

## DAUGHTERS AND FATHERS

# REFLECTIONS IN MY FATHER'S MIRRORS

### KNIFE

If, while I was sleeping, you had looked under my pillow when I was fifteen, you would sometimes have discovered a carving knife wrapped up in a table-napkin. I would hide the knife because I was afraid that my mother was going to kill me—go berserk and kill me, kill my father too. She used to threaten to kill me, but I can't say she ever brandished the knife. And I never actually heard her threaten to kill my father. The first time I put the knife under my pillow was one night after I had been to a dance. I don't know how the emotion grew and escalated, but I remember it as something like this:

I went to a dance, with the permission of my parents, accompanied by a boy they knew. I knew him better because we used to have (in the grotesque manner of the 1950s) something close to sex in the back of his father's car. Well sometime during the night my father took it into his head to drive to the hall and get me, to stop the boy from driving me home. This was bad and humiliating enough for me, but the next thing was it really enraged my mother who was waiting for us at home in tears. We all shouted at each other in the kitchen and during the row I had a kind of flare of perception that my mother would come after me with the carving knife which was in the drawer behind her. It was the kind of argument in which each person is opposed to two of the others. When they had gone to bed I was left behind in the kitchen. I took the knife from the drawer, wrapped it in the napkin, and carried it off

to hide it under my pillow. The next day I put it back in the drawer, and every now and again I would repeat the exercise which became exciting and pleasurable. I don't recall when or why I gave this practice up.

I was the one with the knife. Who was in danger here, and from whom?

The unconscious or semi-conscious logic of it is beautiful, and I wonder what we would have made of this in pre-Freudian times. Since that is impossible to know, I can only record that the bond between me and my father was alive with unmistakable symbols. I had collections, for instance, of fountain pens and pocket knives to which my father (and my grandfather) added from time to time. My father smoked a pipe and this delighted me and fascinated me. And I must record also that I was aware from an early age that some of the feelings I had for my father were sexual feelings.

A friend suggested to me that there was possibly a need for a book about fathers and daughters, and I was filled with a longing to bring this book into being. What if somebody else decided to do the book, and didn't invite me to contribute. Quickly, quickly, do it yourself. As it turned out, women were not falling over themselves to write essays about fathers—neither were men very keen to write about daughters. It is dangerous country this. After all, I carried a knife myself.

Would I be writing this, like this, if my father were still alive? I can't really answer that question. Probably not.

The parents and siblings and partners and children of writers are in a strangely vulnerable position, especially the parents. The night he rushed out and picked me up from the dance, my father couldn't know he was the subject of a study, the result of which would not be published until now.

This luxury of writing is available to me because my father is dead. He can not approve or disapprove in any real way; of course I can imagine his approval or disapproval, but I think there is a lot of difference between the attitudes of a living relative and the attitudes I might imagine in a dead one. On the one hand I can't deliver him injury; on the other hand I can't deliver him love at this distance.

He died ten years ago.

I want to know what it was between us that caused him to come and get me, that was so urgent and dramatic, so troubling and problematic. By fixing on the story of the dance I am giving more importance to it than it probably deserves, but writing is linear, and I had to start somewhere. I wanted to start with the knife because it is such an obvious symbol of sexual desire and threat, and the dance explains the knife. In a way.

So I am not writing a story about my father; nor am I writing a story about

myself; I am writing a story about the relationship between my father and me. 'Relationship' is an abstract noun, and is not a word that comes easily to me in the context of what goes on between people. However, here, with this exploration of the spirit, the abstraction of the father and daughter bond, no other word will do. And the only way I know of to do this is to examine incidents in my life with him, and to describe my feelings about those incidents. The relationship was a transaction that took place between us; I want to take a good look at that transaction. This will not really be a story; there is no beginning and no end, unless you say that I was born and later on he died. The middle is only a collection of incidents.

As I write, it is more than a year since I decided to edit this book. During that year my mind has been always to some extent occupied by what I would write here. As a video machine tracks the picture, I have been tracking this 'story'. I will continue to track the story long after the words have been written. As I have been tracking my story I have wondered what was going on in the essays of all the other writers whose work accompanies mine. I have edited other collections, but I have never before had the experience of being conscious all the time that a bunch of other people were engaged on the same project, were sitting down somewhere in the world thinking about their fathers or their daughters and writing down what they thought. And tracking my story is one thing—getting the picture up on the screen and moving—that is another.

This is not so much about who my father was, or what my father did, as about what he could make me feel.

#### **HANDS**

I don't know how old I was when this thing that used to happen with my hands stopped happening, but I think I was about thirteen. Before that, just a few times in my life, I would look at my father and feel all the strength suddenly go from my hands. I had no words for it, but I know I had a perception that this was a sexual powerlessness. I never articulated any of this; in fact I think this is the first time I have ever spoken of it. I still don't know what to say about it, except that I can see it is very important in the relationship between me and my father. I felt in those moments as if a power supply had been cut off. I would be a little breathless, a little faint, speechless, but the principal sensation was of a loss of strength in my hands. It didn't last long. I haven't heard of anybody else who had this feeling, but perhaps it is common, and one of the things we never talk about.

My mother used to say I had my father's hands, and she would compare my hands to those of my father's sisters both of whom were known, in the family, for their embroidery and their piano-playing. I was always conscious that my mother's comment was double-edged, for there was a certain competition between her and my father's sisters. Was it good, was it right for me to have those hands? Was I also involved in a competition? One of my mother's sisters had no fingers on her right hand. Is this relevant?

We had a thick blue leather book of Grimm's Fairy Tales illustrated by George Cruikshank with small, dense, troubling black and white drawings. In this book there were several stories I used to read over and over again. One of these stories I used to think of as 'The Girl With the Silver Hands'—it was in fact called 'The Handless Maiden'.

As a child I made no conscious connection between myself and the girl with the silver hands.

As is often the case in fairy tales, the story starts with an act on the part of the father. Very often this act is the death of the father, but in 'The Handless Maiden' the father sells his daughter (inadvertently) to the devil. I am relying on memory for the details of the story, rather than re-reading it, as I think the details that mattered to me when I was very young will perhaps have stayed with me, and will be useful. The daughter washed herself with water and drew a chalk circle round herself so that the devil could not reach her. Then the devil forbade her the use of water, but she wept so that her tears washed her clean. At this point it says that the tears 'washed her hands', and this is the first mention of the hands in the story. For some reason the devil then says the father must chop off the girl's hands with an axe. And he does. It happens just like that, with no mention of blood or bone—or noise of any kind. The whole scene is left up to the imagination of the reader. I think that is one of the things I found most powerful, that the key moment, the chopping off of hands, was not described. The details were all mine, as much or as little as I wanted or could stand. It was the moment I could identify with deeply, the moment when the father could chop off the daughter's hands.

Now I know, from having read this story a few times between now and childhood, that plenty of things happen to the girl and that she eventually finds happiness as the wife of a king and the mother of children. But the next salient point for me when I was a girl was the fact that the king made her some silver hands. The two images that haunted me were those of the chopping off of the hands and the supplying of the silver hands. Never mind that in the end the real hands grew back—that seemed to me to be a bit of an anti-

climax, perhaps because it was impossible, whereas the silver hands and the chopping were possibilities of a kind.

I was even tempted to call this section of my essay 'Silver Hands' instead of 'Hands', but then I realised that there was a progression from 'Knife' to 'Hands' that deserved to be preserved and followed up. By what?

### **BLOOD**

This is weird and makes me laugh now, and I have certainly never mentioned it before. I may even delete it before I'm finished here. When I was a child, and sometimes lost the power in my hands at the sight of my father, I also sometimes experienced, in my imagination, when I looked at him, an image of tomato sauce. I would think of the taste of tomato sauce, and the smell of it. I could feel it in my mouth and in my nose. I liked this part of the feeling, and I liked the dreamy sensation I got behind my eyes and the sudden swish of lightness that swept through my abdomen. I compared it to the feeling I got on a swing when the highest point was reached and there was an instant of nothingness before the ground came rushing back. (Once on a swing I scraped my toe on the gravel and there was blood everywhere and my father came running up and took me in his arms and calmed me down and bathed the wound and dressed it. There are tears in my eyes as I write that sentence.)

I make my father sound like the most incredible sex symbol, a creature that could make his six year-old daughter climax on sight.

I even had a sense that the sauce was only a substitute for blood, as if my imagination had stage-managed everything and wasn't going to use the real thing. By the time I put the knife under the pillow, the tomato sauce images had disappeared. I had my own blood to think about. And In fact I think I can be certain that with my own physical maturity my sexual feelings for my father ceased to exist. I know I make that sound so simple; it wasn't simple, wasn't swift, was fraught with scenes, occasional scenes such as the time he picked me up from the dance. I can't remember all these scenes. My memory selects.

### **FATHER**

So? He was well-built, had curly brown hair, very fair skin, brilliant blue eyes. Played cricket, badminton, went fishing and swimming. Photography. He was mad about building and although he was not a professional builder he built our house, a fairly standard 1930s weatherboard decorated on the outside with fancy fretwork. He grew roses and fruit trees and liked to graft

fruit from one tree onto another—a nectarine onto a peach, for instance. He excavated the cellar and established an elaborate workshop where he made things—cupboards, toys, gadgets—in his spare time. He was an optician and was in love with eyes and lenses and light and sight. He cleaned lenses with methylated spirits and there was always at least a faint aroma of this about him. I liked that. His own father had a sawmill, and (or but) my father was an early fanatic about the preservation of Tasmanian forests, used to give public lectures on ‘Re-forestation’ in the fifties, and later he was an ardent follower of Bob Brown and the Greens. When I was young he used to perform with a Scottish pipe band, not piping, but swinging swords or flaming Indian clubs. The memory of my father in a kilt and a tam-o-shanter and white singlet standing alone in the centre of a darkened ballroom and moving in a strange balletic rhythm to the yearning sound of the bagpipes while describing patterns in the dark with the flames in the end of the clubs comes back to me like a visitation from a dream.

## EYES

My father was colour-blind; he couldn’t see a new cricket ball on a green field. When I started compulsively doing oil paintings in black and white and shades of grey he thought I might be a rare daughter who inherits her father’s colour-blindness. But it turned out I was only experimenting with black and white and grey.

We had elaborate and beautiful diagrams (in colour) of eyes, but best of all we had a large board on which were stuck glass facsimiles of the eyes of many species of animals. I’m not sure of the purpose of this display, but it was very fascinating. It was kept in a shed at the bottom of the garden and the wall of the shed that faced the house was made from frosted glass. Imposed on the glass wall was the image of a huge pair of spectacles, the lenses of which were mirrors. These spectacles glinted through the branches of the fruit trees. I saw nothing odd about this when I was young because the wall of the shed had always been like that, but now that I think about it, it sounds strange.

## HIS

I used to sit in the branches of an apricot tree and read, and from time to time I would glance at myself in the mirrors. They were my father’s mirrors; it was his shed; the trees, all the trees belonged to him. The car was his, the house. He built the house before he married my mother. The chooks were his.

My mother, my sister, my brother and I—we all belonged to my father. The cellar was his cellar—it was called ‘under-the-house’.

‘Where is your father?’

‘He’s under-the-house.’

‘Tell him his dinner’s ready.’

It was his dinner. I don’t think any of this ownership was unusual—I observed much the same thing in other families—but it was powerful, so very much taken for granted. I knew a girl whose father died and I truly couldn’t understand how the family could continue to function. My mother owned the sewing machine, the piano, the stove and the dinner service.

The table and the fireplace seem to me to have been owned communally. Our table, our fire.

#### **GIRLS**

The presence, in the house next-door, of my mother’s sister and her husband and three daughters made a significant difference to our lives. The other girls, including my sister, were all older than I was, and we were all like sisters. I think this overwhelming presence of females must have had an effect on the men. My uncle also spent a lot of time making things in his cellar, although his cellar was not as fancy and comfortable and well-fitted as my father’s.

I envisage the houses now as consisting of an underground domain where the men were safe, and of an upper part where the women and girls cooked and sewed and washed in order to make things good for the men. We also laughed and sang and talked a lot. And the preoccupations with the rituals of hair among five girls and two women must have been enough to send the men underground. Both families went on summer holidays together, the fathers taking the girls fishing while the mothers gossiped in deck chairs on the beach—and prepared food of course.

#### **BOY**

My brother was born when I was eight, changing the shape of the lives of all the people in both houses. He was known simply as ‘Boy’, and everyone adored him. He was a great novelty to me and I treated him rather like a doll or a pet, although I knew he was really a little prince. He inherited the brilliant blue of my father’s eyes, but the large size of his eyes came from my mother. I received from my father some of the overflow of his devotion to Boy, sitting in on endless glorious readings of books such as *Wind in the Wil-*

lows which I had heard before, in my own time, but which now acquired even more magical meaning. I could re-run some of my own early childhood snuggled against my father while my brother lay in the crook of his arm looking at the pictures, sucking his thumb and pulling his earlobe. We wore out at least two copies of *Wind in the Willows*.

## BOOKS

The other girls were all old enough to belong to the children's library, but I wasn't. I was six, and you had to be seven. One of the things I longed to do was borrow library books. So my father took me to the adult library and let me borrow on his card.

The library was a hushed and sacred place with a special smell that I associated with books. The smell was probably disinfectant, but it was particular, and brought to mind the smell of glue paper and beeswax and leather. The building was old and dignified, with winding staircases and polished wood and a strange golden light. I was almost delirious with joy—self-importance, expectation, love.

My father held my hand as we went up a narrow staircase with high bookshelves on either side. We were on our way to the books of Charles Dickens. Up, up, up we went, me and my father, and I had the sensation we were moving inside the spiral of the shell of a beautiful transparent snail. This image came to me as a piece of spontaneous knowledge, a gift from my imagination, from my father's loving patience at taking me to borrow a book.

That's the important part of the library story, but perhaps I should record the fact that the book I borrowed was *Barnaby Rudge*. I liked the illustrations very much, and the name of Dolly Varden, but I discovered I really was too young to have this book—although I could read a lot of the words, word by word, I couldn't make much sense out of them.

Yet I went through the book slowly page by page, crying a lot of the time.

Most of the books in the house belonged to my father. My mother and aunt used to get romantic novels from the public library, and didn't seem to have the same interest as my father did in owning books. There were a lot of different kinds of encyclopaedias, but the one I liked best was Harmsworth's *Household Encyclopaedia* in six volumes. My father gave these to me about a year before he died. They constitute 'A Practical Guide to all Home Crafts written by the Leading Experts of the day and containing upwards of 15,000 Illustrations'. Many of the illustrations are on coloured fold-out pages, for example: 'Boat: sets of natural drawings with natural colour photographs for

the construction of a model cross-channel steamer and a model sloop-rigged racing yacht'. I am sometimes asked by journalists to comment on my favourite book. I have never had the courage to confess that Harmsworth's Household Encyclopaedia is actually the one.

When I was a child I was inspired by the coloured pictures of cakes and puddings and I used to make things from the recipes to serve at parties. I recently had one of the fold-out pages showing coloured diagrams of the plans of houses copied and framed and hung on the wall.

The first volume begins with an essay 'My Ideal House' by Marie Belloc Lowndes, the Celebrated Novelist, Author of 'The Heart of Penelope', 'The Lonely House' etc. The essay ends with this sentence: 'To be quite perfect my ideal garden must also have some kind of stream running through it—a stream deep enough for the children to bathe in on very hot days, and yet not deep enough to drown them when Mother isn't there to save them.' I was interested that there was no mention of Father in the text. His absence suggests that his presence arches over all &shy; He has provided the Ideal House and part of the Ideal is the presence of Mother and children.

And these books don't pull any punches, in spite of the romantic flavour. 'Not deep enough to drown them' it says.

And there is an entry 'Death—The Necessary Steps' as well as 'Hysterics—Common Sense Treatment'. (The room should be cleared, as the presence of a crowd of excited and sympathizing friends tends to foster symptoms. A douche of cold water to the face. The ammoniated tincture of valerian in dram doses, every three or four hours, is a good remedy.)

I searched in vain for an entry on Daughter, but I found one on Father. It is a legal description of fatherhood. 'While the father and mother are living together the father is the sole guardian of the children.' This is followed by an entry on Father Christmas. 'Mother' comes after 'Moth Ball' and comes before 'Mother Eve's Pudding'. The mother of an illegitimate child is its only parent in law. Then the entry for child is headed: 'The Child and its Training' and points to further articles such as Adenoids, Mumps, Exercise and Teeth.

This brings me to the subject of teeth.

## TEETH

There is of course no reference in Harmsworth to the connection between an absurd anxiety about teeth and anxiety about sexuality. But I think it's fairly commonly understood that this is the case. I gave up, grew out of—whatever

the expression is—my anxiety about my teeth when I left home and went to university. Suddenly I got my teeth into perspective. But until then—let me tell you:

The first thing I recall about teeth was when my baby teeth fell out and my father made a joke about it. He called me a ‘gummy shark’, and there was even a photograph he took of me dressed as a fairy, grinning broadly, displaying toothless gums. I usually liked any jokes or teasing by my father, but with this one he had really touched a nerve. I tried to be agreeable about it, but I felt as if I had been suddenly attacked in a vicious way by a most unsuspected, loved and trusted ally. Betrayed. Bad enough for my body to be getting out of control without my father making jokes. I resolved that I would take incredibly good care of my second teeth.

At about this time, or so it seems, the daughter of a friend of my mother came from the country to stay with us while she had all her teeth out. She was a young adult with rotten teeth and diseased gums. Horrors. I was secretly hysterical about this, and my decision to care for my teeth developed overnight into mania and obsession. I cleaned my teeth before and after meals, immediately. I had a rotating system of toothbrushes so that I always started with a dry one. I discovered floss. I refused to eat chocolate. When we went on picnics I carried water for cleaning my teeth. If I ran out of water we had to find a tap for me. My father became accustomed to having to stop the car at my will to call into a pharmacy where I would buy a toothbrush and request the use of the sink. This was not a passing phase, but went on for years and years and years. If I couldn’t see where I was going to be able to clean my teeth, I would refuse to eat.

My father was as trapped in it as I was. He seemed to be bemused, bewildered by the passion and vigour of my beliefs and my campaign. When my mother tried to discuss it with the dentist, the dentist didn’t really know what she was talking about. The other girls seemed to know not to tease me about it, but it drove them mad.

Powerful, to say the least.

## **WEDDINGS**

All the girls got married, and the fathers GAVE US AWAY.

## **DEATH**

My mother died fifteen years before my father. He re-married and this act put him at a new remove from me. When he was dying I went to his bedside in

the house he had built himself, and I followed an instinct, primitive and childish, to lie down on the bed beside him to touch him and talk to him. When my step-mother saw this I think she must have been shocked out of her brain. What she said was:

‘It’s so good for him to have his mother with him.’

Her error articulated, at least for me, a truth, a strange and sudden revelation. In that instant, and only for that instant, I was his mother, his wife, his daughter. The moment passed, and a few days later he died in his sleep.

When I kissed him for the last time he was an icy corpse.

But just in time our spirits had been fleetingly united in an expression and tender celebration of the relationship we share.