarred the last few years of her former life in Jerusalem. (My Father's father was supposed to be at a meeting at the [King David hotel](#) on the day of the bombing, but was prevented from attending by a fortuitous stomach

bug.) But in every other respect - food, climate, manners of the local population, quality and size of accommodation, availability of cheap domestic labour, and so much more - she finds England in 1950 to be no match for British Mandatory Palestine. (Out There, as she invariably refers to it.)

My Father barely knows his mother, but he is a dutiful son, and speaks to her solicitously. "Mother, have you decided if you're well enough to come to the Register Office?"

Again, she does the shrug, sigh, upward glance; this time to denote, "How could you possibly imagine that one suffering as I am might be capable of such a thing?"

My Father is relieved, since she is still in her dressing gown, and the timings are tight. "Well, that is a pity," he says, "but I hope that means you can get some more rest before our guests arrive later."

He turns to My Mother. "And, darling, we had better get a move on."

"Tarry we not," My Mother agrees. "Our nuptial hour draws on apace."

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In the taxi on the way to the Register Office, conversation does not flow.

Perhaps the bride and groom - she in a queasy pale green imitation linen, he in his itchy ill-fitting demob suit - can be excused on the grounds of pre-nuptial nerves. And the third member of the wedding party, [My Father's father](#), has never had any talent for inconsequential chat. A stiff, rather remote figure, he has a bristling moustache that gives him a military air, and a tendency to clear his throat juicily, as if about to deliver himself of some pronouncement that never comes.

As for the final occupant of the car - Guy Simmons, a friend of the couple from university, here today as second witness and unofficial best man - he has at least two reasons to feel uncomfortable. The first is that he is perched precariously on the fold-up seat, facing the others, and finding it quite

difficult to maintain the balance of his considerable bulk, particularly as the taxi takes corners. And then there is his former relationship with the bride.

In itself, there is nothing compromising about this. It's an acknowledged and uncontroversial fact that at the time My Father first met My Mother, she was - in a fairly technical, Oxford sense - Guy's girlfriend. They had drunk warm sherry at a college mixer together, and walked hand in hand through Magdalen Meadows, on a couple of occasions. At the time, this transfer of allegiance was managed surprisingly smoothly; partly, it must be said, because Guy had started to find My Mother's disruptive presence in his life a little overwhelming, and was by no means sorry to regard her as a friend, rather than a frankly terrifying romantic partner. But recently, My Mother has decided to make a running gag of the unlikeliness of their short-lived "fling", as she refers to it. And now, in the awkward silence - humming, for once, failing her as a means of filling dead air - she feels impelled to return to this rich source of comedy.

"So, prithee tell us brave Sir Guy, how feel'st thou to see thy former paramour carried off, for aye, by thy noble adversary?"

Guy is a stolid long-suffering type, currently doing his articles at one of the duller City law firms, and fully accustomed to playing second, third or even fourth fiddle in matters of the heart. So he laughs, hollowly, and says, "I'm not sure I shall ever recover, as a matter of fact. But the better man won, and to the victor, the spoils, eh?"

My Father gives him a rueful half-smile, while somehow simultaneously glowering at My Mother. My Father's father clears his throat, and they all turn to him expectantly. But he has nothing to say.

"Not much further," says My Father, the nausea bubbling up inside him again. "We'll be there in five minutes."

"Poor dear Guy," says My Mother, leaning forward to pat his knee. "Still so passionately in love with me!"

\*\*\*

Despite My Mother's best efforts to sparkle, or at least emit a radiant glow, the Wedding Breakfast is a subdued occasion.

One reason for this is the most almost complete lack of any enlivening refreshment. (There must, presumably, be something alcoholic in the fruit punch mixed by My Father's mother to a recipe popular Out There, but if so, it's near-impossible to detect.) It's uncomfortably stuffy, too. Outside, the midsummer sun casts dappled shadows on the lawn; but these are indoor festivities, My Father's parents taking the view that the British climate is not to be trusted. It's probably the ill-assortedness of the gathering, though, that does most to dampen the mood of this supposed celebration. A small huddle of friends of My Father and My Mother from Oxford laugh and talk loudly about politics in one corner of the cavernous sitting room. In another, My Father's two younger sisters giggle, and whisper to each other, but contribute little else to proceedings. Between them, a desiccated elderly couple, friends of My Father's parents from Palestine, search unsuccessfully for conversational common ground with an over-awed uncle and aunt of My Mother's, the only members of her family to attend.

How does My Mother feel about this? Sad, of course. She is fond of her father and wishes he could be there - though she also resents him for having married an inadequate depressive woman, and for having been perpetually sick, thereby depriving My Mother of anything resembling a care-free adolescence. But mostly, what she feels is relief. Because for My Mother this is the very first hour of the first day of a new phase of her existence; one in which she and her Husband move serenely through their days, going to places, saying things to people, buying furniture, making hot-pots, having babies - free, unconstrained, newly minted. For her family to be here, now, would be jarring, incongruous; it would simply make no sense, like coming across a London bus in an Amazonian jungle clearing.

The happy couple have a train to catch, so, mercifully soon, speeches are made (three short ones, by My Father, his father, and Guy), toasts are drunk (a bottle of sparkling perry appears from somewhere, and thimblefuls

dispensed), and the cake (supplied by Joe Lyons for £4 9s 6d) is cut, to applause from all present.

My Mother hurries upstairs to change into her going-away outfit. As she enters her room (of course, she hasn't been allowed to share with My Father), her eye is caught by the two newly completed job applications, on top of the chest of drawers. There's just time to pop them in the post, if she changes quickly.

Tripping lightheartedly down stairs with the letters a few minutes later, she bumps into Guy, emerging from the cloakroom off the hall, where he has been hiding for at least quarter of an hour.

"Ah, bold Sir Guy," she trills. "Wouldst accompany me on my quest to entrust these missives to His Majesty's Messengers?"

Guy has no idea what she is talking about, but feels compelled to take the hand she imperiously holds out to him. She inclines her head, to indicate he should open the front door. And then they walk together - hand in hand, My Mother laughing gaily - to the postbox at the end of the road.

"Oh, Guy, if only my Husband could see us now!" she remarks, joshingly.

He can. He's watching them from the window of his bedroom, where he has gone to change. He raises his hand to cup his brow, where, although he is still in his early-mid 20s, his hairline is already starting to retreat.

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At Paddington, while My Mother buys a magazine, My Father picks up a quarter bottle of brandy, which is all he can afford.

On the train, as soon as he decently can, he pretends to fall asleep. He should, he knows, indulge his new bride, by listening as she picks over the happiest moments of this happiest day of her life. But he just can't face it. He's been married to My Mother for only a few hours, and already he feels oppressed by her suffocating presence, overwhelmed by the current of barely suppressed panic that zings and fizzes around her.



Keeping his eyes firmly closed, he tries to regulate his breath. In.... out.... in.... out.... in.... out....

Perhaps everything will turn out all right, he does his best to reassure himself. She is, he reminds himself again, stunningly attractive - and, potentially, a major asset to his career. True, she is.... highly strung, a little unpredictable even. But then, she has been through so much recently, with her exams, and the wedding to organise, and the perpetual crisis of her ghastly family. It's incredible, really, he reflects, how happy and well-balanced she seems, most of the time. And now that the wedding is over, things really should start to settle down in her life. And maybe, My Father thinks hopefully, they will be able to recapture something of the exhilaration of the first few weeks after they met, when she seemed so dazzlingly different from the drearily indistinguishable Home Counties blue-stockings he had been consorting with since arriving at Oxford.

In any case, he reflects, everything will change when his career gets properly underway. When he's in Parliament, perhaps already a PPS or even a junior Minister, and starting to build his Bar practice, he'll be so busy, so fully engaged intellectually, so far elevated above dull everyday non-political concerns, that it will really hardly make any difference who his wife happens to be, or what she may need or want from him. (He knows he shouldn't allow himself to think this, but - too late! - the thought has already skittered and cartwheeled across his consciousness.)

Gradually, My Father's heartbeat slows, as exhaustion and the calming anaesthetic effects of the brandy - most of which he gulped down in the Gents, before boarding the train - start to kick in. And soon, My Father no longer needs to pretend to be asleep, as, with unquestionable authenticity, his mouth droops open to allow a narrow slug-trail of saliva to dribble down his chin.

Her magazine open on her lap, My Mother watches her Husband sleep, lovingly. How beautiful he is. And how astounding her good fortune in meeting him. What, she wonders, was the likelihood of her path through life intersecting with that of a young man from a world so entirely alien to her

own, and yet so startlingly, implausibly perfect in terms of all the attributes she could ever wish for in a man? My Implausibly Perfect Husband! She like the phrase, and files it away for future use.

And there is so much more about their future that now, as My Father starts to snore in a way she finds thrillingly endearing, comes into focus for her. She sees herself cradling a swaddled infant, while he wraps a protective arm around her shoulders. She sees the home where they, this child, and others, will live happily together; not palatial, but spacious, with a separate kitchen and dining room, and a lovely little garden. And she sees her Implausibly Perfect Husband hurrying home from work each night, always first to leave the office in his eagerness to miss as little as possible of the happy familial hubbub that awaits him.

Where, My Mother wonders, will that home be? Over these last few weeks, she has been doing a bit of location-scouting, and she rather likes the look of the London Borough of Merton. If only he can get the job!

Through the longest evening of the summer, the train trundles unhurriedly across Berkshire, and Hampshire, and into Dorset, where they will spend their honeymoon, its wheels beating out an insistent rhythm as they cross the tracks, "Te-tum, te-TUM.... te-tum, te-TUM.... te-tum, te-TUM.... te-titty-te-tum-te-TUM...."

Without realising she is doing it, My Mother starts to hum in time with the train.

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"Fie, sir! For shame! Why assail'st thou thy lady thus, with this rough and rude unseemly coming on?"

My Father's attempts to introduce a little interest and energy into the otherwise dutiful performance of the wedding night solemnities seem not to be appreciated by his bride.

"Unhand me, prithee, dearest sir!"

He unhands her, and rolls onto his back. His main feeling is relief. All he really wants to do is sleep.

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When she awakes next morning, in the bedroom of their guesthouse, My Mother finds that she's alone. My Father is gone. Although he did briefly consider the possibility, he hasn't decided to cut short the agony of their doomed liaison, by disappearing into the dawn. As the note he has left on his pillow explains, he has in fact gone to look for newspapers. (Something that throughout his life My Father will do when he wants a drink, an opportunity to make an illicit phone call, a way of avoiding disagreeable responsibilities - or indeed, newspapers.)

Having read the note, with an indulgent smile on her face, My Mother kicks back the sheets, and climbs out of bed, in a happy and care-free fashion. The village where they are staying, from what they saw of it when they arrived late yesterday evening, is small; perhaps too small to have a newsagent's. He may not be back for a while. She crosses to the dressing table by the window. She will use this time to beautify herself still further, for her Husband.

On the stool by the dressing table, his jacket is lying where he tossed it aside. She picks it up, intending to hang it nicely for him on the peg behind the door. As she does so, she notices a folded sheet of paper in the inside pocket. Good quality paper. It looks like a letter. She hesitates, but only for a moment. They are, after all, Husband and Wife; one flesh; interests indivisible.

She unfolds the letter, and reads. They have offered him the job! The BTA would like him to start as soon as possible. And they have agreed to pay the extra £104 annually that he (in her view) so rashly demanded. It sounds ideal! Not quite as perfect, perhaps, as the London Borough of Merton job, because the BTA offices are in the Strand, which means his journey home will take a little longer (depending where home turns out to be). But what possible harm can there be in accepting this wonderful job while they wait for news of one that might be even better?

My Mother rummages through her suitcase, which she hasn't had time to unpack yet, to find the writing materials that she's brought, with a view to making further applications while they are away. If she hurries, she can get his acceptance letter done before he comes back with his precious papers. And maybe later, she will find a moment to pop it in the post for him, too.

Luckily, she has remembered to bring stamps.

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**If you are enjoying *My Father keeps the PM waiting*,  
please do [share it with a friend](#).**

# My father and I have breakfast in Jerusalem 1995

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Breakfast with my father is uncomfortable, in two ways.

First, physically. I have always been an anxious and reluctant traveller, and this morning, although we arrived in Jerusalem only 24 hours ago, my body is already informing me, through a variety of signals, that it would greatly have preferred to stay at home. My lower back hurts quite badly (probably from the restrictive rigours of the four-and-a-half-hour flight). My head aches, and my eyes feel tight and gritty, after an almost entirely sleepless first night in an unfamiliar hotel bed. And my stomach - always the first part of me to sound the alarm when wrested from its comfortable routine - is unmistakably far from happy; queasy, skittish, ready to take offence.

And then there is the discomfort I feel at the situation I find myself in: having breakfast with my father, and no one else. When was the last time this happened? Never, as far as I can remember. It's possible, I suppose, that there may have been one far-off Sunday morning, back in my early teens, when my mother was indisposed, my older brother still in bed, and my sister sleeping over with a friend, resulting in us eating breakfast together, alone. But I have no recollection of it. And I can say with confidence that, since my parents separated quarter of a century ago, my father and I have never previously enjoyed breakfast *à deux*. Hardly surprising, then, that conversation is not exactly flowing.

"I'm pretty sure that's Fisk," murmurs my father, a little more loudly than he probably intends, gesturing with his head.

I glance in the direction he indicates, and see a bespectacled grey-haired red-faced fellow-guest, a few tables away, who could indeed be [the celebrated Middle East correspondent](#). In fact, it's more than likely to be him. Our hotel - [the American Colony](#) - is, after all, renowned as a politically non-partisan sanctuary, owned by neither Jews nor Arabs, where visiting dignitaries, media types and other celebrities can stay comfortably, and without fear of anyone taking exception.

"Yes, I think you're right," I say. "I'm almost certain that's Fisk."

And then I try to think of something else to say about Fisk. I admire his writing, but I'm aware this is of no use to my father. What he wants at this point in his life, almost to the exclusion of any other kind of conversation, is to be fed juicy titbits, the more discreditable the better, about people (men) he perceives to be more distinguished and successful than him. I'm wishing I was privy to knowledge that Robert Fisk is a wife-beater, or that he narrowly avoided a cottaging charge in his youth. But I know nothing about him, except what I've learned from his journalism, so I say weakly, "It always impresses me that he actually lives in Beirut - which is why he really understands the Middle East".

This is hopeless. My father sighs. I'm conscious of being a desperately disappointing younger son to him. I cast around for something to say that will catch his interest. [Peter Mandelson](#)! I'm sure I have heard a scurrilous rumour? And my father cherishes a special hatred for him, on account of his having become a household name as a Labour spin doctor, while he, my father, who has some claim to having invented that role, is known only to a handful of ageing political anoraks.

But before I can dredge up whatever it was (some kind of financial impropriety?), my father is on his feet and making his way, surprisingly nimbly for a man who will soon need both hips replaced, to the breakfast buffet, which runs almost the entire length of the dining room's opposite wall.

If I have remembered correctly when this trip took place, my father is now 69, and has fairly recently been diagnosed with the cancer that will kill him

early in 2002. He is a British citizen, and has lived in the UK all his adult life. But he grew up here in what was then Palestine, and although his mother and father were, respectively, Lebanese and American, he has in recent years increasingly come to think of himself as Palestinian. His boyhood home has become the nation of his heart. He visits several times a year, and has started to involve himself in Palestinian causes. Through his fund-raising efforts on behalf of the newly created Al-Quds University Medical School, and the charity [Medical Aid for Palestinians](#), my father will help to save many lives and much suffering among his spiritual-compatriots.

Why am I with him? I think I may have come under some pressure to accompany him, on the grounds that he isn't good at travelling alone, but has run short of companions because of the frequency of these trips. But the main reason I have agreed to this unprecedented adventure is because - with my 40s, and his 70s, coming into view - I have persuaded myself that it represents "one last chance" for my relationship with my father.

Surely, I have reasoned in advance, if we spend a whole week in each other's company, in this place of ancestral significance for us both, we will have no choice but to move beyond the mundanities and bitchy political gossip that have made up the entirety of our conversation for as long as I can remember. Surely, some new level of intimacy will be reached; some sense of our knowing each other, as two men who just happen to have very similar DNA? I suspect that, on the outward journey, I have a picture in my mind of my father and me sharing some kind of epiphany; turning to each other, embracing, and shedding manly tears together. Now, sipping my coffee, wishing I was at home with my family, my stomach in turmoil, that picture is already softening to a fantastical blur.

My father returns bearing two plates piled high with assorted breakfast foods; miniature croissants, bread rolls, slices of cheese and cold meat, fruit, hard-boiled eggs, and more. I wonder for a moment if he is expecting to share this feast with me.

"Well, I spoke to Mrs Vester," he tells me, animatedly. "And she says we can go, whenever we want."

"Great," I reply, with minimal conviction.

I know what he is referring to, because he has talked at length about this on the journey. My father, having stayed at the American Colony on numerous occasions, is - or, at least, imagines himself to be - on friendly terms with the hotel's octogenarian proprietress, [Mrs. Vester](#). She is, my father has impressed upon me, a legendary local figure; a friend and confidante, as well as a purveyor of accommodation, to generations of distinguished visitors to Jerusalem. She is also the owner of some kind of dwelling in a remote part of the Jordan valley, which favoured members of her circle are allowed to visit. She describes this dwelling as a shack, and it's unclear whether she means this in its conventional sense (flimsy, dilapidated), or as a kind of self-deprecatory nickname for something architect-designed, complete with pool and twin garages. My father is desperate to go there.

"I thought we might drive up there today," he says.

"OK," I mutter, non-committally.

I am a lot less keen than my father to visit Mrs Vester's shack. This is partly because I will have to both drive and navigate, since my father is capable of doing neither - and I feel anxious about driving an unfamiliar hire car on foreign roads, even without additional map-reading responsibilities. Also, the shack itself, and the highly prized invitation to visit it, have none of the allure for me that they hold for my father. Also, my gastrointestinal tract is in serious distress now. I'm fairly sure I won't be leaving my hotel room today. But how I am going to break this news to my father? He is not a man who deals well with disappointment.

"It's not far," he says, perhaps sensing my misgivings. "Mrs Vester says we can be there in 90 minutes. And look, we can take a picnic!"

Now I realise why my father has assembled such a gargantuan breakfast. Rather ahead of his time, he carries on his travels a stylish leather and canvas shoulder-bag, which is hanging on the back of his chair. With schoolboyish enjoyment of the subterfuge, he is cramming it with almost all



the buffet items, the more fragile and perishable of which he first wraps in man-sized tissues.

I do my best to look amused, and slightly shocked, by this - but fail dismally. My father doesn't notice. He is entirely focused on getting our trip underway.

"Come on, if you've finished..." he says, getting to his feet. He hasn't noticed that I have eaten nothing. "I'll introduce you to Mrs Vester on the way out."

He does.

She is sitting alone at a corner table; a tiny frail bird-like figure, her head bowed over a plate of fruit, cut into small pieces.

"Mrs Vester," says my father, loudly. "This is my son; my younger son - the one I told you about." And he mentions my name.

She looks up, with a vague smile on her face. It's hard to tell whether or not she knows who my father is. If I had to choose, I would say "not".

"He's very much looking forward to seeing your shack!" my father continues, turning to me. "Aren't you?"

A massive wave of abdominal pain surges through me.

"Yes, very much," I gasp, through gritted teeth.

Mrs Vester is still looking at us in a blearily benevolent manner. She raises her hand, palm outward, in something like a papal blessing, and our audience is over.

"Thank you so much, again, Mrs Vester," says my father, as we shuffle from her presence.

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About 20 minutes later, my father having completed whatever preparations he considers needful for a visit to Mrs Vester's shack, he knocks on the door of my room. I am lying on the bed, with my knees drawn up to my chest, groaning with each shattering peristaltic spasm. Somehow, bent-double, I manage to hobble across the room, and open the door, before collapsing, bathed in sweat, back onto the bed.

Even my father can see that I'm in no fit state to drive. But he hasn't quite given up hope yet.

"I have some Alka-Seltzer in my room," he says. "Which might be worth - "

"Nnnngggh!" I cut him off, with a rending animal groan.

"Well, that's very disappointing," he says, belatedly accepting that our day's expedition is a non-starter. "But I'm sure Mrs Vester wouldn't mind if we went tomorrow, instead. She said any day."

"OK," I sigh, hoping that I may, in fact, have died before then.

"I'll just go and check with her," he says.

And he goes.

\*

The following day, I am, amazingly, well enough to drive - thanks, probably, to some powerful unidentifiable drugs kindly sourced for me by the hotel. I still feel very far below my best, but not quite ill enough to deny my father his visit to Mrs Vester's shack.

We drive there. I find the directions difficult to follow, and we get lost, twice. My father becomes irritable, and drunk. ([He travels with a hip-flask.](#)) When we eventually arrive, it turns out that Mrs Vester's shack is, in fact, a ruin; a small stone-built shepherd's dwelling, with broken down walls and no roof. Its only attractive feature is a sun-dappled terrace, alive with the skitter of lizards, and furnished with a rusty cast iron table and chairs.

My father is enraptured. He is visiting Mrs Vester's shack. No one can take that away from him.

"Let's have our picnic," he says. "It's in my bag, in the car."

I go to fetch our picnic. It almost certainly is in my father's bag. But his bag is not in the car. It's in his hotel room.

\*

On the drive back to Jerusalem, I am feeling a little better, and, despite the picnic débâcle, my father is in good spirits. (He has visited Mrs Vester's shack!)

I briefly consider laying before him something in my life that is troubling me. Or asking him a question that will compel him to reveal some truth about the man he really is. But nothing comes to mind, and the moment passes. And for the remainder of our journey - and the rest of my father's life - our conversation does not move beyond mundanities and bitchy political gossip. [We do not reach any new level of intimacy](#), nor share any epiphany. We do not turn to each other, and embrace. And no tears, manly or otherwise, are shed.

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# My Father has a crack at a supermodel

## 1967

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My Father would - if it were something people really did, rather than a figure of speech - be pinching himself. He is sitting on a leather banquette in what can only (this being the 60s) be described as a swanky Soho eatery with his left thigh leaning lightly, seemingly carelessly, against the right thigh belonging to [Jean Shrimpton](#).

The Shrimp! My Father is thigh-to-gorgeous-firmly-tanned-yet-somehow-also-yieldingly-creamy-thigh with Britain's first supermodel.

Perhaps she hasn't noticed? She is, after, still a little woozy after gulping down a handful of those rather groovy pink pills, left thoughtfully in the changing cubicle at the shoot earlier. Or perhaps (this being the 60s) she is simply inured to fairly minor forms of unwanted physical contact. If she called the cops every time some bloke touched her up, the Krays and all those other colourful Cockney crims of the period would be free to rampage across London at will, entirely unrestrained by the forces of law and order.

In any case, she leaves her leg where it is. And My Father, emboldened by alcohol - he has drunk two large G&Ts before lunch, and more than his share of two very decent bottles of Beaujolais with it - increases the pressure slightly. And thinks, "Maybe I'm in with a chance here.... and anyway, what have I got to lose?"

Actually, what My Father really wants to do - he is quite drunk, he realises - is reach across and touch her nose. It's such a *perfect* nose; so small and flawless; turned up at the tip to so exactly the right degree. My Father is seized by a powerful, almost irresistible urge to find out if it feels as perfect as it looks.

And then suddenly, he feels quite sad. She's such a nice girl. He wasn't expecting that. Over lunch, before thigh-on-thigh action was even the remotest possibility, they have talked about dogs and horses, both girlish passions of hers; she has expressed sensible-sounding views on books that he hasn't read (Doris Lessing, Sylvia Plath); and she has engaged in surprisingly spirited banter with [Donovan](#) (the great Donovan!) over matters of mutual professional interest. And all the while, though sounding not unlike the bright, nicely brought up convent girl that she undoubtedly is, she has looked... unearthly; like something out of a Botticelli; a semi-divine being bathed in a weird, self-emitted phosphorescence.

And now My Father realises that he doesn't just want to touch Jean Shrimpton's nose, or even fuck her; he loves her, and wants to take her home with him, to be part of his life for ever. And he knows, suddenly, that if this proves not to be possible, what remains of his life will be desolate, grey, devoid of consolation. My Father, bravely confronting that prospect, is on the brink of tears. (A master of spin long before the term comes into use, he wonders for a moment how he might be able to present the Jean-Shrimpton-as-long-term-house-guest story to my mother, in a way that will make it seem advantageous to her. Companionship? Domestic help? Relief from the obligation to perform unsavoury conjugal duties?)

And then Donovan gets up from the table, and leaves the room. My Father has been too absorbed in his private misery to notice, but a waiter has come over and summoned Donovan to take a call from his agent, on the phone in the restaurant's crushed velvet vestibule.

My Father rallies. He is alone with the Shrimp! He will never have an opportunity like this again. He is, he reminds himself, at the peak of his powers. He is an attractive man; more attractive now, in fact, in his early 40s, than he was as a younger man. He has grown into his strong-featured, heavy-browed looks. His hair, which started to thin in his late 20s, seems to have stabilised, and remains lustrously dark, almost entirely free from the encroaching grey that is colonising the temples of so many of his contemporaries. My Father is no film star, but he could certainly be described as a distinguished-looking man. He is successful, too. In his job

as Deputy Head of Publicity at the Gas Council, he is making surprisingly good progress with a wildly over-ambitious project to modernise the image of a monolithic nationalised industry, sclerotic in its processes and antediluvian in its attitudes. More importantly, in terms of how he values himself, My Father is making real headway politically; exceptionally well connected among the best lobby journalists, regularly summoned to secretive pow-wows in Westminster snug-bars, on first name terms with Cabinet ministers. (Well, with one. So far.) And, to cap all this, he has just had [his third novel](#) published to respectful if disappointingly-some-way-short-of-adulatory reviews. He is, he reminds himself, by any standards, a good-looking, successful and exceptionally able man. And one, he adds as a not-to-be-forgotten and somewhat self-satisfied postscript, with at least the beginnings of a reputation as a womaniser; so *certainly* not one to pass up a sexual opportunity as unprecedented as this one.

Alone. Slightly the worse for alcohol (and therefore not entirely responsible for his actions). Thigh-to-thigh. With Jean Shrimpton. Who seems to like him. (She has called him darling four times over lunch, though it doesn't occur to him that this may be because she has forgotten - or perhaps never known - his name.)

My Father coughs, as perfunctory cover for shifting a couple of inches to his left, increasing the pressure of his thigh on hers. He says something, which comes out a little slurred and indistinct, but which is probably an invitation for her to accompany him on a visit to the House of Commons later in the afternoon (which we hopes will impress her). And he lifts his left hand, with the intention of reaching out for that adorably perfect nose, before realising, just in time, that she may consider this an off-puttingly unorthodox approach, and redirecting his grasp towards her (equally perfect) bare right knee, which he feels sure she will warmly prefer...

KERBAMM! With remarkable speed and co-ordination (the Shrimp has drunk nothing but soda water over lunch), and extraordinary ferocity, she has snatched up a fork and plunged it into the back of his hand. At least, she has attempted to; blunt, it has bounced off without breaking the skin, but nevertheless causing My Father quite astounding pain, which he expresses

(along with his disappointment, rage and abject humiliation) in a great wordless howl that seems to last for several minutes.

Jean Shrimpton murmurs something that is completely drowned out by My Father's agony, but which may be, "Too dull, darling."

"God, this bird is fucking lethal with cutlery," remarks Donovan, taking in the scene imperturbably, as he returns to the table, his phone call complete.

"Now, who's joining me in a thimbleful of the exceedingly fine Armagnac they have in this gaff?"

\*

*By way of context, My Father has recently signed Jean Shrimpton to be the "new face" of High Speed Gas, for what is rumoured to be a five-figure fee. She, having broken up some time previously with David Bailey, is now muse to Terence Donovan, arguably the second most celebrated photographer currently practising his art in London. The lunch, which is to celebrate this exciting creative collaboration, is being paid for by Donovan. He will later include it in the monthly account he submits to My Father, under the heading "photographic processing chemicals".*

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# **My Father briefly considers the possibility of ending his own life**

## **1960-ish**

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My Father is drunk, behind the wheel of his family's blue Ford Consul. He is very drunk indeed - and getting drunker, sucking on a half-bottle of Teacher's - so it's just as well the car is safely parked in the garage of his home in the Surrey commuter-belt.

It's after midnight. Inside the house, My Father's Sons are asleep upstairs. My Mother, too; very deeply. She has knocked herself out with pills, as she does on nights when My Father calls to warn her he'll be late home. Virtuoso in passive-aggression, though unfamiliar with the term, she wants to be certain of greeting him on his eventual return with authentically oblivious unconsciousness. (Pretending to be asleep is never quite as satisfying, she has found.)

In the car, My Father is feeling disappointed. Deeply, vertiginously, cataclysmically disappointed. With what? It would be quicker to list the aspects of his life that don't induce despairing moans from him, as his alcohol-sodden brain conducts a sluggish inventory.

Career? A disaster; a pathetic and shameful charade. In today's newspaper alone, he has read stories about two of his Oxford contemporaries - one of them a woman, for Christ's sake - achieving glittering things in politics. Things that he, My Father, should in any fair, rational, well-ordered world be achieving himself; things that anyone who knew him at Oxford would have considered him a hundred times more likely to achieve than either of those intellectual nonentities (one of them, for the love of God, a woman).

His marriage? He glances unconsciously upwards in the direction of the bedroom where My Mother is snoring with surprising vigour, for one so



fastidious. Over. Utterly spoiled; ruined. Beyond hope - as it was, he bleakly reflects, from the outset. Why, why, why, my father asks himself, did he do it? What, in the name of sanity, induced him to shackle himself to this paragon of barely disguised neurosis; this roiling vortex of negative emotion - anger, fear, distaste, joylessness - in female form. (He thinks, as he often does, of the idealistic young doctor Lydgate in *Middlemarch*, who marries the beautiful but vacuous Rosamund Vincy, knowing even as he carries off his prize, that bearing its weight will drain him of the strength to achieve any of his life's highest ambitions.)

His love life? (Which, over the last few years, My Father has come to see as something entirely distinct from his marriage.) He shrivels inside as he recalls how he has just spent the afternoon and evening, trying unsuccessfully to get into the knickers of a woman only barely attractive enough to be fuckable. Not only has he sustained a humiliating rebuff, he has paid well over £6 for the privilege; the cost of several large vodka-and-lemonades, in the pub around the corner from the office; plus a taxi back to her place in Kilburn, which, it turned out, she shared with her invalid mother, whose unabashed refusal to make herself scarce put paid to any possibility of the evening's entertainment being satisfactorily concluded; plus yet another taxi back to Waterloo, in the vain hope of arriving home early enough to forestall My Mother's most terrifying retribution.

And then, of course, his children. The two boys asleep inside the house. Towards them, he feels - well, what does he feel? Perhaps a kind of despairing, defeated tenderness. My Father is not an unaffectionate man, and his sons are - at this point in their lives - reasonably endearing little boys. Bright, eager to please, anxious, biddable. At three-ish, My Father's Younger Son is tousle-fringed, apple-cheeked; somewhere on the quite appealing cusp between infancy and boyhood. And his Elder Son, who is seven-ish, is already showing signs of the kind of intellectual precocity guaranteed to win him a special place in My Father's heart.

My Father thinks of himself as a dutiful man, too. So the certain knowledge, which has been growing within him for years, that at some point in the future, he will have to leave My Mother - and abandon his

children to her emotionally vampiric care - must be difficult for him to live with. It seems likely he genuinely regrets that necessity, and intends to postpone it for as long as he possibly can. But he knows he will have to go; and that, in doing so, he will have failed as a father, as he has failed in so, so much else.

A failure.

That most terrible thing to be is what - this evening, locked out of his home and drunk in his car - he knows himself to be.

"I'm a failure," he thinks to himself.

"I. Am. A. Failure." He speaks the words aloud, separately, curious to hear how terrible they sound. "A total, complete and utter fucking failure."

And then My Father - who has finished the Scotch - lets the empty bottle slip from his hand, and weeps.

Why, incidentally, is My Father in the car? Because My Mother has accidentally bolted both front and back doors. And also the French windows in the sitting room, which otherwise give way if firmly pushed, even when locked. But the garage stands open, as does the car (in these innocent days vehicle crime is almost entirely unknown in suburban Surrey), and My drunken Father, alert enough to recognise that hammering on the door to wake the sleeping household will not tend to diminish My Mother's wrath, has calculated that the plushly sprung front bench-seat of his beautiful blue Ford Consul is the most comfortable place available for him to spend the night.

Failure.

Now that the word has been spoken aloud, it seems to echo and reverberate around My Father, with increasing volume and venom. He can't get the sound of it out of his ears, or its appalling significance out of his mind.

He flinches, and shrinks into himself, almost as if under physical attack. My Father feels not just despairing self-pity, but a visceral horror at the stark

undeniable reality of his situation. He would rather be dead, he allows himself to think, than be recognised by everyone as the total, irredeemable failure that he has somehow become.

And then, through the whisky miasma, it occurs to him that there is something clever that people do with hosepipes and car exhausts that would enable him to escape that fate.

For a moment, he contemplates this possibility.

But My Father is not a practical man, and he doubts whether, even if he could find a hosepipe, he would possess the manual dexterity to affix it satisfactorily to the exhaust.

So instead, he considers simply closing the garage doors, and improvising a way of sealing the gap underneath them, to prevent the noxious fumes escaping. The garage is only just big enough for the car, so if he opened all its windows, that would probably do the trick, he thinks. But what can he use to seal up the doors? On the garage shelves, there are only a few half-empty pots of paint, and some gardening tools; nothing suited to his dark purpose. Perhaps he could take off his clothes, ball them up, and wedge them in the gap?

But it's cold now, and My Father doesn't feel drawn to the idea of ending his life shivering in his Y-fronts. Or of being found that way by My Mother, in the morning. And also, he seems to have mislaid his briefcase, so he doesn't have access to the writing materials he would need to leave a note (which, in fairness to My Mother and common decency, he feels he would have to do). And also, it belatedly occurs to him, his car keys are in the drawer of the bedside table in the room where My Mother is deep in pharmaceutically-facilitated slumber.

My Father's attempt at ending his own life has, he realises, ended - though barely begun - in failure.

He allows his poor spinning head, receptacle of the brain that has so dismally failed him, to slump forward onto the steering wheel, where he cradles it in his arms.

Within seconds, he is sleeping as deeply as My Mother, though with none of the same angry satisfaction.

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# **My father and I fail, narrowly, to touch**

## **2001**

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I can't remember why I am in the car. But I know my father is now inhabiting the last sliver of life left to him. And that he has just attended what will be one of his final appointments at the Royal Marsden, where even the country's most eminent cancer specialists can now do little or nothing to retard the course of the disease rampaging through him.

I think, now I recall the scene, that I'm there because the woman my father loves has demanded it of me. She is not finding it easy shepherding him through the pain and fear of his final weeks, and is understandably eager to share the burden with others who should be expected to care about my father.

In any case, I am there in the back of their ancient Volvo, as she drives up the King's Road, my father next to her in the front passenger seat. The mood in the car, as I remember, is less doom-laden than might be expected. Perhaps my father is relieved to have come through another session with his consultant (where the only substantive question to be discussed - although, in the event, it was not explicitly touched upon - was the likely date of his death), and is now looking forward to lunch, with which he will drink a glass of champagne. Or, more accurately, instead of which, he will drink a glass of champagne. (As my father's life teeters towards its end, and his appetites dwindle, his desire for hedonism, rather admirably, grows.)

Whatever the reason, there is a certain lightness between us. My father and I both laugh at something the woman he loves has said.

And then she slows the car, and makes to stop when she can find a space, to let me out. I think we are probably at Paddington, where I will catch a train to take me home to Bristol. I won't be seeing my father again soon. Or perhaps ever, given how infrequent my visits to London are.

As the car stops, and I prepare to open the door with my left hand, I put my right hand on my father's shoulder in front of me, in an unaccustomed gesture of farewell. (As an adult, I occasionally shake my father's hand on meeting, but otherwise, we have no physical connection.) I leave it there for a moment, as I say my goodbyes. As I remove it, readying myself to get out of the car, my father reaches across himself with his left hand, and pats his shoulder, exactly where my hand has been just moments before.

We have come close to making contact, just once, [before he dies](#); but narrowly, so narrowly, we have failed to touch.

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# My Father is a member of arguably London's Most Prestigious Club 1991

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Arriving at his Club for the first time as a newly elected member (he has visited many times before, as a guest), My Father's excitement and sense of achievement are muted by quite a high degree of procedural anxiety. His Club is known, even among gentlemen's clubs, for having numerous forms and customs that members are required to observe. And My Father knows that failure on his part to do so could result in a rare but not unheard of retrospective blackballing. New members of his Club are, he is painfully aware, on probation for 12 months, and the prize of belonging to this revered institution can - unimaginable horror - be snatched away from them at any time within that period.

My Father belongs, as of today, to the Burbage, arguably London's Most Prestigious Club. This would depend on whether you attach prestige to achievements such as having played Hamlet at the Old Vic in the late 1950s, having helped a disgraced former Cabinet minister win a libel action and avoid prison, having twice featured on the Booker shortlist, or having been one of the original presenters of *Panorama*. The Burbage is a club favoured by distinguished actors, lawyers, authors and other assorted media types.

My Father - who, as an old post-war Socialist of the Atlee era, might be expected to oppose the principle of the exclusive members-only establishment - would contend that the Burbage is exceptional in being London's only truly meritocratic club; a place where men of real distinction and achievement, in different fields, can enjoy each other's company, in the comforting knowledge that each has been weighed, measured, and not found wanting by his peers.

Like every other member, My Father has spent several years on the waiting-list, before enduring a heart-stoppingly stressful election, lasting seven long days - in the course of which any one of the Club's 1500 or so members could, if he so wished, have popped a fatal black ball into the hessian bag suspended from the mantelpiece of the grand Adam fireplace in the Thackeray Salon.

In honour of the occasion, My Father is unusually kempt. He is dressed in a dark suit, his shoes have been polished, and he is wearing the Club tie (the hideousness of which somehow increases members' pleasure and pride in being seen in it). Sweatily clasped in the palm of his left hand is a gold Sovereign.

"Good afternoon, sir."

A young liveried doorman is holding the door of the Burbage open for My Father, who fills his lungs with oxygen, and steps inside.

It's early for lunch, and - as My Father has calculated - the lobby is sparsely populated. He doesn't want too big an audience for the ritual he is about to enact.

He steps onto the faded square of carpet outside the porters' lodge. He coughs three times. Old Filkins emerges, yawning, and brushing crumbs from the front of his uniform.

Oh God, has My Father transgressed by arriving at Old Filkins's lunchtime? If so, it's too late to rectify his error now; My Father is standing on the Dickens Aubusson, so must - like a Jumbo jet approaching the end of a short runway at take-off speed - go through with what he has started.

He bows his head, three times in rapid succession. And then - just as he has rehearsed it at home with the Woman He Loves - he pirouettes through 360 degrees with his left hand held out behind him. And by the time he returns to his starting position, face to face with Old Filkins, the gold Sovereign is no longer in his possession. (At all times other than a Member's first visit to the Burbage, any form of payment to Club servants is strictly prohibited.)



"Welcome to the Burbage, sir," says Old Filkins. "May your run be a long and happy one." (A reference to the club's theatrical heritage.)

Relief floods My Father's being; he has come through the new member's first visit test without falling flat on his face, or otherwise making a fool of himself.

Fortuitously - or perhaps not - a shaft of golden sunlight pierces the Burbage's famous cupola, and picks him out as he stands in the lobby, alone now that Filkins has retreated to his lair.

My Father is 65 years old. He feels a lightness, an elation, a warm sense of being accepted by those whose acceptance really counts for something that he hasn't felt since he was a boy. With elastic stride, he crosses to the grand staircase, which he must ascend to penetrate his Club's most exclusive recesses. He takes the first three steps in a single bound, before forcing himself to proceed at a more dignified pace, appropriate to a member of arguably London's Most Prestigious Club.

Above him, a small group of early-lunching members spill out of the Thackeray Salon and make their ambling convivial way towards the dining room.

Isn't the one at the centre of the group - with the luxuriant silver-grey hair and the prosciutto-coloured face - [Kingsley Amis](#)? My Father has every reason to think it might be.

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**1992**

As I hurry along Danvers Street towards the Burbage, I become aware that my father is waiting for me on the steps outside. He isn't actually glancing at his watch, but there's something about his demeanour that suggests he might, at any moment. It's true I am a few minutes late; but since he, in his entire life, has never once arrived on time for any rendezvous, it seems a little unreasonable that he should be so ostentatiously anxious about my punctuality.

"Sorry, I had a thing that over-ran," I say, not very apologetically, as we briefly shake hands.

(In fact, I have just emerged from a subterranean studio in Covent Garden where I have been recording an ad voice-over with a fairly well known actor who has turned out to possess an unsuspected speech impediment that renders him incapable of articulating the client's brand name - which is the reason for the over-run. But since the artiste in question is not a member of the Burbage, my father won't have heard of him. And since, by this stage of his life, my father does not even pretend to be interested in anyone outside the nexus of extreme wealth, fame and political power that fascinates him, I don't risk boring him with any circumstantial detail.)

"You remembered," he says. And I realise his anxiety has been nothing to do with my time-keeping, but based solely on concern over my ability to comply with his Club's dress code. For a moment, I consider feigning incomprehension ("Remembered what?"), but instead I say, "Well, you did remind me. Twice." And I make a show of straightening the tie I am wearing; the only one I possess, hastily knotted on the way from the studio.

My father ushers me into his Club, and upstairs to the dining room, where we will be seated at one of the small satellite tables that fringe the enormously long refectory table at which members unaccompanied by guests are, by custom, bound to eat.

By now, the Burbage has become if not a home-from-home for my father, then at least woven into the fabric of his daily life. When he is in town, he pops in at least once a week, sometimes for lunch with one of the ageing political journalists he still cultivates, but more often for a large Scotch or two in the Thackeray Salon, followed almost invariably by a short siesta in the library. From time to time, he invites a friend or family member to lunch at the Burbage, which he regards as among the greatest privileges and pleasures one human being can confer upon another.

Desultory chat. My father enquires after my children. I ask about the preparations for the exhibition the woman he loves will soon be having in a

small but highly regarded gallery in Cork Street. My father lengthily bemoans the quality of the two candidates currently contending for the vacant leadership of the Labour Party, taking the view (shared by literally no one) that his old friend [Peter Shore](#) could have walked away with it, if he had only allowed himself to be persuaded to throw his hat into the ring.

I switch off (in exactly the way my father does when the conversation doesn't interest him), and - while continuing to murmur assent and nod from time to time - let my glance wander, fairly discreetly, around the high-ceilinged room. It's still quite lightly populated, but the Amis group - one of whom, I now realise, is [Melvyn Bragg](#) - are making an impressive amount of noise, considering the hour. At the long central table, half a dozen older members are hunched over their food, exchanging the odd muttered remark, but hardly taking full advantage of the opportunities for interdisciplinary intellectual stimulation that the Burbage prides itself upon. I note that [Jeremy Paxman](#) has just entered the dining room, with another man I vaguely recognise.

"... in any case," my father is saying, "I suppose either of them would be a slight improvement on the Hopeless [Kinnock](#)".

"I still feel rather sorry for him," I say, partly because I do have sympathy for the recently deposed Labour leader, whom I regard as a decent man hideously maligned and roughed up by the Tory media; and partly because I want to goad my father, whose hostility towards Neil Kinnock is largely based on the intellectual contempt an Oxford man feels for an alumnus of Cardiff University.

"Ah, Raoul," my father says brightly, before I can continue my political analysis. "We're very honoured!"

"How are you, sir?"

An elderly waiter has appeared at our table. He is a small distinguished-looking man, walnut-coloured, with a head that seems several sizes too big for his body and the far-seeing eyes of one who has lived through some immense sadness.

"I'm well, thank you, Raoul," replies my father. "And how is Mrs Raoul? Better, I hope?"

"A little better, thank you, sir. Are you and your guest ready to order?"

"This is my son," says my father. "My younger son, up in town for one of his rare visits. He's been making a TV commercial."

In fact, I have been making a radio commercial, but this minor inaccuracy hardly registers in comparison to my surprise that my father has any sense at all of the reason for my being in London.

"Very pleased to meet you, sir," says Raoul, inclining his head slightly in my direction.

I smile, and nod goofily in return.

"Raoul is our Chief Steward," explains my father. "He's worked here for - what, nearly 40 years, isn't it?"

"Thirty seven," says Raoul. "And a half."

"He knows everything there is to know about the Burbage," continues my father. "Don't you, Raoul?"

Raoul smiles, sadly.

"He's met - well, everyone. You must have overheard a few secrets, in your time, eh, Raoul?"

Raoul continues to smile, and mimes zipping his mouth. He minutely adjusts the order pad he is holding, in his left hand.

"So, what will you have?" says my father, turning to me. "We should let Raoul get on; he's our Chief Steward, you know. The fish pie is frightfully good."

In fact, having eaten it at my father's recommendation on my previous visit to his Club, I know that the fish pie is functional, at best; maybe two rungs

up the gastronomic ladder from hospital food. But my father seems keen for me to have it, so I say, "In that case, I'll have the fish pie, please."

"And maybe the potted shrimps, to start with?" says my father. "Are they good today, Raoul?"

This is a joke. The potted shrimps have been served at the Burbage, prepared to precisely the same recipe from precisely the same ingredients, every day for over 200 years.

"They're excellent today, sir," says Raoul, with a smile of ineffable sadness.

\*

Later, on the train home, I think about my father and his Club and the pleasure - inexplicable to me - that belonging to it seems to bring him. In particular, my thoughts snag on the satisfaction he took from introducing me to Raoul. What, I wonder, was that really about? I lead a fairly blameless life, and make a decent enough living; but, judged by my father's criteria, I don't bring any great credit to him, as my begetter. Raoul was hardly likely to be impressed by - or remotely interested in - my professional accomplishments, or any other aspect of my life.

And then it occurs to me that I have got it back to front. My father's enjoyment was not in introducing me to Raoul, but in making Raoul - the living embodiment of the Burbage's tradition, prestige and meritocratic exclusiveness - known to me. Look at the easy, informal, almost familial terms on which I inhabit arguably London's Most Prestigious Club!

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*1993*

"One Diamond," says My Father, realising even as the words are leaving his mouth that this is the wrong bid.

He is playing bridge, as he does every Tuesday afternoon, in the card room at the Burbage with the Old Queers, his disrespectful collective term for

three nonagenarian fellow-members, who each in their heyday made a living in the theatrical profession.

They have fairly recently admitted My Father to their regular game, clearly (though unspokenly) on a trial basis, as a replacement for the most distinguished member of their foursome, the great Shakespearean Sir Joshua Reilly, now sadly deceased.

"No bid," says the One Who Was in [\*The Forsyte Saga\*](#).

"No bid," says My Father's partner, the One Who Played the Assistant Chief Constable in [\*Softly, Softly\*](#).

"No bid," says the One Who Was Mostly in Stage Musicals.

Damn. My Father, who has dealt himself a fiddly hand, with eight Diamonds to the King Jack and 13 points in all, would have been very happy indeed to be outbid. But now he has to lead, and he is fairly sure his efforts will be met with scorn and derision, particularly by his partner, who has an extensive repertoire of non-verbal expressions of contempt.

My Father has fallen in love with bridge late in life, plays at every opportunity, and feels certain that a man of his intellectual powers should have a natural aptitude for the game. He is wrong; either about his intellectual powers, or about their applicability to bridge. All three of the Old Queers, he has come to realise, are much better than he is, though he tries to console himself with the thought that they have been playing regularly since before he was born.

He leads a high Diamond. The One Who Was Mostly in Stage Musicals replies with a low Heart. And, as the One Who Played the Chief Constable in *Softly, Softly* turns over the dummy - to reveal four more Diamonds - there is a sharp intake of breath all around the table.

"Ouch!" says the One Who Played the Assistant Chief Constable in *Softly, Softly*, sounding as if he is in actual physical pain as a result of My Father's near-criminal misjudgement in under-bidding so grotesquely.

My Father plays the hand, and duly makes five Diamonds, which would have been game. The Old Queers say nothing more, but no eyeball remains unrolled, no despairing sigh goes unexhaled. If they were to hold up cards giving My Father's performance marks, in the manner of ice skating judges, they could not make their condemnation clearer.

Eventually, My Father's ordeal is over. More hands are played, which he manages to negotiate without serious mishap. Points are tallied, and small sums exchanged (My Father loses £2.40). And when the clock strikes four, My Father's companions order fresh drinks, as they always do, and raise a glass to "Dear Josh, whom we will see beyond the final curtain." Then, with elaborate courtesy, they raise their glasses to My Father, to thank him for "another sparkling performance from our understudy" - which he, rightly, interprets as meaning that he will never be invited to take on the role in a permanent capacity.

As they disperse, he briefly considers staying for another, larger Scotch, before heading home. But for today at least, his Club has lost its lustre. To be honest, he feels disappointed with the Burbage; as so often throughout his life, something that he thought would bring him satisfaction, a real sense of achievement, has turned out to be a let-down, nothing special at all, a place mainly frequented by geriatric has-beens.

On his way out, he pops his head around the door of the Thackeray Salon, but nobody of any interest is there. Even that frightful old drunk Amis has somewhere better to be on a wet Tuesday in March.

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*Not long afterwards*

My Father is having lunch at his Club. He has a guest, so he is seated at one of the satellite tables. My Father has ordered the fish pie, but very surprisingly, the potted shrimps are off today, so for his starter he is eating a strange mushy concoction (which he doesn't remember ordering) strongly reminiscent of the semolina served every Monday at his prep school. His guest is Raoul, who is eating the food that he usually serves with an air of

grave judiciousness. My Father senses that others members present, at the long communal table, disapprove of him lunching with the Club's Chief Steward. But he has been a member of the Burbage for well over a year now, so there is no danger of being blackballed.

"And how is Mrs Raoul?" he asks, loudly enough to be heard across the room. "Better, I hope?"

But as he is making this formulaic enquiry, My Father knows that he is, in fact, asking a completely different question, one that Raoul is the only person on earth capable of answering.

"A little better, thank you, sir," says Raoul.

This is cryptic, but My Father knows exactly what Raoul, keeper of the Burbage's secrets, is trying to tell him. My Father lays down his spoon, rises from the table, and strides purposefully from the dining room - conscious of being followed by numerous pairs of eyes.

Entering the library, opposite the dining room, he follows the instructions that Raoul has in some sense given him, and approaches a large full-length portrait of a black-clad man holding a skull; Sir Henry Irving as Hamlet, My Father assumes. Reaching out his hand, he lightly touches the skull, causing the portrait to swing open on a hinge. My Father steps through the door into a massive light-filled vestibule, hung with vast crystal chandeliers (a touch vulgar, perhaps, he thinks), a part of his Club to which he has never gained entry before.

The vestibule is deserted; no sign even of the porters. But, in front of him, a grand staircase - much grander than the one My Father climbed earlier, to reach the dining room - leads to further undiscovered regions, and from these he can hear laughter, voices, a lively hubbub of sparkling well informed conversation.

Stepping onto the staircase, My Father finds that he is floating six inches or so above it, and that he can ascend by merely thinking upward thoughts. But as he rises effortlessly, the knowledge comes to him, with terrible



certainty, that he is now invisible. No one on the floor above will be able to see or hear him, or know that he exists.

Floating upstairs is fun, and My Father resolves that he will never again climb stairs in the conventional way. But this delightful new ability is a very small consolation for the sadness he feels knowing that, even within the four walls of the Burbage, there is another more prestigious Club to which men of real distinction belong, and which, for reasons of invisibility, he will never be able to join.

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*In 1992, 1997, and again in 2001, not long before my father's death, the Club to which he belongs opens for debate among its members the question of whether women should be allowed to apply for membership. On each occasion, by significant margins, the gentlemen vote against the admission of ladies. On each occasion, my father - socialist, egalitarian, devoted husband of the woman he loves, author of novels highly regarded for their insightful depiction of female characters - votes with those who believe that their Club should remain a haven for distinguished men, a place of refuge from the pressures of the modern world, where they can mix, freely and without inhibition, with others of their own kind.*

[Stop press](#)

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**If you are enjoying *My Father keeps the PM waiting*,  
please do [share it with a friend](#).**

# My Father writes another novel on the 07:46 from Worplesdon to Waterloo 1963

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My Father writes novels.

He is such an exceptionally able man that he doesn't need to sit at a desk to write them, or use a typewriter. Instead, he does it on the train, on the way to work. (On the way home, he is usually drunk, and sleeps.) Surrounded by harrumphing commuters engrossed in the *Telegraph* crossword, My Father balances a yellow lined pad on his knee, and hammers out fictional goings-on in a spidery scrawl that only one person on earth can decipher; his PA Linda, for whom the description indispensable and long-suffering could have been newly minted.

He writes fast. Today, in fact - a typical Tuesday morning, in the early 1960s - he starts a new novel as his train leaves Worplesdon, and completes it shortly after passing through Clapham Junction.

My Father's new novel is called *A Man Who Closely Resembles the Author Gets Ahead in his Career by Behaving Unscrupulously, While Also Deceiving Several Women, but Ultimately Learns Some Painful Lessons*.

This is only a working-title. My Father will come up with something snappier while Linda is typing the manuscript.

\*

But why does My Father write?

It could, of course, be for the only valid reason that Dr Johnson allowed for any man but a blockhead to put pen to paper: to make money. It's true that in the early years of their marriage, enduring the unimaginable squalor and

austerity of post-war London, my parents are properly poor, at least by our standards. They are living - subsisting - through a time when a can of pears or a chocolate biscuit is a longed-for luxury; owning a car, or even a fridge, the stuff of madcap, glassy-eyed fantasy.

So perhaps we shouldn't discount the possibility that, when My Father's career as a novelist begins, he is looking to literature to provide a secondary income - or, at least, to pay for the occasional can of pears, perhaps with evaporated milk.

But what of the true creative impulse? Does My Father burn with a sense of himself as an Artist, with something precious and distinctive to add to the sum of human enlightenment? Does he long to delight the discerning and console the comfortless through the gorgeousness of his cadences, the justness and compassion of his reflections? Is he hoping - like another Joyce or Woolf or Lawrence - to extend the possibilities of prose fiction; to play a part, however small, in revitalising - or re-inventing - the form?

In his middle and later years, he is never seen reading a novel, or heard expressing any view on the redemptive power of literature. At this stage of his life, he reads only political biographies and memoirs, trawling them eagerly for discreditable stories about people he regards as being unjustifiably richer and more powerful than him. We have no way of knowing what he reads when he is younger, though we must assume it includes some fiction, since not even a man as intensely able as my father would be able to write novels of publishable standard without some working knowledge of the form. But there seems to be no evidence in his life or in his books that he is ever driven by a love of language or a desire to fashion from it something beautiful and true.

Perhaps he merely wants to entertain? His novels - particularly the early ones - are well reviewed, by critics who, mystifyingly to modern sensibilities, seem to regard them as coruscating black comedy and social satire. One of them - *A Man Almost Indistinguishable from the Author Has a Terrible Time Doing National Service and Gets Into Various Amusing Scrapes Including an Ill Fated Romance with his Commanding Officer's Daughter* - even [gets made into a movie](#). (The film bears virtually no

resemblance to the book, not least because the central character - an academically brilliant but bashful young man, ill-suited to Army life - has to be re-imagined as an up-and-coming pop star, rudely forced by conscription to interrupt his musical career, in order to accommodate the talents of the actor cast in the leading role, the up-and-coming pop star Vince Ponsford.)

Or does he write his novels for the satisfaction of practising a craft, the pleasure there is in putting words together well? Towards the end of his life, when the little time he has left is dragging heavily on him, the suggestion is put to him that he might write as a means of occupying himself; something in the memoirs line, perhaps, for the interest of his family. His response is uncomprehending. Write? Without any prospect of publication, admiring reviews, royalty cheques? Why would he want to do that? What conceivable purpose would it serve?

All of which may lead us to conclude that My Father writes because he wants to be a well known writer. Yes, he could certainly do with the money, but what really drives him is a desire for acclaim. For the world to recognise and admire him as a man so extraordinarily able that he can turn out accomplished fictions almost effortlessly, in his very limited spare time. And, in particular, it seems clear, My Father wants to be admired by women. His books are full of ostentatious attempts to demonstrate his perceptiveness about female psychology, and what he obviously thinks is empathy for the ghastly lives led by the kind of women he writes about. My Father writes, we can be pretty sure, to get laid. ("God," husked Julia, conscious that her skirt was at least three inches shorter than it should be, "how wonderful to meet a man who really understands what life is like for us women these days.")

\*

**A contemporary review of my father's [1963 novel](#), *A Brilliant But Unhappily Married Man with Marked Similarities to the Author Commits Adultery, Thinks He Has At Last Found True Love, but is Consumed by Self-Loathing and Ends Up Killing Himself*.**

Let us hope that *My Father* is a *nom de plume*! For otherwise this exciting young author's extremely racy third novel - clearly based upon first-hand experience - seems certain to make his journey to work on the 7.46 from Worplesdon to Waterloo very uncomfortable indeed. Which of his fellow-commuters will be first to recognise themselves, and, more scandalously, their sex-mad, gin-sozzled wives, in this coruscating depiction of suburban adultery and spiritual ennui?

Beautiful highly sexed Sarah is married to unscrupulous but successful Gordon, a man so materialistic that he regards his wife as a possession (perhaps, if the expression does not seem too outlandish, we might almost say a "trophy") of rather less value to him than his shiny new Rover. Unappreciated, and understandably frustrated, the lovely Sarah allows her roving eye to fall upon Gordon's oldest friend Stephen, brilliant, but mired in a dead-end job and a loveless marriage, with frumpy Claire, who neglects her husband in favour of her three brattish children.

Can the love, or lust, of a good woman redeem Stephen? Not in *My Father's* merciless opinion. His affair with the immensely seductive Sarah quickly spirals out of control, affording him tantalising glimpses of a connubial contentment that always remains detumescently out of reach. Ultimately, when a happy ending rather surprisingly begins to seem a real probability, Stephen's fondness for the bottle, and perhaps a certain nobility of soul that forces him to relinquish the easy masculine option of making a woman his safe haven, conspire to snatch defeat - and a devastatingly tragic dénouement - from the wide open jaws of sexual bliss.

*A Brilliant But Unhappily Married Man* (as I will abbreviate the title) is a remarkable achievement; a novel of savage wit and startling acuity that lays bare the state of the relationship between the sexes in 1963. The bleak conclusion drawn from this withering appraisal, from which *My Father* admirably refuses to flinch, is that a lasting and satisfying love between a man and a woman is impossible, for the simple and, to his mind, irrefutable reason that the sexes hate each other. Men and women, *My Father* shows us, want different, irreconcilable things; and it is hugely to his credit as a male writer that he is equally perceptive about the female side of this

doomed negotiation. He is particularly penetrating (I use the verb advisedly) on the unconscious masochism that makes women want the men they love to hurt them, and unwittingly invite them to do so.

Dissecting the battle of the sexes, though, is only part of My *Father's* grand purpose here. His broader intent, triumphantly realised, is to offer us a social - and perhaps also a Socialist - critique of the empty materialism and vacuous hedonism of modern life. The two principal male characters, Stephen and Gordon, now in their mid-30s (coincidentally the same age as the author) first met as rivals for the Chairmanship of the Labour Club at Oxford (coincidentally, again, a position once held by the author). Their youthful idealism, energetically rejected by Gordon, though still a weakly flickering flame within Stephen, is contrasted, to shattering effect, with the "I'm all right, Jack" devil-take-the-hindmost philosophy of today's hollow men and women.

When, at the novel's almost unbearably powerful climax, Stephen steps out in front of a speeding bus, in preference to starting a new life with the beautiful woman who has given up everything to be with him, we see him not as a contemptible drunkard and weakling, driven to reject the possibility of love by self-pity and self-loathing, but as an authentic modern-day hero, delivering a clarion-tongued and utterly fearless condemnation of the age we now, despairingly, inhabit.

Bravo, *My Father!* No need to renew your season ticket; on this showing, you will not be catching the 7.46 for much longer.

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# My Father approaches a familiar-looking stranger

## December 1946

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My Father is, implausibly, a soldier. He is 20, just young enough, as it's turned out, to avoid frontline service. He is catastrophically, comically, ill-suited to military life; non-conformist, cerebral, physically uncoordinated, personally unkempt, devoid of bellicosity. (He will later turn this miserable period of his life to good account by writing [a novel](#) in which the hero is catastrophically, comically, ill-suited to military life.) Having failed, utterly, to make a soldier of him, his infantry regiment has decided to ship him out to the Army Education Corps, where his talents will be put to better use helping to prepare soon-to-be-discharged soldiers for the civilian world. He has three days' leave before taking up this new more congenial posting, and he is spending them in London.

It's a dankly marrow-chilling early-December day, and My Father, in uniform, is waiting for a westbound Circle line train at High Street Kensington, when something on the eastbound platform opposite starts, almost subliminally, to nag at his attention. He resists whatever it is, because he has no wish to interrupt a reverie he is enjoying, about the day he has ahead of him. My Father is on his way to have lunch at an Italian restaurant near Baker Street with an old schoolfriend who, for reasons obscure but enchanting, will be accompanied by his slightly older sister. Spaghetti, lasagne, cannelloni, Chianti.... in the company of a girl who, my father knows with instinctive certainty, will be another kind of mouth-watering dish; it's a prospect almost more delightful than a pleasure-starved National Serviceman can bring himself to contemplate.

But whatever it is on the opposite platform won't leave My Father in peace. At first just a zone, a fragment of undefined space, to which My Father's eye is unaccountably drawn, it is now becoming more localised, more specific. Whatever it is resolves itself, solidifies.... in the form of a person; a man, elderly, swaddled in a vast British Warm, hunched against the cold, his head tucked in, tortoise-style, and his face partially hidden under the wide brim of a grey trilby. Could it really be who My Father thinks it might be? Too old, surely? And not tall enough. And, in any case, what he would be doing here, now? No, ridiculous even to think it....

Even at this age, My Father is not a man to run in public, unless his life is in danger. But, hearing the clanking rumble of a train approaching the eastbound platform, he breaks into a loping semi-trot as he hurries towards the overpass, where he takes the stairs two at a time. Descending onto the platform, he sees the train is pulling in; and for a moment, he thinks he will be too late - unless he shouts to attract the man's attention. But My Father is not a shouting man, so it's lucky that, by chance or not, the man looks up now, and makes eye-contact with him. It's hard to judge the man's reaction, but it seems likely he feels some apprehension. Why is this burly young soldier bearing down him, with such apparent intent? The train's doors open, but the man does not board; he is waiting for My Father, who now, approaching, a little out of breath from the unaccustomed exertion, gasps the immortal line:

"Excuse me, sir, I believe you may be my father."

\*

And now what happens? We'll never know. The story of my father's unexpected encounter with his father, after many years of wartime separation, has passed into family legend - and, in making this transition, been stripped of all supporting data and circumstantial detail. Does the meeting actually unfold in roughly the way I have described here? Is my father genuinely uncertain about the identity of the man he is about to accost? And, once son and father have established their relationship to each other, then what? Do they embrace? Or shake hands? Or pat each other awkwardly on the arms and shoulders? Do they weep? And does my father



cancel his lunch plans, so that he can spend the rest of the day with his father, catching up on the highs and lows of their lives over the seven or eight years that have passed since they last saw each other?

\*

Stories become legends, or fables, because they contain a truth. And it strikes me now that when I first heard this story, well over half a century ago, it seemed to tell me something optimistic about the world; something vaguely Shakespearean, perhaps, about separation and reconciliation, and the benignly whimsical workings of chance (Just imagine, bumping into your own father, and not recognising him!). All these years later, I find only sadness in the tale of a young man, barely more than a boy, whose father has been so entirely absent throughout his childhood and adolescence that he has become, irretrievably, a stranger. For me, now, it's a story about the father my father will become.

\*\*\*\*\*

# **My father is a giant mosquito**

## **1962-ish**

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I am five or maybe six, and my bedtime - even on the longest and most slowly extinguished summer evening - is quarter to seven. I lie in bed listening, with a powerful sense of grievance, to other children - many no older than me - playing loud games in nearby gardens. Their voices mingle with the persistent hoarse hoo-hooing of love-sick woodpigeons on the roof outside my window.

Sleepless, I watch dust dance in a shaft of honey-coloured June evening light.

My father comes in from work. I hear the front door close behind him, and my mother greeting him. And surprisingly soon afterwards, I hear him coming up the stairs (I recognise his heavier tread).

I sleep with the door open, and he pushes it wider before entering. Seeing that I am still awake, he draws himself up on tiptoes, stretches his arms out rigidly in front of him, fingers pointed, and makes a frightening face which involves pulling up his top lip to reveal his upper teeth, and dragging his luxuriant eyebrows down into a threatening frown. And then he advances on me, making a high-pitched humming noise through his teeth, and menacing me with his pointed fingers, which he uses to administer a series of jabs to my tummy, arms and chest.

I howl with laughter. My father laughs, too.

My mother shouts up the stairs: "He should be settling down now! If you get him too excited, he'll never sleep!"

My father continues to poke and jab at me. I laugh until tears roll down my face, and plead with him to stop. My father is being a bloodthirsty

mosquito. I can't remember if he tells me this, or if I just know that is what he is being. But how could I know, since his bulky six-foot mosquito bears so little resemblance to the actual insect? He must have told me.

At this point in my life, my father is capable of being playful and affectionate.

Or perhaps, it occurs to me now, he is just drunk.

\*\*\*\*\*

# My father feels sure writing a best-selling children's book really can't be that difficult mid-1990s

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*Piddle-Bum was a Giant who lived in a deep dark forest, and whose Farts were the loudest ever heard in all the land....*

\*

*Once upon a time, there were two dinosaurs called Squirty and Squelchy, who lived in the same deep dark primeval forest as Piddle-Bum the Giant. Would you like to know why they were called Squirty and Squelchy? Well, it was to do with their simply ENORMOUS poos....*

\*

*Piddle-Bum the Giant knows his ABC. Do you? Would you like to learn it with him? A is for Arse - what your mother calls bottom, B is for Balls - ask your father, he's got-em....*

\*

*One day, Piddle-Bum the Giant woke up with a BIG problem. In the night, his enormous willy had turned into a trombone....*

\*

Quite quickly, My Father is forced to conclude, by the unenthusiastic response his efforts receive, that the children's publishing business is a closed shop; a cliquey cabal, operated by sour-faced, sexually frustrated

blue-stockings, with none of the insight that he possesses into the literary tastes and psychological preferences of young children.

\*\*\*\*\*

# **My father's obituary is in the Guardian Tuesday 29 January 2002**

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You can read it [here](#).

\*\*\*\*\*

## Thank you

I'd like to thank: my brilliant son-in-law [Ollie Haydon-Mulligan](#) for creating the excellent original work-in-progress website, which provided the basis for the current site; my friend Dana Robertson of [Neon](#) for designing the website and ebook so beautifully; [Matt Lane](#) for building the website so robustly; [Simon Henshaw](#) for the delightful b/w illustrations; [Elspeth Sinclair](#) for reading the book with an editor's eye, and encouraging me to believe I should share it with the world; Nick Sayers of Hodder for saying that he loved the book and calling it "an exceptional piece of writing", though sadly concluding that nobody would want to buy it; my sister Toni and brother Lucian for being so supportive of a project that they might easily have felt was treading on their toes, by telling their story; and lastly, my wife Anna for all the love, happiness and top quality legal advice.

Also, of course, you, for having read this far. Please do feel free to [get in touch](#) if you have any comments or queries.

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## **A note on fact and fiction in *My Father keeps the PM waiting***

In *My Father keeps the PM waiting* I have combined fact and fiction with my own recollections (which, of course, are neither, exactly). Nothing very unusual in that; but what may, perhaps, be worth explaining is that I have given myself complete freedom to move between the true, the made-up and the remembered, as and when I choose.

So I have written about things that definitely happened; things that I think must have happened; things that could conceivably have happened; things that I remember happening but may not have happened as I remember; things that almost certainly didn't happen, unless I have made a lucky guess; and things that definitely didn't happen.

Even if you asked me to, I wouldn't now be able to provide you with a complete breakdown of where fact ends and fiction begins in *My Father keeps the PM waiting*; I have forgotten which parts, exactly, I made up.

But I can say that almost all the events relating to the 1970 general election campaign did take place, though I have allowed myself to imagine the details of how they took place. For example, the PM did make a speech at a meeting attended by celebrity Labour supporters at Hammersmith Town Hall on the evening of Monday 15 June, though there is no documentary evidence to suggest that Basil Brush was among them. The weather was scorchingly hot throughout the campaign, and the first drops of rain for weeks did fall as the PM was leaving No 10 for what proved to be the last time. And it is, freakishly, absolutely true that Guildford - my father's home constituency - was the first to declare, at around 11.17 pm, providing the earliest indication of the disaster to follow for him, and for Labour.

Conversely, most of what I have written about the specifics of My Father's involvement in the campaign is made up. He was an unpaid press adviser to the PM, and did travel with him. And he was widely seen to be responsible for innovations such as the PM's presidential walkabouts. But I don't know



if he really attended a strategy session at No 10 on the Monday morning before the election, or had a night-cap with the PM that evening, or wrote the party political broadcasts, or hated Joe Haines, or bought the wine for the end-of-campaign press party, or watched the results in the PM's suite at the Adelphi hotel. The only claim for truthfulness that I can make is to say that, given his role in the campaign, and the facts I do have about how events unfolded, everything that my fictional character does and says might, fairly plausibly, have been done and said by my father.

As far as My Father's non-political life is concerned, the same applies. Most of the scenes and situations in which I have shown him either did occur, or probably must have done; but almost all the circumstantial detail is made up. So, for example, my father did work with 60s supermodel Jean Shrimpton, but there is no reason to believe she stabbed him with a fork; he did marry my mother on 24 June 1950, and I know they made "cream" by boiling a can of condensed milk, but I have no idea if my father was already certain he was making a terrible mistake; and he did bump into his father in post-war London, and fail to recognise him, but I have no information about what time of year it was, how my grandfather was dressed, or where this encounter took place. I have no evidence that my father ever, for a single moment, contemplated suicide.

I would also like to make it clear that the Other Woman is a fictional character, and there is no reason to believe she had a real-life counterpart.

Even when I am writing from memory about parts of my father's life I was directly involved in, I have given myself permission to make up what I can't remember, or to improve upon what I can. Of our mid-90s trip to Jerusalem, for example, all I can recall with certainty is the appalling food-poisoning I suffered and the terror of driving on lawless foreign highways with my drunken father incapable of navigating, or providing support of any kind. But I'm fairly sure that at least 70% of what I wrote in the piece does correspond, quite closely, to what actually occurred. Well, maybe 65%.

Is this approach to telling my father's story fair to him? Obviously not. But providing a fair assessment of my father's life and achievements was never my intention in undertaking this project. Without going into unnecessary

detail about what my motives actually were (something about wanting to get to know my father better than I did when he was alive), I can say categorically that there is no attempt to be objective here, or to achieve BBC-like balance. This is my side of my father's story.

But what about fairness to you? How can I justify presenting a potential reader with an account of a man's life, but no means of knowing which parts are true, which loosely based on the facts, and which completely made up?

Of course, only you can answer that. I hope that, as you read, you will find yourself sufficiently engaged, and entertained, to nullify any concerns you may have about the purpose, or even the ethics, of the exercise. But if you can't see the point of a book that shows no respect whatever for the boundaries between fact and fiction, I can only hold up my hands and admit that's exactly what I have written.

Incidentally, if you do have any questions arising from what you read here - about which parts are true, or anything else - please do contact me. I may not be able to provide reliable answers, but I would be happy to try.

\*\*\*

## Sources

I think I have made it clear above that this book is not based on extensive research, but I did a certain amount of background reading, and the books I found most useful were:

*The Politics of Power*, by Joe Haines

*Harold Wilson*, by Ben Pimlott

*Inside Number 10*, by Marcia Williams

*White Heat: a History of Britain in the Swinging Sixties*, by Dominic Sandbrook

I also read a number of newspapers from the last few days of the campaign, though, rather laughably, I bought them for £30 a go, from one of those "newspapers from the day of your birth" suppliers. So much for serious research methodology.

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## **An apology of sorts**

I had a difficult relationship with my mother, and I am conscious that she - or the character based on her - is not sympathetically treated in my book.

She was a woman with admirable qualities, and many people thought well of her.

She was an atheist (one of her admirable qualities) so apologising to her now would be meaningless. But I would like to apologise to anyone reading this who feels hurt or offended by what I have written about her. Your version of who she was is, of course, no less "true" than mine.

\*\*\*

I'd also like to apologise to Joe Haines, for portraying him as My Father's evil nemesis. I have no idea how the two men actually felt about each other, but my father was ferociously competitive by nature, so it seems reasonable to assume he regarded the PM's press secretary as a potentially dangerous rival and enemy.

In any case, I hope it's clear that the book's "Joe Haines" is seen through the eyes of My Father, and is not intended to portray the actual person of that name.

\*\*\*\*\*

## About the author

Lindsay Camp is the younger son of William Camp, whose heavily fictionalised life-story forms the basis of this book.

He has had a long career as a freelance writer of brand communications, and is the author of a well regarded book on persuasive writing, called [\*Can I Change Your Mind?\*](#), published by Bloomsbury.

He has been writing for children since his own were very young, and has had around 15 picture books published, many appearing in multiple countries and languages.

You can read some of his poems [here](#).

Lindsay and his wife Anna live in Bristol, and have three adult children, three grandchildren (so far), and one dysfunctional dog.

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If you have enjoyed *My Father keeps the PM waiting*, please do [share it with a friend](#).